

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"A TRAP TO CATCH A SUNBEAM."



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“She thought baby was her only audience.”

COLUMBINE.

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BY

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Author of "A Trap to Catch a Sunbeam," "Only a Little Primrose."

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C O L U M B I N E.

THERE was an organ playing in the road, a broad open road, on one side of which was a long range of barracks, from the windows of which the soldiers were lounging out listening to the music and tossing halfpence to the player. The bright spring sunshine glittered on the young green leaves, and a light breeze wafted the scent of lilacs and hawthorns from the gardens near, and shook gently down the petals from the pink blossoms of the almond trees. The thrushes, and larks, and linnets, in their cages, hanging outside the barrack windows,

among the pots of scarlet geraniums, stocks, and mignonettes, swelled their little throats into song, answering the notes of the wild free birds amongst the trees; and near the organ a group of ragged children stood staring at it, running to pick the halfpence up, and give them to the man. One amongst them, a girl, stood listening, beating her foot in time to the music; then suddenly, as the air changed, she flung her arm round another child standing near, and broke into a quick graceful dance, so graceful and joyous that loud plaudits broke from the men lounging out of the barrack windows, and passers-by stood to watch in wondering admiration, the rapid movements of the supple limbs, the little head so well set on her shoulders, with its masses of rich black hair, the dark eyes flashing with merriment, the little brown ears, in which large gold ear-

rings hung, and the dress, poor and coarse, but picturesque as her little bright self. It was of some coarse dark cloth, very short, showing her small feet in heavy shoes, that it was a wonder she could move so quickly and so lightly at all, in such things.

A scarlet handkerchief was knotted round her neck, and a clean white linen apron longer than her frock was caught up at one corner under the waistband; her head had no covering but her glorious hair, and she danced there beneath the sunshine, unmindful of the admiring eyes which watched her movements, enjoying the pure excitement of the exercise for its sake alone. A man stopped to watch her as, after a moment's pause, she resumed her dance, changing her time according to the tune, from the short rapid steps of the polka to the more undulating graceful

Mazourka ; half closing her dark liquid eyes she threw her head back on the shoulder of the strong rough girl she had chosen to dance with, and with a kind of sentiment, as though she would express some deep and tender feeling, she moved with gentle grace to the music. Then, suddenly breaking from her companion, and whirling round several times on one foot with astonishing rapidity, she threw her arms over her head, with a bright loud laugh and flew away with the speed of an antelope down the long road, stopping once to turn and drop a graceful curtsey, for the plaudits which greeted her performance, to the soldiers who leaned out of the windows to watch her as far as they could see her.

The man, the moment she sprung away, had followed her, but he had to walk rapidly to keep in sight the child, who, laughing and singing, sprang on before him. She turned

presently down a court, in which there was no thoroughfare, and stopped before a house the door of which was open, and across the sill was a low board over which hung a flax-haired baby, scratching up the dirt with its little brown fingers, watched by another child, a year older, with shoeless and stockingless feet, who occasionally fulfilled what it considered its duty by saying "Dirty, adone, baby! oh, your mother will just slap you!" But baby scratched on, unheeding the remonstrance, and the small brother, finding the remonstrance and the threat equally unavailing, left baby to continue his amusement.

"Ah, here's Nita, coming at length," said the boy, with a sigh of relief at this shifting of the responsibility which had devolved on him in her absence. "He will keep on scratching the dirt, Nita."

“Will he?” said the child, listlessly; “I suppose I must take him up then. Oh, you dirty little horror!” she continued, lifting him up from the floor, and receiving for reward for her attention, a smart slap from baby’s dirty hands in her face. But she only laughed, and carried him kicking to a back room, where was a bedstead with apparently but little clothing on it, a broken chair, and a box, on which stood a large yellow basin, and a small wooden bowl, in which was a piece of soap, and at this apology for a wash-stand, she wiped the dirt from the baby’s hands and face. And then turning to the boy who had stood leaning against the door watching her, told him he might go out to play now, if he liked. The boy readily took advantage of the permission, and the girl put the baby down on the floor and began dancing

to it in the same wild graceful fantastic fashion with which she had charmed the soldiers.

She thought baby was her only audience, till a shadow seemed to fall on the floor, and, turning round, she saw a man standing in the doorway.

"Who do you want?" she asked, advancing to him.

"You," said the man, smiling.

"What for?" she asked, looking at him with her fine fearless eyes.

"To make your fortune," said the man. She laughed, and turned to pick up baby, who cried to be noticed.

