

LITTLE CITIZENS

THE HUMOURS OF SCHOOL LIFE

BY MYRA KELLY



Illustrated by W. D. Stevens

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*In 1899 a young woman of Irish birth and ancestry began teaching on the Lower East Side of New York. "The little children of Israel entrusted to her care"¹ so stimulated her imagination that she was inspired to pen a number of volumes about her experience. Myra Kelly (1875–1910) published *Little Citizens: The Humours of School Life* in 1904, and the book has gone through several editions in succeeding years (it was in print as recently as 1984). *Wards of Liberty* (1907) and *Little Aliens* (1910) never equaled *Little Citizens* in popularity. Theodore Roosevelt, who had been police commissioner in New York City before departing for the nation's capital, wrote Miss Kelly that he and his wife knew her "very amusing and very pathetic accounts of East-Side school-children almost by heart."²*

It may well be, as Lee M. Friedman thought, that her stories were "a little oversentimentalized and overdrawn," and Irving Howe is surely right to describe her ear for Jewish accents as "atrocious"³—she confuses a Yiddish with a German accent—but it remains indisputable that Myra Kelly demonstrated "a real skill of portrayal" and gave her public a new appreciation of immigrant Jewish life.⁴

1. Kelly, *Little Citizens* (New York, 1904), p. 3.

2. Cited in Lee M. Friedman, "Myra Kelly," in *To Doctor R.* (for A. S. W. Rosenbach), ed. Percy E. Lawler et al. (Philadelphia, 1946), p. 73.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 78; Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York, 1976), p. 271.

4. Friedman, p. 75.

Four weeks of teaching in a lower East Side school had deprived Constance Bailey of many of the "Ideals in Education" which, during four years in college, she had trustingly acquired. But, despite many discouragements, despite an unintelligible dialect and an autocratic "Course of Study," she clung to an ambition to establish harmony in her kingdom and to impress a high moral tone upon the fifty-eight little children of Israel entrusted to her care. She was therefore troubled and heavy of heart when it was borne in upon her that two of her little flock—cousins to boot, and girls—had so far forgotten the Golden Rule as to be "mad on theirselves and wouldn't to talk even," as that Bureau of Fashionable Intelligence, Sarah Schrodsky, duly reported.

"Und Teacher," Sarah continued, "Eva Gonorowsky's mamma has a mad on Sadie Gonorowsky's mamma, und her papa has a mad on her papa, und her gran'ma has a mad on both of papas und both of mammas, und her gran'pa has a mad somethin' fierce on both of uncles, und her auntie—"

Here Miss Bailey sent the too communicative Sarah to her place and called the divided house of Gonorowsky to her desk for instant judgment. And as she held forth she was delighted to see that her words were falling upon good ground, for the dark and dainty features of her hearers expressed a flattering degree of conviction and of humility. She was admiring the wonderful lashes lying damp and dark on Eva's smooth cheek when the beautiful eyes unclosed, gazed straight across the desk at Sadie, and Eva took a flying leap into Teacher's lap to cling with arms and knees and fingers to her chosen refuge.

"Oh, Teacher, Teacher," she wailed, "Sadie makes on me such a snoot I got a scare over it."

Miss Bailey turned to the so lately placid face of Sadie in search of the devastating "snoot," but met only a serene glance of conscious guilelessness and the assurance:

"No ma'an, I don't makes no snoot on nobody. I get killed as anything off of my mamma sooner I makes a snoot. It ain't polite." This with a reassuring smile and direct and candid gaze.

"Teacher, yiss ma'an, she makes all times a snoot on me," cried the now weeping Eva, "all times. She turns her nose around, und makes go

away her eyes, und comes her tongue out long. On'y I dassent to fight mit her while I'm cousins mit her. Und over cousins you got all times kind feelings."

"Well, Sadie," Teacher questioned, "what have you to say?"

The dark eyes met Teacher's with no shadow in their depths as Sadie uttered her denial:

"I *never* in my world done no snoot."

