

"This will help the fire," said he, tossing the guttering candle in. "And now I'll make him give you some tea."

The child ran to her lap again, away from the spoons that come to play hide-and-seek with the fire-light when the candles are put out, and then she overheard an altercation between Michael and his master on the subject of refreshment, on the one hand, for tired children, and on profligacy in connection with fuel and priceless time on the other.

One wet morning some months later Martin Cummins rose from his meager table saying to Una: "Let out that fire now. It won't be wanted until tonight."

He wiped his scrubby blue chin with a red cotton handkerchief, and glanced frowningly towards the range, where a low-spirted fire struggled for existence. Mite, still at the board, stared dumbly at him, wishing, but afraid to ask, for more. Una, in her prim white apron and black dress, read the wish in his eye. And to think that he was to keep on wishing the same wish every hour with more intensity until night was unbearable! A trembling took possession of her, but she fought it, and conquered.

"What am I to get for dinner, sir?" she asked.

"I'm going to Cornabeg to an auction," her uncle answered, "and 'till be time enough to talk of dinner when I return."

"But I won't be able to work," she said desperately, "and, if I get sick, what will Mite do?"

"Must," said he, fixing her with hard eyes through his glasses, "is a brazen word in a pauper's mouth."

Her lips twitched. "A pauper is one who lives on charity. But I earn far more than my food, though you don't give it to me, and 'must' is a fair word in a worker's mouth."

It was her mother-love for Mite that inspired her, and Grim and Grumpy, looking her up and down, saw that she was resolved.

"Does she mean to take the law o' me?" he asked himself in terror, for a frightful vision of unpaid wages being mulcted from him arose within the cobwebby den of his mind.

Without a word the miser drew out of a long cotton purse which was concealed in his bosom first a penny, and then a halfpenny, and dropped them, then into her outspread palm.

Una insisted on another halfpenny for milk, and he tore from the cotton purse as from his heart a gnarled and battered one.

"A mighty expense ye are to me," he groaned, then added: "I'm leaving here in ten minutes, so get me my overcoat. 'Tis hanging behind my bedroom door. Here's the key, and lock it after you."

He pushed in the dampers over the range to prevent the coals consuming, and Una removed the cups and saucers from the bare board. There was no bread to be locked up, for even the crumbs had been eaten, and the miser withdrew to his shop to issue decrees to his clerk, so that no second of that time so precious because old Cummins bought it, would be lost whilst its purchaser was absent.

Una went upstairs to her uncle's room, and Mite trotted after. It was a bare room, with a rickety bed near the window which overlooked the street, and at the opposite side of the window was a deal washstand, over which hung from a nail a looking glass that reflected the bed; but at the foot of the bed was an inlaid table, on which rested a Sevres bowl, a jug of Waterford glass, and a flat upright case of fine ingrained wood, for it was the old man's custom to keep some of his most precious bits in his bedroom.

Una had some difficulty in removing the coat, and, as she tugged, admiring murmurs came from behind her. Looking hastily around, she found that her little brother had mounted a chair, and had managed to lift the catch on the upright case.

"Oh, Mite!" she cried, and then stopped, for it seemed at first as if moonlight and starlight bloomed through the leaden daylight softly as a song heard across twilight waters, poignantly as the call of heavenly love in the secret heart. And for a moment the girl's spirit seemed to stand in a cathedral aisle, and to be steeped in its cloudy splendor, whilst through the incensed air rolled solemnly deep organ chords, on whose tide her soul arose.

It was just the vision of a flaming silver monstrance, a Grae-l-less casket, thus strangely housed.

Una shut the case with trembling fingers, and taking the child and the coat, went out, locking the door behind her, just as the clocks in the shop chimed a prelude to eleven o'clock.

Martin Cummins went out, wrapped in his threadbare overcoat, his tall and ancient hat low on his forehead, an old woollen scarf twisted about his throat and chin. He returned instantly, to thrust back his head through the glass door.

"Hi, girl!" he shouted. "There's furniture at the end o' the shop that needs a rub. I'll have a look when I come back so don't spare elbow grease."

It was the only sort of polish Una was ever supplied with, and so, though her arms were slim, she

used them with effect. She started operations on a florid chiffonier.

