

The Storyteller.

THE SINGER'S CHILD.

CHAPTER I.

'WELL, I do believe that is another of those children, after I forbade them to enter the garden again!' exclaimed Sister Angela, as she walked down the path leading to the poor-school. Yes, a tiny morsel of humanity was certainly standing among the flowers, but Sister Angela soon discovered that she had been wronging her poor mites, as she was wont to call them, for this child was a stranger to her. Its appearance, as she stood quite still by a bed of scarlet geranium, looking up into the nun's face with doubtful eyes, was sufficiently striking, and Sister Angela noted with surprise the strange beauty of the baby countenance, for the child could not be more than three years of age. A tangled mass of dusky curls shaded a delicate, olive-tinted countenance, to which eyes of unwonted darkness and brilliancy added an air of unusual distinction. A red velvet frock set off the little lady's charms to perfection. There were traces of tears upon her face, which wore a touching expression of childish trouble. Sister Angela laid her hand caressingly on the dark locks.

'Well, my little one, what's the matter?' she asked so kindly that the child could hardly refrain from bursting into tears.

'My mamma! my mamma!' she sobbed. 'I want my mamma!' Then she looked into the nun's eyes with an air of sudden expectancy and asked: 'Did 'oo see mamma?'

'No, darling, I did not see her,' but noting the shadow of pain that flitted across the baby face, 'we may be able to find her, you and I. Come, now, tell me where you live.'

The child seemed puzzled for a minute, then she said, pointing towards the street door:

'In de house der. But we came a long, long way; mamma and Rosie.'

'And who is Rosie?' asked Sister Angela, smiling.

'Ise Rosie, of oo-se,' answered the little one in surprise.

'Oh, I see,' laughed the nun. 'Well, Rosie, how long is it since you lost mamma?'

Rosie puckered up her forehead and thought a moment, then began eagerly:

'Oo see, mamma went out last night, and she did not tum back to Rosie at all. And she's gone all the long, long day, and Rosie all alone, so I tum and look for her myself, but I can't get her at all, and the tears flowed afresh.

'Now, Rosie, you mustn't cry. If I only knew where she lives,' murmured the nun to herself. Rosie looked up again.

'Oo see, I tought she would tum here to the lovely f'owe's. Mamma is so fond of f'owe's.'

A thought struck Sister Angela.

'Tell me, Rosie,' she said; 'did you see the flowers from your house?'

'Es,' answered Rosie confidently; 'de door open,' pointing to the door leading into the street; 'and Rosie saw the f'owe's from the window, so I tum over to look for mamma; but mamma not here.'

'Ah,' thought the nun, 'she is probably staying at Mrs. Griffith's.'

Mrs. Griffith kept a private hotel on the opposite side of the street. Sister Angela took the child by the hand and led her to the school door with the intention of sending one of the children with her to Mrs. Griffith's to inquire if she and her mother were staying there. She encountered one of the bigger girls on the stairs, and was instructing her to take the little one across the street when she was interrupted with:

'But, Sister Angela, she's the singing lady's little girl—the singing lady that was burned to death last night.'

Sister Angela's face showed how shocked she was.

'Are you sure, Maggie?' she asked anxiously.

But Maggie was quite sure. She lived next the convent, and had often seen the child go in and out from Mrs. Griffith's with her mother. The nuns had of course heard of the catastrophe in the town hall on the previous night—how the temporary stage had suddenly caught fire, and how one singer—a stranger who had but a few days before joined the touring company—had sustained injuries to which she succumbed after a couple of hours. But they had heard nothing about her leaving a child.

'Poor little thing,' murmured Sister Angela, gazing down compassionately into the tear-washed face.

Wishing to ascertain the truth of the story, she despatched Maggie to ask Mrs. Griffith to step over to her for a moment. That good lady lost no time in doing so.

'Yes, it was quite true,' she said.

'An' 'twould make your heart ache, Sister Angela,' she continued, 'to hear the poor creature asking all day for her mamma. An' the worst of it is none of the other singers have any notion who the young lady was. It was only a week ago that she joined them, and she never said a single word about herself, only gave her name as Madame Vestris. An' what will be done with the child? The singers will have nothing to do with her, an' they don't know if the mother had friends. I suppose the poor dearie will have to be taken up by the parish.'

At this point Rosie, as if she understood the meaning of these last words, plaintively reiterated:

'Rosie wants mamma. 'Oo get mamma,' looking at the nun so earnestly that the tears welled up into her eyes.

'Rosie must wait for mamma a little while,' said Sister Angela, soothingly.

The trouble vanished suddenly from the little girl's face.

'Rosie likes 'oo,' she said decidedly. 'Rosie stay with 'oo till mamma comes,' and she nestled up to her.

