

## AN UNNECESSARY STORY.

BY JACOB A. RIIS.



MR. BEN WAH was dying. Word came up from the district office of the Charity Organization Society to tell me of it. Would I come and see her before I went away? Mrs. Ben Wah was an old charge of mine, the French Canadian widow of an Iroquois Indian, whom, years before, I had unearthed in a New York West-Side tenement. I was just then making ready for a voyage across the ocean to the old home to see my own mother, and the thought of the aged woman who laid away her children long ago by the cold camp-fires of her tribe in Canadian forests was a call not to be resisted. I went at once.

The signs of illness were there in a notice tacked up on the wall, warning everybody to keep away when her attic should be still, until her friends could come from the charity office. It was a notion she had, Mrs. McCutcheon, the district visitor, explained, that would not let her rest till her "paper" was made out. For her, born in the wilderness, death had no such terror as prying eyes.

"Them police fellows," she said, with the least touch of resentment in her gentle voice, "they might take my things and sell them to buy cigars to smoke." I suspect it was the cigar that grated harshly. It was ever to her a vulgar slur on her beloved pipe. In truth, the mere idea of Mrs. Ben Wah smoking a cigar rouses in me impatient resentment. Without her pipe she was not herself. I see her yet, stuffing it with approving forefinger, on the Christmas day when I had found her with tobacco-pouch empty, and pocket to boot, and nodding the quaint comment from her corner: "It's no disgrace to be poor, but it's sometimes very inconvenient."

There was something in the little attic room that spoke of the coming change louder than the warning paper. A half-finished mat, with its bundle of rags put carefully aside; the thirsty potato-vine on the fire-escape, which reached appealingly from its soap-box toward the window, as if in wondering search for the hands that had tended it so faithfully, bore silent testimony that Mrs. Ben Wah's work-day was over at last. It had been a long day—how long no one may ever know. "The winter of the big

snow," or "the year when deer was scarce" on the Magenetawan, is not as good a guide to time-reckoning in the towns as in the woods, and Mrs. Ben Wah knew no other. Her thoughts dwelt among the memories of the past as she sat slowly nodding her turbaned head, idle for once. The very head-dress, arranged and smoothed with unusual care, was "notice," proceeding from a primitive human impulse. Before the great mystery she "was ashamed and covered her head."

The charity visitor told me what I had half guessed. Beyond the fact that she was tired and had made up her mind to die, nothing ailed Mrs. Ben Wah. But at her age, the doctor had said, it was enough; she would have her way. In faith, she was failing day by day. All that could be done was to make her last days as easy as might be. I talked to her of my travels, of the great salt water upon which I should journey many days; but her thoughts were in the lonely woods, and she did not understand. I told her of beautiful France, the language of which she spoke with a singularly sweet accent, and asked her if there was not something I might bring back to her to make her happy. As I talked on, a reminiscent smile came into her eyes and lingered there. It was evidently something that pleased her. By slow degrees we dragged the bashful confession out of her that there was yet one wish she had in this life.

Once upon a time, long, long ago, when, as a young woman, she had gone about peddling beads, she had seen a bird, such a splendid bird, big and green and beautiful, with a red turban, and that could talk. Talk! As she recalled the glorious apparition, she became quite her old self again, and reached for her neglected pipe with trembling hands. If she could ever see that bird again—but she guessed it was long since gone. She was a young woman then, and now she was old, so old. She settled back in her chair, and let the half-lighted pipe go out.

"Poor old soul!" said Mrs. McCutcheon, patting the wrinkled hand in her lap. Her lips framed the word "Parrot" across the room to me, and I nodded back. When we went out together it was settled between us

that Mrs. Ben Wah was to be doctored according to her own prescription, if it broke the rules of every school of medicine.

I went straight back to the office and wrote in my newspaper that Mrs. Ben Wah was sick and needed a parrot, a green one with a red tuft, and that she must have it right away. I told of her lonely life, and of how, on a Christmas eve, years ago, I had first met her at the door of the Charity Organization Society, laboring up the stairs with a big bundle done up in blue cheese-cloth, which she left in the office with the message that it was for those who were poorer than she. They were opening it when I came in. It contained a lot of little garments of blanket stuff, as they used to make them for the papooses among her people in the far North. It was the very next day that I found her in her attic, penniless and without even the comfort of her pipe. Like the widow of old, she had cast her mite into the treasury, even all she had.

All this I told in my paper, and how she whose whole life had been kindness to others was now in need—in need of a companion to share her lonely life, of something with a voice, which would not come in and go away again, and leave her. And I begged that any one who had a green parrot with a red tuft would send it in at once.

New York is a good town to live in. It has a heart. It no sooner knew that Mrs. Ben Wah wanted a parrot than it hustled about to supply one at once. The morning mail brought stacks of letters, with offers of money to buy a parrot. They came from lawyers, business men, and bank presidents, men who pore over dry ledgers and drive sharp bargains on 'Change, and are never supposed to give a thought to lonely widows pining away in poor attics. While they were being sorted, a poor little tramp song-bird flew in through the open window of the Charities Building in great haste, apparently in search of Mrs. McCutcheon's room. Its feathers were ruffled and its bangs awry, as if it had not had time to make its morning toilet, it had come in such haste to see if it would do. Though it could not talk, it might at least sing to the sick old woman—sing of the silent forests with the silver lakes deep in their bosom, where the young bucks trailed the moose and the panther, and where she listened at the lodge door for their coming; and the song might bring back the smile to her wan lips. But though it was nearly green and had a tousled top, it was not a parrot, and it would not do.

