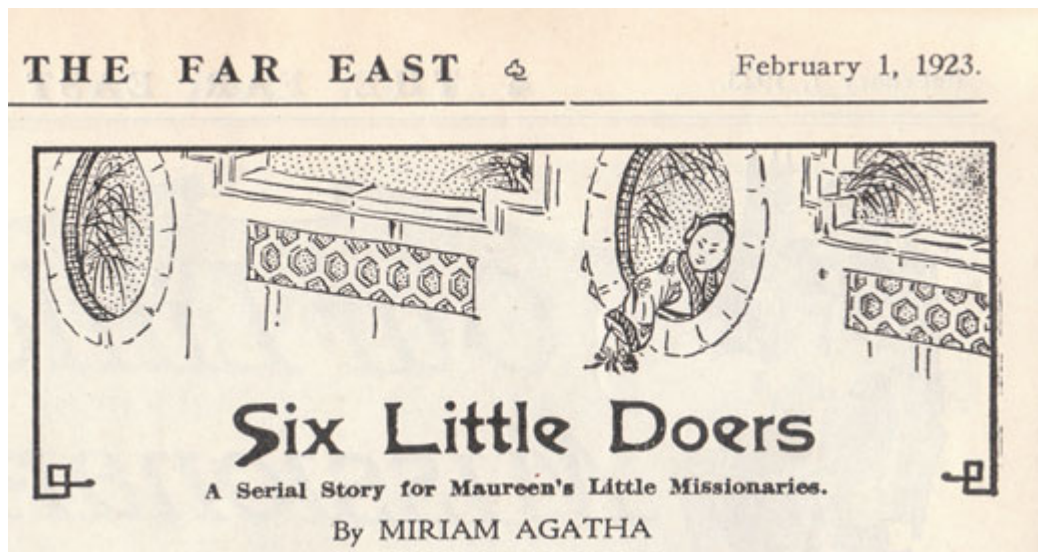


Chapter 4 – Aer-o-planes, February 1923



THE classroom was very still, all the little boys and girls trying hard to be good. It was a bright, blue day, with little sunbeams joyously skipping here and there; one even skipped over the blackboard, and two others played "chasings" round the walls. Some of Sister Veronica's pupils let their eyes wander to the windows and the patches of fascinating blue. But the angels were very busy putting their wings about the children and turning their lingering gaze back to the blackboard and duty.

On the mantel stood a white box with gold lettering, and the sunbeams picked out the gold words with their little fingers:

ANGELS' BOX.

Sister Veronica's class were all Little Missionaries, and had determined to fill the Angels' Box to overflowing. Here was a chance to "do" a little act of mortification - the blackboard was not half as interesting as the windows.

The class went en laboriously making a's that were neither too fat nor too thin, neither too straight nor too "slanty," but just the way Sister Veronica liked them. Only the best a child could do would satisfy Sister.

Mick and Mack had a dual desk in the corner over from the door. Mick was wrestling with a temptation to draw a boat and an aer-o-plane on the other side of his slate, A's were dull old things. Mick wrestled and fought the temptation. Mack was feeling very uneasy. During playhour he had carried on his nature-work in the pepper trees. There were two hats under his desk, his own and Mick's. He hoped the –

Suddenly there was a zizz-zizz and a whirr of tiny wings, and a little squadron of aer-o-planes sailed about the room. Mack's face blushed red as the quiet of the room was broken.

"Ooh, Sister!"

"Beetles!"

"Look at the Kingie!"

"Isn't he shiny?"

"Let me catch 'em, Sister."

"Mack Daly musta brought them in."

"In his hat."

"He's mad on beetles, Sister."

Beetles may be deaf, but they cannot be blind, for three of them flew at Sister's face. Now, Sister did not like any kind of "crawly" things, and, although she was brave, she could not suppress a shudder as she beat off the clumsy insects. The noise and confusion grew, and at this point a new note, a monotonous, brazen note, added itself to the clamour.

