

The Little Mendicants

By Miss C. M. Sedgwick

We have all our pet charities. Our next door neighbor, Mrs. Devon, is one of the board of managers of three charitable societies, and she fulfills her duty critically to all. They are, I believe, the only societies in the city that do not include within the circuit of their charities one of that great pauper class—the Irish. One of them is for the relief of respectable indigent females. “Not one of these, is ever, by any chance,” Mrs. Devon says, “an Irish woman.” Another is for the orphan colored children. Of course there is no danger of any drop of Mrs. Devon’s rains of charity falling here on these unjust ones; the other I do not now remember, but I am sure it includes none of these aliens from Mrs. Devon’s household of faith. I dropped in last week to pay our neighbor a morning visit. I saw she was rather excited, and after some general observations, she asked me, rather abruptly, if I “approved of giving to street-beggars?”

“Oh no, certainly not,” I said, very boldly, hoping, in my secret heart, she would not go into particulars.

“Oh, oh!” she said; “I thought perhaps you did.”

“Oh no, Mrs. Devon,” and I repeated, very glibly, all the stock sayings of political economists which I had gathered from books and lectures against alms-giving. Mrs. Devon heard me through, and then rather let down my vanity by saying,

“I don’t get my principles from books or men. I don’t think they know anything about such matters. I have my own principles, and I have seen enough of the bad effects of giving out at the door, never to do it. There is a drove of Irish go up this street, and we shall never get rid of them till all the neighborhood agree uniformly to refuse them—they are a wretched set of people.”

“Very wretched,” I said modestly.

“Yes, and very undeserving,” resumed Mrs. Devon, “and so dirty, and so stout, and healthy.”

“There is one poor woman,” I ventured to say, “who has been in the habit all winter of going up our street, who is any thing but stout and healthy.”

“Oh yes, I know,” replied Mrs. Devon in the tone of a retort; “I have observed her; she always has a boy and girl with her that ought to be in the house of refuge; yes, she skulks behind our steps while your cook fills her boy’s basket.”

Thus caught in the fact by my sharp-sighted neighbor, I had to confess that this woman’s little girl was a pet of our children, and that being younger than the youngest among them, when she dropped down into the area of a biting Winter’s morning, they felt the contrast so strongly between her condition and their’s, sitting, as they were, warmly clad and well served round their smoking breakfast, that it was difficult to restrain their compassion by any general laws, and that they even went so far sometimes as to smuggle a well-buttered hot cake from their plates into her basket.

“But do you know,” asked Mrs. Devon, apparently quite shocked, “what a liar she is? She had the hardihood to tell me—and she is fatter than any of my children ever were—that she never had eaten but twice in her life!”

I fear Mrs. Devon perceived the smile lurking at the corners of my mouth as I confessed the children had told me that that was little Mag Mahoney’s standing statement. A joke is perennial with children; no use wears it out, and the truth is that this daily repetition of this little romance of Mag is infinitely diverting to our young people; and when their elders have sometimes had the grace to rebuke them for encouraging her to repeat it, they say, “Oh she is so young and so pretty, and fat and droll,” and they tell her to say it—it is not her fault!

“Well!” said Mrs. Devon, her manner and tone conveying much more than her words. “I did not imagine you knew she told this lie; she never had the opportunity to tell it more than once at my

door! It's no wonder the Irish are such finished liars when they begin so early; they lie, and they steal, and they are horrid wretches."

Truth is one of the cardinal virtues that seems particularly adverse to the imaginative constitution of the Irish. On that head I could not gainsay my neighbor, but I ventured modestly to suggest that I had found them particularly honest!

"Honest!" echoed Mrs. Devon; "Why it was but yesterday morning that these same Mahoneys came up the street, and you know the mother always keeps ahead of the children. That is one of their contrivances, so that people may think that [pg 181]

these little brutes are driven forth by want alone. They don't take me in! My waiter had a chamber candlestick in his hand, not silver, but the best of Sheffield-plate. I have had the pair ever since I kept house. The door-bell rung and he set it down on the table in the lower entry. Our area-door happened to be open. David saw the little Mahoneys at your window, but he did not see the mother anywhere, and when he went down stairs the candlestick was gone, and I make no doubt that, while your children were giving out their hot cakes to her's, the mother slipped in and took my candlestick."

