

The Scab

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The rays from a low afternoon sun fell through the dusty panes of a kitchen window and across a disorderly floor where a young man and woman were washing clothes. There were two large tubs of water on a bench, several pails and pans standing about, and a large basket near the door was heaped with clean, wet clothes. The man straightened up, rubbed the suds from his muscular arms, and exclaimed.

"Gosh, Mollie, that's harder work than runnin' an engine. Now they're ready to hang out, ain't they? I'll help you out with them but you'll put 'em on the line, won't ye?"

"Yes, I will, I know; it's all right, I'll hang them up. You might clear away the tubs and scrub the floor."

Mollie Sullivan knew why Dennis did not like to come outside and work where many of his comrades would be passing, though there was no reason why he should be ashamed of performing labor that some one must do if they lived at all. But she was an energetic, willing little body, stanch and true, and ready to work and endure as long as she could stand.

She looked around the yard but did not see her two children.

"Nellie! Walter! Where are you?" she called.

The house was a mere shanty of two rooms built in the outskirts of a big Colorado city, and the yard was a bare enclosure of sand and ashes with a strip of barbed wire fastened to lopsided posts for a fence. No regular street ran near, the alley was at the back of the house and presently two little urchins came into view, their hands full of over ripe bananas, their faces and faded cotton aprons stained with the fruit.

"Oh, you poor young uns! Whatever have you got? Throw that away this minute!"

The children began to cry and their father hearing them came out.

"What is the matter? Where did you get that stuff, kids? It will make you sick as a dog! Here give it yher." He took the rotten fruit and threw it over the fence and the little ones sobbed plaintively.

"Don't you ever let me see you eating such stuff again! Come in, dad has got some pictures for you to look at."

The children followed the father slowly, still sniffing; he wiped their hands and faces with a wet rag, put them up on the meager bed and pulled some bright-colored bits of paper taken from tomato cans and grocers' boxes from his old coat pocket and spread them out before them. Then as he worked, he told them simple little stories. They were sullen and wistful at first, but

gradually grew more interested until they forgot their grievances. Their mother came in presently and smiled at the scene. But her entrance reminded them of their wants.

“Ma, can’t we have our supper now? We won’t want any more tonight, but we want to eat now.”

“Oh, it’s too early for supper yet. Wait just a little while. Look at your pretty pictures. Now I must make up a good fire and iron these waists. Then I’ll go and take them home and get the money for them and maybe we can have a bit of liver and some milk. And tomorrow, we’ll get a whole dollar and a half for the washing we’ve done today, and I’m sure we can afford a nice treat for supper. I’m so glad I got Mis’ Lampton’s washing—it’ll be regular every week, an’ the’s so many wantin’ to wash now adays that I was mighty lucky to get it.”

Dennis had finished up the floor in a thorough though rather clumsy fashion and now sat down on a pine box in a dejected attitude. Mollie pulled out the table, spread a clean sheet over it and brought out three rolls of fine white muslin, glancing at her husband she tried her irons.

Some one with firm, heavy steps came to the door.

“That you, pa? Come right in. Ain’t you off pretty early tonight?” A red-faced, good natured looking man, much like a big Irish boy for all he was the father of matronly Mollie and several more boys and girls at home, looked in, then entered and nearly filled up the little place with his large body and free, swinging motions.

“Where be yer cheers—I thought ye had plenty of ‘em.”

“Set down on the bed, pa. We—we—lent the chairs.”

“An’ yer other room looks empty, too. Where’s yer little bureau an’ the rocker and the nifty little table?”

“Never you mind, dad—we lent them, too. But we don’t need them very bad.”

“Ain’t found any work yet, eh?”

“No, ner ain’t likely to.”

“How long ye been out o’ work, Dennie?”

“‘Bout four months in all. Ye know, I left Kansas City on account of the troubles of the stationary engineers, but I got the promise of a good job here. Feller wanted to leave, he said, but when I had worked four days, he came back and the boss give him his job again. I couldn’t find anything else in my line—had a few odd jobs of a day or two at a time, but ‘t seems there ain’t nothin’ fer skilled workmen.”

