

Angel's Wickedness

by Marie Corelli, 1855-1924

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"I HATE God!" said Angel.

And having made this un-angel-like statement, she folded her short arms across her breast and surveyed her horrified audience defiantly.

It was a cold December Sunday afternoon, and the Reverend Josiah Snawley was superintending a Bible-class in a small, white-washed, damp and comfortless schoolroom in one of the worst quarters of the East End. He was assisted in his pious task by the virginal Miss Powser, a lady of uncertain age, tall and lanky of limb, with sandy locks much frizzled, and a simpering smile. The children ranged in a forlorn row before these two charitable persons were the miserable offspring of fathers and mothers whose chief business it was in life to starve uncomplainingly. And Angel—such was the odd name given her by her godfathers and godmothers in her baptism—was one of the thinnest and most ragged among all the small recipients of the Reverend Josiah's instructions, which had that day consisted of well-worn mild platitudes respecting the love of God towards His wretched, selfish and for ever undeserving creation. She had usually figured as rather a dull, quiet child, more noticeable perhaps than others of her condition, by reason of her very big dark eyes, small sensitive mouth, and untidy mass of chestnut-golden hair; but she had never come prominently to the front, either for cleverness or right-

down naughtiness till now, when she boldly uttered the amazing, blood-curdling declaration above recorded.

"Was that Angel Middleton who spoke?" inquired the Reverend Josiah, with bland austerity. "Say it again, Angel! but no, no!" Here he shook his head solemnly. "You will not dare to say it again!"

"Yes, I will!" retorted Angel, stubbornly. "I hate God! There!"

A terrible pause ensued. The other children stared at their refractory companion in stupefied amazement; they did not quite understand who "God" was, themselves being but poor little weak, physically incapable creatures, who were nearly always too hungry to think much about Infinite and Unreachable splendours; but they had a dim idea that whoever the "Unknown Quantity" in Creation's plan might be, it was very wrong to hate Him! Dreadfully wrong! Frightfully wicked, and alarming from all points of view. After staring at Angel till they could stare no more, some of them put their fingers to their mouths and stared at Miss Powser. What did she think of it? Oh, she was limp with horror!—her eyes had grown paler, greener, and more watery than ever. She had clasped her hands, and was looking plaintively at the Reverend Josiah, as indeed it was her frequent custom to do. He meanwhile laid down the Testament he held, and surveyed the whole class with a glance of righteous indignation.

"I am shocked!" he said slowly, "shocked, and pained, and grieved! Here is a child—one who has been taught Bible-lessons Sunday after Sunday—who tells me she hates God! What blasphemy! What temper! Stand forward, Angel Middleton! Come out of the class!"

Whereupon Angel came out as commanded, and fully declared herself. Like a small alien on strange soil, she stood in advance of the other children, her worn, bursting shoes showing the dirty-stockinged feet within, her patched skirt clinging scantily about her meagre little figure, her arms still folded across her chest, and her lips set in a thin, obstinate line. Something in her look and attitude evidently irritated the Reverend Mr. Snawley, for he said sharply—

"Unfold those arms of yours directly!"

She obeyed; but though the offending limbs dropped passively at her sides, the little grimy hands remained firmly clenched.

"Now!" and the clergyman drew a deep breath, and taking up his Testament gave a smart rap with it on the desk in front of him. "Explain yourself! What do you mean by such wicked conduct? Why do you hate God?"

Angel looked steadily on the floor, and her lips quivered.

"Because I do!" she replied resolutely.

"That's no answer!" And the reverend gentleman turned to his lady-assistant in despair: "Really, Miss Powser, you should not have admitted such a child as this into the Sunday class. She seems to me quite incorrigible; a mere insolent heathen!"

Miss Powser appeared quite crushed by the majesty of this reproach, and feebly murmured something about a "mistaken idea of character," adding as a bright suggestion that the child had better be dismissed.

"Dismissed? Of course, of course!" snorted the Reverend Josiah angrily. "She must never come here again. Such a bad example to the other children! Do you understand what I say, Angel Middleton? You must never come here again!"

"All right," said Angel, calmly; "I don't care."

"Oh, Angel! Angel!" moaned Miss Powser faintly. "I am so sorry to see this. I had hoped for much better things from you. Your father—"

"That's it," interrupted the girl suddenly, her breast heaving. "That's why I hate God. You teaches us that God does everything; well, then, God is killing father. Father never did any harm to anyone; and yet he's dying. I know he is! He couldn't get work when he was well, and now there isn't enough to eat, and there's no fire, and we're as miserable as ever we can be, and all the time you say God is good and loves us. I don't believe it! If God won't care for father, then I won't care for God."

The words rushed impetuously from her lips with a sort of rough eloquence that almost carried conviction; her way of reasoning seemed for the moment surprising and unanswerable. But the Reverend Mr. Snawley was equal to the emergency.

