

[The Greatest of These is Charity]

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LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: THE GREATEST OF THESE IS CHARITY (see also [A Day with the Pattons?])

Date of First Writing January 9, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Mr. Rob Padgett (white)

Fictitious Name Bert Patton

Street Address None

Place Lykesland, South Carolina

Occupation Rural Mail Carrier and Farmer

Name of Writer Mattie T. Jones

Name of Reviser State Office

“Well, I'll be darned! Sadie, what's this you're using for a fire poker this morning?” Marvin Patton asked, as the other guests circled about the oak burning in the brick fireplace.

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"This is Father's sword he carried for three years in the Confederate War," his sister explained, while she stirred the coals with the piece of steel. "Haven't you ever seen it before? It is a funny place to have a sword. One of these days I'm going to polish it and

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send it to the relic room in Columbia. Father has a manuscript there, and it's an interesting paper, too. Notes on his soldier-boy experiences, written from memory when he was seventy."

"And this," Bert added, as he opened a drawer of a nearby secretary, "is the pistol Dad carried in his pocket all those years."

Listen, Son," exclaimed Marvin, "don't point that thing in this direction; turn it the other way. It's the unloaded gun that shoots, you know."

"The piano is another one of our antiques," Miss Sadie said. "It's way over a hundred years old, but still has a sweet tone. It was bought for my mother when she was just a child."

"Sadie, for goodness sake, forget about antiques for a while," Marvin urged impatiently. "Christine, Pete, and Susan ought to be here today, so as to make the family unit complete. We're either too busy or too confounded indifferent these days to ever get the whole family together, it seems. Well, Bobbee, good morning. Dinner ready? And how are you, Bert, old boy? Glad to see you both."

"Mighty glad we could come. We stay pretty close round home since the children are so scattered."

At the table, in response to various compliments on the dinner, which were addressed especially to Bobbee, she remarked a bit deprecatingly, "Preparing a meal is no new experience to me. We had seven girls at home, and I'm telling you, Mother believed in

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that school of experience we hear about. Had lots o' company, too. I was down home yesterday, thirty-eight people there for dinner. But it's no trouble to get up our meals here. We raise most of our eats right here on the farm. We have plenty of corn, hams, butter, milk, chickens, and eggs. We milk three cows now, and we raised a thousand biddies right here on the 3 yard last year. And we always have a good garden of vegetables, winter and summer.

"It's a good thing we have things close to hand, or in jars in the pantry. We never know when Bert's going to bring in a carload of folks to eat. Christmas day, when the table was all laid and dinner ready to serve, in come Bert with five little children whose mother had died. We just brought in extra tables and all ate at the same time. All the children around here think Bert belongs to them. And we like 'em to feel that way. Everybody who gets in trouble comes straight to Bert for help and he's never turned anybody away yet."

"We used to worry," Marvin retorted cynically, "but not any more. The President will feed you if you run out. I'm glad Congress has stopped some of this wild spending, for a while, at least. He's thrown away millions of the people's hard earned money. And he's always springing something new. Business men never knew where they're at. Dad blame it all, I'm tired of it myself."

"Look here, Marvin, you're not supposed to speak evil of dignitaries," Miss Sadie admonished. "Roosevelt's done lots o' good and made things a lot easier for poor people. I declare you've associated with that millionaire son-in-law of yours and sold so many high-priced suits to rich people that you've actually learned to think like they do."

"And Sadie," Bert commented, "wouldn't speak evil of the devil himself and won't let anybody else do it in her presence. Did we hear the President's last speech? If it were broadcast, Sadie heard it. She's never missed a program since we've had a radio. The other day she made a cake, put it in the store, and turned on the radio. Bobbee smelt

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something burning, and, when she opened the stove door, the cake was burnt to a crisp.”

“Pahaw! I don't see why so commonplace a thing as a cake should interfere with a program of beautiful music like Nelson Eddy and Jeannette McDonald put on,” Sadie rejoined.

The meal over, a Negro girl, black as the ace of spades, with ivory white teeth, whiter still because of the contrast, came in to clear the table of dishes. Instead of a maid's cap, she had a modern bird's nest hat perched on the left side of her head. “Miss Martha, I wants to git a envolofe to mail a letter wid. No'm I can't read ner write. I can pick out some letters in the paper, though. How old I is? No'm I don't know 'zactly, but I's 'bout fifteen. But I knows where I was borned, down in de old field. Dick, you git outer my way. You'll mek me brake dese here dishes o' Miss Bobbee's. No'm, I ain't got no husband. Reckin I'd kill 'im ef'n I had one, ef'n he wouldn't treat me right. Yessum, I got two chillun, but dey bof dead, though.”

