

A Sympathetic Link

by A. Ehnenger De Friese

It was one of those cold, gray, cloudy days which often usher in the month of November, that I was briskly walking up Broadway, imagining how nice and cozy I should soon feel, seated near a glowing fire, when I was arrested by a child's voice asking for alms.

The supplicant's face was pinched and blue from the cold atmosphere, and his limbs quivered, for he was dressed in thin cotton clothes, which afforded but slight warmth to his frail looking body. It was not an unusual sight to behold a beggar even more poorly and thinly clad, but it was uncommon to be addressed by a mendicant, however small, in such pure, clear accents, and in an innocent, child-like tone. I drew forth my pocket-book, and to hear the sort of answer the boy would make, I asked:

"How much will do you, my little man?"

"Twenty-five cents, madam, if you please."

"A very modest sum indeed," I replied; "but I have nothing less than a fifty cent stamp. Can you make change?"

"No, madam," he quietly answered; "but if you will trust me for that," looking wistfully at the stamp in my hand, "I will try and pay it back as soon as I am able."

Although I had not a thought of ever hearing of, or receiving the lent treasure, the idea pleased me, together with the boy's straightforward manner; but as I placed the desired sum in his thin hand, I was immediately paid by receiving the sweetest and most grateful look, with a murmur of thanks and an assurance of future payment. And as I departed, the little solicitor bowed with the air of a young prince.

The unique little beggar, debtor or creditor, I hardly knew what to call him, possessed my mind all the way home.

His face had awakened a sad memory, for it reminded me of my own lost darling, for whom I was then in mourning. The delicate features, the fine soft light hair, but most of all, the expression of the clear, full, deep blue eyes so closely resembled his, that the more I pondered on the likeness, the more I was persuaded that the child I had encountered was connected to me by some mysterious link. Could the dead come back and look through those windows of the soul, the eyes of the living? If so, my own angel boy had surely looked at me from the eyes of that little mendicant. I was strongly tempted to turn back and question the child; but what folly! I thought; he may be half a mile away from the place where he accosted me. After entering my home, the first thing I found myself doing was gazing out of the window, when lo! I beheld the boy that had occupied my thoughts so strangely.

He glanced hastily up at the street door, and then hurried away, as though wishing to be unobserved.

Now, my John has not the least sentiment, which is sometimes quite provoking. He is entirely void of superstition, and does not believe in any other form of “feminine weakness;” and when I told him of the little beggar, and how he had impressed me with the feeling that he was linked to me by a sympathetic chain, the br—beauty laughed until the tears ran down his face and anointed a beard more luxuriant than Aaron’s.

“Ah, wifey,” said John, “you may be sure that the link of which you speak is a bright silver one. That lad will make a draft on your spoons. Biddy, keep a sharp eye on all beggars that have refined features, soft golden hair, and eyes that melt into sad wistfulness.”

This injunction was given to our sole help—a stout Irish girl, of whom I stood in awe.

John often reiterated that Biddy was a treasure—a rough diamond; and though her harsh points were rather irritating to delicate nerves, Biddy had in some way convinced me that she contributed largely to my well-being, and that I could no more do without her ready help than I could dispense with John’s ready cash, although John declares that I am a ready help at dispensing that needful.

Several weeks passed away, and with them the memory of the unique beggar. But the merry shouts of the little urchins, as they glided by with their sleds, brought back the echo of another voice, and drew me to the window almost with the expectation of seeing my lost darling joining in the sport he had loved so well.

It brings sadness to a mother’s heart when the first winter storm harshly descends on her child’s grave; but lightly and silently fell the snow over my dead; and watching the shower of white flakes, they seemed pure, beautiful blossoms, scattered by a loving little hand above me.

Numerous applicants for a job, with shovels, halted before our house, but they were all ordered away by Biddy. There was a reason for her shaking her head so peremptorily behind the window bars. She was waiting for her cousin, Tim. Dougherty, to whom she gave such odd jobs; for she claimed it as her privilege to employ Tim., instead of a stranger; and that Biddy must have her rights was beyond question.

John came home and waded through the snow in front of our house, but he did not feel disposed to interfere with Biddy’s prerogative, although she applied to him for liberal funds to pay off her employé; and Biddy often declared that “the boss hadn’t a mane hair in the head of him,” which was no great amount of flattery, for John was then decidedly bald. It was dusk, yet Biddy’s cousin did not appear. She was busy in the kitchen preparing the dinner, and as she knew Tim.’s signal, she did not heed sundry timid knocks on the basement door; but later the open sesame came, and Tim. Dougherty burst in upon Biddy in a tremendous rage. The stoop and the sidewalk were cleared of snow.

