

CHRISTMAS VOICES.

OVER hills and lower plains
Clash a thousand bells;
Each the same great truth proclaims,
Each the story tells;
Old, old story, ever new,
Wondrous story, ever true.
Shepherds watching once by night,
Watching long ago,
Heard a seraph choir bright
Murmur soft and low—
Good-will and love, love and good-will,
Then angels spoke and all was still.

THE LILY OF FAR-AWAY ALLEY.

BY LOUISA DALTON.

I.

HOW the alley came by its name nobody seemed to know. It was certainly very far away from the sunshine and everything else that was pure and sweet; but then it was painfully near to the smoke of the city and all things that were foul and dreadful. The Waif said once, when somebody told him what a beautiful place Heaven was, that he reckoned the alley was named because it was so far away from that happy country.

The Waif was a dwarf, and no one knew positively how old he was; I don't think he knew himself. He was called The Waif because on several occasions he had been invited to a waifs' Christmas dinner. The people in the alley had no idea what the word "waif" meant, only that this little fellow was one, and that he had no regular home. So, as most of the denizens of the alley had some sort of a place to crawl into at night, The Waif acquired a kind of distinction among them; and they were proud of him, and had long ago forgotten whether his name was Dick or Billy, or anything at all.

His body was well proportioned, but very small; and although there was a tradition that he was twenty years old, he had a round, baby face, and looked like a wise child. As for his heart, a giant might have been proud of it; for many years of knocking around the worst section of the city had failed to make him actually bad—though he could not be called innocent, I am afraid. A sympathetic heart was beating in that little breast, and every one had some kindness of his to remember. And many poor homes would have been shared with him, but he was used to the life of a vagabond, and preferred a bed on an old coat, with his feet tucked into a box of shavings, to any shelter the crowded houses had to offer. He seemed so happy that many a lad who was beaten at home longed to be like him, a waif, free as air.

There was a new family in Far-Away Alley. An English miner had, with his wife and children, sunk lower and lower in regard to prosperity and neighborhoods, until he had landed there. A number of boys, The Waif in their midst, were discussing the new arrival. The red cheeks of the English people had attracted their attention. Red cheeks, unless caused by fever, were not common in Far-Away Alley.

"The girl hain't no red cheeks," said The Waif. "She looks just like a potato a-growing in the cellar. Do any of yer tellers know how angels look?"

"Why, wot's angels?" asked the taller of the group.

"Well, angels—is only angels. Didn't yer ever see pictures of 'em? They've got long, shining hair and wings; they can fly. And that English girl looks like one. But, my eye, kids! here she comes herself."

Yes, a thin girl, led by a boy, was slowly walking their way. There was a strange expression on her face. She was looking at them, yet did not seem to see them.

"Where's a bread shop, please?" asked the boy.

The sight of the pale child, looking like a white flower dropped into a gutter, aroused the better natures of the lads, and in an instant about ten kindly offered to show the way.

"My sister's blind, you know," volunteered the strange boy, as they moved on with two guides.

Blind! blind, like the poor old beggar whose dog led him about; all the light of day, or what little there was in the alley, shut out as if a black curtain had fallen! The rest of the boys stood still and looked at one another in silence. They had no fine words, although they were moved.

"It must be rough to be blind," finally said Bill.

"Well, I don't know as there's any fine sights here to miss," ventured another. "Perhaps that girl will think we're all duds with stovepipe hats on," he added, with a smile, at the same time kicking his bare toe against the broken curb.

"Shut up!" cried The Waif. "She's a-coming back."

The boy carried a loaf of bread, and led his sister. "I'll be out pretty soon and get acquainted," he called, looking over his shoulder.

In a few minutes an animated talk was going on, inspired by the advent of the girl who looked like an angel. It cannot be quoted literally. Those lads were children of the street; their conversation was that of thieves and vagrants, and must be translated for these columns. But the new boy, whose name proved to be John, was of a different type; and there was but little of the coarseness of the slums about his speech as he went on, in answer to eager inquiries:

"Yes, she's my sister. She's twelve, I'm ten. She's blind from ketching cold when she had scarlet fever. That was when we wasn't so awful poor. She don't know how poor we are now. Mother's kept it from her. We let her think this is a pretty nice place to live in, but I think it's the worst I ever saw. Her name's Lily. She's awful good, and somehow she makes other folks good. They're so sorry for her, I expect. Mother's feeling awful, 'cause we shan't be able to have a Christmas celebration this year, and the time is drawing near. Lily was born on Christmas Day."

"Christmas don't never come here to anybody," spoke up a boy—"only to The Waif. That's him—that little chap on your right, who forgot to grow any after he was seven years old."

When the laugh caused by this sally had subsided, The Waif spoke. "Boys," he said, "somehow I don't take much comfort thinking of that there dinner; and if they come around this year a-giving out tickets, I'm going to ask 'em if a blind girl what looks like a hungry angel can't have it instead of me."

"Hooray!" shouted a tall boy approvingly.

"Yes," the little fellow went on; "and maybe some of you kids can help her have a Christmas too. What makes her happy the most?" he asked, addressing the English boy.

"Oh, she's happy anyway! She imagines things; makes believe, you know. But if there's anything she dotes on it's music, especially hand organs."

