

The Storyteller.

MARY LOYS' STORY.

IN FOUR CHAPTERS.

(By T. SPARROW, in the *Ave Maria*)

CHAPTER I.

MARY LOYS was a fat, beautiful baby, with large black eyes, and a great capacity for sitting still, sucking her chubby fists while watching intently that portion of the world which came under her notice, as her Italian mother plied the organ day after day in the London streets, with her *bambino* slung loosely on her back.

Mary Loys was happy then, though she did not know it. Ladies gave her *confetti*, and gentlemen ha'pence. She smiled on all alike, and snuggled cozily in her gay-coloured shawl, while the keen winds pierced her mother's frame, and made the struggling breath come in short, quick gasps; and when the wheezy old organ had done its day's work, and had been left at the depot, where such instruments are lodged, her olive-faced *madre* would take her lovingly on her knee, and cover the warm, brown cheeks with lingering kisses. The dimpled arms clasped the half-starved woman's neck, the tiny hands were lost in the sleek-hued hair, the baby lips were pressed to the shivering breast; and, for the time being, mother and child were equally happy—one innocent of all ill, the other soothed into sweet forgetfulness of the hardships of her daily life.

And before she started on her weary trudge to the tenement that was a mockery for a home, she never forgot to slip into the Italian church, and there, with many gestures and sighs, to beg Our Lady to protect her little one, so soon to be motherless and alone. And tears often fell on the wee dark head, while Mary Loys gurgled and cooed at the twinkling lights burning before the altars, and the pretty beads round the neck of the Madonna's statue.

Alas! before Mary Loys was quite three years old her delicate, worn-out mother was sleeping the last sleep, chilled unto death by our cold climate and bitter, biting winds. Before she closed her eyes to earth she begged her next-door neighbour to see that little Mary Loys was brought up a Catholic; and, laying her hand on the weeping child's head, she made her say the "Hail Mary" in Italian after her. Then the feeble flicker of her flame of life went out, and the tiny three-year-old began its battle for existence.

The *Ave Maria* in her broken prattle was the last she heard of her mother-tongue for many a year. The people to whom the orphan was consigned were kindly and honest, but too often knew what it was to want bread. They were of the genuine cockney type: sharp-tongued, hard drinkers, ready with their fists, and not too fond of work; improvident to the last degree, but not without the kind of brain which keenly appreciated a street sermon or an oration from a temperance lecturer. Though favouring the Salvation Army themselves, they kept their promise about Mary Loys, and were careful to send her to a Catholic school as soon as she was old enough.

But the child's temperament was one which abhorred restraint. Wild and fitful, and full of foreign vehemence, she was always at war with her teachers. Nor was she popular with her fellow-pupils. When she chose she learned in an hour what they took a week to comprehend; her marvellous memory made it a mere pleasure to learn by heart long pieces of poetry, whilst her wonderful talent in reciting them drew applause from all who heard. Her gestures were so graceful and her dramatic powers so strong, it made one's heart ache, while one's judgment approved, to see her act with precocious skill and pathos the love scenes from some suburban drama, or declaim with sparkling fervour whole pages from some "penny dreadful" which had fired her fancy.

It seemed as if she must inevitably drift towards the stage. Her great delight was to coax her adopted parents to let her "slip" school and attend one or other of them in their rounds with the organ. Here, arrayed in a fanciful costume, with a coloured handkerchief on her long black hair, she would dance on the pavement with a skill that always attracted a crowd; and then she would go round so prettily and ask for coppers that her bag would be nearly full.

Seeing this, it was but natural that her foster parents should draw her more and more away from school. They were poor; they had seven children of their own; they had willingly given of their meagre substance to the orphan, and now it was but fair that she should pay them back again. Besides, it must be owned that if Mary Loys did not get her own way, she flew into such passions that the more phlegmatic English people thought her half-demented, and for peace sake let her go her own wild, wild way.

So it came about that when I, for philanthropic reasons, resolved to adopt an organ-grinder's life, it was with this very family I arranged to live; and found Mary Loys a pretty child-elf of ten years old, untamed as a gipsy, who gloried in the freedom of her street-Arab life, and who yet retained a certain piquant refinement which was fascinating in the extreme.

My first night in my new domicile I shall never forget. It was in a stuffy court of two-roomed dwellings, and the furniture of the lower room consisted of a bed, table, boxes for chairs, and one chest of drawers. There were two cupboards; one held the coals and the other was used as a larder. Cooking conveniences there were none and washing accommodation was conspicuous by its absence. In the centre of the court was a pump, to which all repaired for laving purposes. In severe weather, if it froze, they went without ablution of any sort.

I arrived in time for supper, which meant a bloater each, using newspapers as plates; a piece of bread handed round with the fingers, and wretched tea; condensed milk we elders had with it, but the children took it raw, though smothered in sugar. Father,

mother and I sat on the boxes round the table; the eldest girl stood and waited on us, while the younger ones sat about the floor, and had their food dropped to them.