"You'd better take the smaller things, Una," remarked Michael, stepping forward, taking the rough cloth out of her hand and giving her a clean duster.

She thanked him absently, her mind on the silver vision of a while ago.

"These heavy articles need a clumsy flat to tackle them," he added, explanatorily.

The girl wondered how she could have endured life with her green eyes had not this lad's kindness been unflinchingly near.

She began to dust some bric-a-brac on a shelf.

"What a lot of lovely things my uncle buys," she ventured.

"Lovely, and ugly, too," his assistant answered dryly, "but always a bargain. He has a wonderful nose for a bargain. Have you seen the monstrance?"

Her face was eloquent. "You have. That was some bargain."

"I thought they were only kept in churches," faltered Una.

"Yes," he replied. "But when the Bargraves, of Castle Bargrave, sold out, a monstrance was found in a garret. They were a Cromwellian lot, of course, and how they came by a monstrance nobody knows. You can attend the auction, and when 'lot 45, a piece of old silver,' was put up it fell to him, nobody bidding against him, for nobody, including the Bargraves, or the auctioneer, knew what it was except your uncle, of course—it was so battered and twisted, besides being covered with a black oxidization, which, to my mind, only enhanced its beauty. But the shining metal is better understood, and, as he is a crack silversmith, too, he restored it without letting it out of his own hands."

Here a countryman called with a watch to be repaired, and Michael went to attend him. Returning he added:

"Mr. Cummins picked up the monstrance for five pounds."

"He can't be so poor," mused Una, and uttered her thoughts.

"Poor!" echoed the long-legged youth, with a laugh, as he fixed a new bottom to an old chair. "Don't you know—" he asked, and stopped to look earnestly at her.

"What?" queried Una.

"That he's by a long shot the richest man in Balcoggar?"

"Then why—" she began and paused, thinking of Mite's slender rations.

"Oh, because he's a—" Michael resumed his hammering. "Well, he's your uncle, anyway."

Una began to rub a hideous Indian idol, but her eyes dilated, for a dream had entered her heart and brain. Her uncle was rich, rich. He could have Mite made straight and strong.

Father Donegan has been trying to get it for fifty pounds for the Carmelites," Michael's voice broke in. "You know their convent, don't you, Una? It is on the hill overlooking the river."

"Oh, I know it well," she answered. "I often take Mite for a walk there."

"Well, the convent is very poor," went on Michael. "It is built on the site of the old abbey, and Father Donegan thinks they have a certain claim to the monstrance, for it was a Bargrave ravaged the old abbey. Hi, kiddie!"

The child, running busily around, had stumbled against his foot; so, dropping his tools, he tossed the white-faced little creature in the air until he bubbled laughter.

A girl came into the shop sweepingly, a draught rushing after, the glass door banging.

"Oh, Mr. Conroy," she exclaimed with emphasis, and even in the dim light which filtered through the crowded shop front one could see her blushes. "I just came in to know if—to know—ahem—green pencils—if you keep them?"

"We don't keep any sort of pencil, Miss Lannigan."

Placing Mite on the floor, and trying to draw down his sleeves, he came forward.

"What queer things this girl seems to want," he said to himself. "Oh, dear," she gasped, "and I want one so badly. I don't know what I'll do without a green pencil."

Una, standing on a chair dusting a shelf, felt sorry for her, and wished she had a green pencil so that she might present it to Miss Lannigan.

"Oh," the girl burst forth again, grasping at a conversational straw, for she felt herself sinking into a vacuum ocean, out of which Michael could not, or would not, help her. "Oh, is this your little cousin, Mr. Conroy?" She stared at Mite.

"No," he answered. "He's Miss Sheerin's brother."

Miss Lannigan was the daughter of the rich grocer next door, and Michael got diurnal surprises from her. She was red-haired, and ruddy, and rotund, and whenever she cast her eyes on Michael, her ordinary every-day scarlet deepened to a crimson that to her love-tortured heart was as flaunting banners and sounding timbrels.

Michael wondered seriously why the girl went to such pains to talk to a hulking chap like him, for he could not go into the store across the yard where the large pieces of furniture were kept, but a glowing head lit the window next door, and a girl's rather drawing tones remarked on the weather; and on his return, still at her post, she would be at such pains to discover

if the load he carried did not hurt him.