“What did it mean?” he demanded to know. “Had she got another sweetheart?”

Sitting in the back parlor, I could hear distinctly the tones of Tim.’s voice, which presently died away to a low murmur. I knew that Biddy had a way of soothing Tim. by treating him to nice bits from our larder; but she was a faithful servant, and insisted on doing the work of two domestics, so I did not mind that.

Tim. soon departed, and Biddy, extremely wroth that her cousin’s legitimate business had been performed by an unknown usurper, flounced into the parlor and handed me a bit of paper, which she said had been left by a “slip of a boy,” that had bidden her to hand it to “the mistress.”

Biddy could not read writing, or she might have destroyed this slip of paper; for before she left the room I had read aloud to John these words:

“Three weeks ago you lent me fifty cents. I could not get any money to pay you back, so I cleared off the snow from your sidewalk. I guess you could not get it done any cheaper. I am very much obliged to you. FRANK.”

“There!” I exclaimed triumphantly; “what do you say to that, sir? That that boy has an independent spirit you cannot dispute.”

“All I have got to say is, Biddy, count the spoons,” and John shouted after the retreating domestic.

Turning over the paper, I saw scrawled some words in pencil that I could hardly decipher, and so applied to John for assistance. John is not good at reading poor writing; he can’t read his own after he has forgotten the subject written about; but I made it out at last, thus: “You will hear from me very soon.”

“No doubt,” said John, “he wants to get in your good graces before he picks your locks.”

“Oh! John, how suspicious you are!” I angrily exclaimed.

“Because I have seen through the craftiness of human nature, I am suspicious, eh, wifey? Come, there’s the dinner bell.” And John tucked me under his arm without ceremony, and we descended to the dining-room. Alas for my favorable impressions! Alas for my confidence in poor humanity! A pair of heavy silver napkin rings, a wedding present, were missing, and I knew John in his heart was laughing at me, although his face appeared as immovable as a rock.

“The rings are certainly lost,” I said sadly, “but I cannot believe that that child is a thief.”

“Pardon me, wifey,” said John, “but I must say you have no discernment of character. A pretty face favorably impresses you, and you immediately conclude that the possessor has a good heart.”

“I questioned Biddy on the appearance of the boy who had given her the note, but she said she had only caught a “stray glimpse of him, but that Tim. was the b’y that niver forgot the face of any man that the two eyes of him sighted;” and when Tim. returned, late in the evening, he gave such clear evidence, that John’s suspicions were confirmed.

“But,” said I, catching at a straw, “how could the boy have stolen the napkin rings if he only entered the hall?”

“Shure, now,” said Biddy, shaking her lover rudely, “Tim. Dougherty, it was yerself that left the street door ajar, in yer madness at me; and while yer was in the kitchen, givin’ me the bit of paper, shure what was asier than for the beggar thafe to inter the dinin’-room, the same’s door bein’ open, that I might be after heeding Tim. when he came for the shovel.”

I could but confess this was a logical explanation, as there was not a shade of suspicion attached to Tim., who had been coming and going to and from our house ever since Biddy was our domestic. As for Biddy, her honesty was not to be questioned.

We took no immediate steps to secure the thief, or to recover the stolen property, for it was probable that the child was in the employ of others, who had transferred the silver to the melting pot immediately on receiving it. I felt sorry that I had been so deceived and disappointed in the boy, for it is very pleasant to believe in a pretty, innocent looking face; and whenever I expressed regret on the subject, John took occasion to deliver a lecture on the gullibility of the feminine gender.

It was a little more than two weeks after the theft, when the queerest little old woman applied at our house for a situation. Biddy was indignant, and cast defiant glances on me until I humbly assured her I had not advertised for help; and Biddy bid the little old woman depart, thoroughly disgusted at what she called her “Dutch impudence.” But she stood in the front hall, and would not budge until she had seen the “laty;” so I was forced to descend and tell her that she must be mistaken if she had been informed that I wished a servant, as I had sufficient and competent help. She wagged her wise looking old head, while saying “Yah, yah, I no reads Inklisch; vill matdam sees vat de paber says.” As she handed me a bit of crumpled paper, she gave my fingers a sharp pinch with her horny ones, and then, begging a “tousan pardons for de troubls,” she stumped down the stoop and left the paper in my hands

Biddy shouted to her to come back for her “character;” but she appeared to be deaf, and trudged on as fast as she could go, while the Irish girl made sport of her short blue calico dress, stout shoes and odd little figure, and then hastened away to admit Tim. for his evening repast.

Smoothing out the crumpled note, I recognized the childish handwriting as being that of the boy I had once been so interested in. But what did the following request portend?

