

THE POOR RELATION

AN AUTHENTIC STORY FROM REAL LIFE

[AUTHOR UNKNOWN]

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It was in the early days of Codman county,¹ that Eldred Worthington² swung his axe upon his shoulder, and departed to seek his fortune in her almost untrodden wilds. Like thousands of others, the early pioneers of our land, he ‘kept bachelor’s hall,’³ until he had ‘made an opening, and reared his rustic cot.’ Then, with buoyant heart, he returned to the place of his nativity, to claim the plighted hand of Miss Abiah Perley, to become his help-mate⁴ in his future home.

To those who know any thing of the difficulties encountered by the first settlers, it will be unnecessary to portray the toils and hardships they had to overcome, before the savage⁵ was driven farther back to his forest-lair. They went forward, growing with the growth of the place; and, in a series of years, rearing a family of eight sons and four daughters. It was a natural wish of the parents that their children should not suffer for want of education, as they themselves had done in early life; and hence they yielded to their particular wishes. Benjamin, the eldest, desired to be a limb of the law; the second was for physic, and had his choice; and Thomas, the third, also, was much gratified, when arrangements were made for his departure to a neighboring sea-port,⁶ to serve a mercantile

¹ This could be a reference to Codman Square District in Boston, Massachusetts, which is known for being a major civic center and is on the National Register of Historic Places (Byrne).

² Although this story claims it’s “an authentic story from real life,” most of the names and places do not have a researchable connection to real life and are probably fictitious unless otherwise noted.

³ The maintaining of residence where a bachelor or of a man whose wife is absent (Merriam-Webster). Men who kept bachelor’s hall were typically their “own cook, butler and man-of-all-work” (Billings, 1892).

⁴ A help-mate denotes a companion who gives help and is “chiefly applied to a wife or husband” (Oxford English Dictionary).

⁵ A common name for Native Americans.

⁶ England.

apprenticeship. His father was so fortunate as to place him in the house of an old acquaintance, Mr. John Howard, one of the first merchants of the city. This gentleman, having commenced life with nothing but his hands, had become extensively concerned in commerce. It was the very field for the mercantile propensity of Thomas. He devoted himself with unceasing assiduity; won the confidence of his employer, was made supercargo of his vessels in several voyages; and family, as the good ship Ajax⁷ was bound on an East India voyage, he had bade farewell to his friends, and went forth upon the distant seas. He was faithful to the important trusts reposed in him. The ship was laden and ready to return; when, to the sad dismay of all on board, who were greatly attached to him, he could not be found! Every effort was made, for weeks and weeks, but the ship was finally compelled to sail without him.

Sad was the news for his disconsolate parents, and his good master, Mr. Howard. Conjecture followed conjecture, but all was mysterious and appalling. The Ajax returned again to the Indies. The strictest injunctions were made by Mr. Howard, that no efforts should be wanting in the endeavor to discover the fate which had befallen his young friend. Captain Bradshaw, a most excellent man, was indefatigable; but deeply did he deplore the day that once more compelled him to weigh anchor, without the slightest tidings to cheer the anxious parents. Though no voyage was made to the Indies for many years afterward, without all possible inquiries, yet the conviction had almost ripened into certainty, that the young man had been murdered, perhaps in the hope of booty, at his last visit to the shore, among an unknown people.

Years rolled away. The region of Codman county advanced rapidly in settlement, enterprise, and industry. Where once stood the farm of the elder Worthington, now the thriving, bustling, and enterprising village of Weckford shot up its aspiring head, with its immense factories, its capacious stores, and rich and tasteful dwellings. It was upon the banks of one of the noblest rivers in the world, where the elder Worthington had sagaciously sat himself down, relying upon his axe and his arm. But how little did he think, that ere fifty years had rolled away, the acres he then reclaimed would become the abode of thousands, and himself thereby rendered one of the wealthiest men of Codman county. Yet this is but one case of that talismanic power which has converted the forest into cities, and given to the poor great riches, in the mighty march of enterprise, industry, and intelligence, in the marvelous realm of the New World.⁸ Weckford had become a place of great note. It was a central point of trade for the surrounding country, which was peopling with astonishing rapidity; and all contributed to give an importance to the family of the Worthingtons. They were not only very rich, but were eminent in the estimation of 'all the region round about.' The sons had grown up under all the advantages which wealth and connexion could impart.

