# The Unprofitable Servant

O. Henry

I am the richer by the acquaintance of four newspaper men. Singly, they are my encyclopedias, friends, mentors, and sometimes bankers. But now and then it happens that all of them will pitch upon the same printworthy incident of the passing earthly panorama and will send in reportorial constructions thereof to their respective journals. It is then that, for me, it is to laugh. For it seems that to each of them, trained and skilled as he may be, the same occurrence presents a different facet of the cut diamond, life.

One will have it (let us say) that Mme. Andre Macarte’s apartment was looted by six burglars, who descended via the fire-escape and bore away a ruby tiara valued at two thousand dollars and a five-hundred-dollar prize Spitz dog, which (in violation of the expectoration ordinance) was making free with the halls of the Wuttapesituckquesunoowetunquah Apartments.

My second “chiel” will take notes to the effect that while a friendly game of pinochle was in progress in the tenement rooms of Mrs. Andy McCarty, a lady guest named Ruby O’Hara threw a burglar down six flights of stairs, where he was pinioned and held by a two-thousand-dollar English bulldog amid a crowd of five hundred excited spectators.

My third chronicler and friend will gather the news threads of the happening in his own happy way; setting forth on the page for you to read that the house of Antonio Macartini was blown up at 6 A. M., by the Black Hand Society, on his refusing to leave two thousand dollars at a certain street corner, killing a pet five-hundred-dollar Pomeranian belonging to Alderman Rubitara’s little daughter (see photo and diagram opposite).

Number four of my history-makers will simply construe from the premises the story that while an audience of two thousand enthusiasts was listening to a Rubinstein concert on Sixth Street, a woman who said she was Mrs. Andrew M. Carter threw a brick through a plate-glass window valued at five hundred dollars. The Carter woman claimed that some one in the building had stolen her dog.

Now, the discrepancies in these registrations of the day’s doings need do no one hurt. Surely, one newspaper is enough for any man to prop against his morning water-bottle to fend off the smiling hatred of his wife’s glance. If he be foolish enough to read four he is no wiser than a Higher Critic.

I remember (probably as well as you do) having read the parable of the talents. A prominent citizen, about to journey into a far country, first hands over to his servants his goods. To one he gives five talents; to another two; to another one—to every man according to his several ability, as the text has it. There are two versions of this parable, as you well know. There may be more—I do not know.

When the p. c. returns he requires an accounting. Two servants have put their talents out at usury and gained one hundred per cent. Good. The unprofitable one simply digs up the talent deposited with him and hands it out on demand. A pattern of behavior for trust companies and banks, surely! In one version we read that he had wrapped it in a napkin and laid it away. But the commentator informs us that the talent mentioned was composed of 750 ounces of silver—about $900 worth. So the chronicler who mentioned the napkin, had either to reduce the amount of the deposit or do a lot of explaining about the size of the napery used in those davs. Therefore in his version we note that he uses the word “pound” instead of “talent.”

A pound of silver may very well be laid away—and carried away—in a napkin, as any hotel or restaurant man will tell you.

But let us get away from our mutton.

When the returned nobleman finds that the one-talented servant has nothing to hand over except the original fund entrusted to him, he is as angry as a multi-millionaire would be if some one should hide under his bed and make a noise like an assessment. He orders the unprofitable servant cast into outer darkness, after first taking away his talent and giving it to the one-hundred-per cent. financier, and breathing strange saws, saying: “From him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.” Which is the same as to say: “Nothing from nothing leaves nothing.”

And now closer draw the threads of parable, precept allegory, and narrative, leading nowhere if you will, or else weaving themselves into the little fiction story about Cliff McGowan and his one talent. There is but a definition to follow; and then the homely actors trip on.

Talent: A gift, endowment or faculty; some peculiar ability, power, or accomplishment, natural or acquired. (A metaphor borrowed from the parable in Matt. XXV. l4-30.)

In New York City to-day there are (estimated) 125,000 living creatures training for the stage. This does not include seals, pigs, dogs, elephants, prize-fighters, Carmens, mind-readers, or Japanese wrestlers. The bulk of them are in the ranks of the Four Million. Out of this number will survive a thousand.

Nine hundred of these will have attained their fulness of fame when they shall dubiously indicate with the point of a hatpin a blurred figure in a flashlight photograph of a stage tout ensemble with the proud commentary: “That’s me.”

Eighty, in the pinkest of (male) Louis XIV court costumes, shall welcome the Queen of the (mythical) Pawpaw Isles in a few well-memorized words, turning a tip-tilted nose upon the nine hundred.

