

THE SPINNER WHO WAS LOST: A STORY: BY CAROLYN SHERWIN BAILEY



HE factory bells of the city were ringing the night in as the girl left the street and climbed the five flights of dusky, dirty tenement stairs, and then stopped at the last landing. Up from below came the brawl of the highway and from a lower tenement rose the sound of a woman screaming, but the girl stood, unheeding, and hesitating a moment. Then she opened the door and crossed the threshold.

The pile of mattresses had been removed from its place in the corner where through the day its heights were covered by a scarlet Tuscan blanket. Now the mattresses were spread upon the floor, and each bore a small tangle-haired head. Here was Maddalena of four, tightly clutching Carmellita, the cat. Her heavy curls lay in sweet disorder on the dingy coat of Carmellita whose fight for a living under the push carts of Halstead Street was a weary one, and allowed no time for ablutions on her return in the evening. But Carmellita was purring with all the ardor of Sicily, and Maddalena's deep breathing kept time to the tune. Here also was Tomasso, one bare, brown leg stretching its fat length from under the sheet. Here lay little Francesca whose brown eyes had opened their deeps in the city so many leagues away from the old country. While from the other room came the labored snoring of the boarder who had a night job in the "yards" and who must soon be wakened to have his supper and fare forth.

There was a Carlo Dolce print hung over the mantel. It was one of his madonnas, but it stared stupidly from its background of red-flowered American wall-paper at the corner where a woman stood solemnly stirring a pot of spaghetti, and slicing in garlic, thickly, as she stirred.

The girl moved toward the stove, and then turned with the least flush on her olive cheeks, as if the smell of the cooking sickened her.

The woman had seen her. She, too, turned and a smile lighted her stolid brown face.

"*Ecco!*" she cried as she held up a dripping length of spaghetti on the end of a fork.

"So late home, Angelica, *carissima?* The supper is nearly cooked. Will you eat?"

"I don't care; I ain't very hungry." The girl looked singularly slight and little as she dropped into a chair and pulled at the long brown braids which crowned her head and fell in thick lengths below her waist. Then she jumped up nervously, and began fumbling in her dress.

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"See!" she crossed to the woman who was again cutting the garlic, her dark figure bent over the pot in the complete absorption of her task.

"See! I made "four-fifty" this week! There ain't one of them can roll so many as I—if I am—a 'dago'!"

She made the motion of holding an imaginary cigarette to her lips.

"The *padrone*—he gives you so many *soldi*?" The woman poured the savory stew into a big brown bowl as she spoke.

"*Padrone*? Boss! And they ain't *soldi* in Chicago. They're good lead 'plunks.'"

The woman shrugged her shoulders as she put the bowl on the table and covered Tomasso's leg with the sheet.

"It is well, Angelica, that you earn the—'plunks.' The *bambini* have no shoes."

"I'll get the shoes next week."

The girl went slowly across to the mantel where she had laid a parcel as she came in.

"I bought me something off one of the carts tonight. It's—" She opened the paper wrappings and carefully rolled the string. Then she spread the tawdry white lace thing on the end of the table farthest away from the bowl of garlic. "It was a bargain from fifty-nine cents. *Mamma mia*, it is one peek-a-boo waist."

The woman turned with the slightest degree of interest as Angelica fingered the needlework and held the cheap thing up to the light of the one oil lamp.

"*Ecco*, but why the peek-a-boo? There will be no *fiesta* in Chicago. The confirmation and the appearing of the blessed saints at the Church of the Guardian Angels will be the only place to wear the—peek-a-boo."

But the girl was not listening. She had swiftly undone her braids, and rolled the shining hair into a great dusky coil. Then she stripped off the dull gingham waist in which she had come from the factory, and she put on the new one, dancing a two-step, and humming a little song of the music hall, softly, as she danced. Then she stopped, and suddenly threw her arms about her mother's neck.

"*Mamma mia*, tomorrow will some new chairs come—chairs with green, stuffed velvet seats—and a sofa. I will pay only a little every week for them. And, see! I bought you these."

She pulled from the pocket in her skirt a string of hair puffs, and held them up to the bewildered eyes of the woman.

