

THE LITTLE DIRTY ANGEL.

By MRS. OLIPHANT.

She was coming home one wintry afternoon just as it became dark. It had been very cold all day, and her hands were nearly frozen with her work in the park, picking up sticks. She was an old woman, in reality about sixty-five but looking eighty, by reason of hard work and exposure to all sorts of weather. She had an old battered bonnet upon her head, beneath which her grey hair, blown about all day by the wind, looked wild and untidy, a shawl which was wound across her breast with the ends tied behind, and her back bent under a load of sticks which she was carrying home for her fire. She had been out since an early hour in the morning, in the open air upon the damp grass, stooping and bending her old back with monotonous and continual movement, the most wearisome perhaps of any muscular effort. Her boots were bad and her feet were wet, and so were her skirts. This was her occupation day by day, and she did not curse her fate, but was thankful to have the poor little pay which kept her alive: and on this day, though her appearance was so forlorn, her spirits were higher than usual. She had met some ladies in the park, and had shown them where the brilliant red and yellow fungus, great toadstools painted as Aspinall's enamel could never paint them, grew thick upon the wet and boggy turf: and they had given old Martha a sixpence. A sixpence is a small matter to many people, but it was not a small matter to this poor old woman. It eased her back a little under her load of sticks—it made the way less long to her tired feet. And yet it was a very long way. All the way from Queen Anne's Drive, in the middle of the park, to the place which is now called River Street, but then Bier Lane—and not a very pleasant place when she got there. The sixpence however made a great deal of difference. It made everything look brighter. As she came out of the park into the road, just below where the fine new fountain and lamp stands, she amused herself by thinking what she could do with it. She thought she would buy a bloater as she went home, to eat as a relish with her tea. She thought that perhaps a rasher of bacon would be nicer, but it would cost more money. She considered whether she would not lay out her fortune to more advantage if she bought some scraps at the butcher's, which would make her a hot supper and leave enough to take with her to the park for a good dinner to-morrow. And then she considered further that though supper and dinner are very good things, yet it was almost sinful to spend such a sum of money entirely upon eating. Sixpence would almost buy half a hundred weight of coals: but then that would leave nothing at all for a relish with her tea, and her face grew long with this thought.

But as she went along a dreadful temptation came over poor Martha. As she came down the road, and the great beautiful Castle rose before her in a mist against the sky, which was still red and warm with reflections of the sunset though the evening was rapidly growing dark, there suddenly appeared to her a flaming globe which she recognised very well, and knew at half a mile off; a light which had sometimes been baneful to her, but which sent the shock of a new idea into her mind. She was very cold and very tired, and at the sight of this light her legs began to feel more weary and her fingers

more frozen than ever. For she knew that if she went in there with her sixpence she could buy a little warmth that would go tingling down to her very toes, and then would mount up to her brain, and make her feel for a moment at least as if the burden was off her back and twenty years off her head. Oh! the difference it would make to her chilled hands and wet feet. It would stand in the stead of food and fire. It would make her feel as if she had everything she wanted, and was as well off as the Queen. She tried to talk to herself as she often did, and to say that this wouldn't last—that after a while she would be colder than ever and more tired, and would have no rasher, nor even bloater, nor the sense of the sixpence in her pocket, which was so comfortable. Then she thought of the glass that would be handed to her over the counter, and the gulp she would make, and the water that would come into her eyes and the choke in her throat, and then the warmth that would run all through her. It was a long pull still to her home, and then she would have to light the fire and boil the kettle before she could have anything—whereas here it was within reach, and in a minute she would be all in a glow.

Ah! but what would the ladies think who gave her the sixpence if they saw her going into the public house? They would not know how cold she was—and they would shake their heads and say, 'That dreadful old woman!' and the old lady would say to the young ones, 'Did't I tell you she would spend it in drink?' Ah! old lady with all your furs on, what would you do if you were as cold as Martha, and as tired? Do you think you would have the heart to push on past that door, and be patient till you got home and lighted the fire and waited for the kettle to boil? She grew colder and colder as she went along feeling all the time that there it was within reach, the warm, tingling, comforting draught. She quickened her steps as this thought got possession of her, and hurried on, almost breaking into a run. Poor old woman, wet and weary, with no one to comfort her! The temptation was too strong: she could not resist it. Just a little comfort, something to make her warm.

