

The Storyteller

SEXTON MAGINNIS.

Sister Margaret's rosy face looked more rosy as the fresh, frosty air struck her cheeks. The convent habit—supposed by the romancers to represent a pensive soul dead to all human interests—had no member of special detachment in her case, it fitted very well with the air of bustle that pervaded the city landscape. Every negro for miles around was shoveling snow from the pavements, and Sister Margaret, who was of an energetic turn, clasped her hands in despair within her spotless sleeves as she viewed the movements of two black 'boys' of 40 and 60 on the pavement of the convent. Pompey and Caesar turned their spades with the graceful languor of waves of fans in the summer.

'It's me—it's I,' she said, correcting herself, for, although Sister Margaret was not a teaching Sister, she was a grammatical purist—it's I that would like to tuck up my habit and get down amongst them. Sure one Kerry man would do more in half an hour with his hands than all of them with their wooden spades.'

There had been a ring at the convent door-bell, and Sister Margaret had, in the temporary absence of the portress, opened it, but no one was in sight.

Sister Margaret, from her position on the high steps, looked about sharply. A young girl with dancing blue eyes, a sprightly step, and high bows in her hat as blue as her eyes, went by smiling and nodding at the good Sister.

'Mary Ann Magee,' she said to herself, 'and it's Mary Ann Magee here and Mary Ann Magee there with her blue bows and her gay ways, and the foolish young men paying her attention, and her old mother working away at the wash-tub. 'Tis the way with Irish mothers—they're foolish and tender with their children. Mrs. Magee is a Tipperary woman, and Tipperary isn't Kerry. And what do you want?'

Sister Margaret was accustomed to tramps. The convent was by no means rich, and the prioress, Mother Juliet, had some economic notions about the treatment of the poor who could work, but, nevertheless, and in spite of Sister Margaret's cool and deliberate gaze, which pierced through the excuses of men, the weary if not always worthy wanderer found the convent alms plain but bounteous.

The man who had suddenly bobbed up from under the iron steps had a gray kitten in his hand. His red-uncut hair had made its way under the battered crown of his hat. His upper garment, buttoned close to the chin, was a coat of the kind called Prince Albert glossy worn, and it had evidently been made for a much shorter person, and this red-haired man was very tall. His shoes were tied with rope, and his pink, frost-bitten wrists shone below the frayed sleeves of the glossy coat.

'Another drinking man, I suppose,' thought Sister Margaret discontentedly.

One look at the clear complexion, marred by several week's growth of sandy-colored hair, un deceived her. She knew her world well, and tramps were as much of her world as the innocent little boys who beseeched her for molasses and bread between school hours. There was an honest look in the helpless brown eyes of the man that to her experienced gaze showed that he was not of the vicious class.

'It's some woman to manage him—poor creature!—he needs. It's the way with half the men—their mothers don't live long enough, and the wives most of them get are without gumption at all. Well, what is it, my good man?' she asked in her professional tone.

'I'm sorry to keep you waitin' Sister,' said the man, with a rich brogue, 'but I just jumped down to pick up this poor omadhaun of a little cat, that got itself almost frozen.'

The Sister examined the stiff ball of gray fur.

'I'll take it. Sure, if Sister Rosalie can't bring it to life by the kitchen fire it must be dead entirely.'

'Is there any work for me, Sister?'

'That brogue—the brogue of her place in Kerry—went to Sister Margaret's heart. She knew that Mother Juliet's economic theories would not be softened by the fact that a tramp had a Kerry brogue, for the poor prioress, with all her learning, scarcely knew the brogue when she heard it. She was well aware, too, that the helplessness of any man would never appeal sufficiently to Mother Juliet to cause her to make work for him when the resources of the convent were taxed to pay the retainers absolutely needed for the care of the heating apparatus and other details which Sister Margaret's capable hands could not touch.

Something to eat and perhaps a note of appeal for him to some kind priest were all Sister Margaret saw, in her mind's eye for the pathetic Kerry man. Still Mother Juliet had one weakness, and this was for souls. She would go far for a strayed sheep, and if this man's soul were in danger, he might be taken on to suit the ashes, and to help with the boiler until his spiritual health should be restored. With fear and trembling and the sound of the old homely reflection in her ears, Sister Margaret asked the question—

'Do you go regularly to Mass, my good man?'

