

for his playing was dreadful and, if he was depending on it for a living, I wondered how he survived at all.

I did think about dropping something in the cap but, as I looked at the forlorn figure, it seemed futile to offer a few pence when he so obviously needed much, much more.

At that point, a new personality loudly proclaimed its arrival on the scene. A smartly dressed professional street entertainer moved down the line playing his fancy accordion while he smilingly solicited donations for the purple bag attached by a strong wire to the accordion. As he approached, a tide of indignation swept over me. The attention of the crowd had swung immediately to this new person and no one even noticed that the old man, outclassed by the competition, had haltingly picked up his cap, pocketed the few pence, and begun to stumble slowly away. As the accordion man neared me, I fought back the urge to kick him soundly in the shins. Then, for no logical reason, my mind flashed back to some words, originating in the Talmud, I had read several years before:

"The noblest charity is to prevent a man from accepting charity, and the best alms are to show and to enable a man to dispense with alms."

My indignation was replaced by an impulse to rush up the street, grasp the old man by the arm, and talk to him, but still I hesitated. The show would soon be going in. What could I do for someone like him? I wasn't even particularly well off myself. Yet, as I hesitated, I realized I could never concentrate on the show after what I had just experienced and something very strong inside me seemed to push me forward.

I LEFT THE LINE. It didn't take me long to catch up. His crutches made the going very slow.

Nervously I said, "Excuse me. I'm tired of waiting in the queue so I've decided to have a cup of coffee. . . . I wonder if you would join me?"

The weatherbeaten face turned to me, the eyes full of surprise, "Why, that's very kind of you. But you must have other plans. It's New Year's Eve."

"No," I reassured him, "I really have no plans and I'd like you to join me."

With very little effort we were soon sitting comfortably in a nearby cafe and now, in the bright light, I could see how very cold he was, and probably in need of a good, square meal.

"Look," I said, "now we are here, won't you have something to eat?"

"Well . . . if you are . . .?"

"I've already had a meal," I said truthfully, "But I'll have a doughnut, and why don't you order something?"

He ordered lamb chops, French fries and peas. When the meal was set in front of him, he produced a brown paper bag and, to my consternation, put the chops in it. Noticing my expression, he explained that because of the arthritis, he couldn't hold a knife and fork properly, but he would eat the meat later at home. As he munched on the vegetables, I persuaded him to accept a drink of gin. It warmed his insides and, as we ate, we talked. He was Mr. O'Sea, born in Ireland. That meant we were fellow countrymen, although of different faiths. His only living relative, a sister, lived in Liverpool. About the crutches—he'd been knocked down by a taxi many years ago and

his leg so badly hurt that they had put in a metal pin and he had to use crutches ever since. By trade, he had been a sailmaker on fishing boats but, with the accident and then the onset of arthritis, he became unable to support himself and now lived at a State-owned home for destitutes—formerly the London Work House. While we chatted, he lit a hand-rolled cigarette and puffed pungent fumes into my face until, feeling rather green, I managed to persuade him to accept a packet of tailor-mades. When we finished the meal, it was getting late and, as we came back onto the street, even colder than before. I tried to talk him into letting me send him home in a taxi but he refused. Instead, he waited at the bus stop to see me off and waved his battered cap as it pulled away.

THAT IS HOW I SPENT New Year's Eve, 1963. But it didn't stop there. In the week that followed I thought a great deal about Mr. O'Sea. I went out and bought a pair of warm gloves and mailed them to him. On Saturday, after having my hair done in his neighborhood, I bought a bag of fruit drops and decided to pay him a visit. Modernized though it might be, Marylebone Lodge was still unmistakably the London Work House. A collection of bleak, greystone buildings, it looked as forbidding as a jail and just about as cheering. An attendant showed me to a large, warm living room filled with row upon row of gnarled, twisted and beaten old bodies in various stages of sleeping, talking, watching the television set at one end of the room, or just staring into space. Mr. O'Sea was absolutely flabbergasted to see me. I realized he hadn't expected me to come at all. We chatted a while and, before I left, I gave him the candy. I wondered what good I could really do someone like him, but he had seemed glad to see me. Calling on Saturdays got to be a regular thing for me. I must admit that I didn't always feel like going but then, as I considered the endless monotony of his life and what an hour meant in mine, I went gladly.

One Saturday in April I arrived at Marylebone Lodge only to be told Mr. O'Sea had been taken to hospital. I began visiting him there after work in the evenings. It was a difficult experience, for Mr. O'Sea had active tuberculosis and the only place where a bed could be found for him was in a ward reserved for terminal cases, with scarcely a day passing without someone meeting a painful death. However, true to his Irish spirit, Mr. O'Sea vowed to survive in spite of everything, though how he kept up his uncomplaining front I will never know. He read avidly from the hospital library, and I came to see that books were both his great love and his great escape. When I visited him, I brought fruit or the occasional little tot of Scotch. I knew how much he liked the latter and, in his surroundings, I felt he deserved a little enjoyment.

WITH THE ONSET OF the warm summer and an improvement in his condition, he was allowed to sit in the shade of the trees in the hospital garden. There I would find him with his books and newspaper. His one prized possession was a watch which his sister, Chrissie, had sent him and, since his old hands were too deformed to wind it, this became my regular job. By now, we knew each other very well. I would tell him about my work and let him read my letters from home and he would show me Chrissie's letters and would always give his newspaper when I left I

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