"Is that your little sister?"

"It's a boy, and it's not my sister."

"Have you a mother and father?"

"People I call so," she answered. "Are

fortunes made by answering questions?" she said saucily.

"Sometimes, child," said the man, smiling at her sharpness. "Who taught you to dance?"

"No one; I taught myself."

"And is this your home? what is your name?"

"Does it matter to you? What if I don't choose to tell you?" she said defiantly.

"I shall wait till your mother comes in, and ask her."

"Ha! ha! how long you'd have to wait, wouldn't he, Bab?" and she tossed the child above her head with her strong young arms and laughed again. At this moment a woman entered, a pale, worn, weary-looking woman who stared to see a stranger in her house, and asked him did he want her.

“I want your little girl, ma’am,” he said, “if you’re inclined to spare her; my name and occupation you will read here.” And he handed a somewhat dirty, greasy card to her. “I saw her dancing just now in the road, and I see she has talents which might be turned to account. I’ll give you money down for her, and so much a week to the child. Will you let her go?”

The woman stared at the card and at the man, and then said,—

“I don’t mind, I’m sure, I’d like Nita to do what she likes best; she does not belong to me, you know. What say, Nita, will you go with this gentleman?”

“What for—to dance in the streets for coppers? No, thank you, I’ll stay here.”

“It’s not in the streets, my fine little maiden; I have a small theatre, and want a little dancer

like you. Come, strike a bargain. Is she no relative to you?" he said, turning again to the woman.

"None at all, sir. Her mother—at least a woman—a foreign woman brought her here when she was quite a baby, and begged a lodging. She looked scarce fit to drag one leg behind the other. I gave her that little room for a trifle a week, and there she died, leaving the poor child alone; I did not like to send her to the work'us, poor thing, so she's grubbed along with mine ever since, doing a little to help with the little ones; but me and my man have often wondered what was to become of her."

"A theatre, a real theatre, is it?" asked the child, who had been thinking seemingly of the man's last words.

"A real theatre;" he answered, "it's a movable one, you know. I travel about."

“No, no, thank you, I’d rather stay here. Do you want me to go, though?” she said, turning suddenly to the woman.

“No, no, child, I don’t want you to go, you ain’t in *my* way ; one mouth more, you see, sir, makes but little odds, you don’t feel it.”

“No, perhaps not now, but she is growing daily bigger, a strong, sturdy little wench, and will make a great hole in the bread and butter soon.”

“I can’t help that, sir, I shall never *send* her away,” said the woman, with a patient sigh ; “her mother left her here.”

“Well, I’m very sorry ; it’s a pity. The child is full of genius. If you, or she, repent before the end of the week that is my address, you know, on that card. Good morning, little lady,—yes,” he said, looking at her, and speaking half to himself—“and it is little ‘lady,’ too, I

believe. A foreigner, do you say the mother was?" he asked, turning to the woman.

"Yes; from Spain some said," she answered. "She spoke English—pretty fair, so as I could understand her well enough, but when she nursed and played with the baby, she ran on in a jargon I could make nothing on. I've saved her big ear-rings she wore, and a large silver ring, against the little one grows up. But what few things else she had, and God knows it wasn't much, I've sold at times to help keep her. I've tried hard to keep these trinkets, though my master often says I'd ought to sell 'em; and sometimes when he's had a drop too much, he swears at her, and says he don't see why he should keep another woman's brat; but he's very good-hearted my Jim is, when he's all right, and then he's pleased enough with her."

“She’s clever, isn’t she, in every way?”

“Oh! lor bless you, yes—sharp as a needle, and she’s got little proud ’perious ways as pleases my man—he often calls her little duchess.”

She stood the child whilst they talked of her leaning against the open doorway, in the golden sunlight, shaking a piece of coloured glass to catch the rays of light for the baby’s amusement, whom she had seated on the ground at her feet, the round well-shaped arm holding up the glass in the sun, the little head leaning against the doorway, one foot crossed over the other with a sort of indolent grace which made her always a study. Her interest in the conversation seemed to have ended with her refusal to accept the stranger’s offer, and as he passed out wishing her “good-by” she moved her head slightly in acknowledgment as a

young princess might have done, and still stood flashing the glass before the eyes of the happy baby, expressing no more interest in him or looking after him as he passed down the court, though he turned back often and stood for a moment at the end to look again at her.

