

As the Twig Was Bent

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It was eleven o'clock, dark and cold, when Michael Hennessy Higgins, the red-headed sculptor of tombstone angels—yet a free-thinker himself—placed a bag of plaster and some tools in a wheelbarrow, signaled to his ten-year-old daughter, Margaret, and started to the graveyard. A few hours earlier, taking her hand, he had told her that he would need help and so she had proudly sat up, wondering what more she could do.

That day they had buried her four-year-old brother, Henry George Higgins. Since he had not responded to his father's homemade croup remedies, death had called for the first time at his home which had known only birth.

Margaret herself was the sixth child, born in Corning, New York, 1879, and since then babies had come so fast that they created no more excitement than a litter of kittens. Two years earlier Margaret had helped wash a fourteen-pound boy who had given her mother a difficult time. As usual, her father had pulled his wife through with the help of his favorite prescription, "good whiskey." He had not lost any of their eleven large babies, although his wife was weaker after each birth and coughed more. Today her grief deepened as she realized that there was not even a snapshot of her boy's darling face.

Just outside the graveyard Michael Higgins hid the lantern under a bush, telling Margaret to swing the light if anyone approached. Her heart jumped at the sight of a white figure, but she stifled her scream when she realized that it was only one of her fa-

ther's marble angels Since he was treating her like an adult, she tried to act like one and was soon reassured when she heard the nearby sound of his shovel and then a thud when it struck the casket

In her several accounts of that night, Margaret later wrote that she had not known that it was against the law to dig up the dead, but had she known, it would not have mattered, since she had complete faith in her father who set her standards of right Nevertheless, this was the longest hour that she had lived through

For two evenings Margaret helped in the workshop while her father broke the death mask made in the graveyard, poured the mould and finished the cast Then he led his family into the studio to unveil the head To the brokenhearted mother it was a wonderful comfort, as well as a unique tribute of love from a husband who often failed in his role of breadwinner

He would have failed less often had he been more single-minded This graveyard sculptor, with his rich Irish brogue, had once been a soldier-hero, then a medical student and a member of the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor, but above all, he was a philosopher Human freedom was his passion and to him that meant freedom of thought and religion, free trade, free schools, textbooks and libraries At this time he was absorbed in Henry George, whose *Progress and Poverty* stood in his meager library along with the *Bible*, a world history, *Aesop's Fables* and a book on phrenology Although the small boy who had died was the author's namesake, the choice of names could not have pleased his mother, since Henry George had been the cause of one of the couple's few conflicts

Michael Higgins had conceived a bold educational project for his town He had ensured the presence of Corning's fifty leading citizens at a lecture by Henry George by inviting them all to a hotel banquet No one recalled much about the speech, but for the Higgins family, it was a long cold winter Michael had paid for the dinner from the joint funds saved up for fuel During the winter months, his wife could not forget that the children of the gentlemen who had enjoyed the feast were always warm, well-fed, and pampered

The Higgins children were never pampered Dressed in hand-

me-downs, thriftily fed, and without any spending money, they went to work as soon as possible. The older ones, who had already left home, helped with the family finances.

Since Margaret came in the middle, she was the big sister of the younger four. She had her mother's wide-set eyes and erect carriage and like her sisters, was small-boned and slender. The boys took after their brawny father and all of the young Higginses had a touch of red in their hair, running from Margaret's chestnut to the bright carrot of a younger brother.

Enterprising, as well as poor, the youngsters developed great resourcefulness. The girls could do anything about a home cook, sew, launder, take care of babies, upholster the furniture, and fix the plumbing. There was not much time for play, but on holidays the boys and girls went swimming, skating, or rabbit hunting in the woods. On Saturdays, they often staged theatricals in the barn, where Margaret showed a flair for recitation.

Lack of pocket money inspired Margaret's own views on the progress and poverty of the early eighteen-nineties. She saw that the rich lived on the pleasant hillsides of Corning in large houses with well-tended lawns where they played croquet or tennis. Even the adults played or strolled hand in hand with their children. The mothers looked young and stylish, and their little girls skipped about in brand-new dresses. Watching them, Margaret noticed that the rich had few children.

Down by the river flats sprawled the glass factories, whose belching smokestacks dirtied the neighborhood. A dozen shrieking children swarmed around each of the ugly little houses, convincing Margaret that large families went with poverty, noise and violence. Small families meant wealth, leisure and fun with parents.

As a craftsman with a monopoly on graveyard sculpture, Michael Higgins's future should have been assured, but as his family grew, his income dropped. This was the result of another attempt to edify his city. Hearing that the famous social crusader, Colonel Robert Ingersoll, was booked for a nearby lecture, Higgins hastened to secure him for Corning. This time he promised his wife that the feast would be purely intellectual and paid for by advance subscriptions. The only hall in town was managed by the Catholic

priest, Father Coughlan, a kindly man who, enjoying arguments with the best talker in town, was glad to accommodate him

But reports about Ingersoll finally reached Father Coughlan also. He heard that the man was a blasphemer. He had once challenged God—"if there was such a one"—to smite him there on the platform. In spite of his agreement and advance payment, Father Coughlan could not risk such a scandal.

Margaret was with her father when he escorted Colonel Ingersoll, this other tall, red-headed, and kindly looking man, to the hall. From a distance they saw a good crowd waiting, but when they arrived, they found the door locked. Boys started booing and throwing tomatoes, while their once friendly townsmen had turned into an angry, snarling mob. Michael Higgins glared around at those trying to suppress free speech. He brushed a squashed tomato from his cheek and then on the spur of the moment, announced that the talk would be given within the hour in the wood clearing near his home on the outskirts of town.