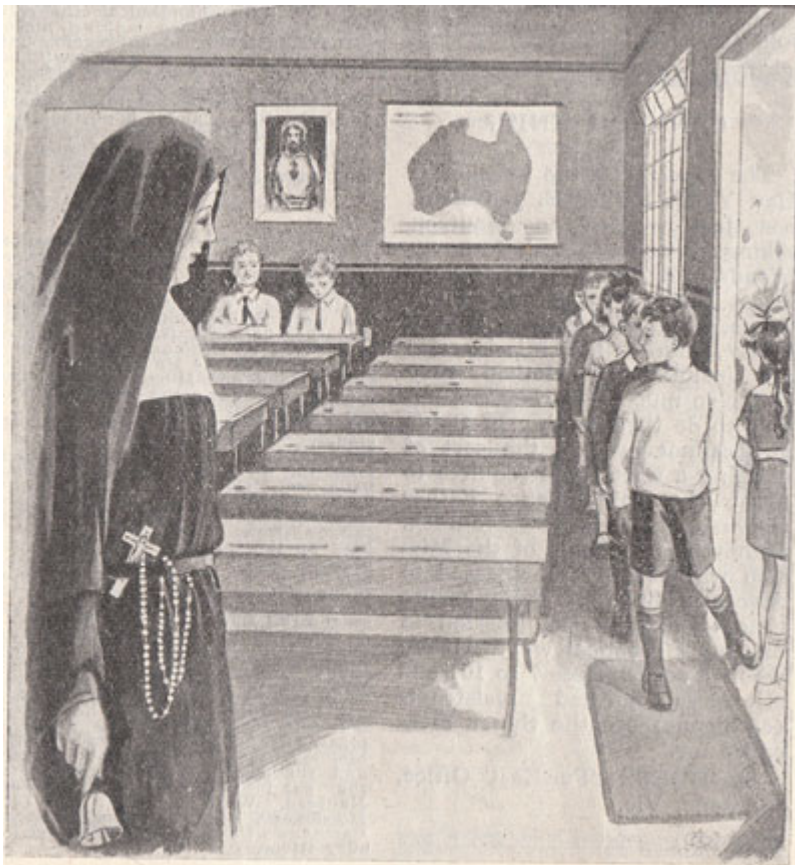
"Locusts!"

"Mack's got them, too!"

"Look, there's one!"

No one, not even Sister Veronica, could expect the children to be quiet while beetles and locusts flew about the room, dashing stupidly against the panes, instead of flying out the open windows. All eyes followed the little aerial visitors until the last one was shoo-ed out the window. It took several minutes to restore order, and then, in a very cold voice, Sister asked Mack if he had brought the insects into the room.

"Yes, Sister," said poor Mack, and Sister told him to remain when the class was dismissed.



Mick looked round with a challenging eye; he seemed to think everyone in the room except Mack deserved punishment. Mick wished he could do something naughty, too, that he might be "kept in" to support Mack. He forgot the Angels' Box, he forgot his Big Brothers, the Missionaries, for whom he had promised to offer "acts." Deliberately he bent over the next desk, and scribbled all over Mossie Ryan's beautifully made a's. With a surprised, indignant cry Mossie arose: "Oh, Sister, Mickie Daly has scribbled on my work."

Mick also was told to remain after school.

When the class marched out with light, happy steps,

chanting joyously, "Sing-a-Song-o'-Sixpence," the two Dalys sat at their desk in the corner. Mick looked defiant; Mack very contrite.

"Well?" Sister said, and the word fell from her lips as if it weighed a ton.

"I didn't know they would get out," Mack said miserably.

"If you had not brought them in -" Sister said, and paused significantly.

"I wanted them, and I thought they were safe in the hats. I'm sorry, Sister, and I'm sorry they flew at you."

Sister Veronica turned to Mick, but there was no apology here. "I meant to spoil Mossie Ryan's writing, I wanted to be kept in, to be with Mack. I want to stay with him always, whatever happens him. He wanted the beetles for his Show. It's for the Mite Box, too, and all the kids knew about it; they need not have laughed. They could have caught the beetles and given them back to him - they were his."

Sister could not but be moved at Mick's brotherly love, although it had taken a rather novel way of showing itself. She asked about Mack's "Show." Mack did not offer to explain, so Mick hastened to do so.

"Mack has a - well, we call it 'The Zoo' and 'The Menagerie.' He has all kinds of insects - live ones. He knows how to feed them. And he's having a Show this afternoon, and a lot of boys and girls are coming. It's a penny to go in. The pennies are for the Mite Box. He wanted to have a lot of beetles and locusts, to have a big aer-o-plane flight after. It doesn't hurt them; they just fly away. But they are all gone now."

Of course, Sister Veronica had to forgive them on Mack's solemnly promising her that he would take greater precautions with his next consignment of "wild animals," and on Mick's grudgingly agreeing to apologise to Mossie Ryan in the morning.

"Run on, then," Sister said, and she smiled as she added: "If I had a penny I'd go to the Show myself."

"You can come for nothing," Mack said shyly, but Sister suddenly remembered that some important work awaited her at the convent; so she thanked Mack, but declined his generous offer.

"The Wild Beast Show" was a great success. All the children were greatly interested, and filled with admiration for Mack's knowledge - all except Mossie Ryan. He said it was silly, and that he wished he had bought a honeycomb or a raspberry bar with his penny. But I think it was the remembrance of his slate of beautiful a's disfigured by Mick's hand that made Mossie Ryan think ill of everything got up by the Dalys.