The monotonous days went on, the poor woman going out to her wretched day's "char-ing," or in default of that sitting at home mending up the ragged clothing of the children, and Nita doing anything she could to help, principally employed with the baby, dancing her wild fantastic dances to it, or tossing it in her arms, singing the burdens of the songs she heard in the streets or the airs played on organs, in a bright ringing voice; sometimes, seated on the floor with it in her lap, its fingers tangled in her long thick hair, submitting to

have it pulled with all baby's force, all indifferent to the pain it might cause. And yet she did not appear to be moved by either love or gratitude especially in all she did for the little thing. "Mind baby!" she was told, and so realising that that meant "don't let him be hurt, nor let him cry," she fulfilled the duty to the letter—he never did cry whilst *she* "minded" him, for her bright continual movements, her merry musical voice, with the gleaming smile that parted her full red lips displaying her white even teeth, all had an endless fascination for the boy. She kept him clean too for her own sake—because whatever was in her of higher, purer culture seemed to show itself in an innate cleanliness, a dislike to all that was uncleanly or essentially low. The wretched children in the court she never

played with or talked to when they were not clean, nor would let the elder boy if she could prevent him. She deplored his shoeless feet, but she kept him clean as well as she knew how, and scolded him if words passed his lip that were unfit for him to use, with a strange sense of right born in her, not taught, for education she had none. To love the sun, the trees and flowers, such as grew in the neighbourhood where she had lived her little life; music; all things bright and beautiful, was her nature; to hate all things coarse and ugly and unlovely was her nature too, but to love and worship Him who made the things she loved, she had not been taught, nor save in horrid oaths ever heard His name mentioned.

It might have been a week or more since the visit of the stranger, when the man Stevens came home very late and not sober.

His wife had waited tea for him and supper—the latter meal was still on the table when he came in, she only said,—

“How late you are,” in her meek voice and with her poor heavy eyes—heavy with sorrow and unrest—raised to his, but he had no pity, no love in his heart for his wretched weary wife, and he only uttered bitter cruel words and stumbled into a chair with a horrid threat to kill her if she spoke again. And then turning he saw the child Nita lying on the mat before the small fire, her arm supporting her head, some flowers beside her—Immortelles—she had been making into wreaths. A neighbour had offered her a few halfpence to help her make them; but it was late and she was tired, and she had flung down her flowers and was lying there idly when he entered. His manner, his cruel

wicked words stirred the passion in the child's heart, which from her look had been so difficult to keep in control—a kind of grandeur in her nature prevented her from ever displaying it to the weak, weary, tender woman who had tried to fill a mother's place to her, or to the little children she nursed, but the man and some of the neighbours had seen often the tempest raised, her eyes gleaming with anger, the veins standing out on her broad forehead, the little fists clenched and the whole form convulsed with anger, and now his degraded state, his cruel unkindness to the patient wife made her blood boil, and in her fierce eyes he read her scorn and indignation.

Knowing well enough what had caused it—sufficiently himself to know how well he deserved it, and enraged to be thus as it were rebuked by a child—he staggered to his feet,

and seizing her by the arm dragged her up and shook her violently, while a storm of hideous words and oaths broke from his dry parched lips.

The poor mother screamed to him to desist, but he rested not till he flung her from him on the ground and then rushed out of the house. The poor woman raised her in her arms and carried her to bed, bathed the swollen arm where the cruel grip had been, but never a word said either of them. The Immortelles lay on the floor and the moon's rays came in through the small window and fell on them and on the pale face of the child, awake in her miserable little bed. No tears or cries had the man's cruelty wrung from her proud heart, but she would bear it never more, that was the settled determination which seemed to speak in her glowing eyes, wide open there

in the pale moonlight and on her close-shut lips. * * * * *

Seated in a clergyman's study, in a large old-fashioned vicarage house in a small country town in the south of England, sits a man in earnest conversation with the Vicar.

He is evidently a foreigner, his appearance would betray that without the foreign accent which marks his speech.

"I have sought her so long sorrowing with tears," he has said as he clasped his trembling hands together, "and for ever just when I think to clasp her in my arms she escapes—the dream passes, the vision fades—and my hope is gone."

"I think from what you tell me that you are certainly on the right track now. The troupe only left the town yesterday, and I know they were bound to Wilchester. I should advise your at once proceeding there."

“Yes, yes, I am so a stranger that I shall not know my way, but I shall find it, I make not doubt; if I could keep hope, fatigue and trouble would be naught to me. My poor beautiful Juanita. Oh! I have felt to hate all Inglis for his sake that took her from the orange groves and the sweet scented fruits and blue skies of her own fair land, and from the father that loved her, to bring her here to your fogs and your dull streets, and leave her to die with no care, no love. I knew he was bad, with his smooth tongue, his fair face—he lured her away and left her to die in a strange land, the villain, wicked man.”