The man hung his head, and even the wisp of hair that struggled beneath his hat seemed to grow redder. Sister Margaret's face was illumined with a beautiful and hopeful smile.

'Tell the truth now, as you're an honest man,' she said.

To tell the truth as an honest man, replied the applicant with lead on his voice. 'I've been neglectful. I've been to Mass oft and on the year, but not regular.'

And have you gone to your duties?' continued Sister Margaret, knowing well that her hopes for her competitor depended largely on his having not done nearly everything he ought to have done. The man blushed and hesitated. Sister Margaret tried to assume a professional manner as portress.

'I've not been regular, he said. 'If I were near the holy Sisters and workin' for them maybe God would give me the grace—'

'Have you been away from your duties for more than a year?' asked Sister Margaret with apprehension.

'Oh, it's me that's ashamed to confess it,' said the man. 'It's me that's ashamed Sister, to say three years and more, come Pas-thur.'

'Thanks be to God,' said Sister Margaret involuntarily. 'You're in mortal sin, man! Go back to the kitchen gate, and I'll tell mother Juliet.'

Mother Juliet had just come into the old-fashioned parlor through the great mahogany doors of Henry Clay's time when Sister Margaret entered. She held Street's 'Economics for Young Minds' and the chapter on 'Money' was marked by a lace-edged picture of St. Stephen with a large arrow in his side. Her most important class was over, and as she had put her whole heart in it,

she was tired and absent-minded. Sister Margaret loved and revered her, but as she was a convert and not from Kerry, Sister Margaret often felt that she needed unusual management.

'Well, my dear Sister?' asked the prioress, looking, in her white robe, like a very tired and well-bred statue.

'It's a soul, reverend mother, that's waiting nourishment and work at the back gate,' said Sister Margaret—'a soul—'

'Yes, yes,' said the prioress. 'Well, Sister, you know what to do. There are tickets for the Charitable Association on the mantel-piece in the kitchen. Although, of course, I agree with what the Holy Father says in his very latest encyclical as to almsgiving, yet I cannot help thinking that the sanest way in which to treat our fellow-creatures must be based on scientific principles. The Holy Father—'

'Ah, since I heard Father Dudley's sermon on 'The Husks of Science,' it's little I care for it, reverend mother. There's a poor soul at the gate mother, that hasn't been to his duty for three years, and the number of times he has missed Mass I can't—'

'Dear, dear! You don't tell me so, Sister Margaret!'

'And it's little good the tickets of the Charitable Association will do a poor man in a state of sin.'

'Give him a good cup of coffee, and send him with a note to Father Dudley. He will touch the poor man's heart and lead him to confession. Sister Margaret I notice that the window panes in the laundry are not so clear—'

'It's little you know of the heart of man, reverend mother,' said Sister Margaret. 'Little you know! It's not the higher education that will help you there. If you were brought up with the farming-folk in the old country, things would be different. The heart of man—'

A smile hovered about the edges of the prioress' lips. She understood the heart of woman well enough to see dimly into Sister Margaret's plan.

'Well,' she said, with the impatience of these details caused by absorption of her thoughts of her own teaching—'well, do what you can, but remember, we are poorer than even our vow of poverty requires, Sister Margaret. You, in your great kindness, forget that our resources are not what they once were. Give him something for doing the laundry windows.'

'I can't forget, reverend mother,' said Sister Margaret 'that there's a soul to be saved.'

'Set him to work, then,' answered the prioress, growing graver at once, 'and I will go,' she added rather timidly 'and read something spiritual to him. There are some beautiful passages in St. Francis de Sales, and he may be an intelligent man.'

'Little she knows, God help her!' thought Sister Margaret. 'Sure a good talk of old Kerry days will be better for the boy than all the spiritual reading in the world.'

The prioress was relieved by the look of hesitancy on Sister Margaret's face.

'You know better, Sister, how to deal with the case, but get the poor man off to Father Dudley at once, just as soon as you see him softening a little.'

'It's strange,' thought the prioress, with a gentle perception of the situation, 'that all Sister Margaret's distressed souls are Irish.'

In a few minutes Lewis Maginnis was at work, on a ladder in the laundry, battling with that small amount of matter that seldom gets out of place in a convent. His story was plain. He had drifted from a Kerry farm to New York. It was evident that he was simple, good-natured rather soft in temperament, and at the beck of circumstances. He had worked when he could find