

# STORY OF MY BEGGAR.

BY E. L. SNELL.

WRITTEN ESPECIALLY FOR THE HELENA INDEPENDENT.

ABOUT TEN YEARS AGO, I THINK, I first met him. I remember it very distinctly, though I can't fix the date. However, that doesn't matter. It was on Fifth avenue one hot summer evening. I was feeling very much out of sorts because I had been chasing around for some hours for a man when the city editor was very anxious I should interview concerning certain "astounding revelations" made to the paper that morning, all tending to show that he was an unscrupulous and unmitigated rascal. If men who happen to become absorbing, if temporary, objects of public interest only knew what extreme annoyance they cause painstaking and hard working reporters by leaving town or hiding themselves when the demand for news of them is greatest, I am sure they would be more considerate.

If my beggar had had any suspicion of the mood I was in he would have pressed me by on the other side of the street and tackled some other fellow. But fate had ordained it otherwise. My first impulse was to tell him to go to the devil. It isn't flattering to a reporter's vanity to have a beggar to solicit aims of him. He likes to think that he is such a wide awake looking fellow that no beggar would imagine he could take him in.

I didn't tell him to go to the devil because something in his manner restrained me. That something was suggestive of the

exclaimed, "I am going to teach you a lesson. You got a dinner out of me when you first asked me for a pack of lies on me, and if it was worth a dinner then it is worth a dinner now. I'm going to order a big one for you, and if you don't eat it all and polish the bones clean I'll call in a policeman and have you arrested and sent to the island for six months."

His eyes flashed and he hesitated some choice French words. For a moment he looked every inch a man, and I feared that he intended to show fight. I didn't wish to get into a physical encounter with him, because that would have involved me in disgrace inevitable however it terminated. Therefore, I was very much relieved when, with a shrug of his shoulders, he became again the beggar—my beggar.

I told the proprietor what my scheme was, and he ordered with great zest and spirit, and told several of the customers what was going on. They tarried to see the thing through, and declared that it was as good as any 10-cent show on the board. Before the curtain fell, the Frenchman, it was evident that he was a Frenchman, was permitted to leave that restaurant, was made to stow away an Irish stew, a plate of corn-beef hash, a plate of oysters, a dish of potatoes, and an oyster pie, so called. He must have suffered tortures. But nobody felt a bit sorry for him. He was jeered and scoffed at all through the ordeal. The only words he ever made use of whether he would succeed or "bust." And when at last he gulped down the last mouthful he was roughly hustled into the street by the virtuous proprietor to the accompaniment of many profane maledictions.

The affair paid me very well. I wrote a funny story about it styled "A Gastronomic Revue," which went all over the country and netted me many times the price of the two dinners with the dollar thrown in. It was then that I began to feel that I had a sort of proprietary interest in the Frenchman, and fell into the habit of referring to him as "my beggar."

I ran across him several times after that, and by introducing variations succeeded in making three more fairly good stories about him. But the fact that he had become a sort of a regular feature in any way diminish the feeling of virtuous indignation with which I continued to regard him. Next to doing somebody a good turn there is nothing so well calculated to put one on good terms with himself as indulgence in a feeling of virtuous indignation. I never let slip an opportunity of letting my beggar know what I thought of him.

On two occasions I came upon him when he had succeeded in making his with his plausible story and was about to receive a substantial reward. Each time my interference prevented him from getting it, and that afforded me much satisfaction. It is a duty one owes to society to expose an impostor. In my moments of virtuous indignation my conscience pricked me a bit because I hadn't had him arrested and put through the police court and made amends by threatening him with such proceedings several times.

As the years went by I noticed with much satisfaction that my beggar, notwithstanding the fact that he was such an accomplished artist, did not seem to thrive in his profession. Instead of growing fat he steadily waxed thinner. His features became pinched and haggard looking, his scanty gray locks turned snow white, he became stoop shouldered, and at last took to use a stick. But one thing puzzled me about him. Instead of slinking off ashamed and ashamed on the occasions when I ran across him and asked him to a bit of my mind, he actually had the impudence to resent my remarks in language which, though I could not understand it because it was French, I am sure was not ill. More than that, instead of cowering before my indignant glances, he made me feel uncomfortable by steadily glaring at me with an expression of scornful contempt. He really

didn't seem to feel that he ought to be thoroughly ashamed of himself. I came to the conclusion that his moral perceptions, and his sense of right and wrong, had become thoroughly perverted through a persistent adherence to a life of imposture.

Six months ago I was sent to Bellevue hospital to find out whether a notorious tough, who without any provocation had picked a quarrel in a barroom with a gentleman who had just arrived from Texas, was likely to survive the emptying of the contents of a six-shot into his chest.