"There," she tried to pin them in place. "Your hair, *mamma*,—it is too thin, and you do it too flat. Only see, I will fix it, and then you shall put on a black dress and sit on the sofa in the evening—"

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The woman interrupted. She had been inscrutable before, but that was all changed now. With a quick gesture she flung the puffs into the stove. She watched them as they twisted and crisped in the fire. Then she spoke. It was the old conflict of Eden that has come through the ages—a conflict patricidal between the children and the men and women who begat them; it was the last cry of a yesterday at the birth pains of a today thrilling in her words.

“No, Angelica! I came to this land of the Americans because they told me of the great workshops where the *signore* would pour gold into one’s apron; and I found—” She pointed to the four walls of the tenement room—“this!

“New chairs is it? Green stuffed? They, too, will I burn. No, Angelica! Wear the peek-a-boo. I must mind the *bambini* and cook the food.”

The girl stopped dancing. She dropped her hands listlessly at her side as she listened to her mother’s words. Then she turned quickly, went across the threshold, down the stairs and into the street again.

The woman watched her. Then she continued methodically the duties of the evening. She woke the boarder, who ate the bowl of spaghetti in utter silence and took his departure. She turned Madalena on her mattress and removed Carmellita, who was trying to usurp the little girl’s pillow. She washed the dishes at the dirty sink. Then she sat down for a minute, and spread her wrinkled, cracked hands over her apron, slowly counting the fingers with their broken nails, one by one. Slowly she looked about the untidy, heated room, and the scene suddenly shifted.

The four house walls with their lurid paper disappeared before her sight. The odor of the food was replaced by the strong, sweet scent of wild primroses. The dingy smoke of the city which had been pouring in through the window was gone, and in its place shone a blue sky, cloudless and deep. She was at home again, in the fields of Sicily.

She moved, took her hands from her lap, adjusted the yellow handkerchief which was knotted about her throat, and smiled. Through the din of Halstead Street there came the buzz and dreary wail of bagpipes. The goatherds play them, as they climb down the mountainsides of Tuscany through the olive groves to the village and the *fiesta* of Saint Bernardo. It is an old, old tune the pipes are playing. Ulysses stopped, leaving his flocks of Polyphemus, to listen to it. Persephone, wandering in her meadows of asphodel, stood spellbound at its dreamy beauty. The *Bambino* of Bethlehem turned in his manger cradle as he heard the quaint, carrying tune

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played by his shepherd guests on their way from the hills of David.

The woman could not have explained the miracle, but her happiness had unexpectedly returned. She was once more a part of Ætna, and the olive groves, and the vineyards, and the long gold noons. She was back with her people of the hazel and the beech forests where the little white owl cries in the evening and fields of yellow flowers spring beneath the lemon groves, and the wonderful purple sea bathes it all. And along the road stand the wayside shrines where lamps are lit at night—beacons of the old-world faith.

She rose to her feet. She straightened the short green skirt with its embroidery of gold which she wore. From her blue cotton bodice she pulled a short, rounded stick spindle hand-cut from olive wood, and from the pocket of her apron she took a bundle of strong goat hair, carded, ready for spinning.

With her right hand she drew out great lengths of the hair which she fastened securely to the tip of the spindle shaft, while she dropped the rest of the bundle into a copper bowl on the hearth. Then she began to spin, the crude spindle resting on her thigh as she twirled it round and round with wonderful swiftness and dexterity, its rapid whirling scarcely ceasing before her hand fastened another bit of hair to the top, and another impulse sent the spindle on its mad way again as the thread grew longer and longer.

It was to be a tent roof. When she had finished the spinning, she would fasten the threads in long rows to the ground in the field where she was working. That would be the warp. Her deft fingers would weave the woof in and out in tough lengths. There would be a wide strip of cloth when she had finished, weather-proof, and a warm covering for the head of Sebastiano, her shepherd lover, when he must stay on the mountainside all night with the goats to guard them from wild beasts.

The spindle flew faster and faster. Sebastiano was coming. She could hear his whistle in the road. He would praise the cunning of her hands, for was she not the most skilled spinner of San Felice? And when she had finished they would dance until the stars came out—the mad, beautiful tarantelle.

