

the food hunter, who immediately slipped it inside his coat and went off to share it with the family.¹²

The starving were everywhere and could not be avoided, even by veteran travelers like the Reverend S. Godolphin Osbourne. He and his English traveling companion were, later, on their way to Westport, in a cracked old coach with the paint worn off, a dingy harness, and a driver wearing the inevitable top hat and swallow-tailed frieze coat, when they became emotionally involved, against their will, with another seeker of food. This one, though, absolutely refused to lose self-respect in order to obtain it. The countryside between Limerick and Westport was wild, beautiful, hardly cultivated, with green mountains tinged with yellow and brown rising everywhere in the background. The brightly variegated plain seemed ideal for grazing purposes, but there were few farm animals and even fewer farms.

Suddenly a barefoot girl about twelve years old appeared—from nowhere, it seemed, for there were no trees and no cabins close to the road. Dressed in a man's old coat closely buttoned to conceal the fact that she was otherwise naked, she began running beside their coach, keeping pace with it whether it went very fast, as it did when the road was straight and level, or slowly, as it did around turns or up slippery grades. She did not ask for anything but with fists clenched kept running, matching her speed to the horse's so that she was always directly beside the two seated English gentlemen in the car and just behind the driver on his high seat.

Osbourne and his friend had by now reached the point where they refused all mendicants, including even those who, like this girl, were obviously not professional. From experience they had learned that by relieving them with the value of no more than a meal, they would be subjected to an eloquence of gratitude, spoken in every feature and gesture, invoking every office of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, every pleading of the saints, to bless them throughout their lives and on into eternity.

Osbourne especially was firmly against giving alms to this barefoot girl in the threadbare coat, whose long blond hair bounced against her back as she ran, as though she was astride a trotting horse. He kept urging his friend to resist while they both kept telling her, again and again, that they would give her nothing.

But she never asked for anything, and in time they became astonished at her concentration, her stamina, the stoical expression that held in thrall her lovely features. She was a magnificent creature with a fine, expressive face going back to what had once been an Irish aristocracy, a face whose beauty now appeared almost improper in the daughter of a peasant. At any other time in Ireland, when singing and dancing and poetry reading in a warm commingling of families were weekly occurrences, the people watching such a girl in a jig would have said something like, "Faith, but that one mixes her legs well. Sure, while your back was turned, she could walk up your sleeve and build a nest in your ear."¹³ She was that pretty, slender, and agile, but now her every feature showed such controlled determination that the two silent traveling companions grew more and more attentive to this unexpected and unwelcome contest. Osbourne, as he himself could plainly see, was much more irritated than his friend by her silent, wearying importunity.

The friend kept shaking his head at her in refusal, but with every quarter-mile traveled he did so with less and less conviction. His heart finally began to soften at the sight of her, asking for nothing but refusing to be denied, gasping for breath but clinging to some irreducible minimum of pride, literally running her heart out so she could go back to her mother and father (whose old coat she was wearing because hers had been new enough to pawn) and surprise them and her brothers and sisters with some food, or the money to buy some.

"The naked spokes of those naked legs, still seemed to turn in some mysterious harmony with our wheels," Osbourne said. "On, on she went ever by our side, using her eyes only to pick her way, never speaking, not even looking at us."

It was not until she had run at least two miles, a distance she would have to retrace on bleeding feet, that she won the day. Soaked with sweat, her eyes burning with salt, her mouth open and gasping for breath, she became very hot, coughed, and buckled over as if from stomach cramps. Still she ran with undiminished speed, absolutely determined to match the speed of the horse and remain parallel with the two Englishmen sitting in the carriage. Finally Osbourne's companion, fearful that her determination would destroy her, gave in.

"That cough did it," Osbourne said. "He gave her a fourpenny: I confess I forgave him—it was hard earned, though by a bad sort of industry."¹⁴

The girl invoked neither the office of the Saviour nor the grace of the Virgin nor the pleading of the Saints to bless the English gentlemen. She took the money from them as she might have taken an apple from a tree or a fish from a lake, and walked slowly back with it along the road toward home. The fourpenny piece, equal to roughly half a day's pay for the lowliest worker, would buy enough meal to keep the family fed for another day or two. With it held tightly in her fist, she would enter, like sunlight, the darkness of the cabin and somehow reconcile everyone to it.