'But, Mrs. Griffith,' said Sister Angela, taking up the conversation where it had been broken off, 'had Madame Vestris no belongings—no letters by which her friends could be traced?'

'Oh, there's plenty of letters—the inspector examined them all a while ago, but every one of them is to Isabel from Harry—always from Harry, no other name, an' there isn't a single envelope in the lot; so they're no good. The inspector has got a gold locket an' chain, an' in the locket the picture of a fine young man, an' at the back the words, 'From Harry to Isabel.' He must be her husband, for the child there is as like him as two peas.'

Then Mrs. Griffith went on to tell the nun how the police were to advertise for Madame Vestris' friends, if the report of her untimely end in the papers elicited no information as to her identity. Meanwhile she was to keep the child. If no friend came forward to claim her, well, of course, the parish would take her up, or perhaps she would be sent to an industrial school.

Sister Angela sighed as Mrs. Griffith finished.

'Well, Mrs. Griffith, it is to be hoped the child's friends will turn up. I shall tell Rev. Mother about it, and in case of failure she may be able to do something for her. Good-bye, Rosie,' to the child, 'you must come to see me again.'

But Rosie clung to her and refused to be led away.

'Me stay with 'oo,' she sobbed out. 'Me like 'oo, and 'oo find mamma for Rosie,' and no amount of coaxing would induce her to go with Mrs. Griffith.

'Well,' said the nun at length, 'perhaps it would be better to leave her with me awhile. I will take her to Rev. Mother and tell her the story. You can come back for her in the evening.'

So Mrs. Griffith departed and Sister Angela took Rosie up to the convent.

CHAPTER II.

A month had passed and the numerous advertisements for the friends of the unfortunate Madame Vestris had ended in failure. It was clear that the name had been assumed, and the little girl, on being questioned, was quite ignorant of her surname. Rosie—that was all the name she had ever known. There was no mark on the dead woman's clothing, though the child's were all marked 'Rosie D.'—a proof that Vestris was not their real name. In any case the search had to be given up as hopeless. The question now became—what was to be done with Rosie? Orphaned, nameless, unclaimed, the little gipsy-faced child was truly an object of pity.

Since that evening on which she had first strayed into the garden, Rosie had been a constant visitor at the convent. She had conceived a special attachment for Sister Angela, and, indeed, seemed quite happy when with any of the nuns, though Mrs. Griffith declared that she was constantly calling for her 'Mamma' when with her.

However, as was but natural in so young a child, these inquiries became less frequent in time, and during the last week had been rarer than ever. Yet whenever she was not at the convent she seemed lonely and discontented.

'I don't like 'oo,' she would say when Mrs. Griffith would bring her home in the evening, 'but I do like de nuns.'

And when Rev. Mother said to her one day, 'Rosie will soon be going away to a grand school where there are a lot of other little girls,' she had cried, and clinging to her had said, 'Rosie won't go. Rosie stay always with 'oo.'

When, some days later, Mrs. Griffith brought her to say good-bye, she tightly clutched Sister Angela and declared she would not go.

'Rosie never, never leave 'oo,' she sobbed; 'Rosie want to stay here always.'

The nuns were deeply touched. Even the policeman who had come to take her to the Industrial School had not the heart to force her to go with him.

The Rev. Mother, in deep distress, called the senior nuns around her. According to their Rule they were bound to educate every year five or six children free of cost. This had hitherto been carried out in the boarding-school, into which Rosie was too young to be received. But instead of one of these boarders, could they not maintain Rosie at Mrs. Griffith's while she attended the day school attached to the convent?

The idea seemed feasible and was acted on at once, to the delight of the nuns, who had all grown fond of the motherless child. So the policeman was dismissed, and Rosie became the adopted child of the convent.

Her education began next morning in the day school or the 'Academy' as it was called in the town, and thenceforth, except that she slept and took her meals at Mrs. Griffith's, she might be said to have lived there entirely. She was never happier than when trotting about the schoolroom after one of the nuns, except, indeed, when Sister Angela took her down to the garden—and then her happiness was truly perfect.

She became a prime favourite with both teachers and pupils; she was the 'baby' of the Academy and her lovable ways and pretty chatter endeared her to all. But it was her extraordinary beauty that perhaps fascinated them most—a beauty which unlike that of ordinary childhood became more evident as she grew older. Signs of unusual precocity, too, became apparent. It was marvellous with what ease she understood things that are stumbling-blocks to other children. But from the beginning music was her special forte. She had not been many days at the Academy before it was noticed that whenever anyone was practising she was sure to sidle up to the piano, listening all the while with rapt attention. And when the player chanced to be proficient she would clap her hands and cry with dancing eyes:

'Oh, dat's lovely—Rosie like dat.'

So it was decided that she should be taught. Sister Bernardette never forgot the delight of the child at her first lesson. She had