When Annie had left the room, Miss Sadie said, “Poor little old thing. She does come in handy for bringing in wood, sweeping yards, and doing other heavy work about the place. Sometimes we pay her, and sometimes we pay her to stay away. We try to keep her and Dick in clothes and shoes. We've just given her those new shoes she has on now. She and Dick were outcasts, and we took them for their sakes rather than for ours. They both think the world of 'Cap'n Bert,' and the rest of us, too, as for that. We couldn't be true to our tradition, if we'd mistreat the Negroes on the quarters. We're told that, after the war, our grandparents sold old treasured keepsakes, one by one, in order to keep an ex-slave comfortable. Then Father and Mother had lots of the 'milk of human kindness' and were always good to the Negroes.

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“Our parents were in their early twenties when the war closed, Father's education was cut short by the war, but Mother graduated at the Columbia Female College, in these days when it was still a question whether a woman had sense enough to warrant an education or not. My mother, accustomed to slaves all her life, had a hard time making adjustments. She has told us that, as a bride, she gave out a peck of flour for biscuits the first morning.

“My father owned a plantation in Fairfield County and carried my mother there as a bride. The lands were fertile. Everything in plant and animal life could be raised on it. The scenery was charming and varied. But there were rocks and hills galore, and farming was expensive. Father's other brothers had homes in Richland County, and they persuaded him to move near them. Some sort of an exchange was worked out between father and the farmer in Richland. I don't think any money was exchanged.

“Six of their twelve children, however, were born in Fairfield, and we elder children started to school there. I can see the little old schoolhouse now down in the 25-acre pasture, so far from home that mother always sent a Negro nurse with us to protect us from the rams, bulls, and boars, should they become vicious. Other children came to the school, and the patrons paid the small salaries of the teachers, who usually lived in the community.

“After we moved to Lykesland, Father was delighted with his new place and soon became a pioneer in progressive methods of farming. He made terraces to prevent soil erosion, rotated his crops, and secured registered breeds of stock and cattle. The task of rearing that big family must have been a staggering one to them. Mother was never very strong and always stayed in the background, interested in making a home rather than a living. But she was the source of inspiration and courage to the rest of us, the real power behind the throne. A prolonged illness, and she left us at the age of forty-five.”

With the quick motion and easy grace that characterizes her every movement, Miss Sadie moved over to the built-in book shelves and returned with the family Bible. The covers were dog-eared and worn; the pages were ragged, misplaced, and yellow with age. “What

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a good time we children have had reading these Bible stories in the preface. Mother would make us wash our hands so clean they would bear inspection. Then she'd seat us in the middle of the floor, with this Bible in the midst of us. How we loved those stories with the colored illustrations. She was one woman who didn't think it was too holy for the children to enjoy." At the bottom of the page, where the important records of the family were kept, these words were scrawled in a child's handwriting: "Victor celt born August 19, 1891 written by Pete."

"You know Pete's married? Oh, yes, he's been married six years. Married the head nurse at O'teen. That's the Federal T.B. sanateriun at Asheville, you know. Jane is a lovely girl. We're all very fond of her. For the two years that Pete was a patient and she his nurse, they were in love. They wrote each other every day, and occasionally Jane, accompanied by another nurse, would drop in to visit Pete during off hours. But the marriage was a complete surprise to everybody. At first, we thought it was very unwise, but Pete argued that if Jane were going to nurse T.B. patients all her life, she just as well nurse him, and both of them could have companionship and a home. Jane makes a good salary, about \$150 and her board, and she takes excellent care of Pete.

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Is he/ as attractive as ever? Well, we think so, and there are frequent discussions among their friends as to which is the better looking, Pete or Marvin. Pete has tried raising chickens and hogs, but he has to go back to bed every time he exercises much, and he says he's writing a book now when he has to stay in bed. He's one of the many tragedies of the World War. He and Ned were such good friends.

