

MARY ELIZABETH

Mary Elizabeth was a little girl with a long name. She was poor, she was sick, she was ragged, she was dirty, she was cold, she was hungry, she was frightened. She had no home, she had no mother, she had no father. She had no supper, she had had no dinner, she had had no breakfast. She had no place to go and nobody to care where she went.

In fact, Mary Elizabeth had not much of anything but a short pink calico dress, a little red cotton-and-wool shawl, and her long name. Besides this, she had a pair of old rubbers, too large for her. She was walking up Washington Street. It was late in the afternoon of a bitter January day.

"God made so many people," thought Mary Elizabeth, "He must have made so many suppers. Seems as if there'd ought to be one for one extry little girl." But she thought this in a gentle way. She was a very gentle little girl. All girls who hadn't anything were not like Mary Elizabeth.

So now she was shuffling up Washington Street, not knowing exactly what to do next,—peeping into people's faces, timidly looking away from them, heart-sick (for a very little girl can be very heart-sick), colder, she thought, every minute, and hungrier each hour than she was the hour before.

The child left Washington Street at last, where everybody had homes and suppers without one extra one to spare for a little girl, and turned into a short, bright, showy street, where stood a great hotel.

Whether the door-keeper was away, or busy, or sick, or careless, or whether the head-waiter at the dining-room was so tall that he couldn't see so short a beggar, or whether the clerk at the desk was so noisy that he couldn't hear so still a beggar, or however it was, Mary Elizabeth did get in; by the door-keeper, past the head-waiter, under the shadow of the clerk, over the smooth, slippery marble floor the child crept on.

She came to the office door and stood still. She looked around her with wide eyes. She had never seen a place like that. Lights flashed over it, many and bright. Gentlemen sat in it smoking and reading. They were all warm. Not one of them looked as if he had had no dinner and no breakfast and no supper.

"How many extry suppers," thought the little girl, "it must ha' taken to feed 'em all. I guess maybe there'll be one for me in here."

Mary Elizabeth stood in the middle of it, in her pink calico dress and red plaid shawl. The shawl was tied over her head and about her neck with a ragged tippet. Her bare feet showed in the old rubbers. She began to shuffle about the room, holding out one purple little hand.

Story

One or two of the gentlemen laughed; some frowned; more did nothing at all; most did not notice, or did not seem to notice, the child. One said: "What's the matter here?"

Mary Elizabeth shuffled on. She went from one to the other, less timidly; a kind of desperation had taken possession of her. The odours from the dining-room came in, of strong, hot coffee, and strange roast meats. Mary Elizabeth thought of Jo.

It seemed to her she was so hungry that, if she could not get a supper, she should jump up and run and rush about and snatch something and steal like Jo. She held out her hand, but only said: "I'm hungry!"

A gentleman called her. He was the gentleman who had asked: "What's the matter here?" He called her in behind his daily paper which was big enough to hide three of Mary Elizabeth, and when he saw that nobody was looking he gave her a five-cent piece in a hurry, as if he had committed a sin, and said quickly: "There, there, child! go now, go!"

Then he began to read his newspaper quite hard and fast and to look severe, as one does who never gives anything to beggars, as a matter of principle. But nobody else gave anything to Mary Elizabeth. She shuffled from one to another, hopelessly. Every gentleman shook his head. One called for a waiter to put her out. This frightened her and she stood still.

Over by a window, in a lonely corner of the great room, a young man was sitting apart from the others. He sat with his elbows on the table and his face buried in his arms. He was a well-dressed young man, with brown, curling hair.

Mary Elizabeth wondered why he looked so miserable and why he sat alone. She thought, perhaps, that if he weren't so happy as the other gentlemen, he would be more sorry for cold and hungry girls. She hesitated, then walked along and directly up to him.

One or two gentlemen laid down their papers and watched this; they smiled and nodded to each other. The child did not see them to wonder why. She went up and put her hand upon the young man's arm. He started. The brown, curly head lifted itself from the shelter of his arms; a young face looked sharply at the beggar girl,—a beautiful young face it might have been. It was haggard now and dreadful to look at,—bloating and badly marked with the unmistakable marks of a wicked week's debauch. He roughly said:

"What do you want?"

"I'm hungry," said Mary Elizabeth.

"I can't help that. Go away."

"I haven't had anything to eat for a whole day—a whole day!" repeated the child.

Her lip quivered. But she spoke distinctly. Her voice sounded through the room. One gentleman after another laid down his paper or his pipe. Several were watching this little scene.

Story

"Go away!" repeated the young man, irritably. "Don't bother me. I haven't had anything to eat for three days!"

His face went down into his arms again. Mary Elizabeth stood staring at the brown, curling hair. She stood perfectly still for some moments. She evidently was greatly puzzled. She walked away a little distance, then stopped and thought it over.

And now paper after paper and pipe after cigar went down. Every gentleman in the room began to look on. The young man with the beautiful brown curls, and dissipated, disgraced, and hidden face was not stiller than the rest.