Miss Lannigan glanced at Una. She did not at all approve of her black-lashed eyes, her dainty hands and feet; of the way in which she moved, or spoke, or was silent. And, above all, Miss Lannigan did not approve of her having come to live with her great-uncle.

Another customer dropped in, and, as Miss Lannigan did not mean to be rushed, she approached Una.

Are there—maybe there are pencils, green ones, on that shelf, she pleaded.

"No," began Una. "I—" "Isn't it frightfully dull here?" Miss Lannigan swiftly burst in with a sudden lack of interest in pencils.

"Balcoggar is frightfully dull," "It seems dull," agreed Una, glancing through the window at the dismal street outside.

"Dull!" repeated the red-haired girl with some asperity at the mildness of the term. "Tian't dull; 'tis stale, musty. Ditchwater is lively towards it. Dull! 'Tian't dull. 'Tis dead. There isn't a dance—even the fleas can't hop. I noticed them," she added emphatically on observing Una's surprise.

Which seemed to imply that Miss Lannigan had fleas at home, Una thought, amazedly.

"They only crawl," she continued. "Everyone says so. They're in consumption, I think, and they carry it to people, too. Dull! She lowered her voice. "'Tian't alone dull, but spiteful.' She glanced over her shoulder. "A girl can't even squint at a fellow but such things as say—Oh-h!" she breathed loudly, then: "If I were you, I'd go back!" burst from her.

"I have nowhere to go," said Una, somewhat dazed.

The flood of Miss Lannigan's eloquence was dammed. She stared and blinked her pale blue eyes at Una. This contingency had not occurred to her. Then her eyes grew wider, and her jaw dropped, and she retreated with the air of one vanquished and beaten flat on every side.

The rain kept pouring all day from uncompromising skies, and Mr. Cummins returned wet through and shivering. Still shivering, he rose next morning, but a few hours later his inflexible will had to surrender to a fiery demon that lunged a spear through his brain and stretched his body on a rack.

But he peremptorily refused to see a doctor, though Michael told him that a dangerous type of influenza was prevalent.

Una, bringing the patient a drink the following morning, knocked at his door. Hearing a voice within, she entered.

"How are you, Uncle?" she asked.

"Eh?" answered the old man, hazily.

"Tell him I don't intend to take a farden less than the market value of the article—eighty pound."

The girl stopped, startled.

"Eh—'tis my last word," pursued her uncle. "What's that—a Catholic! Yes, but a business man, too. He's a fine business man himself. Does he know what he's asking me to do? To sacrifice thirty pound!"

His voice fell in cracked tones of amazement, and the mellow morning sunshine, pouring through rents in the crooked yellow blind at the head of the bed, revealed him very wizened and crafty with claw-like fingers clutching at a red cotton handkerchief twisted about his neck, his dim eyes rolling and staring.

"Thirty pound!" he repeated amazedly, paused and gave a dry sarcastic laugh.

Una ran downstairs, and asked Michael to get a doctor. When she returned Mite was standing by the bedside, prattling and tugging at the coverlet, and, when she observed that her uncle did not turn the child away, she knew that he was bad indeed.

When the doctor arrived, seeing that the patient was in a critical state, he declared that he would need constant watching, and ordered the priest to be sent for at once. Father Donegan came, and administered Extreme Unction, but Martin Cummins did not recognize him. Una was frightened at this, and prayed fervently for his recovery and repentance.

Michael remained with him that night and the morning's light showed that the miser had taken a long stride towards the eternal gates.

The next night Una sat up with her grand-uncle, and, as the sounds in the street died away, and silence, except for the quickened breathing of the patient, invested the sick-room, fear drew near and stood dragon-headed beside her. Her uncle would die, and she and Mite would be homeless, for his profligate son in America would inherit all his wealth.

There was a fire in the rusty grate, due to Michael's thoughtfulness, but she now grew cold, for Hope was dying.

"Tell Father Donegan he'll not get the monstrance a farden less."

Her uncle's rattling voice broke loudly on her meditations, so different from the incoherent mumbblings of a moment since. Una arose and looked at him. Death seemed stamped upon that greyish twitching face. She gave him a drink and returned to her seat.

The monstrance!