"Who is Ned? Lawsy me, I thought I had told you about Ned," she said, as she carefully replaced the precious book in its place on the shelf. Didn't I ever tell you that Ned is sort of an adopted member of the family? You've seen our new brick parsonage? Several years ago, we were about ton lose it because of a six-hundred-dollar debt; so we women decided to sell meals at the State Fair to make some money. We worked ourselves nearly

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to death, but we had lots of fun, and paid the six-hundred-dollar debt. This lad, Ned, took his meals with us, and he was such an attractive chap we all enjoyed him. A few days after the Fair closed, in walked Ned one morning. 'You told me if I ever needed a friend, I could count on you,' he said. 'I've lost my job. I want a friend; so I've come to you.'

"That was a different problem from any we had ever had before. We didn't know what in the world to do with Ned. We had no guest room at that time, and Bert drew the line on sharing his room with this questionable stranger from Canada, who had been traveling with the aquaplane. But something had to be done. Ned had no clothes, no food, no money, no home. So we put an extra bed on the back porch and made him welcome to all we had.

"When the first rain came a few days later, ye gods, the porch leaked so in the middle of the night that Ned couldn't stay out there 8 at all; so Bert called him into his quarters. Bert never expresses any emotions, as you know, but we had observed with interest how Ned was growing in his favor. The whole family fell for Ned. Christine came for a visit. Christine is our eldest sister, Mrs. L. C. Carroll, at Winnsboro, you know. Well, she and Ned read French plays together. He followed Bert around like a shadow and helped with the work whenever he was needed. It was too funny to see him coming from the field one afternoon on the bare back of a mule, and the mule running as fast as she could. The mule ran straight to her stall, and Ned was thrown against a stump. We were petrified with fear. Ned lay lifeless; we were sure he had been killed. Finally, Bert came in from his work, and we carried Ned into the house. After several days in bed, he was out again and seemed O.K.

"After about eight months, Ned said one day, 'Well, I got to go, I've got a brother somewhere and I got to go find him.' We shared what money we had with him, and Bert gave him some extra clothes and took him nearly to Camden. We often wonder what became of Ned."

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During most of the day, Martha had sat quietly. She slipped from the room, and Marvin remarked, "She's gone now to see that everything has been done just right. She's worth her weight in gold. When she was a little thing, she used to tell us, 'I'm the chicken of the blue hen.'"

"Look, Bert, there's a mocking bird right there on the back of that green rocker, and he's singing, too!" Bobbee exclaimed. "Sh-h-h let's be quiet. There were two red birds there last week. Ain't that too sweet for anything?"

"This is my swallow's nest," Bert said, as he carefully lifted a nest from the mantelpiece. "There were four babies in it when Sade found it on the hearth last summer. I put them in a sparrow's nest, and I be-dog if she didn't feed 'em just like they were her own babies. Let's take the folks in the back yard to see the cats and dogs and pigs, Bobbee."

"Honey, come on here," Bobbee called, and her pet pig came running. "He'll come to my window at midnight, if I call him. Bert gave him to me, because he's a runt. But the thing I'm proud of is that calf running out there. She cut her neck on a nail about six weeks ago, and we've had a time keeping out infection. It's healed good now, though. Bert, call the cats and make 'em climb the ladder. That's just fine; where's the other one? Kitty! There they go. Now you can't make 'em come down till Joe leaves."

"We named Bull for Joe Louis," Bert said. "We had three dogs once, and altogether they had thirty-six puppies. I be-dog if I didn't have to kill every darned one of 'em because one of the mothers developed rabies, and I was afraid the last one of 'em would go mad."

"But, Bert, the very sweetest and smartest dog I've ever seen was Mr. Woo. You remember he'd turn the electric light on and off. Geewhiz, he was a wonder."

"That's a pen I made for a hawk last spring," Bert said. The darn thing kept eating my red biddies, and I just had to shoot him. He fell with a broken wing. Then I got sorry, bound up his wing, and cared for him till he was well. I thought, of course, he'd be appreciative of the

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favor; but instead, he brought in all his friends and neighbors in the fall when they wanted delicacies, and I had to kill him after all.

“How long have I been keeping chickens? Ever since I can remember. We keep our reds here in this run and our white leghorns over yonder in 10 the rear of the yard. We like eggs, and those leghorns keep us supplied. Haven't bought three dozen eggs in two years. I'd say we've sold seventy-five dollars worth of chickens and eggs, together, and we eat chicken whenever we want it.”