“Well, there’ll be more idle men today, an’ jobs a plenty goin’ a beggin’—sech as they be.”

Dennis sprang to his feet. “Where?” he exclaimed.

“Now, don’t git excited. Ye won’t be after gittin’ them jobs, I’m thinkin’. The roadmen have struck on the D. & R. G., as they ought to ‘a’ done long ago. All the other employes on the road got their wages raised since the panic reduction in ‘93. Section men have been workin’ fer less than they can feed their families on, let alone livin’ decent. Yes, I’m out of a job, too, Dennis, but I got a good reason.”

Dennis stared at his father-in-law, troubled and amazed. He had thought if the worst came that Mollie could take the little ones home while he started out on a quest for work. Her father’s wages as section boss would have been sufficient to keep both families from want, with Mollie’s help, until he found work and then he would make it up to the “old man.” Now that hope was gone.

“Could a man get a job workin’ on the road?”

“A man could—but I guess a man won’t,” answered Kelly decidedly. “It wouldn’t be safe. Remember, the boys are puttin’ up a great fight—don’t you butt in. I’m president of the union in this city, and I approve of the strike.”

“Of course Dennis isn’t thinking of sech a thing, father. I know the men have been workin’ fer wretched wages, not enough to live half decent, an’ they’re all right. Dennis wouldn’t take the place of any of ‘em.”

“It’ll be a fight to a finish. The boys do the hardest work on the road and the most depends on their work, yet they’re the poorest paid and the least considered.”

Dennis had sat down again and was gazing moodily at the newly cleaned floor. Mollie folded up the ironed waists in a newspaper and got her hat.

“Now, Dennis, I’m going to take this work home and with the money I get, I’m going to buy something nice fer supper.”

“Mamma, Nellie hung’y now. Want supper now.”

“Can’t you wait till mamma comes back? Then it’ll taste so much better with all of us eating together.”

Both children began to cry softly and hopelessly as though they knew it was of little use. But Mollie looked in the cupboard and found two little dry crusts of bread. “See, here! I’ll give you a little sugar in some water and you can dip these crusts in and play you are eating ice cream. Now be good till I come back, there’s my little dears.”

She stooped to whisper to Dennis as she passed him, “Cheer up, Dennis, we’re not so very bad off,” and hurried away.

The children played with their cups of sweetened water and crusts, making them last as long as possible, and finally as the shadows deepened they fell asleep on the bed. Their father sat silently pondering and brooding until the room grew dark and the lamp on the corner outside began to shine in through the window. Then he got up suddenly, wondering what was keeping Mollie so long. He went out and looked up and down the dreary vacant lots and along the sandy path they used in going to the next street, but no familiar form could he see. He was feeling that sickening, discouraged sensation which comes of hunger, a long standing hunger that had not been thoroughly satisfied for many days. It seemed to him that even Mollie had deserted him and nothing but despair was left him. A half an hour passed before he discerned his wife coming slowly out of the darkness, her head drooping and her basket swaying loosely in her hand.

“What is it, Mollie, dear? Are you sick?” he said as he took one of her limp hands in his

“No, only tired and disappointed. Mrs. Grant wasn’t at home and a woman I never saw before took the clean clothes and said the money would be sent to me; then she shut the door. I couldn’t bear to come back empty handed, so I went around by Mrs. Brown’s where I used to work and thought I would ask her to lend me a quarter. But Mrs. Brown had gone down town, an’ I hung around and waited fer her a long time but she didn’t come and I began to feel so queer like—I thought I better come home.”

“My poor Mollie! Well, the children have gone to bed and we’ll try not to mind. God! It makes me feel like a villain to have you come to this, Mollie! It’s mighty tough—an’ here I am so helpless with my big, strong arms. I can’t stand it much longer.”

“There, Dennis, we’ll get the money in time, and there’s still some things in the house we can spare.” They entered the dark kitchen together and as Dennis passed on to get a match, Mollie sunk to the floor with a quiet sigh. He lighted the little lamp and looked at her. She lay perfectly still and senseless.

