THE KNITTED COLLAR

Mary Anne Hoare

(1818-1872)

°From Shamrock Leaves; or, Tales and Sketches of Ireland, 1851.

“Blessed is he that considereth the poor: the LORD will deliver him in time of trouble.” Psalm 41:1.

One dark dismal morning in the month of November, 1846, a miserable group of human beings were assembled in the attic of an old crumbling house, situated in a filthy obscure lane in a large Irish city. The room contained no furniture save an old empty box, a broken pitcher, and a bundle of damp straw, on which lay a man pale and ghastly. His wife and four children were crouching on the ground, near a fireless grate; their tatted rags and famine-stricken faces testifying too surely the dreadful extremity to which they were reduced.

"Nelly," said the man, "give me a drink of water. Oh, then, if 'twas that I always drank, 'tisn't this way we’d be now?"

"Denis, agra, don't fret yourself," replied the poor woman, rising feebly, and holding the jug to his parched lips. "If I had anything at all to give you, darling, you'd do well yet; but where to get even one halfpenny to buy a grain of meal, I don't know."

The eldest daughter, a girl of fourteen, who had been holding one of her little brothers in her wasted arms, and trying gently to hush the plaintive cries of the starving child, looked up, and said eagerly, "Oh! Mother, I had the collar that Jane Brown gave me thread to knit, nearly finished, when little Denny began to cry; maybe I could put the last stitch to it now, if you'd take him in your arms, and then I might be able to sell it in the streets."

"Do, darling," said her mother, "in the name of God, though He knows this blessed minute that 'tis badly able you are either to work or to walk."

Mary Sullivan, like many Irish girls, had much taste and facility in executing fine knitting; she had learned the art in happier days, while attending an excellent charity-school, and now she tried to make her talent available for the support of her family. They had once been well off. Denis Sullivan was a journeyman

shoemaker, and earned a sufficiency for their wants. In an evil hour he was persuaded by a fellow workman to enter a public-house and take a glass of whiskey; then the common oft-repeated fate was his, his earnings squandered, his family reduced to want, and finally his own health totally destroyed.

Things were in this state, when bitter famine visited the land in 1846. Then the Sullivan's were literally left to perish, for those who had charity to dispense could scarcely reach one half the cases of heartrending misery which they witnessed; and therefore justly selected its objects of relief those who were brought to destitution by the pressure of the times, and not by any fault of their own. A drunken journeyman shoemaker could not hope for assistance while so many sober industrious men were perishing; and Sullivan's unfortunate family of course suffered with him. His wife, a poor weakly woman, in a spirit of almost Turkish apathy, was content to lie down and die; and when all their little articles of clothing and furniture had been pawned, the three young children pined away from hunger in slow but sure decay.

Mary alone of all the family tried to do something. She was a gentle, dark-eyed girl, with a look of patient suffering in her thin pale face, and a soft low voice which few, one would think, could listen to unmoved. The sale of work, however, had become almost hopeless; so many were trying to live by it, and so few had money to buy. The delicate fabrics, both in knitting and embroidery, which many a bony finger worked at till the hollow eye grew dim, were often disposed of for two or three pence beyond the price of the materials.

The collar which poor Mary had now finished was beautifully fine, and had cost her many hours of toil; yet she almost despaired of selling it, as she sallied forth at eleven o'clock, shivering with cold and hunger.

About four o'clock the same day, as a fashionably dressed lady was walking along a road at the western end of the city, she heard a plaintive voice behind her saying, "Will you please, ma'am, to buy a knitted collar?"

She turned, and poor Mary, now almost fainting from exhaustion, offered the lace-like piece of work for her inspection.

"What do you ask for it, child?"

"Two shillings, ma'am."

"Oh, that's much too dear! I'll give you one for it."

"It took me several days to knit, and my parents and brothers are starving," said poor Mary, bursting into tears.

"Oh, yes; I suppose the old story. Well, child, if you don't like to give it for a shilling, you can sell it elsewhere."

"Take it, ma'am," said Mary, giving it to the lady, and eagerly seizing the offered shilling. There was life to her and those she loved in that bit of silver, that paltry coin which its former possessors would have squandered, without a thought, for any unneeded trifle, yet now considered well-spent in securing a bargain.