“Bert, let's show her our prize hogs,” Bobbee insisted.

“This is the hen that lays our golden eggs,” Bert said. “We keep her in a separate pen from the other hogs. She's Duroc Jersey, and was an unusual buy for five dollars. In three years, I've sold \$450 worth of pigs, and the upkeep hasn't been so much.

“I'm not much of a cotton farmer. Fact is, I haven't been much interested in farming till the last few years. My job has been to carry the mail for Uncle Sam. When my mother died, our struggle began in earnest. She was ill for several years, and Father kept borrowing a little money on the home place so he could make ends meet. The oldest child, Christine, had just finished Columbia Female College. She looked after the housekeeping, cared for us children, and taught school over there at Smith's school. With her salary of \$35 a month, she helped to send Marvin to Spartenburg for a business course, hoping he could help out with our finances. But his health failed, and for a year or more he was not able to work at all. Then we all struggled with the education of the other children, each one helping with every other one. My Lord, we had a hard time.”

“No such thing, Bert,” said Miss Sadie. “We've always been happy. And sacrifice is a part of the joy of having a big family and sharing with one another. It was no sacrifice for me to leave home and work as matron at Columbia Female College for two years, so that my salary of \$50 a month might be applied to the education of the two younger children. And it was 11 a pleasure for me to rent a house for \$15 a month and take six boarders at

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\$25 each, in order for Mary to get college training. Shuck's that's an interesting part of the game. I got a big thrill out of my part of the sacrifice, if that's what you want to call it."

"Well," Bert took up his story again, "I saw where things were headed; so when I had a chance at this job, of carrying mail, I took it. I was about twenty-five. At first, I had only eighteen miles, and my salary was \$51. For a few years I used two horses. The roads were terrible, and sometimes I had to get a mule to pull me out of the mud. When the roads improved and my route increased to thirty miles, I used a car. I've bought seventeen Chevrolets, and I believe my car expense has been \$400 a year. I reckon I've put \$7,000 in these cars. But I was well paid - my salary went to \$175 a month - and I should have saved money. But there have been many and unusual demands on me. I've been retired five years now, at a salary of \$96 a month. I consider Uncle Sam a pretty good fellow to work for.

"The loss of our home was a staggering blow to us all. Father died suddenly in 1915. The mortgage on the place kept growing with the years. The World War came on. Camp Jackson was being built, and labor went to six dollars a day, and we couldn't compete with that sort of price. Later, the boll weevil and the depression hit us. We had been offered \$40,000 for the place, but when the showdown came, we couldn't raise the \$15,000 we had borrowed on it, and so it had to go."

"Let's forget it," Marvin said, "I've prayed day and night that I never could think of it again. It's the worst kind of nightmare to me." "And the saddest day of my life," Sadie added, "was when I left my home." And together they walked off in the direction of the barn.

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"We moved over to the Brooks Place," Bert continued, "and Sadie nursed an old couple to help pay the rent. After three years, we tried another farm, hoping we could do better. In the meantime, the doctor found I had diabetes and other complications, and I've been on a strict diet ever since. He ordered rest in a hospital. But somebody in the family had to carry

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on, and I couldn't stop. We come here three years ago. I pay \$350 rent and have 50 acres. I'm allowed to plant fifteen acres in cotton. Last year the boll weevil got all the cotton in this section. I only made six bales, and I usually make a bale to the acre. I doubt if we clear \$10 per bale anyway; so I'm depending more and more on other things to supply my salary and to pay for the privilege of planting a crop. I pay 70 cents a day for labor and own my stock and plows, and so forth.

“You have observed I haven't known anything much about the cost of things. We have never bothered with that side of it much; we've been too careless, I realize. But Bobbee is a good business woman, and together we're already working on a budget for this year. Come back a year from now, and I'll be well versed in these figures. The sunshine is not so warm now; maybe we had better go to the fire.”