"Oh, Mollie, Mollie! What ever is this? What shall I do?" he said sinking on his knees beside her. But she did not answer and he bethought himself of some water presently, got it, bathed her forehead and rubbed her hands, until with another little sigh, she opened her eyes and sat up.

"I was only tired, Dennis. I'm all right now. Don't worry about me."

"You're workin' too hard an' you don't have enough to eat. God! An' I can't do nothin'!"

"Don't be discouraged, Dennis. Something will happen to get us out o' this hole an' sometime we'll laugh about these days. Now fix up the fire—thank goodness, we've got some coal left—and I'll make some mush out of the little meal there is. An' maybe I can shake a few grains of tea out of the canister, that will revive me."

They made the mush and the little cup of weak tea and ate in silence. The children woke whimpering and were fed some of the mush with a pinch of sugar on it; then they all laid down on the springless couch and slept soundly—the one luxury left them.

The next morning Dennis got up before the others were awake, quietly dressed and stole out of the house. He walked toward the railroad and had not gone far when he met a man who accosted him.

"Hello, Sullivan! Ye ain't workin' now air ye? Come an' git a job on the section—they 're wantin' men, an' ye 'll git two dollars a day."

"As a scab, eh?"

"Scab—nothing! As a free American citizen. Ye've got a right to earn a livin' aint ye? D-n the unions an' their tyranny—they can't say whether a man may work or not."

"But if the union men don't stand by one another they'll soon be at the mercy of the bosses. No, I don't go against the unions."

"Oh, well, as to that—ye don't need to. But ye got to live, man! An' yer children got to have something to eat. You come down now an' hire out. Two dollars a day an' ye can join the gang an' git yer dinner at the section house. An' here, I'll advance ye something to leave with yer wife, cause ye may have to leave town." The man slipped a greenback into Dennis' hand and moved quickly away, for he saw two union men coming up the street. They were Mollie's father, Jerry Kelly, and a comrade.

"Hello, Dennis! What did you have to say to that dirty dog, yonder?"

"Well, I didn't say much of anything."

"What's he sayin' to you? He don't want no good around here."

"He was offerin' me a job."

"An' be you goin' to take it? You goin' to play the traitor?"

"Look here, Jerry. I'm about to the end of my rope. Yesterday the children was eatin' dirty, rotten bananas they'd picked up in the alley. Last night Mollie fainted away with the hard work and the hunger. Most all our furniture is gone and we ain't none of us got a second garment to our backs. I can't stand this any more. I can wield a shovel an' I'm goin' to."

"No, you won't, Dennie. I've got a little left yet and you send Mollie and the children home to my house, then you go somewhere else an' find work. Ye'll find it somewhere in the west here. But don't fer God's sake be the one to down the boys when it is the fight of their lives."

"Well, I'll start out this very day. I'll go an' tell Mollie and then I'll go." He turned around and went home. Mollie was folding down the clothes they had washed the day before and the children were lying listlessly on the bed, half dressed. There was no sign of any breakfast.

"Mollie I jest met your father. He says yer to come home and stay, an' I'll go away and hunt work. I'm goin' right now."

“Where will ye go Dennis?”

“I don’t know. Maybe on a farm some where; I ‘spose I could make enough to keep us from starving. An’ here, Mollie, I met an old comrade who lent me this. You take it and get something good fer yer breakfast.”

Mollie looked at him with frightened eyes.

“Dennis, ye goin’ to be a traitor? Where did you git that money?”

“Never you mind. I didn’t steal it. It’s good money and it’ll buy good victuals. I won’t see you workin’ yerself to death an’ the children goin’ hungry.”

Mollie came up to him and placed her hands on his shoulders.

“Dennis, that’s scab money, an’ you go take it back where you got it. I sha’n’t touch a cent of it. We ain’t gone hungry yet, and we’ve got some work. Promise me you won’t go to work on the Section, Dennis.”

“Mollie, I’m goin’ to find work. I won’t work fer the railroad if I can help it, but work I must have. You go home to your father an’ do the best ye can. And take this money.”

