The Storyteller

LITTLE RODY.

He was a fair, fragile little urchin, with light curly hair and clear blue eyes that looked straight at you when he cried, 'Buy a paper, sir?' 'Carry your parcel?'

Yes, Rody was a veritable street Arab, with no one to love him, no one to care for him; a poor waif, that the world seemed to imagine was made of tougher stuff than flesh and blood. But Rody was not accustomed to think over his misfortunes and did not consider himself ill-used because cold and hunger formed a part of daily existence. When a few crumbs from the rich man's table fell to his lot he enjoyed them, and called himself lucky if a kindly passer-by dropped him a copper. Eleven years was the precise time this small boy had inhabited our globe, and yet he had suffered more, much more, than many of us easy-going, well-to-do worldlings suffer in a lifetime.

There was a time when Rody was neither a waif nor an outcast, when he had a little cot and a fond mother, who tucked him away each night in warm blankets, as she kissed him, whispering softly, 'God bless my own boy, Rody! God love my own boy, my own little Rody!' That was a long time ago now, nearly four years, but Rody remembered it well, and often, when he felt cold and miserable, it did him good to think of those far-off days, and to picture to himself the cottage where he had knelt at his mother's knee, and learned the first lessons of piety truth, and love. Yes, Rody liked to dream of that happy time, and relate to his wondering companions how he had once lived in a cozy, thatched cottage, and gathered violets from mossy hedges and cowslips in green fields.

'But why did you not always stay where the trees and flowers were, Rody?' some pale-faced mite would ask. That was a question the boy never chose to answer. Perhaps he feared the tears, which were so near his eyes, might steal down unawares and then Rody considered it unmanly to betray all he felt for his dear, dead mother. And yet, all the same, when alone: 'Ah! why had she died and left him?' was the questioning cry of the child's heart.

It was only in a shadowy, distant way Rody remembered his father, the tall, strong man who used to lift him on his shoulder, whistle to him and kiss him.

One bitterly cold week in January that kind father died, and the doctors said pneumonia had claimed another victim as its own. Rody's pretty, fragile mother never recovered from the shock of her young husband's death. She pined away slowly, and before two years had passed was laid beside him in the churchyard. At that time Rody had only a vague idea of death. The poor little fellow cried when he looked at his mother's pale, still face, and worn, transparent hands, and begged her to speak to him. Kind friends and neighbors, as is their wont, took the child from the bedside, and filled his pockets with sweetmeats.

'Don't cry, Rody!' they said; 'your mother has gone to a happy home above the skies.'

'Why did mother leave me all alone?' wailed the child.

'Because God called her,' they told him; 'and you must be a good boy, and you'll be with her later on. Your Uncle Joe or his wife will be coming for you from Dublin to-morrow, so don't cry any more.'

But Rody was not to be quieted. He sobbed and sobbed, and called:

'Muddy! Muddy! your own little Rody wants you!'

Even when the hard-faced, black-eyed woman, who called herself Aunt Ellen, lifted him into a third-class carriage, which was to bring him away from the sweet, wild country and the home he loved to a crowded tenement-house in a dismal back street in the Liberties, still he cried. However, young as he was, Rody soon found there was no good fretting or wailing for his dead mother. Aunt Ellen, to say the least of her, was not sympathetic. From the first she regarded the child as a nuisance. He would be the cause of extra expense and trouble, and this one fact was quite sufficient to make Rody objectionable to his aunt. Uncle Joe Rody learned to regard in rather a peculiar light. He was a dark, surly man, who at times was kind to the child, but oftener beat him, swore at him and told him to begone and beg. For some time the child was unable to account for his uncle's uncontrollable fits of passion, but, as he grew older, he began to perceive the reason why his uncle and aunt quarreled so frequently and so fiercely—why they declared they hated each other—that they wished one another dead. Both were drunkards.

Uncle Joe was in the habit of spending the greater part of the week's wages in the public house, and his slatternly wife was very little better in this respect. Alas! poor Rody was the chief sufferer, for he came in for blows from both parties. Often when Aunt Ellen feared to vent her angry passion on her husband, the child proved a convenient object on which to revenge herself. So, too, on the other hand, Uncle Joe relieved his feelings by beating the poor child.