⁷ A ship that sailed to Liverpool bringing back newspapers and news from London (*Working Man's Advocate*, 1831). There was another ship under the name of Ajax that would transport emigrants to the United States (*Trumpet and Universalist Magazine*, 1833).

⁸ A name for the Western Hemisphere, specifically the Americas, helping to distinguish them from the Old World of the Eastern Hemisphere consisting of Europe, Africa, and Asia (Oxford English Dictionary).

They had studied learned professions, as a matter of course, and settled in Weckford, relying upon the immense wealth which the extraordinary rise of property had poured into the lap of the family. Honors thickened upon them. Benjamin was twice elected to congress, and all the brothers were at times elevated to favor in the municipality, or the honors of state partialities.

The father and mother of this numerous family were now in the vale of years. The prudence, economy, and simplicity, which won the esteem of all, and laid the foundation of their wealth, continued to shed a benign influence over their declining days. They were the very antipodes⁹ of the new races who had come upon the stage of human action; and often did they deplore, in the bosom of their own domestic circle, that heartless etiquette and cold formality, which had rendered their children so ambitious to outshine others, and to be looked up to the exclusives of Weckford. But there was a deeper feeling still, which hung heavily over their wasting years; the painful disappearance of their son, who had ever been their favorite, but who had also been regarded by the brothers and sisters with that unnatural jealousy which such a feeling is apt to beget in the minds of mere worldlings. In October of this year, the aged veteran was forewarned, by the insidious influences of flickering mortality, that he was soon to be ‘gathered to his fathers:’¹⁰

‘For time, though old, is strong in flight;
Years had rolled swiftly by,
And Autumn’s falling leaf foretold,
The good old man must die;’¹¹

and, with the prudence, foresight, and calmness, which had actuated him through all his well-spent life, he sent for his estimable attorney, the honorable Phillip Longfellow, and by his ‘last will and testament’ divided his immense estate equally among his children; but an especial provision was inserted, reserving in the hands of a trustee, during the period of twenty years, an equal portion of the whole estate of Thomas, the income of which was to be annually divided among all the children. The trustee was to use all diligence in the almost ‘forlorn hope’ of endeavoring to gain tidings of the long-lost son. The widow, beside her ‘thirds,’ had some benefices which were to go to the lost son, should he ever be discovered; but if no intelligence should be gained, within the twenty years, then the whole reservations were to be equally divided among the other children.

Winter at length came, with its awful severity to lengthened life, and the good old Mr. Worthington, mourned by all the villagers, was followed to the family vault, in the Oaklands of Mount Pleasant,¹² at the ripe age of ninety-eight years. There is a wedded sympathy between those who have been united in true love, that but ripens with the lapse of time. Sixty-nine years had passed away, since Miss Abiah Perley left her paternal abode, for

⁹ People who live opposite to each other on the globe (Oxford English Dictionary). A possible reference to those living in Australia and New Zealand.

¹⁰ A reference to “gathered unto his people” from Genesis 25:8, meaning he would soon die and be reunited with family in heaven.

¹¹ Lyrics from the song “Fine Old English Gentlemen” (Reddall, Dudley).

¹² This could be a reference to “one of Philadelphia’s most noted Colonial manor-houses” (Eberlein, 1912).

the rude but rural cot of Weckfrod. She had lived, during this long period, in the long bonds of holy love, a patten of affection, kindness, and peace; and the death of her husband severed a chord which nothing on earth had power to unite. It weaned her affections from this world, and she sighed only to join him in that 'better country'¹³ to which, in the fullness of time, he had been called away; and in less than two years afterward, the last rites of earth were performed over her departed spirit, as her mortal ashes were laid beside his to whom her soul had so long been wedded.