"Quite a pathetic case there," said the surgeon, as we were passing through one of the wards after I had ascertained that the chances were about one hundred to one against the tough's surviving the operation. "We got a lot of fellows like that, but that one has made a real feat that we haven't got hearts stowed away somewhere."

He indicated with a jerk of his thumb, which was lying in a sling, a certain fellow who was old, though the face was turned from me, because his hair was thin and white.

"He came here three months ago," said the surgeon; "he had been kicked over by a runaway team and was badly smashed up in a number of places. We saw from the first there was no hope for him. He had got something knocked out of shape inside that was bound to get the best of him. He has astonished us all by lasting so long, but it is only a question of a few days now when he'll be summoned to go up north, 'four felloes.' I hope he will get a good berth, for he deserves it."

"He was delirious for several days after he came here," continued the surgeon, "and if it hadn't been for that we should never have found out his story. He kept raving about a son in Paris, and how willing he would do if he could just see him once. Then he would go off on another tack and threaten dire vengeance on any one who told what he had done to support that son. It was all in French, but the nurse who happened to talk French, understood him. In the pocket of the coat he had on when brought in, a wretched, threadbare garment, was found a bundle of letters from his son. Their condition showed that he had read most of them over hundreds of times. And very nice, affectionate letters they were, too. In nearly every one thanks were returned for remittances received, and the writer expressed gratification that his father was getting along so well and was so happy and cheerful. Something was always said, too, about hoping to meet soon, but not specifying when, and always turning up to prevent that meeting. In the last letter, which the poor man had evidently received a few days before the accident, the writer told how he had graduated from college with high honors, and was now an appointment as a tutor, and how he hoped soon to be able to do something to show his appreciation of his father's kindness and that sort of thing. It was a letter

that any father might be proud of, and must have gladdened the old man's heart. The last letter was the last one which the old man showed in his delirium was the one feeling that possessed his heart, so touched the nurse that she wrote a letter to the son, telling him enough about his father to enable him to know that if he wished to see him alive he must lose no time in crossing the ocean.

"But it was not until the old man had recovered from his delirium and heard what the nurse had done that we found out what an utter sacrifice his life had been for the last ten or eleven years. The thought of meeting his son seemed to fill him with joy and he would have given up his life at that moment. And at last he confided to the nurse what it was. In France he had had a snug little fortune. But an unfortunate investment and a false friend swept it nearly all away. Then his wife died, and there was left him nothing to live for but a son, who was just nine years old. That was eleven years ago. He came to New York to begin life over again, determined in any event to make money by some means, to buy the education and training of a gentleman. But without a trade or profession he could get no work by which he could make money enough to support himself and his son in the city. He was discharged from one place because his clothing was so shabby. What little he had saved he had sent to Paris to pay for the education and support of his darling boy. When his son grew older he made him believe that he had found congenial employment and was happy and prosperous. And he kept up that fiction year after year with heroic fidelity, from time to time, however, only knowing how, but sustained by the knowledge that his body knew nothing of the pangs of poverty, and was getting a good education and training in Paris. But what marred the joy for him was the thought of meeting his son was this fear that when he came to New York he would find out that his father had been a beggar.

"We reassured him by telling him that the old man was content to live from his son at all hazards. And when the son turned up—a fine, handsome young fellow he is, too—we all entered into a conspiracy



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to keep him in entire ignorance of what his father had done in New York. We found a man who in such a cause was willing to be with a clear conscience and make the son believe that he had been employing the father all these years, and doesn't know that this is a charity hospital. And he is staying at the house of Dr. —, who pre-tends that he has been his father's physician for many years. But the old man's gratitude makes it easy to keep up the deception."

"The story touched me deeply. Nobody but a confirmed cynic could fall to be moved by it."

"That man must be a downright hero," I said; "I should like to see what such a man looks like that I may know the type."

"Well, step gently and come around to the other side of the bed and you may see him," said the good, hearted surgeon. "Just think," he added, in a burst of indignation, "how many people have insulted the old man and scoffed and jeered at him who are not worthy to blacken his boots."

When I saw the man I started involuntarily and awkwardly fell full my moustache, while something very much like pains of remorse shot through my heart.

It was my beggar.

The nurse opened his eyes and recognized me. "Pardonnez moi," he said, pleadingly; "promise, monsieur, you will not tell my son; promise, monsieur, promise. For his sake, promise, monsieur, you will not tell him; promise, monsieur, you will not tell him."

I hardly know what I did. I know that, try my hardest, I couldn't keep back the tears from my eyes kneeling at his side imploring his forgiveness.

Three days later I attended the funeral of the beggar.

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