

✿ ✿ The Story Page. ✿ ✿

"Sparrows."

BY OLIVE CHRISTIAN MALVERRY.

A blast of cold wind came sweeping down Apollo Street, and in its rude hurry it tore off the battered thing that served Miss Josephine Popp as a hat. The people of London, as represented by the squalid denizens of Apollo Street had curious ways of their own. They loved fine sounding names, but they were not disagreeably proud. The splendid patronymic bestowed upon each new arrival in that uninviting locality was quickly abbreviated into some most informal title. And the style and name by which Miss Josephine Popp found herself generally addressed was simply "Ginger." It was Ginger this, and Ginger that, all day long, for the child made a scanty living by running errands.

The ladies of Apollo Street who found the cares of life press so heavily on them, that they could make time for nothing save to stand on their doorsteps discussing home politics, were glad of Ginger's services. The little girl could always be depended on, and as the ladies argued, "a pint's worth double, if somebody saves your legs going after it." So Ginger's farthings accumulated, and she paid her way bravely. It is true that errands done at a farthing for two, pick up a shilling; and to anyone at all fastidious in the matter of footgear, the runs would hardly have been worth the shoes at the end of a week. But Ginger was not fastidious in the least. Her little patched skirt showed too much leg, and out of her down-trodden shoes, pink heels and toes peeped unashamedly. The rusty jacket she wore was too short in the sleeves and too long in the waist, and her hat was a well acclimatized creation. Nevertheless Ginger conformed to proprieties, and to be seen in the street without that quaint head decoration hurt her greatly.

She faced the wind now, and flung herself after the rollicking runaway, her mass of red curls flying wildly as she went. The boys in the street shouted, the girls jeered and shouted too. No one, however, thought of helping the forlorn little creature in her chase. The hat driven before the wind rolled madly on, out of the narrow alley into the High Street. Ginger came upon it at last, and stooped down with hands eagerly outstretched to grasp the skittish thing. But she slipped in the greasy mud and went down under the swift wheels of a passing cab. There was a sickening, crooked bump, and the cabby looked down in horror upon the muddy little bundle in the road.

"Like my cursed luck," he muttered. "Just when I 'ad a swell fare, too. 'E'd given me 'alf-a-crown and thought nothin' of it."

With a jerk he pulled the cab up, and the "fare" sprang out—a man of splendid height, enveloped in a long fur coat. Ginger lay quite still a pathetic little heap. Her curls were flung wide into the mud, and one small hand was stretched out in dumb entreaty. The man stooped over the child and lifted her up tenderly. Then he returned to the cab, and, getting in, settled the tiny sorrowful burden comfortably in his lap.

"Drive to St. Mary's Hospital," he said through the trap the cabby was holding up. Arriving at the place he flung the man a double fare, and passed quickly into the building.

He was evidently well known, for he passed direct to the matron's room, and hardly waiting to hear the "Come in!" that followed his little knock, he stepped inside with his burden.

"I say, Matron, I've brought you another sparrow," he said to the sweet-faced woman who rose to greet him as he entered.

"Oh, Mr. Jack, where did you pick this up?"

There were tears in the gentle eyes, and the woman held out her loving arms to receive yet another responsibility. Jack Roland fo'ed his arms and said hoarsely.

"We ran over her. She's one of the sparrows, you know, whose fall someone over yonder is watching." There was a mocking bitterness in his voice.

"I am sick of it all," he said. And then with a white-ning face, he turned and went out.

When Ginger opened her eyes that night, she saw one star shining in through the window. There was a wonderful quietness around. The child turned her head slowly and gazed about the dimly lighted ward. She saw the pictures on the walls and the rows of white beds, but her great blue eyes rested at last on the slender form of a woman standing at a table far down the ward. The wail lay quite still, and watched the woman talking to the nurse. Presently the lady turned and came up to the child.

"What is it, little one?" she said, bending over Ginger.