Mrs. Devon's manner made me feel for the moment as if our poor children were confederates of the Mahoneys, and impressing my sympathy almost in a tone of contrition, I begged to see the mate of the stolen candlestick, and offered to go myself to the Mahoney's little cabin and attempt to recover the stolen goods. This softened Mrs. Devon. She evidently looked upon it as a concession on my part to the truth. The candlestick was produced, a little the worse for use, as thirty years' wear, even on Sheffield-plate, and with the best of housewifery, will show. However, the value of the article had nothing to do with the sin of the theft, and such was my faith in the Mahoneys, and such, I must confess, the friendly relations of our family with them, that I felt confident of being able to recover the candlestick if they had stolen it; and in truth I thought the evidence was rather against them. In the course of the morning I went to the Mahoneys—I had been there before. They live in a little isolated cabin on a vacant lot far up the Sixth Avenue. It was a soft morning in February. The door stood ajar and around it ducks and hens were picking up crumbs that argued an abundant income from the alms-basket. Adjoining the house there was a pen of broken boards, where another pensioner on the little mendicants' foragings was thriving and grunting. I said the door was ajar; I lingered there for a moment to observe and listen. Alas, we involuntarily cast the poor beyond the pale of our good-breeding! There were two rooms within the house, one just large enough to contain a bed, the other some twelve feet square where all the family offices and observances were performed: and, surely, the household gods never looked down on a scene of greater confusion and filth, good-humor blended with affection, and flowers growing out of this dunghill and nourished by the light and dews and favor of Heaven. The floor apparently had never known water, except it had been spilled there; coals collected from the siftings in the street were deposited in a scattering heap by a battered smoking stove; and some kindlings in dangerous proximity, were on the other side of it. The mother sat by the table, on the only available chair in the room. A board was put across two others, and thus furnished a seat for our friends Ned and Mag who, with a little half-clothed urchin between them, occupied it much in the classic position of the ancients; another child, half-way in its life-journey, between Mag and the 'the baby' was under the table playing with a full litter of pups! Animal life throve at the Mahoneys' out-door and in. No wonder the little mendicants were early and late at rich men's doors to supply all the hungry mouths at home—children, pigs, fowls, dogs and all! Among the consumers I have not included a canary that hung over the table, and stimulated by the clatter of the children, sang as sweetly as if he had been in the loveliest bower of his own sunny land. While I still occupied my post of observation, Ned shook up and shook out, for the feathers floated in every direction, a caseless pillow and put it behind his mother's back.

"There mammy," he said, "rest your bones agen it, it will cure the ache of them."

"God bless ye, Neddy, it does help a bit."

“Och, mammy, dear, and so it will, and yeess will be well again quite entirely if yeess will be after eating like Maggy and me. Hold the dish here a bit, Mag. Mag brought a deep earthen dish with a piece notched out of the edge here and there, and Ned, with the half of a broken plate, scooped from a stewing caldron an indescribable mess far transcending in variety Meg Merrilies’s De’il’s broth. It was made of motley contents of the alms baskets. Fish, flesh and fowl, puddings tarts and pies, all mixed together, and all together making not an unsavory salmagundi, judging from the steam that reached my olfactory nerves.

“There, mammy, there,” said Ned, fishing up a whole egg, eat that first just. William Hall’s cook in the Fifth avenue gave it to me for you; the Almighty bless her white hairs; she said it was good for you, and Pat McGruff says if you eat plenty of them they’ll make your lungs grow again!” “Och!” he exclaimed, giving the mess another stir,” here’s a bit o’ plum pudding that Miss— (naming our youngest) gave me; the blessed virgin watch over her, the little darlant! Just be after eating it, mammy; it will make your stomach feel so good, and full, (another stir) and faith! Here’s the turkey’s wing the little lady with the big black eyes gave Maggy from her own plate—the Saints love her! The one that’s always after making Mag say she’s ate but twice in her life, (our mischievous Nell.) Eat it mammy, dear, it will put strength into your legs again!”