"Any particular tune?"

"Yes; she likes 'Swanee River' and 'Home, Sweet Home.' Guess she likes 'Home, Sweet Home' best, though. Do you know it?"

"No," answered The Waif.

"Most of our homes is just places to go and get licked when the old man's drunk," explained a looker-on.

"Now, kids," continued The Waif, "what do you say to giving that blind girl a treat when Christmas comes round? I'll find out what a hand organ man will charge to play every fifteen minutes all the afternoon, and have every other tune 'Home, Sweet Home.' Then we'll rustle round—at something honest, mind you—and chip in enough to pay him."

The idea was so novel that the boys were surprised into agreeing before they knew it.

"And," said John, "I'll get her to tell you a story, a true one, about Christmas. She's great at telling stories."

So the meeting broke up, the boys going their various ways, The Waif wiping his eyes on his sleeve. As he passed the old house where the English family lived, a little song floated out into the smoke and gloom.—

"Be it ever so humble,
There's no place like home."

And he knew it was the blind child singing.

In due time an Italian organ grinder was engaged for the day before Christmas for fifty cents. He had at first wished to have seventy-five for his services, but had lowered his price when he heard that Lily was blind; and he would fix the instrument so that every other tune should be her favorite.

II.

The 24th of December was clear and warm for the season. Lily had entered heartily into the scheme of story-telling, and had her own little secret besides. She had no idea of the rags and squalor of the alley; it was full of children who had never heard the beautiful Christmas story. That was enough. Mrs. Perkins, who took in washing, had put her tubs out of doors and given up a whole room for the occasion. At the proper

moment The Waif gave a signal, and the hand organ struck up. When the music was over Lily began. Her voice was clear, though low, and not a word escaped her listeners. Straight on she went, telling in her own way of the Babe and His Mother; of the Child Jesus, and then of the Man and His agonizing death. "And," she ended, "He died for poor folks just as well as for rich folks; for He was poor too. He had nowhere to lay His head, and He never had a beautiful Christmas like this, with music and everything lovely in it." The Waif was weeping, with no attempt at concealment. "And now," the blind girl went on, "here's a lady who wants to talk to you."

Miss Bowen stepped from a corner, and told them how some kind people had built a home for boys who had no other, and how even boys with homes were invited there on the blessed Christmas Day; and she told them how a few days before she had come to the alley to look for children, and had first of all found little Lily, who was their friend, and who had planned this surprise for them. "And," she concluded, "I want every one of you to take dinner with me to-morrow."

"Will she go?" asked one, with an awkward motion to indicate Lily. And when the lady smiled and nodded yes they all shouted, and The Waif gave the signal for the hand organ to strike up again.

And they did go, each with as decent garments as he could muster, to St. Joseph's Home, of which Miss Bowen was the presiding spirit, and to the building of which her fortune had been given. And after High Mass in the chapel, at which the boys were awe-stricken and delighted attendants, there was a real old-fashioned Christmas dinner and a warm suit of clothes for every guest.

Here would be a good place to end my story, with the boys of Far-Away Alley learning to love the One who died for them; but there is more to tell. Besides, this is not a Christmas story.

That night The Waif could not sleep. It was not the cold that kept him awake; for the weather was mild, and he had a snug place under a doorstep. It was the new, strange message which kept his brain in a whirl.

"Christ died for me—me, a poor dwarf in Far-Away Alley! I've stole, and drunk a little too much sometimes, and lied, and yet He died for me, and will forgive me if I'm sorry. And He started a Church when He was on earth, and I can be in it; and there's nobody so—what's that? Fire!"

Thin tongues of flame were bursting out of an old wooden house in that narrow street. He screamed with all his might, and then some one gave the alarm. In less time than it takes to tell it the alley was swarming. Fire engines rattled over the stones, and orders were shouted. Suddenly, above it all, a woman's voice was heard.

"My baby! my baby! In the corner room up there. I thought Jim had her safe."

The fireman hesitated to mount the ladders which were placed against those burning walls; but The Waif, his body that of a child, but his muscles those of a man, was up one of them like a cat. He swung himself into the window, snatched the little one (who was sound asleep), and dropped it into a blanket held below, just as the roof fell in. Some timbers caught him and held him. The people saw him and worked like madmen, in order to reach him before the fire did. He was trying to be brave, but the smoke was choking him. Just then a clear voice arose above the shouts and the crash of falling walls. Lily was as near as they would let her go, and was calling to him to keep up his courage. Just then the man lifted a beam off his chest, and the flames burned his hair—but he was saved!

Far-Away Alley is no more. The fire wiped it out, and then began an era of improvement in the neighborhood. Wide streets were made, and its inhabitants found homes elsewhere. The Waif is a waif no more; he is a useful and honored inmate of St. Joseph's Home, and has been named James Bowen by Church and State.

And Lily? An oculist says she may see again before long; but whether she does or not, she will, we are sure, always be the happy, loving Lily, whose version of the "old, old story" softened the hearts of the boys in Far-Away Alley.

A Western paper says, "A child was run over by a wagon three years old, and cross-eyed, with pantofoles on, which never spoke afterwards."