A mere thought curled itself like a canker worm into her heart. She could sell it. His son knows nothing about it. The thought borrowed

wings from fancy, and flew to her brain.

She would get fifty pounds for it from Father Donegan and if he questioned her right to sell it, she would say that her dying uncle raved of it, of his refusal, and to relieve him in his last moments, she was selling it at Father Donegan's price.

That, she told herself, was hardly lying; it was, perhaps, sophistry, surely to be condoned when the selling was almost a giving—the monstrance was worth eighty pounds—and the purpose was holy, to straighten Mite.

The girl's eyes glowed at the thought.

And Michael, she knew, would not speak. She believed without vanity—for coquetry and vanity were foreign to Una—that the youth would suffer even shame for her; that it was his steadfast way to suffer, if necessary for a friend.

The possibility of Father Donegan's doubting her never occurred to her. She trembled as her conscience, she made up her mind. She would not wait for her uncle to die. She would take the monstrance early in the morning—the doctor said he would live through the night—and thus evade the law.

Una congratulated herself on the latter bit of foresight and cunning, she whose simplicity had been child-like. Then she softly arose, and glancing at the old man, saw that he was still unconscious of his surroundings. She slipped over to the table where the case stood, undid the hasp, and once more the delicate mystical beauty of the monstrance bloomed forth and stunned her. It shone like a transfigured passion-flower, or a spirit in guise of silver, profoundly meditating.

The girl, trembling as she did on first seeing it, and knew not why, only that she felt herself in the presence of a mystery. She felt that there issued from this which had been the Holy of Holies an emanation all yearning tenderness that filled her with joy and most intimate peace, as if the Fount of Love had revisited His former dwelling place. Her soul again heard heavenly harmonies, and in it, now aglow with light, no guile could live, and she saw that Truth and Justice are never crafty. Her resolution faded like an evil dream.

A sudden scuffling sound caused her to turn in affright. Her uncle was sitting up in bed, gaunt and awful, staring at the monstrance with eyes from which the veil of time had been torn. In the mirror over the washstand the same grey tragic face was reflected.

"Mercy! Mercy! Mercy!" the old man cried gratefully, and the girl, recoiling, saw with an insight born of exultation that the vital spark was flying back to its source, its avarice turned to abhorrence, for the clear light from Beyond had flowed to him, too, through the monstrance, bearing repentance.

Una took a step towards the old man, and then her heart seemed to stop as he fell back dead.

The grey light of dawn filtered through the torn blind on the dead face and on the kneeling girl, and, filled with emotion, she recollected lines once read:

"'Twas the saddle and the ground,  
I mercy sought and mercy found."

A cry from her little brother pierced the morning stillness, and running to him, she found him very sick. He had contracted the influenza from his grand-uncle, and the child's delicate, misshapen frame could not resist it more than twenty-four hours. They were buried in the one grave—the world-wide and the innocent—the same grey tragic face was reflected.

Una stood by very pale and tearless, as the earth fell on the little coffin that held the only thing dear to her on earth, and the breeze blowing the withered leaves upon the graves seemed to whisper:

"All things are dust, and you are alone."

But the new spirit which had been born in her the night her uncle died rejected the whisper of unfaith and told her that she could never be alone, that he had lighted a star in her heart was nearest in the darkness.

The day after the funeral a search was made amongst old Cummins' papers, and a letter dated ten years before from an American hospital, enclosing a bill was found, stating that his son had died there. There was no receipt; so Una paid the bill, as she was declared sole heir.

Michael now runs the shop as master, and the red-haired girl now runs the house as mistress, and, no longer wishful for green pencils, runs it well. But that did not come to pass until Michael grew accustomed to the thought of Una a nun in the Carmelite Convent of Balcoggar, in whose chapel the silver monstrance at last found a meet abode.—Norah McCarthy.

To be misunderstood is the cross and bitterness of life. It is the secret of that sad and melancholy smile on the lips of great men which so few understand; it is the cruellest trial reserved for self-devotion; it is what must have oftenest wronged the heart of the Son of Man; and if God could suffer, it would be the wound we should be forever inflating upon Him. He also—He alone—is the misunderstood, the least comprehended. Never to tire, never to grow cold; to be patient, sympathetic, tender, to look for the budding flower and the opening heart; to hope always like God: to love always—this is duty.—Amiel.

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