Down the street he set off with his red head very high, leading the Colonel, whose red head was also high. Clutching her father's hand, and her posture as proud as she could manage, Margaret trotted at his side. Those who had come to hear and not to stop the speaking, fell in behind them and were soon seated under fragrant pine trees. The sun set in a blaze of glory, making a proper setting for the fiery orator. But again, the results of the meeting were more memorable than what was said.

Next morning, when Margaret led the younger Higginses past the parochial school on their daily three-mile hike to the public school, they were greeted by shrieks of "Devil's children! Heathens!" In the future, there was a rift between the Higgins youngsters and their neighbors. Increasingly the family depended on itself and lived apart from the community. Far worse for the children than the social ostracism was the economic boycott of their father. There were no more local orders for tombstone angels, and he had to go far afield for commissions.

Michael Higgins used to boast that while he could not give his children riches, he left them "unchained from dogmas." Some of his children grew up resentful of his trouble-making independence.

More than the others, Margaret patterned herself on him, learning to make up her own mind and hold steadfast, in spite of public opinion. In later years she felt that her childhood had been hard, but had prepared her for the future. Vaguely she saw that her father's independence was related to his physical courage, on which were based the many stories of his youth.

As a lad of thirteen, newly arrived from Ireland, Michael had answered Lincoln's call for volunteers by trying to enlist. He had to wait for his fifteenth birthday before the Twelfth New York Cavalry accepted him as drummer boy. Once, single-handedly, he had captured a Confederate captain on his mule and he always insisted that the latter was more valued than the former. General Sherman had cited the boy for bravery, but by mid-life Michael Higgins was more concerned with intellectual than with physical courage.

As though foreseeing from her father's example that courage must be her chief resource, the shy Margaret set out to conquer her own fears. She learned to go to bed without a candle and to jump, like her big brothers, from the rafters in the barn to the hayloft thirty feet below. Then she faced her worst test, an ordeal that she thought important enough to repeat at some length in her two autobiographical accounts.

In Corning, the Erie Railroad crossed the Chemung River on a narrow iron span which men used as a short cut. Margaret's father had once helped her across by lifting her over the wide gaps, but the experience had terrified her. For that very reason, and in spite of the fact that it was forbidden, she decided that she must cross the bridge alone.

Halfway over she heard the dreaded hum of an oncoming train, and she stumbled. Perhaps that saved her life. She fell between the iron ties, over which she instinctively curled her arms. Unable to pull herself up again, she dangled there over the deep, rapid river. In a moment, the cars rushed down upon her and the wheels crashed over her head. Numbed and helpless, she hung there as the train thundered across the bridge. Providentially, a fisherman below saw the child and rescued her. He gave her two smacks on the rear, faced her toward home and went back down to his line.

Margaret turned around again. Since the trip was as long one way as the other, she decided to fulfill, not fail, her test and in a few minutes she arrived triumphant on the other side. Although she took the long, safe way home, and her arms were bruised and bleeding, she had not learned to be cautious. Inwardly, she was excited by a new self-confidence. She began to feel that Margaret Higgins could achieve what she set out to do. In her Corning days, she had no idea what she wanted to achieve, but her father said that everyone should leave the world better for having lived in it and she meant to leave it very much better.

Michael Higgins stretched his daughter's thoughts toward general welfare, but her mother was the practical guardian of the family welfare. While he was enjoying a book which he sometimes shared with his children, she was usually ironing those white starched shirts on which he prided himself. Rarely did she find an hour to sit down. Yet for all her cares and gentle nature, she too had an independent spirit. She banned corporal punishment and said that scoldings should be given in private. She was the peacemaker, as well as the champion of any child who suffered injustice. When a teacher beat her young son Joe, she walked miles to give that teacher a tongue-lashing. Afterward, she made her reluctant husband report the matter to the Board of Education, which, after inquiry, fired the offender.

If Joe was bruised by a teacher who beat her pupils, his sister was bruised by one who humiliated them. Margaret had almost finished eighth grade when she arrived a few minutes late one morning and was greeted by a tirade of sarcasm from the teacher. Some of the boys, welcoming a distraction from their lesson, prolonged the scolding with appreciative guffaws. On and on went both the abuse and the laughter until Margaret decided that she had had enough. She stacked up her books and marched out of the room.

Back home, she announced that she would never return to that school. Her horrified parents protested that there were only two more weeks before graduation. What would become of her, a dropout from eighth grade? When she set her chin in what they called her Rock of Gibraltar look, her father summoned a family council,

the first of many to consider Margaret's future. Her two older sisters took the initiative.

These were unusual women, as indeed, would be all four of the Higgins daughters. Feminine and charming, not one followed the traditional role of wife and mother. It was as though Anne Higgins's everlasting burdens had instilled a deep rejection of that part. Yet each of the sisters was endowed with her mother's gift for self-sacrifice.

Mary Higgins was said to have given up marriage because the family needed her earnings. While still young, she had become the paid companion of the daughter of a wealthy Corning couple and she remained with that daughter for the rest of her life. Nan became a stenographer and together these sisters prevented their parents' economic plight from becoming desperate. They also offered special opportunities, such as helping the younger brothers through college.

These older sisters now resolved that Margaret should have more education. They finally arranged with a Methodist school in the Catskills for her to earn her board by waiting on table and washing dishes. They guaranteed the other expenses. Claverack, they persuaded Margaret, would be a step toward Cornell, on which she had set her heart.