Ten, in tiny lace caps, shall dust Ibsen furniture for six minutes after the rising of the curtain.

Nine shall attain the circuits, besieging with muscle, skill, eye, hand, voice, wit, brain, heel and toe the ultimate high walls of stardom.

One shall inherit Broadway. Sic venit gloria mundi.

Cliff McGowan and Mac McGowan were cousins. They lived on the West Side and were talented. Singing, dancing, imitations, trick bicycle riding, boxing, German and Irish dialect comedy, and a little sleight-of-hand and balancing of wheat straws and wheelbarrows on the ends of their chins came as easy to them as it is for you to fix your rat so it won’t show or to dodge a creditor through the swinging-doors of a well-lighted cafe—according as you may belong to the one or the other division of the greatest prestidigitators—the people. They were slim, pale, consummately self-possessed youths, whose fingernails were always irreproachably (and clothes seams reproachfully) shiny. Their conversation was in sentences so short that they made Kipling’s seem as long as court citations.

Having the temperament, they did no work. Any afternoon you could find them on Eighth Avenue either in front of Spinelli’s barber shop, Mike Dugan’s place, or the Limerick Hotel, rubbing their forefinger nails with dingy silk handkerchiefs. At any time, if you had happened to be standing, undecisive, near a pool-table, and Cliff and Mac had, casually, as it were, drawn near, mentioning something disinterestedly, about a game, well, indeed, would it have been for you had you gone your way, unresponsive. Which assertion, carefully considered, is a study in tense, punctuation, and advice to strangers.

Of all kinships it is likely that the closest is that of cousin. Between cousins there exist the ties of race, name, and favor—ties thicker than water, and yet not coagulated with the jealous precipitations of brotherhood or the enjoining obligations of the matrimonial yoke. You can bestow upon a cousin almost the interest and affection that you would give to a stranger; you need not feel toward him the contempt and embarrassment that you have for one of your father’s sons—it is the closer clan-feeling that sometimes makes the branch of a tree stronger than its trunk.

Thus were the two McGowans bonded. They enjoyed a quiet celebrity in their district, which was a strip west of Eighth Avenue with the Pump for its pivot. Their talents were praised in a hundred “joints”; their friendship was famed even in a neighborhood where men had been known to fight off the wives of their friends—when domestic onslaught was being made upon their friends by the wives of their friends. (Thus do the limitations of English force us to repetends.)

So, side by side, grim, sallow, lowering, inseparable, undefeated, the cousins fought their way into the temple of Art—art with a big A, which causes to intervene a lesson in geometry.

One night at about eleven o’clock Del Delano dropped into Mike’s place on Eighth Avenue. From that moment, instead of remaining a Place, the cafe became a Resort. It was as though King Edward had condescended to mingle with ten-spots of a different suit; or Joe Gans had casually strolled in to look over the Tuskegee School; or Mr. Shaw, of England, had accepted an invitation to read selections from “Rena, the Snow-bird” at an unveiling of the proposed monument to James Owen O’Connor at Chinquapin Falls, Mississippi. In spite of these comparisons, you will have to be told why the patronizing of a third-rate saloon on the West Side by the said Del Delano conferred such a specific honor upon the place.

Del Delano could not make his feet behave; and so the world paid him $300 a week to see them misconduct themselves on the vaudeville stage. To make the matter plain to you (and to swell the number of words), he was the best fancy dancer on any of the circuits between Ottawa and Corpus Christi. With his eyes fixed on vacancy and his feet apparently fixed on nothing, he “nightly charmed thousands,” as his press-agent incorrectly stated. Even taking night performance and matinee together, he scarcely could have charmed more than eighteen hundred, including those who left after Zora, the Nautch girl, had squeezed herself through a hoop twelve inches in diameter, and those who were waiting for the moving pictures.

But Del Delano was the West Side’s favorite; and nowhere is there a more loyal Side. Five years before our story was submitted to the editors, Del had crawled from some Tenth Avenue basement like a lean rat and had bitten his way into the Big Cheese. Patched, half-starved, cuffless, and as scornful of the Hook as an interpreter of Ibsen, he had danced his way into health (as you and I view it) and fame in sixteen minutes on Amateur Night at Creary’s (Variety) Theatre in Eighth Avenue. A bookmaker (one of the kind that talent wins with instead of losing) sat in the audience, asleep, dreaming of an impossible pick-up among the amateurs. After a snore, a glass of beer from the handsome waiter, and a temporary blindness caused by the diamonds of a transmontane blonde in Box E, the bookmaker woke up long enough to engage Del Delano for a three-weeks’ trial engagement fused with a trained-dog short-circuit covering the three Washingtons—Heights, Statue, and Square.