“Na, Neddy—na; they get waker and waker every day. I’m after thinking they’ll never take me out with you agin.”

“Now, mammy, dear, there’s nobody would dare say that to me but just yeess-self; we’ll have many a fair run together yet. Eat, mammy, eat, Pat Mc- [pg 182]

Gruff says plenty of good food will cure every thing in life, and its plenty ye’ll have, and the pig and the pups too, while there’s Mag and I to collect for yeess all!”

I made my entrée at this point, and I believe a smile was lurking on my lips, for Mrs. Mahoney looked as if she thought I had the feeling of having detected her, and Ned snatched up the dish from impulse to hide it, and over it went, on the puppies and child under the table, who with their snatching and lickings soon disposed of more than their fair share of the fodder.

“Sure” said poor Mrs. Mahony, apologetically, “and it is not ivry day we’ve such plinty.”

“And it’s the doctor’s orders from the infirmary,” interposed Ned. He paused.

“That your mother should have plenty to eat Ned?”

“That’s just it, indeed,” said the ready fellow, re-assured by my manner, and when I went on to say that I was only sorry poor Mrs. Mahony’s appetite was not as good as her food, she said, “indeed, ma’am, it is not often were having such a dinner as this; it matters not for me, but the children and the pups, (I keep them for the poor fatherless childer, just for a little diversion like,) and the geese and the hens, (it’s the eggs brings us a few shillings,) and the pigs, (was not it the pigs was all my poor husband left to his fatherless children?) all would starve together but for yeess and the like of ye, madam; but indeed and indeed theres days when we look starvation in the face.”

I saw that Mrs. Mahony felt it necessary to convince me that the sumptuous repast I had witnessed was accidental; and I was mortified, as I have often been, to perceive that the poor regard the rich as looking on their accidental plenty, their genial hours, their few social festivities, with a jealous and condemning eye. Though I am well aware that it was very inexcusable in Mrs. Mahony to permit her children to beg for the subsistence of her family and the support of her live stock, and although I know it is a vice to indulge in charities whereby children are tempted to an idle and corrupting mode of life, yet I must confess that this dirty little Ned, with his strong filial devotion triumphing over all the deteriorations of his condition—the anxious, loving mother—laughing little Mag, feeding the baby and fondling it, and the boy playing with the pups—he enjoying existence much as they did in its freedom from thought and pain—altogether made me for the moment forget my stern principles in my sympathy with the scene; and when I heard these little mendicants throwing back blessings on all who had blessed them, I felt that there is no unmitigated evil—that on the darkest channels of human life, light falls from Heaven. That is a

truth but not a truth to make us idle or inactive for if through all the natural evils of life and the accumulated wrongs of our social condition, a providential care is visible, surely man should become an earthly providence to the outcast children.

But I have forgotten my errand to Mrs. Mahoney, which, though I aimed at as much delicacy as the nature of the case permitted, was rather discordant with my previous manifestations. Mrs. Mahoney stoutly denied knowing any thing of my neighbor's candlestick, and so fervently thanked the Almighty that in her lowest poverty, even when her husband laid starving with cold and dying at home, she had never touched what was not her own, and so solemnly appealed to Him who was soon to judge her, that I was convinced of her innocence and made her quite easy by the appearance that I was so.

From that time she rapidly declined, and though she was supplied with what my little friend Ned called genteel food, gruel, broth, &c., her appetite never returned.