Let us change the scene to a baker's shop, in street. It was a large establishment, and the deep shelves were piled with the crisp, fresh loaves of every shape, size, and quality; from the fine light French roll, to the dark, compact "household brick;" and the wide window displayed biscuits, cakes, and confectionery, in various tempting forms. It was half-past four o'clock, and the space outside the counter was filled with purchasers, very different in their rank and appearance.

Two richly dressed ladies, whose carriage was in waiting, were selecting, with jewelled fingers, some of the prettiest bon-bons (candies) which the attentive master of the shop produced, and mirthfully discussing which kind "baby" was likely to prefer: near them stood a stout, fresh coloured country-woman, wrapped in a blue cloak, and holding up her checked apron, while she impatiently called out--"Ah, then, good luck to you, Honest man, and don't be keeping me this way; but just give me them two lumps, and three bricks I axed you for: here's the money ready, and 'tis three miles of the road home I ought to have over me by this."

The master of the shop had but two boys to assist him behind the counter, and though they hurried and toiled and "did the impossible" to content their clamorous customers, the latter were by no means satisfied to wait for their turn to be served.

There were but two individuals in the shop who appeared to possess the very un-Irish quality of patience. One of them seemed to have learned it in a hard school; she was a thin, pale girl, barefooted, and clothed in miserable, scanty rags, which, however, were clean, and as tidily put on as they would admit of. She held a shilling tightly grasped in her slender fingers, and advancing through an opening in the crowd, asked the youngest shop-boy for a stale loaf of "thirds"--(the coarsest kind of bread manufactured).

He had just finished serving a farmer, and hastily giving her what she wanted, took the shilling, and returned her the change. There had been standing next the girl, a pleasing-looking, neatly-dressed lady, who now advanced, and asked for

some Naples biscuits.--The boy was busy weighing them, when the girl came back, and said to him, "If you please, what did you charge for the loaf?"

"Threepence, and I gave you the change."

"But you gave me sixpence and a fourpence, so you kept a penny too little."

The boy looked vexed at his blunder, which he probably feared his master might observe; so hastily taking the silver fourpence, and giving the girl threepence, he said, “It’s all right, now, you may go.”

She was hastening away, when the gentle-looking lady next her said, "Stay, you have been very honest; good principle may be shown as well about a penny as a pound--here is a shilling for you."

The girl involuntarily raised her clasped hands.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, ma'am," she said, "God for ever bless you!" and then hastened out of the shop, before the lady could again address her.

Miss Saville had only moderate means, but possessed a truly benevolent heart. She usually resided in a remote part of the country, with her brother, who was a clergyman, and who was wont to assert, that in attention to the schools, and visiting the sick in his parish, his sister Sarah was worth two curates, "aye, and hard-working ones, too."

She was now staying on a visit with a married sister, who resided near; and who, although blessed with an excellent husband, and several fine children, could not be called as truly happy as her maiden sister: for though, in the main, a good--natured woman, she lacked that generous, thoughtful benevolence of spirit which distinguished Miss Saville. On this day, however, the latter walked home to dinner in a self-reproaching frame of mind.

"How very thoughtless I was," she said to herself. "not to ask that poor child where she lives, and something of her history. I'm sure she's in great distress, and she seemed so honest and so grateful. I wish very much I could find her out."

A few hours afterwards, a happy family party were assembled in Mr. Elliott's drawing-room. His sister-in-law, Miss Saville, held her youngest nephew on her knee, and was surrounded by four other bright-eyed little ones, among whom she had just distributed her purchase of Naples biscuits; and as they ate, they listened with much interest to Aunt Sarah’s account of the honest girl, who, "though she looked so very poor, would not keep a penny which did not belong to her."

Mrs. Elliott, who was seated at her work-table, arranging some lace trimming on a cap, now got up, and handing a small collar to her sister, said--

"Look, Sarah, did you ever see any knitting so fine as that?"

"It is, indeed, beautiful--quite like lace; where did you get it, Eliza?"

"I bought it to-day in the street-such a bargain! Just fancy the girl who had it asked two shillings; and when I offered her one, seemed quite glad to take it. Really, there's no knowing what to offer; for now money is so scarce, people who live by knitting and needlework, are willing to take almost anything. I dare say Miss Wilson, the milliner, would charge me five shillings for that collar."