By the time this story was read and accepted, Del Delano was drawing his three-hundred dollars a week, which, divided by seven (Sunday acts not in costume being permissible), dispels the delusion entertained by most of us that we have seen better days. You can easily imagine the worshipful agitation of Eighth Avenue whenever Del Delano honored it with a visit after his terpsichorean act in a historically great and vilely ventilated Broadway theatre. If the West Side could claim forty-two minutes out of his forty-two weeks’ bookings every year, it was an occasion for bonfires and repainting of the Pump. And now you know why Mike’s saloon is a Resort, and no longer a simple Place.

Del Delano entered Mike’s alone. So nearly concealed in a fur-lined overcoat and a derby two sizes too large for him was Prince Lightfoot that you saw of his face only his pale, hatchet-edged features and a pair of unwinking, cold, light blue eyes. Nearly every man lounging at Mike’s bar recognized the renowned product of the West Side. To those who did not, wisdom was conveyed by prodding elbows and growls of one-sided introduction.

Upon Charley, one of the bartenders, both fame and fortune descended simultaneously. He had once been honored by shaking hands with the great Delano at a Seventh Avenue boxing bout. So with lungs of brass he now cried: “Hallo, Del, old man; what’ll it be?”

Mike, the proprietor, who was cranking the cash register, heard. On the next day he raised Charley’s wages five a week.

Del Delano drank a pony beer, paying for it carelessly out of his nightly earnings of $42.85 and 5/7c. He nodded amiably but coldly at the long line of Mike’s patrons and strolled past then into the rear room of the cafe. For he heard in there sounds pertaining to his own art—the light, stirring staccato of a buck-and-wing dance.

In the back room Mac McGowan was giving a private exhibition of the genius of his feet. A few young men sat at tables looking on critically while they amused themselves seriously with beer. They nodded approval at some new fancy steps of Mac’s own invention.

At the sight of the great Del Delano, the amateur’s feet stuttered, blundered, clicked a few times, and ceased to move. The tongues of one’s shoes become tied in the presence of the Master. Mac’s sallow face took on a slight flush.

From the uncertain cavity between Del Delano’s hat brim and the lapels of his high fur coat collar came a thin puff of cigarette smoke and then a voice:

“Do that last step over again, kid. And don’t hold your arms quite so stiff. Now, then!”

Once more Mac went through his paces. According to the traditions of the man dancer, his entire being was transformed into mere feet and legs. His gaze and expression became cataleptic; his body, unbending above the waist, but as light as a cork, bobbed like the same cork dancing on the ripples of a running brook. The beat of his heels and toes pleased you like a snare-drum obligato. The performance ended with an amazing clatter of leather against wood that culminated in a sudden flat-footed stamp, leaving the dancer erect and as motionless as a pillar of the colonial portico of a mansion in a Kentucky prohibition town. Mac felt that he had done his best and that Del Delano would turn his back upon him in derisive scorn.

An approximate silence followed, broken only by the mewing of a cafe cat and the hubbub and uproar of a few million citizens and transportation facilities outside.

Mac turned a hopeless but nervy eye upon Del Delano’s face. In it he read disgust, admiration, envy, indifference, approval, disappointment, praise, and contempt.

Thus, in the countenances of those we hate or love we find what we most desire or fear to see. Which is an assertion equalling in its wisdom and chiaroscuro the most famous sayings of the most foolish philosophers that the world has ever known.

Del Delano retired within his overcoat and hat. In two minutes he emerged and turned his left side to Mac. Then he spoke.

“You’ve got a foot movement, kid, like a baby hippopotamus trying to side-step a jab from a humming-bird. And you hold yourself like a truck driver having his picture taken in a Third Avenue photograph gallery. And you haven’t got any method or style. And your knees are about as limber as a couple of Yale pass-keys. And you strike the eye as weighing, let us say, 450 pounds while you work. But, say, would you mind giving me your name?”

“McGowan,” said the humbled amateur—“Mac McGowan.”

Delano the Great slowly lighted a cigarette and continued, through its smoke:

“In other words, you’re rotten. You can’t dance. But I’ll tell you one thing you’ve got.”

“Throw it all off of your system while you’re at it,” said Mac. “What’ve I got?”