A shudder of admiring awe swept over the assembled class—followed by a gasp of open contradiction as Sadie went on with her vindication. For Sadie's snoots were the envy of all the class. Had not Morris Mogilewsky paid three cents for lessons in the art, and, with the accomplishment, frightened a baby into what its angry mother described as "spine-yell convulsions"? And now Sadie was saying, "I *couldn't* to make no snoot. Never. But, Teacher, it's like this: Eva makes *me* whole bunches of trouble. Bertha Binderwitz und me is monitors in the yard when the childrens comes back from dinner. So-o-oh, I says, 'front dress,' like you says, so the childrens shall look on what head is in front of them. On'y Eva she don't 'front dress' at all, but extra she longs out her neck and rubs on me somethin' fierce—"

"It's a lie!" interrupted Eva gently. "I don't make nothing like that. I stands by my line und Sadie she makes faces on me with her hand. It ain't polite." This with plaintive self-righteousness. "No ma'an, it *ain't* polite—you makes snoots mit your hand like this." And as Eva illustrated with outspread fingers and a pink thumb in juxtaposition to a diminutive nose, Teacher, with uncertain gravity, was forced to admit that snoots of that description are sanctioned by few books of etiquette.

"Now, my dear little girls," said she, "this quarrelling must stop. I want you to kiss each other as cousins should."

This suggestion was a distinct failure. Eva and Sadie, with much fluttering of aprons and waving of curls, sought opposite corners of the schoolroom, while up started Sarah Schrodsky with: "Teacher, they couldn't to make no kissing. They're mad on theirselves 'cause their mammas has a mad. Sadie's mamma says like this on Eva's mamma, 'Don't you dast to talk to me—you lives by the fifth floor und your man is a robber.' Und Eva's mamma says—"

When Teacher had managed to silence Sarah she led the weeping Gonorowskys back to their places and the scholastic world wagged on

in outward tranquillity.

Hostilities were temporarily suspended some days later owing to the illness of Sadie, by far the more aggressive of the opposing parties. Eva led a placid life for three peaceful days, and then—as by law prescribed and postal card invited—Sadie’s mother came to explain her daughter’s absence. Large of person, bland of manner, in a heavy black shawl and a heavier black wig, Mrs. Lazarus Gonorowsky stood beaming and bobbing in the hall.

“I likes I should Sadie Gonorowsky’s teacher see,” she began, in the peculiar English of the adult population of the East Side. Mrs. Gonorowsky could neither use nor understand her young daughter’s copious invective. Upon being assured that the diminutive form before her was indeed clothed with authority, she announced:

“Comes a letter I should by the school come. I was Sadie’s mamma.” Here she drew from the inner recesses of the black shawl a bundle which, being placed in a perpendicular position, proved to be the most recent addition to the Gonorowsky household. She smoothed it with a work-worn but tender hand, and repeated in a saddened voice: “Yes, ma’am, I was her mamma und she lays now on the bed.”

The increasing sadness of Mrs. Gonorowsky’s announcement and its sinister phraseology startled Teacher. “Not dead!” she cried. “Oh, surely not dead!”

“Sure not,” was the indignant response. “She’s got such a sickness she must lay on the bed, und comes the doctor. Sadie’s papa holds much on that child, Miss Teacher, und all times he has a worry over her. Me too. She comes by the school tomorrow maybe, und I ask you by a favour you should do me the kindness to look on her. So she feel again sick she should better on the house come. She say, ‘Oh, mamma, I got a lovely teacher; I likes to look on her the while she has such a light face.’ ”

Having thus diplomatically led up to a question, Mrs. Gonorowsky with great suavity asked, “Sadie is a good girl, hein?”

“Oh, yes, indeed.”

“She is shmartd, hein? She don’t make you no troubles?”

“Well,” Miss Bailey answered, “she has rather bothered me lately by quarrelling with her little cousin, Eva.”

“So-o-oh!” exclaimed Sadie’s parent ponderously. “So-o-oh, Eva Gonorowsky makes you troubles; she is a bad girl—I tell Sadie—Sadie

is a good girl—I tell her she should make nothings with Eva soch a bad girl. For what you not put her back by baby class? She is not shmartd.”

“Oh, but she is; she is a bright little thing,” cried Teacher. “I couldn’t think of putting her back. She’s a dear little girl and I can’t imagine why Sadie quarrels with her.”

Mrs. Gonorowsky drew her ample form to a wonderful erectness, readjusted her shawl, and answered with much stateliness:

“It was a trouble from off of real estate.” With dignity and blandness she proceeded to kiss Teacher’s hand, and signified entire willingness to entrust her precious Sadie to the care of so estimable a young person, inquired solicitously if the work were not too much for so small a lady, and cautioned the young person against rainy mornings. Had she a mackintosh? Mr. Gonorowsky was selling them off that week. Were her imperceptibles sufficiently warm? Mr. Gonorowsky, by a strange chance, was absolutely giving away “fine all from wool” imperceptibles, and the store was near. Mrs. Gonorowsky then withdrew, leaving a kindly sentiment in Teacher’s heart and an atmosphere of ironing-boards and onions in the hall. On the following morning Sadie returned to her “light-faced” teacher, and for one whole day hostilities were suspended.

