

St. Cecilia of the Court

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I. THE COMING OF CECILIA.

Jim Belway, having wiped off one little pane of his tiny window, the better to peer through the rainy mist and the twilight gloom of the court, casually noticed that a new family was moving into No. 20, which was directly opposite his shop. Not that there was anything sufficiently novel in that to attract his attention—for outside of the few inhabitants who, having dwelt for years in the shadow of the Court, constituted its aristocracy, the population was very nomadic; even the aristocrats were not above frequently changing their domain from one tenement to tenement, or from apartment to apartment in the same house; but then moving, in the Court, was robbed of most of the features which make it dreaded outside, for it could be done with charming readiness, the household goods of the residents being restricted to those demanded by absolute necessity.

But there was a certain air about the operations going on across the way that held Jim's attention. Firstly, the commander-in-chief, or, perhaps more properly speaking, the commandress-in-chief, wore a waist whose warm crimson color lent an air of festivity to the proceedings; even her voice had a ring which bespoke conscious superiority to her surroundings. Secondly, a man was lifting into the hall a marble-topped table, a fact which needed not the seeing, for the crimson-garbed lady in the doorway was eloquently anxious about its safety, and loudly announced that it had once cost twelve dollars, and that not so very long since, either. When by knocking the precious table against the sill, the man was overwhelmed by a volume of fiery reproaches, Jim found the performance interesting enough to step outside the shop, where Mickey Daley was industriously sucking a lemon stick.

'And who is it that's moving in now?' asked Jim, knocking the ashes from his pipe. 'Who is it?' Mickey removed the stick of candy from his mouth. 'It's the Sweeneys, that's who.'

Neither of them had noticed the girl who was standing near them, holding by the hand a little fellow whose stout body and puffed-out cheeks stood out in amusing contrast to her own little thin figure and sharp pointed features; she turned at Mickey's short words, and, planting herself squarely before them, said curtly, 'Well, and what if it is?'

Jim, with that air of calm meditation which was his most distinguishing trait, calmly puffed on his pipe; but Mickey, who felt within him the soul-stirring independence of a free-born citizen, drew up his sturdy form firmly, and asked promptly, 'Say, do you know who yer sassin'?' 'No, I don't know who I'm sassin'!' If Mickey had thought to impress the girl by his cool assumption of grandeur, he had evidently failed, for her big eyes shot fire at him as she snapped back, and I ain't afraid to sass you back nor nobody else what lives in this Court!'

The pugilistic Mickey was quite unaccustomed to such fearless tones from any one his own size, particularly from a girl, so he took in the situation with rather a puzzled air that was not entirely lost on the girl, for with a magnificent toss of the head that reminded Jim vaguely of the lady in the scarlet waist, 'There ain't nobody in this Court

what's any better than the Sweeneys!'

'Oh, ain't there!' Mickey's tone was full of fine irony. 'Well, maybe there's a lot what's just as good!'

'Maybe there is, and then maybe there ain't.' The girl turned her back ungraciously on Mickey, and jerking her thumb over her shoulder in his direction, spoke to Jim: 'Say, who's that, any way?'

Jim let his black eyes drift slowly over the child's indignant face, and took a long puff before he answered; then, without a twitch of his solemn face, he made them a courtly bow, and pointing to Mickey, announced, 'Mr. Michael Daley, ma'am, at your service. Now, who may you be?'

With a firm uplifting of her red-crowned head, and without one glance at Mickey, she introduced herself. 'I'm Cecilia Angelina Sweeney, that's who I am!'

'Holy Smokes!' Mickey sat down on the ground with a suddenness that boded ill for his spinal column, and mimicked the name in a high and shrill key. 'Cecilia Angelina Sweeney! Did you ever hear the likes of that for a name, now!'

'Well, it's just the likes of you that wouldn't be knowin' the name of a blessed saint!' Cecilia delivered her speech with a sarcastic emphasis that proved she knew what a master stroke it was. Jim tried not to smile as Mickey turned an awe-struck face to his.

'Say, Jim, did you've ever hear of a saint named Cecilia Angelina?'

'And who said that any saint was called that?' demanded the girl fiercely. It was Cecilia that was a saint, and a fine one she was too! she was that fine it's no wonder the likes of you never heard of her! and Angelina is a name that my aunt what's dead read in a book; it's my aunt herself what's an angel now and so she knew it was a fine name. So there!'