“Genius,” said Del Delano. “Except myself, it’s up to you to be the best fancy dancer in the United States, Europe, Asia, and the colonial possessions of all three.”

“Smoke up!” said Mac McGowan.

“Genius,” repeated the Master—“you’ve got a talent for genius. Your brains are in your feet, where a dancer’s ought to be. You’ve been self-taught until you’re almost ruined, but not quite. What you need is a trainer. I’ll take you in hand and put you at the top of the profession. There’s room there for the two of us. You may beat me,” said the Master, casting upon him a cold, savage look combining so much rivalry, affection, justice, and human hate that it stamped him at once as one of the little great ones of the earth—“you may beat me; but I doubt it. I’ve got the start and the pull. But at the top is where you belong. Your name, you say, is Robinson?”

“McGowan,” repeated the amateur, “Mac McGowan.”

“It don’t matter,” said Delano. “Suppose you walk up to my hotel with me. I’d like to talk to you. Your footwork is the worst I ever saw, Madigan—but—well, I’d like to talk to you. You may not think so, but I’m not so stuck up. I came off of the West Side myself. That overcoat cost me eight hundred dollars; but the collar ain’t so high but what I can see over it. I taught myself to dance, and I put in most of nine years at it before I shook a foot in public. But I had genius. I didn’t go too far wrong in teaching myself as you’ve done. You’ve got the rottenest method and style of anybody I ever saw.”

“Oh, I don’t think much of the few little steps I take,” said Mac, with hypocritical lightness.

“Don’t talk like a package of self-raising buckwheat flour,” said Del Delano. “You’ve had a talent handed to you by the Proposition Higher Up; and it’s up to you to do the proper thing with it. I’d like to have you go up to my hotel for a talk, if you will.”

In his rooms in the King Clovis Hotel, Del Delano put on a scarlet house coat bordered with gold braid and set out Apollinaris and a box of sweet crackers.

Mac’s eye wandered.

“Forget it,” said Del. “Drink and tobacco may be all right for a man who makes his living with his hands; but they won’t do if you’re depending on your head or your feet. If one end of you gets tangled, so does the other. That’s why beer and cigarettes don’t hurt piano players and picture painters. But you’ve got to cut ‘em out if you want to do mental or pedal work. Now, have a cracker, and then we’ll talk some.”

“All right,” said Mac. “I take it as an honor, of course, for you to notice my hopping around. Of course I’d like to do something in a professional line. Of course I can sing a little and do card tricks and Irish and German comedy stuff, and of course I’m not so bad on the trapeze and comic bicycle stunts and Hebrew monologues and–-”

“One moment,” interrupted Del Delano, “before we begin. I said you couldn’t dance. Well, that wasn’t quite right. You’ve only got two or three bad tricks in your method. You’re handy with your feet, and you belong at the top, where I am. I’ll put you there. I’ve got six weeks continuous in New York; and in four I can shape up your style till the booking agents will fight one another to get you. And I’ll do it, too. I’m of, from, and for the West Side. ‘Del Delano’ looks good on bill-boards, but the family name’s Crowley. Now, Mackintosh—McGowan, I mean—you’ve got your chance—fifty times a better one than I had.”

“I’d be a shine to turn it down,” said Mac. “And I hope you understand I appreciate it. Me and my cousin Cliff McGowan was thinking of getting a try-out at Creary’s on amateur night a month from to-morrow.”

“Good stuff!” said Delano. “I got mine there. Junius T. Rollins, the booker for Kuhn & Dooley, jumped on the stage and engaged me after my dance. And the boards were an inch deep in nickels and dimes and quarters. There wasn’t but nine penny pieces found in the lot.”

“I ought to tell you,” said Mac, after two minutes of pensiveness, “that my cousin Cliff can beat me dancing. We’ve always been what you might call pals. If you’d take him up instead of me, now, it might be better. He’s invented a lot of steps that I can’t cut.”

“Forget it,” said Delano. “Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays of every week from now till amateur night, a month off, I’ll coach you. I’ll make you as good as I am; and nobody could do more for you. My act’s over every night at 10:15. Half an hour later I’ll take you up and drill you till twelve. I’ll put you at the top of the bunch, right where I am. You’ve got talent. Your style’s bum; but you’ve got the genius. You let me manage it. I’m from the West Side myself, and I’d rather see one of the same gang win out before I would an East-Sider, or any of the Flatbush or Hackensack Meadow kind of butt-iners. I’ll see that Junius Rollins is present on your Friday night; and if he don’t climb over the footlights and offer you fifty a week as a starter, I’ll let you draw it down from my own salary every Monday night. Now, am I talking on the level or am I not?”