But on the morning after this truce Eva was absent from her accustomed place and Sadie blandly disclaimed all knowledge of her whereabouts. After the noon recess a pathetic little figure wavered in the doorway with one arm in a sling and one eye in a poultice. The remaining eye was fixed in deep reproach on the face of Isidore Belchatosky, the Adonis of the class, and the eye was the eye of Eva.

“Eva!” exclaimed Teacher, “oh, Eva, what can you have been doing? What’s the matter with your eye?”

“Isidore Belchatosky he goes und makes me this here shiner,” said Eva’s accusing voice, as the eye under the poultice was uncovered for a moment. It was indeed a “shiner” of aggravated aspect, and Isidore cringed as it met his affrighted gaze. The sling and the bandages were of gay chintz, showing forth the adventures of Robinson Crusoe, and their lurid colours made them horribly conspicuous. Friday scampered across Eva’s forehead, pursued by savages; and Crusoe, under his enormous umbrella, nestled close to her heart.

“Surely Isidore would never hit a little girl?” Teacher remonstrated.

“Teacher, yiss ma’an; he makes me this here shiner. Sadie she goes

und tells him she kisses him a kiss so he makes me a shiner. He's lovin' mit her und she's got kind feelin's by him, the while his papa's got a candy cart. It's a stylish candy cart mit a bell und a horn. So-o-oh I was yesterday on the store for buy my mamma some wurst, und I don't make nothings mit nobody."

Here the poor, half-blind Eva, with her love and talent for pantomime, took a gay little walk past Teacher's desk, with tossing head and swinging skirts. Then with a cry she recoiled from the very memory of her wrongs.

"Come Isidore! Und he hits me a hack on my leg so I couldn't to hold it even. So I falls und I make me this here shiner. Und when my mamma seen how comes such a bile on my bone she had a mad; she hollered somethin' fierce."

One could well sympathize with the harassed Mrs. Nathan Gonorowsky.

"So-o-oh," continued Eva with melancholy enjoyment, "my mamma she puts medsin at a rag und bangages up mine eye. Und now I ain't healthy."

"Sadie Gonorowsky, come here!" commanded Miss Bailey, in a voice which lifted Sadie bodily from the place to which she had guiltily determined to cling. And Sadie went, jaunty of air, but with shifting eyes.

"Isidore Belchatosky, come here!" commanded Miss Bailey, and Isidore slunk after his divinity.

Teacher was savagely angry, but by-laws forbade corporal punishment, and principles—and the Principal—bade noisy upbraidings. And so with long, strange words, to supply the element of dread uncertainty, she began to speak, slowly and coldly as one ever should when addressing ears accustomed to much sputtering profanity.

"Sadie and Isidore, did you dare to interfere with the life, the liberty and the happiness of our cherished young friend, Eva Gonorowsky? Did you *dare*?"

"No ma'an," said Sadie with a sob.

"It's a lie!" said Isidore with a snuffle.

"Did you, Isidore, allow yourself to be tempted by beauty to such inconceivable depravity as to blacken Eva's eye?"

"No ma'an. Self done it."

"Did you, Sadie, descend so low as to barter kisses with Isidore

Belchatosky?"

"No ma'an," this with much scorn. "I wouldn't to kiss him; he's a scare-cat, und he tells out."

"What did he tell?" asked Teacher.

"He tells out how I say I kiss him a kiss so he make Eva a shiner. Und I wouldn't to do it. Never. So he gave me five cents even, I wouldn't to kiss no scare-cat."

"Well, then, why did you promise?"

"Cause I couldn't to hit her mineself," said the doughty Sadie. She was inches taller than her victim, and stout withal. "I couldn't, 'cause I ain't so healthy; I'm a nervous child, Teacher, und I was day-before-yesterday sick on the bed."

Here the plaintive plaintiff showed a desire to testify once more, and Teacher appointed three-thirty that afternoon as the hour most suitable for a thorough examination of the case.

When the last arm had been twisted into the last sleeve, when the last chin had been tied into the last shawl, when the last dispute as to ownership in disreputable mittens had been settled, the great case of *Gonorowsky vs. Gonorowsky* was called. On either side of the desk stood a diminutive Gonorowsky; Eva still plaintive, and Sadie, redly, on the defensive. Directly in front stood that labourer defrauded of his hire, that tool in the hands of guileful woman—Isidore Belchatosky.