Several years had now elapsed since the death of the parents. Weckford had continued to advance in population and wealth; and, as a consequence, the Worthingtons had grown richer and richer. They had indeed attained the apparent summit of their ambition, for non assumed to rival them in fashion, wealth, or importance. They were the leaders of the ton, and the very apex of the élite, in all things.

There were two principal streets in the village of Weckford, stretching along the banks of the river, as far as the eye could reach; and the offices, stores, dwellings, and factories of the Worthingtons, their children, and connexions, were every where to be seen. Many of the mansions, along Pleasant-street, were embellished with balustrades, where the residents, at the close of the labors of the day, came forth to enjoy the sweet odors from the flowers of the gardens, of the ornamental trees of the walks, and the cooling breezes from off the beautiful river. It was at such an hour, that a stranger, clad in miserable tatters, with a long beard, disheveled ringlets, and leaning upon a rough stick, cut from the woods, tottered slowly and feebly into the village.

'Will you tell me,' said the stranger, inquiring at the door of a descendant of the Worthingtons, 'where the dwelling of Thomas Worthington, Esq. is?'

'It is that noble edifice which you see yonder, beyond the long row of factories.'

The inquirer moved slowly on, apparently scarce able to sustain himself from physical imbecility. He was met at the outer gate by a servant.

'Will you tell your master that a distant relation, from across the water, who has experienced many misfortunes, desires to see him?'

The servant returned, and ushered the traveler into the outer hall; and in a few minutes, the owner of the mansion appeared.

'I am, Sir, your supplicant,' said the stranger. 'You doubtless recollect, that a brother of your mother, residing in Scotland, had many sons. Misfortunes have thickened upon one of them. He is poor, and, from a recent loss of every thing by shipwreck, is now penniless. He begs a lodging at your hands, and something wherewith to clothe his almost naked fame.'

'I have nothing to give to stragglers,' said the lord of the mansion. 'Most persons like you are impostors.'

'I am no imposter,' said the petitioner; 'here is proof that I am not,' taking a letter from the American consul from him pocket; 'but I am your poor unfortunate cousin; and if you will but relieve my pressing wants, Providence may put it into my power to reward your kindness.'

¹³ A reference to heaven. Many people "died in the faith of a better country, even and heavenly" (Star, 1847).

‘I repeat, I have nothing to give; and I should advise you to get some daily work to supply your wants.’

The stranger heaved a deep sigh, and left the house. He tottered on. It was impossible to pass many dwellings, without encountering one owned and occupied by a Worthington, or his descendant. He called upon many; told his misfortunes, and solicited relief; but all were deaf to his petition, and most of them shut the door in his face.

Late in the evening, an old Quaker gentleman, who accidentally heard the ‘poor relation’s’ story, while passing the door of one of the Worthingtons, offered him a lodging and supper. He went with the benevolent old gentleman; and on the following morning he again wandered forth to renew his calls of the day before. It was observed that he was very particular not to neglect to call upon every son of the deceased Mr. Worthington. He expended several days in this way, but every where there appeared the same undisguised dead of a ‘poor relation.’

At length, he sought the magnificent dwelling of the Honorable Benjamin Worthington, which was situated about two miles from the main settlement of the village of Weckford. It stood upon a commanding eminence, which overlooked the village, and was justly regarded as one of the most delightful rural retreats that the country could boast. After going through the usual ceremonies of the door, he was introduced to the business-office of the ‘Oaklands Mansion.’ Presently, the Hon. Mr. Worthington appeared. The stranger repeated his solicitation for relief, and this claim as a relation; but here, too, he met nothing but coldness and neglect.

‘Then,’ said the stranger, ‘if you will not relieve the wants of your most unfortunate cousin, perhaps I can tell you something that will move your pity. You had a brother Thomas, who, many long years ago, most mysteriously disappeared?’