Mary Loys never took her great black eyes from my face; and as I had heard her tale from the nuns, and seen her act, we were not long in making friends.

"I will look after her to-morrow," she announced, nodding her pretty head at me with an air of proprietorship. "She can take the organ and I'll dance."

The man growled assent, the woman held her tongue; some of the children whimpered, as each had had her dream of being the chosen *cicerone*. But Mary Loys speedily silenced the malcontents by the promise of a real fairy-tale and, seeing that I had finished my modest meal, she packed me off to bed with scant ceremony.

The room upstairs had been delegated to my sole use, but I did not reach it without some bumps and bruises; for the way thither was up a winding stair, with a knotted rope for baluster. It was too low to stand upright, the window would not open, and there was no fireplace. A mattress lay on the floor, with a coarse sheet and a patchwork quilt. They always slept in their clothes, she informed me, and no doubt expected me to do the same.

That was not the most restful night of my life; but I am not relating my own experiences, so I will pass in silence to breakfast, which was *en famille*, being tea and bread dipped in melted fat,—much relished by the youngsters, but hardly appreciated by me, the same fat being rancid.

Mary Loys was delighted when she saw me in my organ-grinding costume—a short brown skirt, coarse woollen stockings, a dark green shoulder-shawl and a bright green straw hat. And I might have been shy of my rough audience, had I not from the first moment been conscious that Mary Loys drew all the attention to herself. I grinded but she danced, or rather darted, leaped, and whirled about in steps of her own devising, with a wild grace and agility which I have never seen excelled. It seemed infectious, children congregated from all parts and joined in the wild, madcap revel; boys caught hold of each other and waltzed round in clumsy vogue; dirty women danced the dragged infants in their arms; and men with pipes in their mouths, slouching against the wall, laughed lazily as they watched the performance. And Mary Loys, with sparkling eyes, flying hair and flushed cheeks, flew in and out, to and fro,—wildly, madly, frantically; and as suddenly would stop, and demurely present her box for pennies.

After a few days I began to participate in Mary Loys's love for the streets, and to discover it was not all lawlessness which prompted it. The freedom and fresh air were as necessary to her as water is to a fish. Her home was cramped and crowded; the children jangled and wrangled; the parents nagged each other all day, and usually ended with blows. The coarseness of the home-life went against some innate fineness in her nature. Their only pleasure was drink,—drink for old, for young, for middle-aged. The children take a sip as they run to and fro with the jug; if a woman feels "down," it is a glass she takes; if she is "up," she treats a friend. Joy is commemorated by a "liquoring up," while sorrow is endured by the aid of constant imbibing; the sober partake at home, the unsober away from home,—that is the only difference.

And the food! Who was to make them understand that a child of pure Italian descent could not thrive on cheap bits of pork that no one else would buy, or mutton pies composed of lumps of fat and underdone paste, to be washed down by gin and tea, or ale in a pewter pot? While her guardians grieved over a meal of cheese and fat bacon, one high and the other strong, Mary Loys simply sickened at the sight and would bang out of the house in a rebellious mood, not knowing the cause of her ill temper; and sullenly prepare to receive the blows with which very likely she would be greeted on her return.

She soon attached herself to me with all the *abandon* of her southern nature; and when I found that she never went to Mass on Sunday, had been to confession only once, and knew very little of her religion, I never rested till I made her understand a little of why she came into the world, and of the good God who was watching over her. She drank it all in eagerly, and was soon preparing for her first Communion. She was anxious to make it on a feast of Our Lady, and that of the Immaculate Conception was chosen.

"I hope it will snow," she said to me; I want it to be white outside my soul as well as inside."

Her sense of the fitness of things made her rather grieve at not having a white dress and veil in which to receive our Blessed Lord. I did not wish to encourage her love of "smartness" by giving her the things, so I tried to show how it was the inward spotlessness which was so pleasing to our Saviour. But I had reckoned without my host.

The night before Mary Loys spent a long time at the pump, though it was bitterly cold. At length she came in half-frozen, smuggling a parcel about which she disdained to answer.

I was then living at my own home, and she called for me at a quarter to eight in the morning as arranged. The queerest little figure met my astonished gaze as I shiveringly let her in. She had obtained a couple of towels, washed them, rough-dried them, pinned one in front and one at the back, and thus succeeded in making a semblance of a white costume. With her great dark eyes and mane of raven hair, she made the funniest snow-angel I have ever seen.

"It's the best I can do," she said, demurely; "and at least it is neat and clean."

Side by side Mary Loys and I knelt to receive the Bread of Angels; and when our prayers were over I took her, tightly clasping my hand, to the orphan asylum of the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul, where for four years she was to reside and complete her education. So she promised me, as, with tearful *adieu*, she bade a long and tender farewell.

(To be continued)

SMOKE "ROYAL COLORS" TOBACCO.

(IMPROVED AROMATIC)