Amateur night at Creary’s Eighth Avenue Theatre is cut by the same pattern as amateur nights elsewhere. After the regular performance the humblest talent may, by previous arrangement with the management, make its debut upon the public stage. Ambitious non-professionals, mostly self-instructed, display their skill and powers of entertainment along the broadest lines. They may sing, dance, mimic, juggle, contort, recite, or disport themselves along any of the ragged boundary lines of Art. From the ranks of these anxious tyros are chosen the professionals that adorn or otherwise make conspicuous the full-blown stage. Press-agents delight in recounting to open-mouthed and close-eared reporters stories of the humble beginnings of the brilliant stars whose orbits they control.

Such and such a prima donna (they will tell you) made her initial bow to the public while turning handsprings on an amateur night. One great matinee favorite made his debut on a generous Friday evening singing coon songs of his own composition. A tragedian famous on two continents and an island first attracted attention by an amateur impersonation of a newly landed Scandinavian peasant girl. One Broadway comedian that turns ‘em away got a booking on a Friday night by reciting (seriously) the graveyard scene in “Hamlet.”

Thus they get their chance. Amateur night is a kindly boon. It is charity divested of almsgiving. It is a brotherly hand reached down by members of the best united band of coworkers in the world to raise up less fortunate ones without labelling them beggars. It gives you the chance, if you can grasp it, to step for a few minutes before some badly painted scenery and, during the playing by the orchestra of some ten or twelve bars of music, and while the soles of your shoes may be clearly holding to the uppers, to secure a salary equal to a Congressman’s or any orthodox minister’s. Could an ambitious student of literature or financial methods get a chance like that by spending twenty minutes in a Carnegie library? I do not not trow so.

But shall we look in at Creary’s? Let us say that the specific Friday night had arrived on which the fortunate Mac McGowan was to justify the flattering predictions of his distinguished patron and, incidentally, drop his silver talent into the slit of the slot-machine of fame and fortune that gives up reputation and dough. I offer, sure of your acquiescence, that we now forswear hypocritical philosophy and bigoted comment, permitting the story to finish itself in the dress of material allegations—a medium more worthy, when held to the line, than the most laborious creations of the word-milliners….

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easily among the wings with his patron, the great Del Delano. For, whatever footlights shone in the City-That-Would-Be-Amused, the freedom of their unshaded side was Del’s. And if he should take up an amateur— see? and bring him around—see? and, winking one of his cold blue eyes, say to the manager: “Take it from me—he’s got the goods—see?” you wouldn’t expect that amateur to sit on an unpainted bench sudorifically awaiting his turn, would you? So Mac strolled around largely with the nonpareil; and the seven waited, clammily, on the bench.

A giant in shirt-sleeves, with a grim, kind face in which many stitches had been taken by surgeons from time to time, i. e., with a long stick, looped at the end. He was the man with the Hook. The manager, with his close-smoothed blond hair, his one-sided smile, and his abnormally easy manner, pored with patient condescension over the difficult program of the amateurs. The last of the professional turns—the Grand March of the Happy Huzzard—had been completed; the last wrinkle and darn of their blue silkolene cotton tights had vanished from the stage. The man in the orchestra who played the kettle-drum, cymbals, triangle, sandpaper, whang-doodle, hoofbeats, and catcalls, and fired the pistol shots, had wiped his brow. The illegal holiday of the Romans had arrived.

While the orchestra plays the famous waltz from “The Dismal Wife,” let us bestow two hundred words upon the psychology of the audience.

The orchestra floor was filled by People. The boxes contained Persons. In the galleries was the Foreordained Verdict. The claque was there as it had originated in the Stone Age and was afterward adapted by the French. Every Micky and Maggie who sat upon Creary’s amateur bench, wise beyond their talents, knew that their success or doom lay already meted out to them by that crowded, whistling, roaring mass of Romans in the three galleries. They knew that the winning or the losing of the game for each one lay in the strength of the “gang” aloft that could turn the applause to its favorite. On a Broadway first night a wooer of fame may win it from the ticket buyers over the heads of the cognoscenti. But not so at Creary’s. The amateur’s fate is arithmetical. The number of his supporting admirers present at his try-out decides it in advance. But how these outlying Friday nights put to a certain shame the Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and matinees of the Broadway stage you should know….

(Here the manuscript ends.)