When she died, the expenses of the funeral were provided for by a few friends of the children, and I went with one of them to witness the ceremonies of the occasion. The house was filled and surrounded by Mrs. Mahoney's Catholic friends. They made way for us to enter the door. The fowls were picking up the crumbs around the step just as on the first day I was there; the dogs were thrust outside, and were amusing some idle boys; the little canary, as if in sympathy with the subdued tone within, was mute on his perch. The coffin containing the body was in the inner-room, and the door-way being filled up, I did not at first see it. The three younger children, including Maggy, were sitting on the laps of different friends—Maggy recognizing each new comer with a cordial nod, and the little ones sufficiently entertained with looking round and devouring huge bits of cake. My eye sought in vain my little friend Ned; the wave receded from the door-way, and I saw the end of the coffin and a crucifix standing on it; that most thrilling symbol, around which the thoughts of desertion and sympathy—of sin and pardon—of death and eternal life cluster—the symbol that brings down the monarch to the level of the poor, that raises the poor above all earthly thrones. Beside the crucifix was a lighted candle, the token I believe to the pious Catholic of the undying spirit. I heard loud sobs, and felt sure they must proceed from poor little Ned. I pressed toward the door, and there I recognized him, or rather a pair of unwashed legs and ragged shoes that I knew belonged to him. His head was plunged into the coffin where he was laying his cheek to his mother's, kissing her and with the passion of his race vehemently lamenting her. Poor Ned's legs were too much for my friend's or mine; we exchanged smiles that soon however gave place to the [pg 183]

more seeming tribute of tears, for the boy's wailings were heart-breaking.

"It's not I that will be after living in the world without you, mammy!" he said. "Who now will be always the same to me whether I'm bad or good? Ah, mammy, you never spoke the cross word to me, and ye'll niver spake again, mammy, niver, niver!"

I lifted the child out of the coffin and tried to comfort him; after awhile I succeeded, for poor Ned's grief was like the grief of other children, proverbially transient as April clouds. The hearse did not come at the promised time, and my friend and I, after waiting a full half hour, came away. I looked about for Ned to say a parting word to him, but he was no where to be seen. As we left the door we perceived, some fifty yards in advance of us, a gathering of men and boys. As we advanced the circle broke to allow us to pass on the pavement, and we beheld in the air the identical legs that were protruded from the coffin, and Ned's body, pinning to the pavement a boy half as large again as himself, whom he was belaboring with lusty blows and crying between them. "I'll teach you to call my mammy a thief! She, a thief, my mammy that never stole from an enemy, let alone a friend! My mammy a thief! She's gone to the good God, and if you spake the word again, its I will send ye howling tother place!"

"Ned!" said I, and put my hand gently on him. The boy jumped as if he were electrified and sprang to my side.

“Sure ma’am, and I could not help it,” he said, in answer to my remonstrance upon his ill-timed resentment. “The devil a bit would I be after fighting when my mammy was a burying; it was just to convince ‘em my mammy never touched that dirty candlestick.”

A suspicion flashed across my mind. “What candlestick, Ned?” I asked.

“Sure, ma’am,” answered Ned drawing close to me and lowering his voice, “ye be’s such a friend to us, I’ll tell ye the truth. It was that woman that lives next to you, with the black flashing eyes—it was she called my mother a thief, and Tim Potts that goes of dirty errands for her waiter got the story there. She might have had her candlestick to this day, but she was after shutting the door in my mammy’s face when she was that wake-like her legs trimbled under her, and just for a bad compliment I took her dirty candlestick and threw it to the pigs, and ye may see for yourself, ma’am, they champed it out of shape, and it was all unbeknownst to my mammy; and would you wish me to hear her, lying dead there, called a thief for the dirty thing?”

Before I could reply the hearse appearing in sight brought a fresh shower from Ned’s eyes, and I deferred examining the candlestick and enlightening Ned’s conscience to a future opportunity, and returned to my home meditating on the singular characteristics commingled in the Irish race. Since every wind that blows brings to our shores a fresh swarm of these people, who are to form so potent an element in our future national character, it behoves us to study them well, and make the best we can of them. And a rich study they are, with their gusty passions and unwavering faith, their susceptibility to kindness and their inveterate prejudices, their utter incapacity for verbal truth and the overruling truth of their affections, their quick and savage resentments and their fervid gratitude, their barbarous ignorance and their brilliant imaginativeness, their bee-like diligence and their brutish filth, their eager acquisitiveness and their impulsive generosity. These opposing qualities, with the richness and confusion of their ideas and their anomalous expression, make them an exquisite compound of poetry, inconsequence, wit and blunder. [pg 184]

[*Columbian Lady’s and Gentleman’s Magazine*, April 1846, 181-184]