“I won’t! Not if it was to save me from dyin’. An’ if you want to prove to me that you’ll do the best you can to find other work, you take it back.”

So determined was she that Dennis put the bill in his vest pocket, kissed her and the children and hurried away.

He went down to the freight yard and hung about until he found a chance to creep into a box car. In half an hour he was moving west as fast as the “cannon ball” freight could carry him.

About seventy miles from the city was the division station, a little town prettily situated at the foot of the mountains. Dennis crawled out and looked about him. It was night, and few people were about. He had not intended to use the five-dollar bill he had with him, but he was hungry, desolate and in a strange place. He went to the little hotel, got a warm supper and went to bed.

Then next morning he started out to see what he could find. The town was a dull little burg, the railroad being the only excuse for its existence. He ran onto the section boss almost the first thing. He needed him, needed him badly and he seemed to be the only one who did. He yielded and was set to work with the rest of the gang.

“Ye’ve got to look out fer yerself. We can’t keep a standin’ army here to protect ye. But, d’ye see them two men standin’ on the corner?”

“Yes.”

“Well, they’re deputy marshals an’ they’ll arrest anybody that interferes with ye.”

The shovel and wheelbarrow were new to Dennis, and very soon his back was aching fit to break. He never saw work go so badly. Tools were constantly getting broken, wheels coming off the barrows, stones got in the way and upset his loads. “I guess the men earn their wages all right,” he thought, but doggedly kept on.

He worked until Saturday night amid all kinds of mishaps, aches, pains and discouragements. In the forenoon a heavy rainstorm had come on accompanied with wind, thunder and lightning. At 6 o’clock a washout was reported between the town and the city and all hands that could be mustered were wanted to repair the damage. Dennis had a few moments before felt so exhausted that he did not believe he could drag one foot before the other, but the excitement lent him new strength—and then, it was a chance to earn a few more extra dollars.

The gang found the track washed away for some rods and the supports gone from a low bridge over a sand arroya which was usually dry. It was a difficult job to fix up even a temporary bridge

in the wet sand; and the men were unskillful and already worn out. But they worked away as well as they could and the express was telegraphed to come on.

Dennis felt very uneasy. He doubted that the bridge would stand the strain of a heavy train, for the work had been too hastily and too clumsily done. He could not make up his mind to go to the tool cars and rest with the other men. In the still and solemn breaking of the new day he sat down and watched for the coming train.

The distant rumble was heard before the sun came up. The track was an up grade and the engine labored heavily, yet the train came on at a good speed. A cold chill ran over him as the cars slowed up at the bridge. The big engine, the baggage and express cars and two passengers passed over in safety. And then—did his eyes deceive him? No, he saw the flimsy structure sway and totter, saw the supports give away and the two hind cars go over like toys and pile up end ways in the old arroya.

Then pandemonium broke loose. The engine shrieked, screams and yells arose and the sound of escaping steam added to the confusion. The over-wearied men came stumbling out of the tool cars, and the uninjured passengers began to crawl out of the car windows. The conductor finally made his appearance unhurt, and he soon had a rescuing party organized and set to work. Help was telegraphed for and the extent of the disaster looked into.

Dennis worked like a hero; he brought out many a poor victim and lifted miraculous weights to free imprisoned passengers. He came to a woman and two children under a broken seat, all apparently lifeless; and when he had succeeded in bringing them out of the car and saw the woman's face—he knew it was his own wife and little ones!

A terrible rage took possession of him. Scab work had killed his loved ones! Oh, God! That clumsy, unskilled men should be allowed to tamper with the lives of human beings like this! He might starve but he would never touch a scab tool again as long as he lived!

But Mollie was only stunned and the boy was only asleep. The little girl recovered from a blow on the head in a little while. And the four sat on the sand, penniless, homeless, but hopeful and reunited.

“Dennis, I was afraid you were working on the road, and I started after you. I would not have taken one cent of money earned this way. But, dear, there is a chance of a job in the engine room of the ——— Hotel, and I came to find you and get you to come and secure it.”

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