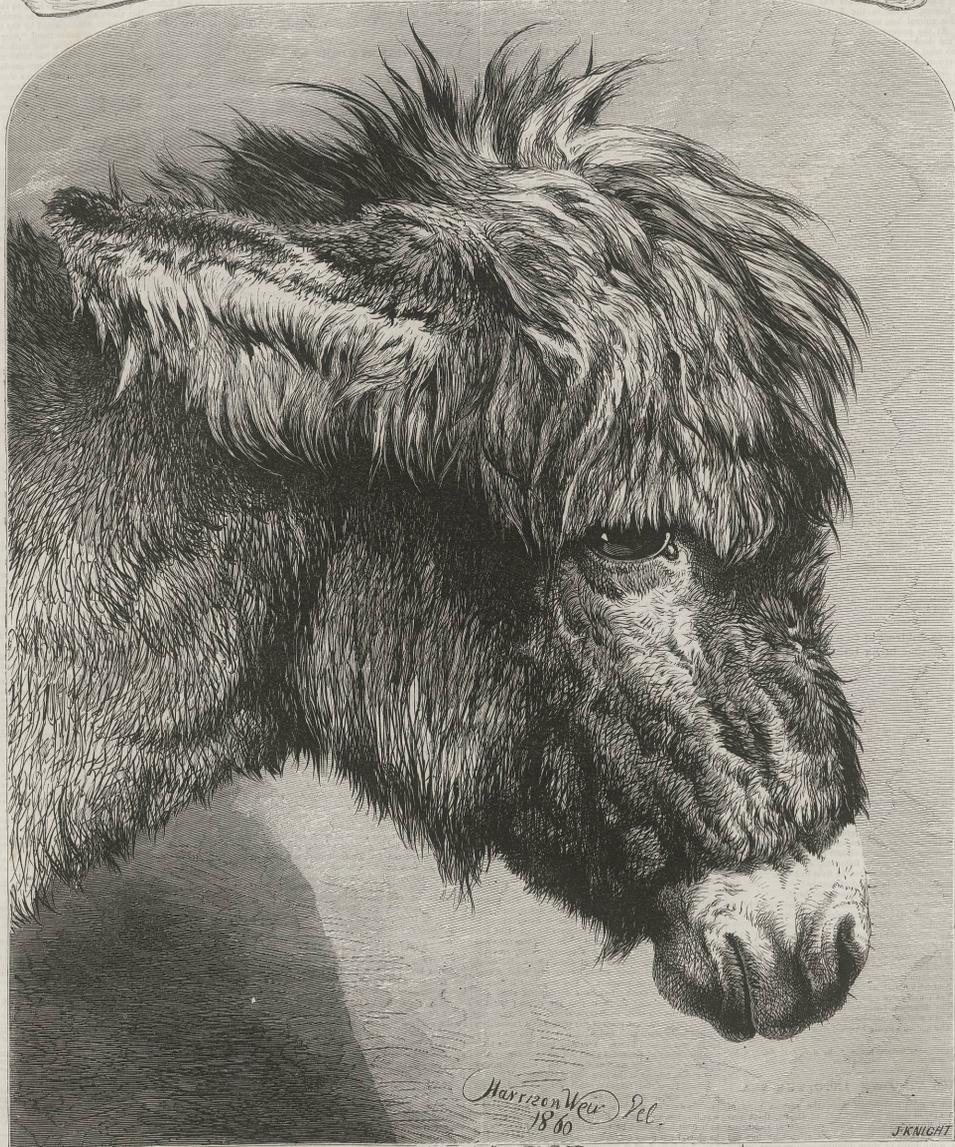


BRITISH WORKMAN



A PLEA FOR
THE POOR MAN'S FRIEND



"Take her to the poor-house," said a rough man.

"Take her to the poor-house," said a rough man to whom the question, "What's to be done with Maggie?" was asked. "Nobody's going to be bothered with her."

"The poor-house is a sad place for a sick and helpless child," answered one.

"For your child or mine," said the other, "but for this brat it will prove a blessed change. She'll be kept clean, have healthy food, and be doctored, which is more than can be said of her past condition."

There was reason in that, but still it didn't satisfy. The day following the day of death was made the day of burial. A few neighbours were at the miserable hotel, but none followed the dead cart as it bore the unshrouded remains to the pauper grave. Farmer Jones, after the funeral was over, placed John in his wagon and drove away, satisfied that he had done his part. Mrs. Ellis spoke to Katie with a hurried air—"Bid your sister good-bye," and then drew the terrified child apart ere scarcely their lips had touched in a sobbing farewell. Hastily others went out, some glancing at Maggie, and some resolutely refraining from a look, until all had gone. She was alone. Jess over the threshold, Joe Thompson, the wheelwright, passed, and said to the blacksmith's wife, who was hastening off with the rest—

"It's a cruel thing to leave her so."

"Then take her to the poor-house; she'll have to go there," answered the blacksmith's wife, springing away and leaving Joe behind.

For a little while the man stood with a puzzled air, then he turned back and went into the hotel again. Maggie with a painful effort, had raised herself to an upright position, and was sitting on the bed, straining her eyes upon the door out of which all had just departed. A vague terror had come into her thin, white face.

"Oh, Mr. Thompson," she cried, "don't leave me alone!"

Though rough in exterior, Joe Thompson, the wheelwright, had a heart, and it was very tender in some places. He liked children, and was pleased to have them come to his shop, where many a wagon was made or mended for the village lads without a drat on their hoarded expenses.

"No, dear," he answered, in a kind voice, going to the bed and stooping down over the child, "you shan't be left alone." Then he wrapped her with the gentleness some neighbour had brought; and, lifting her in his strong arms, bore her out into the air, and across the field that lay between the hotel and his home.