"You are a very wicked, ignorant child," he declared sternly. "If your father can't get work, it is most probably his own fault. If he is ill and incapable there is always the workhouse. And if God doesn't take care of him as you say, it must be because he's a bad man."

Angel's big eyes flashed fire.

"Yer lie!" she said steadily. "He's worth a dozen such as you, anyway."

And with this she turned on her heel and left the schoolroom, her proud step and manner indicating that she metaphorically shook the dust of it for ever from her feet. Her departure was watched in absolute silence by her startled companions, the insulted and indignant clergyman, and the pathetic Miss Powser; but when she had fairly gone, Mr. Snawley, turning to the rest of the class, said solemnly—

"Children, you have seen to-day a terrible exhibition of the power of Satan. No one that is not possessed of a devil would dare to express any hatred of God! Now remember, never let me see any of you playing with Angel Middleton; keep away from her altogether, for she's a bad girl—thoroughly bad—and will only lead you into mischief. Do you hear?"

A murmur, which might have meant either assent or dissent, ran through the class, and the Reverend Josiah, smoothing his vexed brow, took up his Testament and was about to resume his instructions, when a little shrill, piping voice cried out—

"Please, sir, I want to leave the class, sir!"

"You want to leave the class, Johnnie Coleman!" echoed the clergyman—"what for?"

"Please, sir, 'cos Angel's gone, sir!" and Johnnie stumped his way to the front and showed himself—a small, bright, elfish-looking boy of about twelve. "Yer see, sir, I can't anyways promise not to speak to Angel, sir; she's my gal!"

A gurgling laugh of evident delight rippled along the class at Johnnie's bold avowal, but a stem look from Mr. Snawley rapidly checked this ebullition of feeling.

"Your gal!" and the good clergyman repeated the words in a tone of shocked offence; "John Coleman, you surprise me!"

John Coleman, ragged, blue-eyed and dirty, seemed to care but little as to whether he surprised the Reverend Josiah or not, for he resumed the thread of his shameless argument with the most unblushing audacity.

"Iss, sir. She's my gal, an' I'm her bloke. Lor' bless yer, sir! we've bin so fur years an' years—ivver since we wos babbies, sir. Yer see, sir, 'twouldn't do fur me to go agin Angel now—'twouldn't be gentleman-like, sir!"

Evidently John Coleman knew his code of chivalry by heart, though he was only a costermonger's apprentice, and was not to be moved by fear from any of the rules thereof, for, gathering courage instead of alarm from the amazed and utter speechlessness of wrath with which Mr. Snawley regarded him, he proceeded to defend the cause of his absent ladye-love after the fashion of all true knights worthy of their name.

"I spec's Angel's hungry, sir. That's wot riles her wrong-like. Don't yer know, sir, what it is to 'ave a gnawin' in yer inside, sir? Oh, it's orful bad, sir! really 'tis, sir—makes yer 'ate everybody wot's got their stummicks full. An' when Angel gets a bit 'ere an' there, she gives it all to 'er father, sir, an' niver a mossul for 'erself; an' now e's a going to 'is long 'ome, so they sez, an' it's 'ard on Angel anyways, and—"

"That will do!" burst out Mr. Snawley loudly, and suddenly interrupting the flow of Master Johnnie's eloquence, and glaring at him in majestic disdain; "you can go."

"Iss, sir. Thank-ye, sir. Much obleeged, sir." And, with many a shuffle and grin, Johnnie departed cheerfully, apparently quite unconscious of having committed any breach of good manners in the open declaration of his sentiments towards his "gal," and entirely unaware of the fact that, apart from the disgust his "vulgarity" had excited in the refined mind of the Reverend Josiah, he had actually caused the pale suggestion of a blush to appear on the yellow maiden-cheek of Miss Powser! Immoral John Coleman! It is to be feared he was totally "unregenerate"—for once out of the schoolroom he never gave it or his pious teachers another thought, but, whooping and whistling carelessly, started off at a run intending to join Angel and comfort her as best he might, for her private and personal griefs as well as for her expulsion from the Bible-class. For once, however, he failed to find her in any of those particular haunts they two were wont to patronize.

"S'pose she's gone home!" he muttered discontentedly. "An' she won't thank me for botherin' round w'en 'er father's so bad. Never mind! I'll wait near the alley in case she comes out an' wants me for ennythink."

And with this faithful purpose in view, he betook himself to the corner of a dirty back slum, full of low tenement houses tottering to decay, in one of which miserable abodes his "gal" had her dwelling; and, sitting down on an inverted barrel, he began to con over a pictorial alphabet, a present from Miss Powser, which, though he knew it by heart, always entertained him mightily by reason of the strange coloured monstrosities that adorned every separate letter.