"I don't know," gasped the small creature. "I feel queer all over. Where 'ave I got to?"

"You had an accident, my child, and now we are going to take care of you. Just shut up your eyes and don't think about anything now. This is St. Mary's

Hospital, and you will be very safe. I am the matron, that means mother, so you must settle yourself quite happily here."

The words were sweet and kind, and Ginger put out a timid hand.

"There's no one to take care of my Dickie," she said. "Who's Dickie?"

"Why," said the child, looking up, with a wonderful light in her eyes. "He's my sparrow. He's a knowin' little fellow. I bought him from some boys in the street who were draggin' him about with a broken leg. Now he's all right, and he do know me," she said proudly. "But there'll be no one to feed him now; and Mrs. Billing's black cat's always 'agin' round the door."

And as the familiar picture suddenly presented itself to her mind, she burst into bitter wailing. The matron succeeded in calming her after some time, by promising that the bird should be sent for next morning. Ginger's face cleared, and she said between suppressed sobs.

"I'll ask God to keep an eye on him, because you know what He says about the sparrows, don't yer?"

"Yes," said the woman tenderly. "I do know." Then she kissed the child, and went back to her own room. On the table lay a little note, which she took up and read. "Dear Nurse Mary," it ran. "I'm off ag'in tomorrow at twelve. You know what that means; three weeks alone with the Devil. If the kid I brought in today needs anything, let her have it, and charge all her expenses to my account. When I return, I'll come and see you. Jack Roland."

The woman's eyes were so blurred with tears that she scarcely saw the last words.

"Oh! Master Jack," she cried, bowing her head on the table, "to think that you should have come to this! The bonniest baby I ever carried. Your mother left you to my keeping, and now I can do nothing for you."

She was racked with sobs, and the sound of her heaving breath was all that touched the stillness of the room. But presently she rose and went to her desk, and taking her pen in her hand, she bent her head again and prayed. "Our Father, to Whom we can turn when faith grows dim, Thou Whose almighty heart can mark the sparrow's fall, bring my boy back to me for his mother's sake. Put Thy hand out and remove the temptation from him."

Then she took her pen and wrote, "Dear Master Jack, —The little one you brought in today is breaking her heart about her pet sparrow, which is left in her home. Could you come for five minutes tomorrow morning and see the child? It would be a very kind thing to do. Your affectionate nurse, Mary."

"Bo her!" said Jack Roland, when he read the note next morning. "I suppose I must go; but it's a beastly nuisance. If I can't get out of town to-day, I'll make a blazing cad of myself. Thank God, no one's seen me drunk yet! But I'll be done for if Mary doesn't let me get away in time. I can't stand out for more than half a day now."

He shouted to his man, and went to his dressing table, where a bottle of whiskey and a glass stood. He poured out half a glass of the stuff, and diluted it from his water bottle. He was just raising it to his lips when his servant entered. In a sudden fit of passion, he flung the glass out of the window and turned to the man with a curse.

"Fetch me a cab, and take that stuff away and keep it out of my way till we get down to Westmorland." Then he quickly dressed and tore down.

The Angel that the Almighty Wisdom sends to measure men's strength and weakness before their trial is allotted, had taken count of Jack Roland's temptation. The periodical passion which smote this young and splendid creature was on him now. He suffered from an inherited and irresistible craving for drink. A gentleman at all times of his life, he refrained, even in the hour of his weakness, the instinct of good breeding, which makes a man desire to hide his shame from the world. He carried an old and honored name; but he stood alone, for all the people of his blood had passed beyond the judgment of men. Besides his nurse Mary, who was now matron at St. Mary's Hospital, there was no one whose influence he acknowledged.

He burst into her room in his usual impulsive way, and said,

"Why did you send for me, Mary?"