“You traced her to a street in London, you say, and learned that she died there, sir?” asked the clergyman.

“Yes, Señor, yes, I got this letter what I

show you, these few sad lines of suffering, and I came at once to fetch her. When I came to arrive there she was not. I have so much trial to make myself my explanations, and still worse to receive them of others, that I found it a work of many days to discover any trace of my sweet girl and any hope even to find her more; but at length with my hard work I find she had got—and that he the villain had left her, and she is somewheres alone with one little baby striving to make a life for herself with her dancing. I seek and I seek, but nowheres can I find her, and with a great heavy heart I go home to my own land; of course I had my ‘affaires’ to attend to and I must be there. I leave a friend to kindly watch for me, but the years go by and I hear noting. At last I got this oder letter what I show you to tell me he my friend think he

have got a trace, a link of her, that he has found all that is left of my child—her little one. I fly to England—I seek the poor miserable place where they say she was, and lo, she is gone—runned away—they say, what to them was it—only one burden the less to bear. They had been good; I gave them money of which I see they had great need, and again pursue my search.”

“You are satisfied then that it is your grand-child.”

“Oh! yes, I have here the ear-rings and her ring and some letters,” he said eagerly, producing a pocket-book from which he took the things, “which quite assures me. But I shall no longer keep you. I will go on my way, for if she is above ground I shall find my little girl.”

“She inherits her mother’s talent of dancing,

certainly," said the Vicar, "for I hear she is quite wonderful, the most perfect columbine ever seen, and worthy of a much higher rank in her profession; but it is a sad life for a young innocent girl."

"Oh! it is too sad, too pitiful, but I shall find her and take her home to the sunny land, and she shall want never more, never more. And now I will bid you farewell. You will think of the poor Espagnol in his weary search and bid him God speed."

"I will, I do, and I shall be most interested in your success. I wish I could better have helped you."

"You have helped me much, I thank you. Depend on me to repay you the little loan, it is a great cost this long search——"

"Papa, who *is* your foreign friend?" said a bright young voice, and a merry face peeped

in at the window which opened into the garden.

“Ah! Miss Curiosity, I thought you’d want to know.”

“Mamma wants to know, she sent me. What an age he has been here; do come and tell us all about it,” and springing into the room she put her arm through her father’s and laughingly dragged him on to the lawn where beneath the trees his wife sat working.

“It is a very romantic story,” he said, sitting down on the turf beside her; “the little dancing girl who has made such a sensation is a Spanish donzella. That poor old man is her grandfather; his daughter ran away from him with a scampish Englishman who deserted her, and she died in some miserable lodging in London. The poor people with whom she lodged kept her poor baby till it grew up to twelve years

old and then tempted, they suppose, by the offer of a strolling company of players to join them, she ran away from these poor protectors. Now, after years of searching inquiry, the old man has learnt her fate and has traced her to this town — he came to me for advice.”

“And assistance; of course, Richard. You have given him money, and he’ll turn out an arrant swindler,” said his wife, laughing.

“I own I have lent him some money; but I am not frightened; the man is honest enough.”

“Oh! Richard, what a dear, silly, good-natured darling you are. I wouldn’t have lent him a farthing.”

“No, my dear, you would have given him a pound.”

“Yes, that mamma would,” said Lucy, laughing. “I think you are both alike.”

“ Better trust all and be deceived, and mourn that trust and
that believing,
Than doubt one heart which, if believed, would make the
joy of that believing.”

“ I always think of those lines, Lucy ; we
had better be deceived twice than doubt un-
justly once.”

Where the sweet orange groves fill the air
with their scented blossoms, the deep intense
blue of the sky reflected in the fair waters of
the Guadalquivir, in her Spanish home walks
with stately grace the poor child who once
danced to please the audience of a travelling
theatre and “ minded ” a half-starved baby for
the poor guerdon of her hard fare.

Her life is bright now ; she is the idol of
the old man who had searched for her with
such patience and devotion, and he has
rewarded the trust reposed in him by the good
Vicar who had so readily lent him money to

pursue his search, by not only returning the sum but adding another to it to be expended on the poor of the parish in token of his gratitude to Heaven for giving him back his child and taking her from the hard life which in her despair and desolation she had chosen as—a travelling

“COLUMBINE.”

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