Some one did care for her, however, and something occurred that stopped her on the road. In the old days it would have been an angel in disguise—and perhaps it was so: but what it looked like was only a little crying child. It was standing against the railings of a house, and with its little fists in its eyes was wailing and weeping, rising now and then into a roar, 'O-o-o-h,' it would murmur, and then 'Oh-hoo-ho-ho,' with a kind of shriek at the end. It was a ragged little creature, blue with the cold, and its tears falling down had made little clear lines like furrows in the dirt on its cheeks. Martha was off post haste towards the place of temptation when she heard the child crying. She hastened past it, but the cry pursued her, and she could not help stopping. A child crying out in the night is a pitiful thing, and though she was only an old woman working in the park, and very, very much tempted to go and spend her sixpence in the public house, Martha still had a heart—and a warm old heart it was, though she was as cold as an icicle, with her wet skirts beating against her wet ankles, and the bundle of sticks on her back.

'What's the matter, little 'un,' she said.

The child only answered with 'O-o-o-h' and 'Oh-hoo-ho-ho' again.

'What's the matter, I say?' Martha was only human, and she was anxious now to hurry to the

public house before her conscience should get up and stop her. So though she could not pass it by, she took hold of the child and gave it a shake. 'Stop crying, child, and tell us what's the matter. Where's your mother?' she said.

'Mammy's done and left me,' said the little thing. 'O-o-o-h! mammy's done and left me!' and roused by the comfort of an audience, it wailed and wept more and more.

'Where d'ye live?' said Martha, shaking the child again.

'I don't live nowhere; mammy done away and left me!' said the child.

'Oh hold your noise,' said Martha, in her haste, 'hold your noise, when I tell you, where's your mammy gone?'

The child took its fist from its eyes, and pointed towards the park. 'Mammy's done away there; she said she tudn't be bothered with me: mammy's done and left me.'

Lord bless us all! gone and left a baby like that!' old Martha said.

By this time some other people had gathered round, who began to advise her, as she was the first to take the responsibility. 'Take him to the police office,' 'Take him to the Overseer,' 'Send him to the workhouse,' they said.

Martha by this time stood quite still, and had ceased to wish to hurry away. She saw that the chance of something hot in the public house had become impossible, and she felt cross and colder than ever. She gave the child a little shake again. 'Havn't you got no home to go to at all, you little varment?' she said.

But to all questions the poor little thing only wailed and replied that his mammy had done away.

And then everybody round began again to recommend the police office, the workhouse and the Overseer, till Martha lost patience altogether. Something had begun to work in her heart, but it did not make her voice soft all at once. She turned to the child, and said to it roughly, 'Will you come along o' me?'

He took both his fists out of his eyes, and he gazed in her face, and stopped crying: and then he put one of his little fists, such a little fist! into the old woman's hand.

She had forgotten all about the public house. She led the child past the very door, talking to him all the way, and forgot which it was. Something else had come in to warm her and drive the thought of the steaming glass away. Our poor old grey-haired woman, ragged and damp and cold, what was it that had come into her heart? It was Charity: that divinest thing which St. Paul interprets and calls Love. It warmed her all about her heart, and put away the other thought. Instead of a little fictitious comfort for herself, to comfort the poor little lost child: that is the kind of exchange that makes a poor old woman as good as the greatest. She led him along and talked to him all the way, saying, 'Don't ye take on, now, little 'un. Don't ye cry. We'll be home in a minnit, and you shall have some supper along o' me, and go to bed along o' me; and to-morrow we'll see if we can't find your mammy: though she must be a rare bad 'un, said old Martha to herself, 'to leave a babby like this upon the road of a winter night. What's your name, my dear?'

'I'm little Joey, and I 'as matches for to sell,' said the tiny little boy.

'Well, Joey, you and me will 'ave to be mates till we find your mammy,' said old Martha. 'I wish I could carry ye, little 'un, but I can't, ye see, for I've all these sticks on my back, and I'm so tired I dunno how to put one foot afore the other; but as soon as we gets home there'll be a nice little fire, and we'll boil the kettle and we'll have our tea: and won't we be comfortable? Don't ye cry, little man, it aint so far off now.'

'I aint a-going to cry,' said little Joey, holding very fast by her hand. The clutch of his little fingers seemed to touch something that went right up the old woman's arm to her old heart.

'Bless his little soul,' she cried, and a tear came welling up warm into each of her eyes, and made the lamps shine like stars, and the road quite bright; almost as bright as it was in the Jubilee time, when we were all rejoicing for the Queen. And Martha forgot all about the temptations of the road, the shining lamp over the public house, and what was within: and trudged along, so tired she could scarcely walk, but with the warmth in her heart tingling to her very toes.

And so the little angel trudging on half asleep through the road, brought her safely home.