Meanwhile, as he imagined, Angel had gone home—"home" being a sort of close cupboard, dignified in East End parlance by the name of "room," where on a common truckle-bed, scantily covered, lay the sleeping figure of a man. He was not old—not more than forty at most—but Death had marked his pale, pinched features with the great Sign Ineffaceable, and the struggle of passing from hence

seemed to have already begun, for as he slept his chest heaved labouringly up and down with the rapid breath that each moment was drawn in shorter gasps of pain and difficulty. Angel sat close by him, and her big soft eyes were fixed with passionate eagerness on his face—her whole little loving, ardent soul was mirrored in that watchful, yearning gaze.

“How can I?” she murmured to herself, “how can I love God, when He is so cruel to father?” Just then the sick man stirred, and opening his eyes, large, dark and gentle, like those of his little daughter, he smiled faintly.

“Is that you, Angel?” he asked whisperingly.

“Yes, father!” And taking his thin hand in her own, she kissed it. His glance rested on her lovingly.

“Ain’t you been to class, dearie?”

“Yes, father. But—” She paused—then seeing he looked anxious and inquiring, she added—” But they don’t want me there no more.”

“Don’t want yer there no more!” her father echoed in feeble wonder. “Why, Angel—”

“Don’t ye worry, father!” she burst forth eagerly, “it’s all my fault; ‘tain’t theirs! I said I hated God, and Mr. Snawley said I was wicked, an’ I s’pose I am, but I can’t help it, and there’s all about it! I’m sick of their preachin’ an’ nonsense, an’ it don’t make you no better nor me, an’ we’re all wretched, an’ if it’s all God’s doing then I do hate God, an’ that’s the truth!”

A flickering gleam of energy came across the suffering man’s face, and his large eyes shone with preternatural light.

“Don’t ye, Angel! Don’t ye hate God, my little gel! ye mustn’t—no, no! God’s good; always good, my dear! It’s all right wi’ Him, Angel; it’s the world that forgets Him that’s wrong. God does everything kind, dearie. He gave me your mother, and He only took her away when she was tired and wanted to go. All for the best, Angel! All for the best, little lass! Love God, my child, love Him with all your heart, an’ all your soul, an’ all your mind.”

His voice died in indistinct murmuring, but he still kept his gaze fixed wistfully on his daughter’s half-ashamed, half-sullen little face. She, continuing to fondle his hand, suddenly asked, “Why was I called Angel, father?”

He smiled, a very sweet and youthful smile.

“Just a fancy o’mine an’ your mother’s, my dear, that’s all! We was young an’ happy-like then, an’ work was easier to get; an’ such a dear sweet baby lass ye were when ye were born, with gold curls all over your head and bonnie bright eyes, that we said ye were like a little angel. An’ so we named ye Angel for the sake of the pleasantness of it an’ the sound of it, an’ ye must be an angel, dearie, Angel by name and angel by nature. Yes, yes! it’s all right! God gave ye to me, an’ He knows all—all the trouble an’ worry an’ fret—”

He broke off suddenly, and sat up straight in his bed, while Angel, terrified by a strange expression in his face that she had never seen there before, cried out sharply, “Father! Father! what is it?”

He did not answer her; his eyes were full of radiance, and seemed to be looking at something his frightened child could not see.

"Angel!" he said, presently, in a faint hoarse whisper, "look! There's your mother! I knew she'd come! Don't ye hate God, my little gel! He's sent her for me. God's as good as good can be; it's the world that's wrong—the world—"

He paused; his breathing almost stopped, and he still stared steadily before him.

"Father! Father!" sobbed Angel, sinking on her knees in a passion of grief and fear. "Oh, father!"

His hand wandered feebly to her bent head, and lay coldly on her warm soft hair.

"Don't ye—hate—God—Angel," he gasped brokenly. "Love Him!—an'—an' He'll take care of ye!" Then, all at once, with a rich manly ring in his voice, such as his poor forlorn daughter had seldom heard, he exclaimed, "All right, my lass, I'm coming!"

Starting up at the sound and chilled to the heart with dread, Angel gave one wild look at him; and lo! while she yet gazed, he fell back heavily; a solemn shadow crossed his face—a shadow, which passing as swiftly as it had descended, left the features smooth and young; every line of care and perplexity vanished as if by magic; a smile settled on the lips, and all was over. With a shriek of agony the desolate child flung herself across the bed by her father's stiffening corpse, unable to realise his death, and out of the very acuteness of her despair sank for the time being into merciful insensibility.