If Cecilia's plan of reasoning was somewhat lame, Mickey did not discover it, but was reduced to a state of incoherent murmuring. Jim, to turn the tide of battle gave the little fellow, clinging to the girl's skirt, a playful poke, and inquired, 'And what's your name, now!'

'Puddin'!' The little one, feeling that he had been too long unnoticed, dug his hands into the depths of his dilapidated trousers, and shrieked forth the word in one staccato breath.

Jim shook his head. 'I say, what's your name?'

As if fearful that Jim's lack of understanding came from insufficient lung power on his part, the boy drew in his breath with a great gasp, and yelled, 'My name's Puddin'!'

Jim cast a reproachful look at Mickey, who was chuckling loudly, and spoke thoughtfully, 'That's a fine name, now! only I never heard it before.'

Mickey turned grandly to Jim then, and observed sarcastically, 'And didn't you ever hear tell of Saint Puddin'?' 'You—you—!' Cecilia stopped for lack of a word to express her contempt. 'It's makin' fun you are of the blessed saints! and I wouldn't be wastin' my breath on such as you!' Then she stopped to explain to Jim, 'His right name is Joseph Michael, but he's always been that fat and round that it's Puddin' he's always been called, and if ye never did hear tell of it before, it's a better name than some others I've heard tell of right here!' And with this parting shot, she

went, and left them looking after her through the misty gloom.

Mickey followed Jim into the shop, and sat down on one end of his bench, while Jim reached up to light the lamp, which speedily threw a few cheery yellow gleams across the tiny room; but tiny as the room was, it was known to every child of the court as the only place holding a bit of cheer, in which they were welcome. What with the bench and the little stove, the room was quite crowded when Jim had even one visitor. A curtain, which made no pretense to being anything but an old quilt, was stretched across the rear end, shutting from view the cot on which Jim slept, and the nails holding his surplus wardrobe, consisting of a much-worn black coat, and his hat, which was worn on his weekly exodus from the Court. On the wall, there, by the cot, hung a picture, the only pretense Jim had ever made to elegance; it was only a photograph, and a rather faded one at that; the face was not even beautiful, but there was in it, when one looked close, a beauty that was hidden from the casual observer. The frame was of rich gilding—only Jim knew how many months of self-denial that frame had cost.

It would seem that self-denial was almost an impossibility for Jim, for what luxuries, nay, almost what comforts, could he deny himself? He worked, and ate, and slept within the narrow borders of the shop. Work was rarely plenty, and his income but sufficed to pay the rent and buy the little food he required; still he had but himself to provide for, and now and then a child, running in, would be offered an apple or a bit of candy. How could the child know that it had been treasured just for the satisfaction Jim would feel to see the little hands clutch the rare dainty? For Jim's most prominent trait was his absorbing love of childhood, and not a child in the dozens that swarmed in the Court but that knew it well. Was it morning? Not one went by without pausing to see if he were within. Was it night? They crowded into the shop, to hear a story, or at the very least, to hear a kindly word. Was there a quarrel amongst the children at the pump, the social meeting-place in the centre of the yard? Then Jim, when it grew noisy, had only to shout a sharp word from the doorway, for well they knew that he had no favors for any one who fought.

They had often asked him how old he was, and always came the same answer, 'How old could I be now if not as old as my thumb?' If you looked at his eyes, he was young! For in spite of constant use, they were bright and youthful. The fringe of hair that surrounded the bald spot on his head, was gray—his form, from bending so much over awl and needle, could no longer straighten out entirely; still, he could not be very old, for his voice rang clear, he could pitch marbles as well as the rest of them, and he could whittle the end of a piece of broomstick until it had eyes and nose and mouth, so that many a little girl expended on such a doll all the deep maternal longing which filled her childish heart.

And then, too, the children knew that, upon the shelf over the cot, was a pasteboard box, holding a flute. Sometimes, when he felt unusually good, he would take it down, and play a bit of melody that would make their feet tap on the floor in merry tune—then his black eyes would glow, and seem to grow blacker still, eyes, inherited, with his innate love of music, from his Italian father. But there was nothing Italian in the way he played 'Yankee Doodle,' while the audience shouted it forth with more force than melody; but there was a smoothness to his voice when he sang that may have come also from his father, for who, having come to earth under Italy's sky, failed to imbue the softness and richness and languor of the air? But with all the smoothness of his voice, Jim had dwelt too long within the Court not to have caught the prevailing speech, which would have made a stranger mark him as more Celt than Italian.

Perhaps he was thinking of all this just