‘Yes,’ said the honorable gentleman; but he is no doubt dead, long and long ago.’

‘He is NOT dead!’ said the stranger, ‘but after an age of misery and misfortunes, he has returned in poverty and in rags; and now solicits you to clothes and feed him.’

‘Impossible!’ exclaimed the Honorable Mr. Worthington.

‘Here is a mark upon my arm, received by a burn, when a child, which proves the truth of what I say,’ said the long-lost son.

Horror seemed to convulse the frame of the lord of the Oaklands. ‘Take this note,’ said he; ‘go to the Swan Hotel, a small tavern directly upon the road, about two miles beyond this, and I will come to you with some clothes, and money to provide you a passage over the seas.’

The stranger departed; but not to the Swan inn did he bend his footsteps. He wandered to the confines of Weckford, where he was told that a distant relation of the Worthingtons lived, in a small cottage, a few miles beyond. Here he resolved once more to make himself known. He did so; and found the inmate, the widow of a cousin who had come to this country, and settled many years before, in a neighboring sea-port. He had died, leaving a very small property to his widow, and an only child. Mrs. Amelia Perley – for this was the name of the young widow – was overjoyed to see a relative of her ‘dear husband,’ although in rags. She bade him welcome to her table; provided some proper clothing for him at once; and with a sweet smile, that added new pleasure to the offer, she proffered him a home beneath her humble cottage, until he should find one more congenial. The poor stranger accepted the favor the kind-hearted widow, with becoming thankfulness, and

remained under her roof a short time; but at length suddenly and mysteriously disappeared! Wither he had gone, his kind hostess knew not a little delighted to be so easily rid of a 'poor relation,' who might have been a burthen,¹⁴ and a shame; but most of all was rejoiced the Hon. Benjamin Worthington, to whom the disclosure of his relationship had been so alarming.

Time passed on, and the disappearance of the mendicant¹⁵ was forgotten in the whirl of fashion, business, and pleasure; although the honorable elder brother was now and then visited by a painful recollection of the 'unfortunate' mark upon the arm of the returned wanderer.

It was a holiday in Weckford. Business was suspended, and the people were abroad, participating in the pastimes of the day. A superb carriage, with four white horses, and servants in livery, drove through Pleasant-street, and stopped at the 'Mansion-House,' the first hotel of Weckford. Parlors were taken in the name of 'Mr. Edmund Perley, and servants from Scotland.' Forthwith it went upon the wings of rumor, that 'the rich Mr. Perley had arrived from Scotland.' As the Worthingtons were aware that the relations of their mother were reputed to be very rich in Scotland, they gathered to the hotel, in great numbers, to offer their respects, and solicit the pleasure of the Honorable Mr. Perley's acquaintance. Day after day did the Worthingtons, and all the descendants, down to the lowest contiguity of blood, pour into the "Mansion-House," to 'beg the honor of the rich and Honorable Mr. Perley's visits.' The carriage of the 'Hon. Benjamin Worthington' was out from the Oaklands, and the barouche of 'Edward Worthington, Esq.' from the 'Worthington Mansion.' There was neither end to the family outpouring, nor to their solicitude to bestow attentions. The stranger was polite in his replies; and at last, in return, he invited all his kind relative to honor him as his levee, at 'the Mansion.'

There never was such an outpouring of Worthingtons. The great halls of the 'Mansion-House' were filled to repletion. All was gayety, beauty, and fashion. It was a magnificent assemblage of the richest and most respectable families of the town; and each one was most anxious to outstrip the others in doing honors to 'the rich and distinguished Mr. Perley, from abroad;' when the 'poor relation' made his appearance, in the midst of the brilliant assembly, dressed in precisely the same clothes in which he wandered through the village, and holding in his hand't he same uncouth stick, cut from the wilds, which supported his feeble steps from house to house!