“Please come, early in the morning, to 183 D— street, and you will hear something to your advantage. Be sure to come alone.”

Here was a chance to secure the thief, or perhaps a whole den of them, was my first thought. I would send John as my substitute, accompanied by a detective officer. No, I would first reconnoiter the premises myself, for somehow I had still a lingering hope of the boy’s integrity. Perhaps the child had repented of the theft, and now wished to confess his sin; so I said nothing to John concerning his request, and set out the next morning with the ostensible purpose of doing all I could to reclaim that boy, should it prove as I hoped. I had a tedious time in looking for 183 D— street, for it was in a part of the town of which I was wholly unacquainted. While looking at a small, crazy looking old house, I descried a white-capped head suddenly disappear from the window, and in a moment the queer little woman that had applied for a situation came out of the house, and by a curious pantomime beckoned me to follow her. I summoned all my confidence in human nature; I reasoned that I had no enemies; no one could wish to do me harm in so deliberate manner; and then entered the house after my guide. With her finger on her lips to enjoin silence, the woman conducted me up a short flight of stairs, and into a back room, where I was surprised to see cleanliness exhibited in every particular, for the entrance and stairs were in a very dirty condition. There was a smaller apartment leading from the living room, and she, going softly in, motioned me after her. On a neat-conditioned cot lay the boy who had been suspected of theft. He was asleep, but by the dark rings under the golden fringed eyelids I knew he was ill. “He is very sick,” I said, in a whisper. The woman touched her own chest, nodded, then handed me a chair and left the room.

Looking on that white, upturned face, so calm, so peaceful, I again thought of my dead boy, my lost darling. My heart yearned toward the quiet little sleeper, and bending over him, I let a tear drop on his smooth, round forehead. It awakened him, and, starting up, he looked wildly about.

“Do not be afraid,” I said softly, to assure him.

“Oh, Madam,” he cried, “your good guardian angel conducted you here. No harm would be allowed to come to one who befriended a poor orphan. I want to tell you about it— about them.”

He now breathed with so much exertion, that I saw he was suffering from the effect of severe congestion of the lungs.

“Do not distress yourself, my dear, by talking,” I said. “I will come again to see you in a few days. You will be better able to talk then.”

“Oh, I must—I must tell you now!” he cried eagerly. “I can’t sleep another night with it on my mind, and if I wait it may be too late.”

He told me how hard he had tried to earn pennies enough to pay me the sum I had lent him, and when he found it impossible to gather together the requisite sum, he had thought of clearing the snow away in payment, and how he had written the note and given it to my servant, after he had knocked in vain for admittance, until the door had been opened to admit another. He was hungry and cold, and espying the well-laden table, had slipped into the dining-room unobserved, just to see how he would feel if he was comfortably housed and fed again; and then, when he saw the silver so temptingly displayed, and thought how much comfort the worth of them would bring him, he felt his first temptation to steal; he confessed he had taken the napkin rings, and begged my forgiveness, and hoped to do all in his power to make restitution. All this I suppose you have anticipated. I am happy to disappoint you. He did not speak of himself, but he told me of a plot to rob, and, if it would pay, to murder both my husband and myself. He disclosed the most fiendish and diabolical scheme with which to carry this crime into execution, and while it had been concocted he had breathlessly listened to it, standing in the hall of my own house! He had heard the date fixed on which to accomplish it. He designated the place where the stolen property had been taken, for he had followed the thief to a pawnbroker’s, who was also a receiver of stolen goods, it was afterward found. He had caught a severe cold in being out all day, and late into the evening, and had been sick ever since, and some of the time delirious, or he would have communicated with me before. The hand of Providence had been at work; it was better that he had not had the opportunity.

There was no need to tell me how it had occurred to Biddy and her confederate to awaken a suspicion by a small theft, and this lad, of whom Biddy had heard so much, might be suspected as the thief, and a tool of burglars; for Tim. had read the boy’s note to Biddy, and her exhibition of anger in the parlor was a sham.

When I took John into my confidence, he actually had magnanimity enough to look ashamed of himself; but John was needed to help frustrate a terrible design, and he went about it in a manner that proved all, and more, than the noble boy had said.

It is now two years since Biddy and her cousin were lodged in prison. The odd little German woman is now our honest help, and the orphan boy that was once her lodger, has taken the place of our lost darling in our home, and filled the aching void in our hearts. John has forgotten his lecture on female gullibility, and he never laughs at me now as being sentimental when I affirm that the loved dead sometimes looks at us from the eyes of the living, nor does he dispute that our adopted son is a sympathetic link in love’s chain, binding our hearts more closely to our angel boy, happier than we could make him in a beneficent Father’s love.

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