"Well, Master Jack, the little girl would like to see you. She's the oddest little mortal I've ever seen—a regular little street arab, with a wonderful knowledge of life's philosophy, and the heart of a hero. She's not dangerously hurt, but her injuries are painful. Yet she has never made a single complaint, nor thought of anything except a sparrow she's left at home. It seems the bird depends on her for support."

Jack gave a queer little laugh.

"And does the wee woman support herself too, as well as this dependent?"

"Oh! yes," said Mary, with an odd twitch of her loving mouth. "She calls herself an 'orpling,' says she resides in Apollo Street in a room which costs her half-a-crown a week, and she 'does for' herself. She is thirteen years old, she says."

"What profession does this independent person follow?" asked Jack.

"She runs errands for the ladies of the neighborhood at two for a farthing."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Jack. "But what can I do for her, Mary?"

"Go up and see her," said the nurse. "She'll tell you herself."

Outside the snow was drifting in the streets and the world was preparing for Christmas. But to neither Jack nor Ginger had the season any happy significance. The man had outworn his illusions, and the child had hardly yet awakened to them. But she greeted the fur-coated gentleman with undisguised admiration and joy.

"Well, kiddie," said Jack a little awkwardly, "how are we today?"

"I'm quite well, thank you," gasped Ginger, feasting her eyes on his splendor.

"Oh! that's right. And now is there anything you would like me to do for you before I go away?"

"Are you going away?" said Ginger with a drooping mouth.

"Yes, for a little while."

"Why?" asked the child.

Jack stroked his brown moustache thoughtfully.

"I'm going because I must," he said at last. "But I'll do anything you want me to do, before I go."

A sudden flood of longing swept over the lonely heart of the little wail, the irresistible yearning for love was upon her. She could not have put her want into words, but she held out her hands and said with passionate entreaty in her voice.

"Take me with you! I can do most anything, and I could run all your errands for you. My word I'd do 'em sharp."

She had grasped his hands, and held them tight. The boyish chivalry that had kept Jack from degradation in his weakest moments, was instantly awakened. The small creature's appeal touched him more than he would have cared to admit. What prompted him to say the next words which fell from his lips, he could not, even in after years, have explained. But he stooped down and touched the child's shining hair with his lips.

"I'll stay as long as you want me, kiddie," he said.

It was Christmas time again. Five years had made the world no older; but Jack had grown a wiser man and Ginger into a wonderful little lady. Jack was sitting in his library waiting for her to come in. The door opened, and Nurse Mary entered.

"Oh! Mary, I thought—"

"You thought it was Miss Ginger, Master Jack!" she laughed.

"Well, I'm awfully anxious to see her," he said.

"Aren't you?"

"More than I like to say, Master Jack. They've sent such wonderful reports from that fine school where you sent her, that I'm thinking she must have grown marvellously winsome."

"I haven't a shadow of a doubt of it," said Jack, "and here she is."

The door was flung open; there was a whirlwind of snowy fur; and Ginger was sobbing her heart out in Jack's arms.

"I've been dying to see you for three years, Guardie," she said.

"Well then you've managed very well," laughed Jack, "the prolonged agony seems to have developed you wonderfully."

After dinner they sat together talking far into the night. Ginger's shining red hair caught strange glints from the fire light, and her delicate white face was touched with the glory of love.

"I think," she said very quietly, resting her pretty head on her hands, "the debt is about equal. If my love for you has saved you from sin and disgrace, your love for me has changed me from an ignorant little Arab into— Oh! Jack, I'm not half good enough for all you've done for me. But I have tried hard."

The man rose from his place and went over to the girl. "You've done more than well, Ginger, and I'm very, very proud of you. This is Christmas Eve, you know, I've not had many presents in my life. I've got something for you, and I want you to give me the only Christmas present I could really care for."

"I'd give you my head if you wanted it," said Ginger, enthusiastically.

"It's not only the head I want," he said laughingly, "but the very whole of you."

Next morning, when all the bells were ringing, Ginger