“What do you all know about Christine these days?” Marvin asked. “I've felt all day that they might drive up here this afternoon. I sold Mr. Connor a suit of clothes the other day, and he said neither of them is very well these days. He told me some kind of cock-and-bull story about their not coming up here any oftener. They are both crazy about those boys of J.W.'s. That's Christine's third family to raise, isn't it? After Mother's death, she was a mother and a teacher to us children. Then we got from under her wing, I guess, like 13 Napoleon, she wanted another family to conquer; so she finally consented to marry Mr. Connor, and his seven children became her charge. Now, since J.W.'s death, she has these two grandchildren. Sakes alive, we could hardly live through the rearing of our four. She's done a good job, too. Out of the Connor children, she's made a distinguished Methodist preacher, a capable school superintendent, and two excellent school teachers. She entered the schoolroom for the second time and put her salary into their education. A darned good record for a stepmother, I'd say.

“Susan married a widower, too. She and Brother Saxon didn't get home for Christmas, but Susan sent me and Martha a lovely coat apiece. Susan hasn't lost her sense of humor, and it relieves many tense situations in that Methodist parsonage. Her sarcasm sometimes

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hurts the sensitive parishoners, I imagine; but she's charming and handsome, and Mr. Saxon is devoted to her. She and Mary were so congenial. Somehow none of us can get over Mary's untimely death.

“Mother always had a sort of feeling that Marvin was spared for a purpose. When he was six years old, he had an awful case of typhoid fever. For days we thought he'd die. Cousin Frank was a mighty good man, and every night, after plowing all day, he'd come over home and he and my parents would go in the living room to pray for Marvin. One night, after the prayer, he said, 'Cousin Sallie, Marvin is going to get well. I feel our prayer is answered.' That very night about 12 o'clock the crisis came, and Marvin improved from then on. A few years later, he was seriously ill again. The doctor made an incision and lanced an abscess on his liver. He sharpened a stick, disinfected it, and held the incision open with it. Mighty risky we'd think this day and time.

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“When Father first came to this community, the first Sunday we were here, dressed in our best bib an' tucker, we all came to this church. I recall we came, eight strong, in a double-seated open vehicle, driving a mule and a horse, Beck and Annie, with Annie's colt running along under the shaft.”

“Excuse me, Sade,” Marvin interrupted, “is that the Sunday I had to wear one of the girl's aprons which you turned round and buttoned in front for a shirt? I can see those buttons now, sewed all round the waist for me to fasten my pants to. No boy was ever so sinned against. I'll resent it till my dying day.”

“Well, there wasn't anything else to do, Marvin. You didn't have a clean one, and you know as well as I do that there was no excuse Father would accept for not going to church. I think you should congratulate us on our ingenuity instead of blaming us.

“Father was made Sunday School superintendent that very day, and he held the position for twenty-five years. He was superintendent in Fairfield, and a steward in three churches.

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Bert has taken his place as steward in our church now. Father gave a lot of time to temperance work too.”

“Now you can see what lovely broad acres lie along this road,” Marvin remarked. “Originally all these plantations were owned by Father and his brothers and my wife's father and his brothers.

“I recall one year Father made a bumper crop out here without spending a cent for commercial fertilizer. This highway will enhance the value of the property, too. These folks have been offered six hundred dollars an acre for some of this land, but they are holding it for \$1,000. Better take us home now, Bobbee. Bert can't stay away from 15 home after dark.”

We passed by the Negro quarters. Dick ran out to the road and said, “Cap'n Bert, whar you gwine? Lemme go wid you, Cap'n Bert. Us done fed up de mules and' de hawgs an' milked de cows. Lemme go wid you, please, sir.”

“You can't go this time, Dick. Tell your daddy to look after things till I get back.”

“This is the place where I beat my husband farming last year,” Mrs. Patton said proudly. “He gave me an acre in here, and I made two bales on it. He didn't name but one on his best land. Right here below the Veterans' Hospital is the place I've picked out for our new home. We don't want but ten acres either, with a brick bungalow on it. Oh, yes, we're working on the house plans. Haven't done anything else since Christmas. It may be only our dream house, but I am hoping not.

“When we have our own place, we're going to do truck farming. We plan to put out strawberries, raspberries, and dewberries the first year. Then gradually we'll get our peach and apple and pecan orchards planted; oh, yes, a vineyard, too. We'll have red chickens for food and white leghorns for laying eggs. That's as far as I'm going, but Bert says he's got to raise hogs and livestock. Of course, I'm expecting him to raise the feed

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for everything we have. We hope the hospital will furnish a market for our produce, but if it doesn't we'll have the curb market to fall back on. I believe it will beat planting cotton all to pieces.”

JJC