"Now," Teacher began, "I want to hear nothing but the truth. Isidore, did you hit Eva?"

"Yiss ma'an."

"What for?"

"For a kiss."

"From whom?"

Here Sadie muttered a threat "to lay him down dead if he tells," and Isidore required promise of safe conduct to his own block before he consented to murmur:

"Sadie Gonorowsky."

"Did you get the kiss?"

"No ma'an."

"Do you know anything about this fight?"

"No ma'an."

"Well, then, you may go home now, and bring your mother with you to-morrow morning."

Isidore left with a heavy heart and the enquiry was continued.

“What has Sadie been doing to you, Eva?” asked Teacher, and Eva, with resigned mien, answered:

“All things,” and then details followed.

“She makes on me a snoot, she pulls me on the bottom of my hair, she goes und takes her pencil und gives me a stick in my face. When I was marchin’ she extra takes her shoes und steps at my legs; I got two swollen legs over her. Und now”—here a sob—“you could to look on how she makes me biles und shiners.”

As Eva’s voice droned out these many accusations, Sadie grew more emphatic in her favourite repartee:

“It’s a lie! It’s a lie! It’s a lie!”

“And now, Eva, will you tell me *why* Sadie has been doing all these naughty things?”

“Teacher, I don’t know.”

“Oh, yes; you do!”

“No ma’an; I don’t. I could swear if I do. I kiss up to God.” She wafted a kiss towards the ceiling. “I got all times a kind feelin’ over Sadie, on’y she wouldn’t to be glad on me. I seen yesterday her little brother in the street mit Sadie und she make he shouldn’t to talk to me. My heart it breaks when she make like that; I’m got no brother und no sister und I’m lovin’ *so* much mit my little cousin. She goes und makes he should say nothin’ und in *mine* eyes stands tears. I was sad.”

“Well, dear, that’s a shame,” said Teacher, “and if you really don’t understand, go out into the assembly room and wait for me. Sadie is going to tell me all about it.”

Eva vanished, only to return with the lurid bandage in her hand and the query:—“Can I make this wet?”

Upon receiving permission so to do she retired with her courteous “Good-afternoon, Teacher,” and her unchanged “Good-by, Sadie; I’m got yet that kind feelin’.” Truly the “pangs of disprized love” seemed hers.

Several kinds of persuasion were practised in Room 18 during the next five minutes. Then Sadie accepted defeat, faced the inevitable, and began:

“It’s like this: I dassent to be glad on Eva. So I want even, I dassent. My mamma has the same mad, und my papa. My mamma she says like this: So my papa gets sooner glad on my uncle she wouldn’t to be

wifes mit him no more! *Such* is the mad she has!”

“Why?”

“Well. Mine uncle he come out of Russia. From long he come when I was a little bit of baby. Und he didn’t to have no money for buy a house. So my papa—he’s awful kind—he gives him thousen dollers so he could to buy. Und say, Teacher, what you think? he don’t pays it back. It *ain’t* polite you takes thousen dollers und don’t pays it back.”

Sadie’s air, as she submitted this rule of social etiquette to Teacher’s wider knowledge, was a wondrous thing to see—so deferential was it and yet so assured.

“So my papa he writes a letter on my uncle how he could to pay that thousen dollers. *Goes* months. *Comes* no thousen dollers. So my papa he goes on the lawyer und the lawyer he writes on my uncle a letter how he should to pay. *Goes* months. *Comes* no thousen dollers.” At each repetition of these fateful words Sadie shook her serious head, pursed up her rosy mouth, folded her hands resignedly, and sighed deeply. Clearly this was a tale more than twice told, for the voice and manner of Sadie were as the voice and manner of Mrs. Lazarus Gonorowsky, and the recital was plagiarism—masterly and complete.

“And then?” prompted Teacher, lest the conversation languish.

“Well, my papa writes some more a letter on mine uncle. Oh-o-oh, a awful bossy-und-mad letter. All the mad words what my papa knows he writes on mine uncle. Und my mamma she sets by my papa’s side und all the mad words what my mamma knows she tells on my papa und he writes them, too, on mine uncle. Mine uncle (that’s Eva’s papa) could to have a fierce mad sooner he seen that bossy letter. But *goes* two days. *Comes* no thousen dollers.”

Here ensued a long and dramatic pause.