The little figure in the pink calico and the red shawl and big rubbers stood for a moment silent among them all. The waiter came to take her out but the gentlemen motioned him away. Mary Elizabeth turned her five-cent piece over and over in her purple hand. Her hand shook. The tears came. The smell of the dinner from the dining-room grew savoury and strong. The child put the piece of money to her lips as if she could have eaten it, then turned and, without further hesitation, went back. She touched the young man—on the bright hair this time—with her trembling little hand.

The room was so still now that what she said rang out to the corridor, where the waiters stood, with the clerk behind looking over the desk to see.

"I'm sorry you are so hungry. If you haven't had anything for three days, you must be hungrier than me. I've got five cents. A gentleman gave it me. I wish you would take it. I've only gone one day. You can get some supper with it, and—maybe—I—can get some somewheres! I wish you'd please to take it!"

Mary Elizabeth stood quite still, holding out her five-cent piece. She did not understand the stir that went all over the bright room. She did not see that some of the gentlemen coughed and wiped their spectacles. She did not know why the brown curls before her came up with such a start, nor why the young man's wasted face flushed red and hot with a noble shame.

She did not in the least understand why he flung the five-cent piece upon the table, and, snatching her in his arms, held her fast and hid his face on her plaid shawl and sobbed. Nor did she seem to know what could be the reason that nobody seemed amused to see this gentleman cry. The gentleman who had given her the money came up, and some more came up, and they gathered around, and she in the midst of them, and they all spoke kindly, and the young man with the bad face that might have been so beautiful stood up, still clinging to her, and said aloud:

"She's shamed me before you all, and she's shamed me to myself! I'll learn a lesson from this beggar, so help me God!" So then he took the child upon his knee, and the gentlemen came up to listen, and the young man asked her what her name was.

"Mary Elizabeth, sir."

Story

"Names used to mean things—in the Bible—when I was as little as you. I read the Bible then. Does Mary Elizabeth mean angel of rebuke?"

"Sir?"

"Where do you live, Mary Elizabeth?"

"Nowhere, sir."

"Where do you sleep?"

"In Mrs. O'Flynn's shed, sir. It's too cold for the cows. She's so kind, she lets us stay."

"Whom do you stay with?"

"Nobody, only Jo."

"Is Jo your brother?"

"No, sir. Jo is a girl. I haven't got only Jo."

"What does Jo do for a living?"

"She—gets it, sir."

"And what do you do?"

"I beg. It's better than to—get it, sir, I think."

"Where's your mother?"

"Dead."

"What did she die of?"

"Drink, sir," said Mary Elizabeth, in her distinct and gentle tone.

"Ah—well. And your father?"

"He is dead. He died in prison."

"What sent him to prison?"

"Drink, sir."

"Oh!"

Story

"I had a brother once," continued Mary Elizabeth, who grew quite eloquent with so large an audience, "but he died, too."

"I do want my supper," she added, after a pause, speaking in a whisper, as if to Jo or to herself, "and Jo'll be wondering for me."

"Wait, then," said the young man. "I'll see if I can't beg enough to get you your supper."

"I thought there must be an extry one among so many folks!" cried Mary Elizabeth; for now, she thought, she should get back her five cents. And, truly, the young man put the five cents into his hat, to begin with. Then he took out his purse, and put in something that made less noise than the five-cent piece and something more and more and more. Then he passed around the great room, walking still unsteadily, and the gentleman who gave the five cents and all the gentlemen put something into the young man's hat. So, when he came back to the table, he emptied the hat and counted the money, and, truly, it was forty dollars.

"Forty dollars!"

Mary Elizabeth looked frightened.

"It's yours," said the young man. "Now come to supper. But see! this gentleman who gave you the five-cent piece shall take care of the money for you. You can trust him. He's got a wife, too. But we'll come to supper now."

So the young man took her by the hand, and the gentleman whose wife knew all about what to do with orphans took her by the other hand, and one or two more gentlemen followed, and they all went into the dining-room, and put Mary Elizabeth in a chair at a clean white table, and asked her what she wanted for her supper.

Mary Elizabeth said that a little dry toast and a cup of milk would do nicely. So all the gentlemen laughed. And she wondered why. And the young man with the brown curls laughed, too, and began to look quite happy. But he ordered chicken and cranberry sauce and mashed potatoes and celery and rolls and butter and tomatoes and an ice cream and a cup of tea and nuts and raisins and cake and custard and apples and grapes. And Mary Elizabeth sat in her pink dress and red shawl and ate the whole; and why it didn't kill her nobody knows; but it didn't. The young man with the face that might have been beautiful—that might be yet, one would have thought who had seen him then—stood watching the little girl.

"She's preached me the best sermon," he said below his breath, "I ever heard. May God bless her! I wish there were a thousand like her in this selfish world!" And when I heard about it I wished so, too.

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