It would be impossible to delineate the various countenances which were exhibited. We must leave the filling up of that picture to the imagination of the reader. It is only necessary to add, that the stranger was the long-lost Thomas, who had made an immense fortune in the Indies. He now immediately took steps to carry out the will of his beloved parent, receiving all the property it gave him. In the year following, he purchased the delightful retreat of 'Auburn Grove,' where he erected a charming residence. He soon after led to the altar the amiable and affectionate young widow, Mrs. Amelia Perley, who was not

¹⁴ Alternate/antiquated spelling of "burden" (Oxford English Dictionary).

¹⁵ A member of a Christian religious order who lived solely on alms; a holy man or woman who begs for food (Oxford English Dictionary).

too proud to welcome him to her humble cottage as a relative of her departed husband, even though he appeared there in the borrowed tatters of poverty and misfortune. It was a lesson which is often repeated by the villagers at Weckford, and will do no harm by being repeated elsewhere.



EDITOR'S NOTE

The year this story was published saw the Panic of 1837; a time of financial crisis that grew into a major recession, lasting until the mid-1840s. The economic expansion that happened prior to this from 1834-1836 resulted in the prices of land, cotton, and slaves sharply increasing. State governments and people started hoarding specie (gold and silver) and issued bank notes to absolve their debt. Jackson issued the Specie Circular, which “commanded the Treasury to no longer accept paper notes as a payment” when he became alarmed with the growing number of bank notes (United States History). Because of this, banks restricted credit and called in loans, which resulted in people withdrawing their funds at a rapid rate. Unemployment soon spread throughout the country and food riots occurred in various cities. Martin Van Buren’s administration took a lax position in responding to the nation’s problems, which contributed to the recession lasting till the mid 1840 and probably cost him a reelection in 1840 (United States History).

The idea of social work gained momentum in the early 19th century. Benjamin Franklin could be viewed as one of the first people who started the idea of charity and volunteerism in late 18th-century America. “When fires threatened to destroy the city, he organized the nation's first volunteer fire company, an idea so compelling that cities up and down the Atlantic seaboard adopted it,” (Neuman). The mass migrations to the United States in the 1800s drew more attention to the need for volunteerism that already had growing roots. With a great influx of people, many neighborhoods became over populated, resulting in social problems and illnesses (Gehlert). In the mid 1800s, people took action to combat these negative consequences of migration by building dispensaries and infirmaries. From this foundation blossomed the idea of charity and giving back to those less fortunate, which is illustrated in this story.

This fable tells a moralizing tale of a family who turned their back on a long lost brother in hopes of retaining the wealth their parents willed to them. The background context of the Panic of 1837 and the increasing popularity of charity could explain why the author wanted to illustrate two greedy brothers who brushed off an impoverished man claiming to be their lost brother, Thomas. If they acknowledged their familial ties to the disheveled mendicant, they would have had to give up some of their wealth, something risky to do during a financial crisis, and shows them turning a shy eye to the idea of charity. Although the two brothers eventually had to relinquish what was willed to Thomas, they might have gained even more wealth if they accepted him when he was in a state of supposed poverty. They never knew he made a fortune from the Indies and Thomas shared his fortune with the person who took him in when no one else would, conveying the idea that a person will get more out of charity than what he originally put into it.

The structure of this story is reminiscent of a wide variety of fairytales, such as “The Three Feathers,” and “The Twelve Huntsmen.” These stories have specific numerical representations for the main elements in the stories, like the three brothers in “The Poor Relation,” as well as a test the characters have to go through. Although “The Poor Relation” lacks more fantastical elements, such as mystical creatures and magic, it keeps one of the most important elements that have made these stories so popular: a lesson at the end. A factor that gives this story a competitive edge with the other traditional fables is it provides commentary on economic struggles and a cautionary lesson on deciding between selflessness

and greed. With poverty and volatile economic cycles still being factors affecting people in the United States today, this story provides a timeless insight on the idea of giving charity to those less fortunate, especially in tumultuous financial times.

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