“Well, comes no thousen dollers. Comes nothings. On’y by night my mamma she puts me on my bed; when comes my uncle! He comes und makes a knopping on our door. I couldn’t to tell even how he makes knopping. I had such a scare I was green on the face, und my heart was going so you could to hear. I’m a nervous child, Missis Bailey, und my face is all times green sooner I gets a scare.”

This last observation was a triumph of mimicry, and recalled Mrs. Gonorowsky so vividly as to make her atmosphere of garlic and old furniture quite perceptible.

“So my mamma hears how my uncle knopps und says ‘Lemme in—

lemme in.' She says ('scuse me, Teacher)—she says 'he must be' ('scuse me) 'drunk.' That's how my mamma says.

"So goes my papa by the door und says 'Who stands?' Und my uncle he says 'Lemme in.' So-o-oh my papa he opens the door. Stands my uncle mit cheeky looks und he showed a fist on my papa. My papa has a fierce mad sooner he seen that fist—fists is awful cheeky when somebody ain't paid. So my papa he says ('scuse me)—it's fierce how he says, on'y he had a mad over that fist. He says ('scuse me), 'Go to hell!' und my uncle, what ain't paid that thousen dollers, he says just like that to my papa. He says too ('scuse me, Teacher), 'Go to hell!' So-o-oh then my papa hits my uncle (that's Eva's papa), und how my papa is strong I couldn't to tell even. He pulls every morning by the extrasizer, und he's got such a muscles! So he hits my uncle (that's Eva's papa), und my uncle he fall und he fall und he fall—we live by the third floor, und he fall off of the third floor by the street—und even in falling he says like that ('scuse me, Teacher), 'Go to hell! go to hell! go to hell!' Ain't it somethin' fierce how he says? On all the steps he says, 'Go to hell! go to hell! go to hell!' "

Miss Bailey had listened to authoritative lectures upon "The Place and Influence of the Teacher in Community Life," and was debating as to whether she had better inflict her visit of remonstrance upon Mr. Lazarus Gonorowsky, of the powerful and cultivated muscle, or upon Mr. Nathan Gonorowsky, of the deplorable manners, when this opportunity to bring the higher standards of living into the home was taken from her. The house of Gonorowsky, in jagged fragments, was tested as by fire and came forth united.

Eva was absent one morning, and Sadie presented the explanation in a rather dirty envelope:

Dear Miss:

Excuse pliss that Eva Gonarofsky comes not on the school. We was moving und she couldn't to find her clothes.

Yurs Resptphs,

Her elders,

Nathan Gonorowsky,

Becky Ganurwoski.

"Is Eva going far away?" asked Teacher. "Will she come to this school any more?"

"Teacher, yiss ma'an, sure she comes; she lives now by my house.

My uncle he lives by my house, too. Und my aunt.”

“And you’re not angry with your cousin any more?”

“Teacher, no ma’an; I’m loving mit her. She’s got on now all mine best clothes the while her mamma buys her new. My aunt buys new clothes, too. Und my uncle.”

Sadie reported this shopping epidemic so cheerily that Teacher asked with mild surprise:

“Where are all their old things?”

“Teacher, they’re burned. Und my uncle’s store und his *all* of goods, und his house und his three sewing machines. All, all burned!”

“Oh, dear me!” said Teacher. “Your poor uncle! Now he can never pay that thousand dollars.”

Sadie regarded Teacher with puzzled eyes.

“Sure he pays. He’s now ‘most as rich like Van’pilt. I guess he’s got a hundred dollers. He pays all right, all right, und my papa had a party over him: he had such a awful glad!”

“Glad on your uncle?” cried Teacher, startled into colloquialisms.

“Yiss ma’an. Und my mamma has a glad on Eva’s mamma, und my gran’ma has a glad on both of papas und both of mammas, und my gran’pa has a glad just like my gran’ma. All, all glad!”

As Teacher walked towards Grand Street that afternoon, she met a radiant little girl with a small and most unsteady boy in tow. She recognized Eva and surmised the cousin whose coldness had hurt her even unto tears.

“Well, Eva, and what little boy is this?” she asked.

And the beaming and transformed Eva answered:

“It’s my little cousin. He’s lovin’ mit me now. Sadie, too, is lovin’. I take him out the while it’s healthy he walks, on’y he ain’t so big und he falls. Say, Teacher, it’s nice when he falls. I holds him in my hands.”

And fall he did. Eva picked him up, greatly to their mutual delight, and explained:

“He’s heavy, und my this here arm ain’t yet so healthy, but I hold him in my hands the while he’s cousins mit me, und over cousins I’m got all times that kind feelin’.”