HALSTEAD STREET was busy and merry; it was half-past eight and Saturday evening. From the Hungarian quarter came a crash of music and a din of breaking glass as an unusually jocular party of diners upset a restaurant table. Down at the Italian end of the street a wedding procession was coming from the Church of the Guardian Angels, deluged by a friendly shower of peanuts, and overarched by red and yellow glass tumblers strung

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in festoons across the road. There were children, children everywhere, and cats, and garbage cans, and the sound of a phonograph at the door of "The Greek Parthenon," and every sort of a huckster calling his wares and a brass band playing the Dead March as it headed a procession of mourners on their cheerful way to a wake.

The blind beggar who sat on his stumps of legs in the road selling shoe-strings and peppermint candy sticks had just laid down the bagpipes with which he was wont to attract a crowd, and Johann Hubner, vegetable vendor, *par excellence*, was looking over his salads preparatory to shutting his shop for the night.

It was an unusual move on the part of Johann—this early closing with the prospect of a lost two, and perhaps three hours' trade. He was not even waiting for the weekly visit of the Herr Professor who came every Saturday from the University to buy fresh lettuce.

The appearance of Johann was also unwonted. He wore creased, store trousers and creaking polished boots. His boiled shirt was surmounted by a high tab collar, the stiffness of which added to the tightness of his trousers interfered with his movements as he went in and out among the vegetables, pouring one basket of berries into another, laying the rosiest apples upon the top of the piles, and polishing the regal purple of the cabbages that they might decorate the heaps of spinach on Monday.

But the labor of Johann lacked ardor. He stopped, often, to adjust the speckled necktie which nearly covered his shirt bosom with its voluptuousness. At last he gave up altogether. He sat down on a vinegar barrel, lighted a tallow dip that he might see better, and pulled a legal looking document from his pocket. As he did so, a little figure darted out of the moving crowd of the street and stood, poised, on the door-sill of the shop.

"Angelica!"

Johann put the paper under an egg crate, and came forward, his eyes shining.

"I was just going by, and I thought I'd drop in."

The girl was a picture as she tossed her hair restlessly from her white forehead, and looked with wide, brown Italian eyes at the man. The sleeves of the peek-a-boo waist were pushed far above the plump, pink elbows, and the tender outlines of the girlish figure were sharply drawn in the shadows of the candle light.

"But you're shutting up too early, and Johann——" she laughed merrily—"you're all dressed up."

Johann reached stealthily under the crate and pulled out the paper. Then he motioned to Angelica and pointed to a seat on the vinegar barrel by his side as he unfolded the document.

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“Do you see that?” he said with a thumb on the red seal. “It’s our license! I just run over to the city clerk’s fer it this morning, and I’m goin’ to see your mother tonight, and we’ll get married to-morrow. Why, little angel,” he went on, as Angelica shuddered, and drew away—“You aren’t that afeerd of me? You know we’d got it all planned fer Easter, anyhow, and you know how I’ve been lovin’ you ever since you was a little thing coming by from the factory and stopping in fer apples—”

Angelica covered her face a moment. Then she spoke, moving away from him toward the door.

“Johann—don’t you—kiss me. Wait. That’s what I came by for tonight. I came to tell you I changed my mind. I ain’t ever going to marry you. Don’t come near me. Don’t touch me. I don’t—no, I don’t love you no more. Don’t you dare come home with me. We’re ‘dagoes’, Johann, and——” she wrung her arms in the keenest agony as she darted through the door, and her clear voice trailed back through the noise of the street, “I’m ashamed of my mother.”

Of a truth there was no accounting for the ways of woman. Johann hurried to the door, but Angelica had slipped into the crowd and was lost from his view. He tucked the license in his waistcoat. She would return. A woman’s no always meant yes. He would wait a half-hour, and then he would find out from some of the neighbors the number of the tenement where the girl lived, and he would see the mother in spite of Angelica’s whim. In the meantime, there was the Herr Professor, picking his way through the street, his rush basket on his arm, his old gray hat pulled low over his forehead, and his spectacles pushed far above his kindly blue eyes.

“So, Johann, my friend, you have still a little salad left? No-where in all this big Chicago do I find such crisp, such tender and dewy lettuce. And the onions, and a bit of garlic will I have, too, to add zest to the dish. Marvel of marvels, you have, also, a cheese cake awaiting me?”