Very soon Rody's dimpled cheeks lost their roses, and a hunted, hungry look stole into his great dark eyes. For hours together he sat, with his little face pressed against the dirt-besmeared window, his little heart breaking for one word of love or pity. Things did not improve with time in Uncle Joe's dwelling. Each year a greater number of blows fell to Rody's lot. Each year he longed more and more to get away from his inhuman protectors.

One dark winter night, when the child had been maltreated more severely than usual, he fled from his wretched home to return no more. Alone, hungry and miserable, Rody started to eke out a precarious existence. Poor little mite! He faced the world with a braver heart than many a man, yet what a sickening feeling of despair often took possession of him as he stood at nightfall at the corner of some deserted street, a bundle of unsold 'Evening Telegraphs' under his arm, and not a penny to call his own. Everywhere around him was food, money and warmth, but only cold and hunger were his portion. But what had this small waif done? Of what crime was he guilty that he should gaze with famished eyes at the good things of this world and yet never taste of them—no, were he slowly dying of hunger! Poor little Rody! He had injured no one—done no evil—but he was poor, wretchedly poor, and, therefore, passers-by thought, if they thought at all, that it was meet, that it was natural that he should suffer.

Rody did not seek pity, or wail out in distress. He bore his privations with a mute callousness which might have shamed many a stronger soul. He beat his cold, mud-besmeared feet against the wet pavement when they were cold, and contented himself with gazing in at savory dishes in cook-shop windows when adverse fortune had left him supperless. But there was something which grieved Rody even more than cold and want, and that was the longing of his soul to love and be loved. Even when he had been unusually lucky in the sale of his paper, or Dame Fortune had bestowed one whole shilling on him as his own, the child felt that vague feeling of loneliness which he could never have explained. Perhaps it was this emotion which made him cling to the sweet memory of his mother, and perhaps, too, it was the thought of her which kept him so long from sin.

But the boy was human—intensely human—he did not pray; in fact, he had forgotten God and prayer, and when the poor, as we all know, become unmindful of their Father in heaven or learn to regard him in a far-off, shadowy way, they find it very hard, indeed, in their wants and sorrows to keep to the right path. Rody was not an exception to this rule. He often felt it would be much more profitable to cheat or steal than be honest, much easier to lie than speak the truth, but then there was no one to care particularly he thought, what he did—it was all the same whether he was good or bad, and the fact of being upright had only left him destitute.

Such was the train of Rody's thoughts one cold winter evening as he stood at Grafton street corner with a few unsold 'Evening Telegraphs' in his hand.

'Little use I've trying to live,' he muttered between his chattering teeth. 'Every one can have something but me. I'm the worst off of the whole of them,' and Rody wiped away the unbidden tears that were trickling down his cheeks with the sleeve of his tattered coat.

'Come, my boy, get on now! You can't stand here!' cried a voice by his side. Rody raised his clear, honest eyes to the speaker, and then fled in terror, for the street Arab generally regards the 'Bobby in blue' as his natural enemy. When he had reached the end of the street, and not till then, he stopped.

Poor little mite! his head was throbbing madly, and his frame shook with a hacking cough. A few yards from him was a gay toy shop, surrounded by laughing children. Rody, relieved from his fear, watched them. They all looked so happy, he thought. He alone was miserable. Suddenly a bright shilling rolled towards him. He gazed at it longingly. He knew it belonged to one of those merry boys who were eagerly discussing the merits of a pop-gun. They had plenty—he was starving and ill. Besides, no one was looking. He could easily take it. He stooped down, picked up the money, and then ran as if for his very life. But he had been seen, and six pairs of legs followed in swift pursuit, and shrill voices yelled, 'Stop, thief! Stop, thief!'

Rody heard them, and knew that he was followed. He strained every nerve, every muscle, to keep ahead of his pursuers. He darted down one street, then up another, now ran through one lane, now through another, until he fell exhausted in a dark gateway, his brain swimming, and the cry of 'Stop thief!' still ringing in his ears. As he raised his hand to his throbbing forehead, he felt it wet with warm blood. A thousand lights, he thought, danced before his eyes, while 'Stop thief! Stop thief!' seemed to be echoed and re-echoed by the shrill winter wind. Although Rody pressed his little hands against his ears to deaden the sound, yet the weird cry still went on, only growing louder and louder each minute, until at last it culminated in one long wild shriek, and then—Rody knew no more.

Some hours later some workmen who were passing found a huddled-up, senseless little figure in the gateway. They brought the child to the