Miss Saville looked very grave, and was silent, but Mr. Elliott, who had been reading the newspaper, now laid it down, and said--

"Do you think it honest, Eliza, to take the fruit of a poor girl's industry for one-fifth of its value?"

"Really, James, you men have the strangest notions!—why should it not be honest to purchase an article for the price at which its owner is willing to sell it?"

"Not willing, Eliza. By your own account it is wrung from them by the direst want; and perhaps the other shilling which you withheld from the poor maker of that little article, and which to you is nothing, might have given food and comfort to a starving family."

Mrs. Elliott blushed, but did not speak. Her conscience told her, her husband was right, yet she did not like--what woman does?--to own herself in the wrong.

Mr. Elliott did not wish to give his wife pain; and her sister felt glad to see that an impression, which she hoped might prove lasting, had been made on her mind; so, after a momentary pause, the conversation turned on other subjects, and the evening concluded happily. In the silence of night, however, ere they fell asleep, perhaps the last reflection of each was something of this kind:

"How I wish," thought Miss Saville, "I knew where that poor girl lives. I shall not forget her pale face and gentle voice for some time."

"Well," thought her brother, "I blamed Eliza for not being charitable, and I fear I'm not half enough so myself. When I'm paying my subscriptions next week, I think I'll double them."

"I wish I had given the shilling to that poor girl," was Mrs. Elliott's reflection. "James is right. I'll never again bargain with a poor work-woman."

Let us now return to the wretched attic inhabited by the Sullivan's.

A month had elapsed since the day when our story commenced, and their miserable resources were utterly exhausted. Denis and his youngest child lay dead; they had both expired of hunger the preceding day, and as yet no one came to bury them. The wife lay gasping at the corpses' feet, and a low, dull moaning proceeded from the white, drawn lips of the two little skeletons lying on the floor, who, but for that sign of life, could scarcely be distinguished from their dead brother.

Where was Mary? Day after day, when the last halfpenny was expended, had she crawled forth to beg alms for her perishing family: often she returned to them empty. Her failing strength and eyesight, together with the long December nights, unlighted by fire or candle, forbade her resuming her ill-rewarded knitting. This day she went out, almost frantically, to beseech a morsel of bread; for she felt that ere another sun went down, they must all perish. We will leave her tottering towards a crowded thoroughfare, where she thought, perchance, even one halfpenny might be obtained.

About two o'clock, that day, Mr. and Mrs. Elliott, and their sister, emerged from a haberdasher's (clothing) shop, in a street where the ladies had been making various purchases, and the gentleman as gentlemen always have done and always will do--amused himself by commenting on their proceedings, and thanking his stars that masculine costume is so much more easily arranged than that pertaining to the softer portion of the creation. They were about to cross the street, when Mr. Elliott said-- "There's a crowd on the opposite footpath; we had better wait till it disperses."

"'Tis only a poor hungry crathur that fainted," said a man who was passing, "and she's lying now like dead."

"Let us go," said Miss Saville, "and see what can be done." And on she went, followed by her brother and sister.

There lay poor Mary, apparently lifeless, her head resting against a lamp post. Miserably death-like as she looked, Miss Saville immediately recognised the girl she had met at the baker's; and her sister the same moment knew the poor seller of the knitted collar.

No time was lost by Mr. Elliott in getting her conveyed to the nearest apothecary's shop; where, after some time, she was restored to consciousness. A few words sufficed to make known her story, and to direct her benefactor to the miserable dwelling where her parents lay.

Thither Mr. Elliott went, and found that Nelly Sullivan had breathed her last since morning. The little boys were still alive, and able to swallow the cordial he offered them. He summoned some of the neighbours to his assistance, and provided for the decent burial of the dead. He then had the poor children wrapped up, and conveyed to a house inhabited by an old woman who had nursed his family, and who readily undertook the charge of them and of Mary.

After some time, they all recovered their bodily health, but it was long before Mary could be roused from a state of deep dejection. At length Miss Saville took her to the country, and there the grateful girl lives with her as a servant, each day becomes more useful. The boys, through Mr. Elliott's interest, have been placed at school, where they promise to do well. Their benefactors found that such giving was indeed "twice blessed," for they experienced an abundant enlargement of their own hearts, while doing good to others.

Mrs. Elliott especially, though thrifty, as a housewife should be, in buying from rich trades people, has never been known to cheapen the work of the poor, since the day on which she purchased the knitted collar.