The basket was brimming full as the Professor counted out his change, and wandered leisurely on down Halstead Street. He was a familiar old figure there. No one questioned his right to toss up the baby he saw playing in the gutter, and none made sport of the rush basket with its weekly store of green stuff. Surely the fame of Johann’s shop must spread, even as far as the University, and if the Herr Professor wished to drop into the Hungarian restaurant, or have a beaker of foaming ale at one of the German gardens, or buy a bunch of macaroni at one of the little Italian stores—well and good. Halstead Street was completely oblivious of any sociologic or evolu-

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tionary interest it might afford the world of letters as embodied by the University.

So the Herr Professor took his solitary path, unmolested, threading his way in and out between the garbage cans.

“Wonderful—the Italian temperament,” he said to himself as he stopped a second to watch a little mother of five years deposit her sleeping infant charge in the shadow of a stoop and then pick up her ragged skirts as she hopped to and fro in the street in time to the grinding of a hand organ.

“I do believe”—he pulled his spectacles lower—

“Yes—it is the tarantelle—their strange dance of death in life—”

He stood at the corner of an alley to watch the child’s graceful motions. As he waited, he saw a slight girlish figure rise from the shadows beside him. The girl hesitated a moment. Then she tilted a tiny, white paper funnel full of some powdery stuff toward her soft, red lips.

“Don’t do it, my child!”

The Herr Professor wrenched Angelica’s wrist with a strong grip which made her cry out in pain, and sent the powder sifting down to mingle with the dust of the alley.

“You’d be so sorry afterward—and then there’s your mother.”

He stooped and took a grain of the powder on his finger, just touching it to his tongue.

“Strychnine! Another illustration of the Italian temperament. Now, my child—”

He shifted the basket of salad to his left arm as he put his right one tenderly around Angelica’s trembling little form. “I insist upon seeing you home.”

THE thread had grown long and fine and stout in an hour, for the *bambini* had slept quietly and there had been no interruption. The woman wound it carefully in a ball. Then she unwound it, and crossed and recrossed the width of the deal table with the lengths in her hands. Yes, there was nearly enough for the weaving. It must be done in time for Sebastiano. The spindle flew swiftly again.

Ah, he was coming. That step!

But the door opened at the touch of the Herr Professor, who led in the cringing, frightened little Angelica.

He removed his hat with old-fashioned politeness as he saw the woman.

“I met your little girl—and I brought her——” but the Herr Professor suddenly halted in his explanation. The crude spindle

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had dropped upon the floor at his entrance. He picked it up. He rubbed his spectacles vigorously as if he were not sure of the verity of his eyesight. Then he handed the stick to the woman.

“Go on.” He said it almost rudely. “Spin, I say! Spin!”

With the inborn obedience of her race, the woman resumed her work and the spindle whirled and twisted and writhed at her touch.

Had the Herr Professor gone clean mad? He paced the room, rubbing his hands together as if in exultation. Now he stopped a moment to bend over the spinner, and then resumed the pacing, talking softly to himself all the time.

“They said you could do it. They wrote books about you, but it never was proved. They said that you sat in the fields of Palestine with the stick you broke from an olive tree for a spindle, and you spun, spun in the sunshine, without a distaff, the thread that was to be woven into the garments of the kings, and the tents of the Israelites. David watched you as he tended his sheep, and he sang you a pastorelle by the brook of Kedar. Then your hands forgot their cunning. Men made you wheels—wheels! They raised a prison house of iron girders, with stone walls—and there they left you chained to a machine. But you escaped. You are here!”

“Johann!” The Herr Professor showed no surprise at the unwarmed and creaking entrance of Johann Hubner who stood in the doorway, adjusting his necktie, and looking with wondering eyes at the scene before him.

“Johann, I have found her!” He pointed to the woman.

“She shall go to the University—to the museum in this—” he reverently touched the old green skirt with its tawdry embroidery—“and this—” he touched the faded blue bodice. “There shall she sit and spin for all the world to see. *Ach*—she makes us all famous, Johann—we who know her. Behold! The spinner who was lost!”

The woman looked with stolid eyes at the audience who had so rudely broken in upon her dream. But Angelica—she understood. Her shame was lost in the glorification of her mother. Through the silence, unbroken save by the loud purring of Carmellita, she crossed the room and slipped her soft little hand into Johann’s big, fruit-stained one.