

to deal. They had long used such tales in their unremitting<sup>o</sup> efforts at family discipline, ever since they had frightened their first children into awed silence by tales of bugaboo men who prowled in the darkness.

These old women enjoyed a moment of triumph as if they had made good at last and had come into a region of sanctions<sup>o</sup> and punishments which they understood. Years of living had taught them that recrimination with grown-up children and grandchildren is worse than useless, that punishments are impossible, that domestic instruction is best given through tales and metaphors.

As the old women talked with the new volubility<sup>o</sup> which the story of the Devil Baby had released in them, going back into their long memories and urging its credibility upon me, the story seemed to condense that mystical wisdom which becomes deposited in the heart of man by unnoticed innumerable experiences.

Perhaps my many conversations with these aged visitors crystallized thoughts and impressions I had been receiving through years, or the tale itself may have ignited a fire, as it were, whose light illumined some of my darkest memories of neglected and uncomfortable old age, of old peasant women who had ruthlessly probed into the ugly depths of human nature in themselves and others. Many of them who came to see the Devil Baby had been forced to face tragic experiences, the powers of brutality and horror had had full scope in their lives and for years they had had acquaintance with disaster and death. Such old women do not shirk<sup>o</sup> life's misery by feeble idealism, for they are long past the stage of make-believe. They relate without flinching the most hideous experiences: "My face has had this queer twist for now nearly sixty years; I was ten when it got that way, the night after I saw my father do my mother to death with his knife." "Yes, I had fourteen children; only two grew to be men and both of them were killed in the same explosion. I was never sure they brought home the right bodies." But even the most hideous sorrows which the old women related had apparently subsided into the paler emotion of ineffectual<sup>o</sup> regret, after Memory had long done her work upon them; the old people seemed, in some unaccountable way, to lose all bitterness and resentment against life, or rather to be so completely without it that they must have lost it long since.

*unremitting*: constant, ceaseless

*sanctions*: restrictions

*volubility*: talkativeness

*shirk*: evade

*ineffectual*: powerless, futile

None of them had a word of blame for undutiful children or heedless grandchildren, because apparently the petty and transitory had fallen away from their austere<sup>o</sup> old age, the fires were burnt out, resentments, hatreds, and even cherished sorrows had become actually unintelligible.

Perhaps those women, because they had come to expect nothing more from life and had perforce<sup>o</sup> ceased from grasping and striving, had obtained, if not renunciation, at least that quiet endurance which allows the wounds of the spirit to heal. Through their stored-up habit of acquiescence, they offered a fleeting glimpse of the translucent<sup>o</sup> wisdom, so often embodied in the old, but so difficult to portray. It is doubtless what Michael Angelo had in mind when he made the Sybils old, what Dante meant by the phrase "those who had learned of life," and the age-worn minstrel who turned into song a Memory which was more that of history and tradition than his own.

In contrast to the visitors to the Devil Baby who spoke only such words of groping wisdom as they were able, were other old women who, although they had already reconciled themselves to much misery, were still enduring more: "You might say it's a disgrace to have your son beat you up for the sake of a bit of money you've earned by scrubbing—your own man is different—but I haven't the heart to blame the boy for doing what he's seen all his life, his father forever went wild when the drink was in him and struck me to the very day of his death. The ugliness was born in the boy as the marks of the Devil was born in the poor child up-stairs."

Some of these old women had struggled for weary years with poverty and much childbearing, had known what it was to be bullied and beaten by their husbands, neglected and ignored by their prosperous children, and burdened by the support of the imbecile and the shiftless ones. They had literally gone "Deep written all their days with care."

One old woman actually came from the poorhouse, having heard of the Devil Baby "through a lady from Polk Street visiting an old friend who has a bed in our ward." It was no slight achievement for the penniless and crippled old inmate to make her escape. She had asked "a young bar-keep in a saloon across the road" to lend her ten cents, offering as security the fact that she was an old acquaintance at Hull-House who could not be refused so slight a loan. She marvelled at some length over the goodness of the young man, for she had

*austere*: lacking in luxury or excess

*perforce*: of necessity, necessarily

*translucent*: clear, lucid