The young women who write in the big books in the office caught it and put it in a cage to sing to them instead. In the midst of the commotion came the parrot itself, big and green, in a "stunning" cage. It was an amiable bird, despite its splendid get-up, and cocked its crimson head to one side to have it scratched through the bars, and held up one claw, as if to shake hands.

How to get it to Mrs. Ben Wah's without the shock killing her was the problem that next presented itself. Mrs. McCutcheon solved it by doing the cage up carefully in newspapers and taking it along herself. All the way down the bird passed muffled comments on the Metropolitan Railway service and on its captivity, to the considerable embarrassment of its keeper; but they reached the Beach-street tenement and Mrs. Ben Wah's attic at last. There Mrs. McCutcheon stowed it carefully away in a corner, while she busied herself about her aged friend.

She was working slowly down through an address which she had designed to break the thing gently and by degrees, when the parrot, extending a feeler on its own hook, said "K-r-r-a-a!" behind its paper screen.

Mrs. Ben Wah sat up straight and looked fixedly at the corner. Seeing the big bundle there, she went over and peered into it. She caught a quick breath and stared, wide-eyed.

"Where you get that bird?" she demanded of Mrs. McCutcheon, faintly.

"Oh, that is Mr. Riis's bird," said that lady, sparring for time; "a friend gave it to him—"

"Where you take him?" Mrs. Ben Wah gasped, her hand pressed against her feeble old heart.

Her friend saw, and gave right up.

"I am not going to take it anywhere," she said. "I brought it for you. This is to be its home, and you are to be its mother, grandma, and its friend. You are to be always together from now on—always, and have a good time." With that she tore the paper from the cage.

The parrot, after all, made the speech of the occasion. He considered the garret; the potato-field on the fire-escape, through which the sunlight came in, making a cheerful streak on the floor; Mrs. Ben Wah and her turban; and his late carrier: then he climbed upon his stick, turned a somersault, and said, "Here we are," or words to that effect. Thereupon he held his head over to be scratched by Mrs. Ben Wah in token of a compact of friendship then and there made.

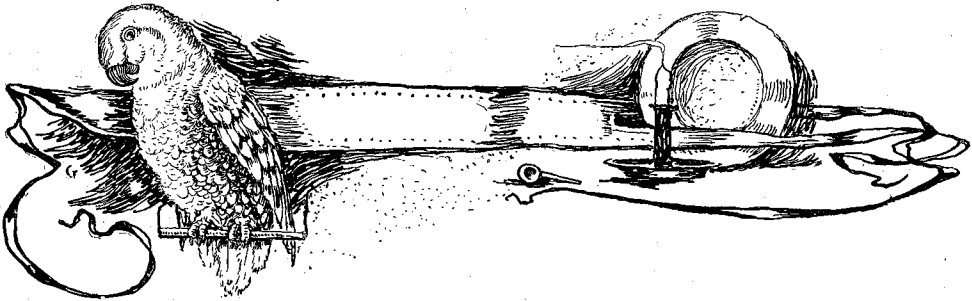
Joy, after all, does not kill. Mrs. Ben Wah wept long and silently big, happy tears of gratitude. Then she wiped them away, and went about her household cares as of old. The prescription had worked. The next day the "notice" vanished from the wall of the room, where there were now two voices for one.

I came back from Europe to find my old friend with a lighter step and a lighter heart than in many a day. The parrot had learned to speak Canadian French to the extent of demanding his crackers and water in the lingo of the *habitant*. Whether he will yet stretch his linguistic acquirements to the learning of Iroquois I shall not say. It is at least possible. The two are inseparable. The last time I went to see them, no one answered my knock on the door-jamb. I raised the curtain that serves

for a door, and looked in. Mrs. Ben Wah was asleep upon the bed. Perched upon her shoulder was the parrot, no longer constrained by the bars of a cage, with his head tucked snugly in her neck, asleep too. So I left them, and so I like to remember them always, comrades true.

It happened that when I was in Chicago last spring I told their story to a friend, a woman. "Oh, write it!" she said. "You must!" And when I asked why, she replied, with feminine logic: "Because it is so unnecessary. The barrel of flour does n't stick out all over it."

Now I have done as she bade me. Perhaps she was right. Women know these things best. Like my own city, they have hearts, and will understand the unnecessary story of Mrs. Ben Wah and her parrot.



## A YANKEE TEACHER IN THE SOUTH.

### AN EXPERIENCE IN THE EARLY DAYS OF RECONSTRUCTION.

BY ELIZABETH G. RICE.



SIX weeks from the day that General Beauregard evacuated Charleston, a party of New England men and women, including myself, entered the city as volunteer teachers for the colored schools that had been organized under the superintendence of Mr. James Redpath. We had been sent out by a society in Boston, who paid us a small sum above our necessary expenses, the government providing, as far as possible, transportation, rations, and military protection.

Everywhere were to be seen ruins, new and old; and the sense of disaster was greatly increased by the fires that took place the night that the city was evacuated. When the Union troops entered, their first effort was to extinguish these fires. Then the officers took possession of the vacant houses, which had already been emptied of

everything of much value. Our party of twelve looked about to find a vacant house that pleased us, and soon selected a large brownstone mansion. Only a few large articles remained, such as sideboard and dining-table, and a few bedsteads and wardrobes. The fine library, which must have numbered several thousand volumes, had been taken away by our troops only the day before,—so the colored people on the place told us,—and busts of Roman emperors still stood surmounting the empty shelves. In the courtyard were two small brick houses for the servants, and a well-yard where half a dozen bloodhounds lived in kennels, contributing much to our sense of safety. A former steward, nearly white, was in charge of the place. He felt kindly toward us, as we were on a mission to his race, and was very glad to remain for wages. To com-