Now Joe Thompson's wife, who happened to be childless, was not a woman of the spotless temper nor much given to sentimental for others' good, and Joe had well-grounded doubts touching the nature of pressing he should receive on his arrival. Mrs. Thompson saw him approach-

ing from the window, and with raffling feathers, met him a few paces from the door, as he opened the garden gate and came in. He bore a precous burden, and he felt it to be his breast, a sphere of tenderness went out from him, and penetrated cord itself around them both, and was springing into life.

"What have you here?" sharply questioned Mrs. Thompson.

Joe felt the child start and shrink against him. He did not reply except by a look that was pleading and cautionary, that said, "Wait a moment for explanations, and be gentle," and, passing in, carried Maggie to the small chamber on the first floor, and laid her on a bed. Then stepping back to face with his wife in the passage-way outside. "You haven't brought home that sick brat!" Anger and astonishment were the tones of Mrs. Joe Thompson; her face was in a flame.

"I think women's hearts are sometimes very hard," said Joe. "I usually Joe Thompson got out of his wife's way, or kept rightly silent and non-committal when she fired up on any subject; it was with some surprise, therefore, that she now encountered a firmly set countenance and a resolute pair of eyes.

"Women's hearts are not half so hard as men's," replied Joe.

Joe saw, by a quick intuition, that his resolute bearing had impressed his wife, and he answered quickly, and with real indignation—"Be that as it may, every child in the funeral train turned her eyes steadily from her sick child's face, and when the cart went off with her

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and worked until dusky evening released him from labour. A light shining through the little chamber window, was the first object that attracted Joe's attention on turning towards the house. It was a good omen. The path led him by this window, and when opposite, he could not help pausing to look in. It was now dark enough outside to screen a little raised on a pillow, with the lamp shining full upon her face. Mrs. Thompson was by the bed talking to the child; and but her countenance was not seen.

From Maggie's face, therefore, Joe must read the character of their intercourse. He saw that her eyes were intently fixed upon his wife; that now and then few words came, as if in answers, from her lips; but her expression was sad and tender; but he saw nothing of bitterness or pain. A deep drawn breath was followed by one of relief as she lifted herself from his heart.

On entering, Joe did not go immediately to the little chamber. His heavy tread about the kitchen brought his wife somewhat hurriedly from the room where she had been with Maggie. Joe thought it best not to refer to the child, nor to manifest any concern in regard to her.

"How soon will appear be really?" he asked.

"Right soon," answered Mrs. Thompson, beginning to bustle about. There was no asperity in her voice.

After washing from his hands the dust and soil of work, Joe left the kitchen and went to the little bedroom. A pair of large bright eyes looked up at him tenderly, brightly. How his heart exulted in his bosom! Joe sat down, and now for the first time examining the child face carefully under the lamp-light, saw that it was an attractive face, and full of a child's sweetness which suffering had not been able to obliterate.

"You name is Maggie?" he said, as he sat down, and took her so little hand in his.

"Yes, sir."

Her eyes struck at a chord that quickened in a low strain of music.

"Have you been sick long?"

"Yes, sir."

What sweet patience was in her tone!

"Has the doctor been to see you, Maggie?"

"He used to come, Sir."

"But he hasn't come lately?"

"No, sir."

"Have you any pain, Maggie?"

"I have none now."

"This morning my side ached very much, and my back hurt when you carried me in your arms."

"It hurts you to be lifted or moved about, does it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your side doesn't ache now, does it Maggie?"

"No, sir. It does 't hurt me."

"Did it ache a great deal, Maggie?"

"Yes, sir; but it hasn't ached any more since I've been on the soft bed."

"The soft bed feels good?"

"O yes, sir—so good!"

"Supper is ready, said Mrs. Thompson, looking out into the room a little while afterwards.

Joe glanced from his wife's face to that of Maggie; she understood him and answered.

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Mrs. Thompson talking with the poor child.

referred to during the meal. At its close, Mrs. Thompson tasted a slice of bread, and softened it with milk and water; adding to this a cup of tea, she took them to Maggie, and held the small waiter on which she had placed them while the hungry child ate with every sign of pleasure.

"Is it good?" asked Mrs. Thompson, seeing with what a keen relish the food was taken.

The child paused with the cup in her hand, and answered with a look of gratitude that awoke to new life old human feelings which had been slumbering in Mrs. Thompson's heart for years.

"We'll keep her a day or two longer; she is so weak and helpless," said Mrs. Joe Thompson, in answer to her husband's remark, at breakfast time on the next morning, that he must step down and see the Guardians of the Poor about Maggie.

"She'll be so much in your way," said Joe.

"I shan't mind that for a day or two. Poor thing!"

Joe did not see the Guardians of the Poor on that day, on the next day, or on the day following! In fact, he never saw them at all on Maggie's account, for it was less than a week, Mrs. Joe Thompson would as soon have thought of taking up her abode herself in the poor-house, as sending Maggie there!

What light and blessing did that sick child bring to the home of Joe Thompson, the poor wheelwright! It had been dark, and cold, and miserable there for a long time, just because his wife had nothing to love and care for out of herself, and so became sour, irritable, ill-tempered, and self-sufficing in the dissolution of her woman's nature. Now the sweetness of that sick child looking ever to her in love, patience, and gratitude, was as honey to her soul, and she carried her in her heart as well as in her arms, a precious burden. As for Joe Thompson, there was not a man in all the neighbourhood who drank daily of a more precious wine of life than he. An angel had come into his house disguised as a sick, helpless, and miserable child, and filled all its dreary chambers with the sunshine of love.

"NO, MATES! I'LL NOT."

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