Late on that same evening Johnnie Coleman, sleepy and disappointed, prepared to leave the corner of the alley where he had kept faithful vigil all the afternoon, and set himself to return to the dirty piece of matting on the floor in his master, the costermonger's, abode, which matting he, being an orphan, accepted as bed and lodgement. Suddenly his eyes were attracted by a bright glare in the sky, and hardly had he had time to receive the impression of this when the cry of "Fire! Fire!" resounded through the street, and set him running off at racing speed for the exciting scene of the disaster. It was some distance away, and as he ran he was quite unaware that another fleet-footed figure pursued him—no other than his "gal," Angel Middleton. She had crept out of her wretched dwelling, poor child, sick with hunger and stupefied with grief, and perceiving her ragged boy-friend waiting for her at the corner, had come towards him slowly and languidly, and had been just about to call him by name, when off he had rushed at the pace described, not seeing her, whereupon she, in the mere nervous impulse of the moment, followed. Soon the two, running thus, were merged and lost in a great crowd of people, who stood looking up at a wreath of brilliant flames that darted from the roof and walls of a small shop and dwelling in one—the house of a general grocer and dealer in oil and household provision. Owing to the inflammable nature of the goods kept in the store, the fire grew fast and furious, and though the engines rapidly arrived it was evident that very little could be done to save the perishing building. The owner of the place threw himself from one of the windows and escaped by a miracle without injury; but when his wife, half-suffocated with smoke, was dragged out from the burning walls more dead than alive, she struggled frantically to rush back again into the heart of the flames.

"My children! my baby!" she screamed and wailed. "Save them! Oh! save them! Let me go!—let me die with them!"

"Steady, mother!" said one of the pitying firemen, holding her arm in a tight grip. "'Tain't no use frettin'. Leave the little 'uns to God!" Yes, truly to God, and—His "Angel"! For suddenly the crowd parted; a little girl, whitefaced and dark-eyed, with golden-brown hair streaming behind her like a comet, rushed through and made straight for the burning house. There was a horrified pause; then Johnnie Coleman's shrill voice, rendered shriller by terror, cried out—"It's Angel! Angel Middleton!"

"Angel Middleton!" roared the crowd, not knowing the name, but catching it up and echoing it forth like a cheer in responsive excitement. "Hooray for Angel! There's a brave gel for ye! See; she's got the baby!"

And, sure enough, there at one of the burnt-out windows, with smoke and flame eddying around her, stood Angel, holding a tiny infant in her arms, the while she looked anxiously down into the street below for some further means of rescue. Several people rushed forward, holding an extended sheet which had been hastily procured, and, fearing lest she should be stupefied into inaction by the smoke, they shouted—

"Throw it, Angel! Never fear! Throw it down!"

Whereupon Angel threw the child; it was caught in safety, and she, the rescuer, vanished. Only to reappear again, however, at the same window with two more small children, of about two and four years of age, at sight of which such a thunder of acclamation went up as might have been heard at the furthest holes and corners of degraded Whitechapel. She meanwhile, leaning far out over the charred and smoking window-frame, demanded in clear, ringing tones—

"Are there any more children? Are these all?"

"Yes, yes!" shrieked the frantic mother, running forward with her just-restored baby clasped to her breast—"All!—You've saved them all! God love you, dear!"

Once more the protecting sheet was outspread, and without any haste or alarm for her own safety, Angel let one child after another drop straightly and steadily from her hold; they were caught and saved, uninjured. Then all interest became centred on the girl-heroine herself; and as the wall on which she had her footing tottered to and fro, a great cry went up from the crowd.

"Quick, quick, Angel! Jump!"

A smile crossed her pale face for a moment; she looked to right and left, and was just about to leap from her perilous position, when, with a sickening crash the brickwork beneath her gave way and crumbled to ruins, while up roared a new and fierce pyramid of fire. Quickly and courageously all hands went to the rescue of the rescuer, and in a few minutes, which, to the pitying onlookers seemed long hours, they dragged her forth, cruelly burnt but not disfigured; crushed and dying but not dead. Lifting her tenderly, they carried her out of the reach of the smoke and laid her down—one gentle-hearted fireman supporting her little golden head against his arm, while the mother, whose children she had saved, fell on her knees beside her, weeping and blessing her, and kissing her poor charred hands. She was quite conscious, and very peaceful.

"Don't ye mind," she said placidly; "father's gone, and 'twould ha' bin no use for me to stay. Why, Johnnie, are you there?" And her wandering eyes rested smilingly on a small doubled-up object close by that looked more like a bundle of rags than a boy.—

"Iss," sobbed Johnnie. "Oh, Angel! I've bin waitin' for ye all the arternoon. I wouldn't stop in class arter they wouldn't 'ave ye no more—an' I wanted to see ye an' tell ye as how it wouldn't make no change in me, an' now—now—"

Tears prevented the faithful Johnnie's further utterance; and Angel, with an effort, made a sign that she wished him to come nearer. He came, and she put up her lips to his.

"Kiss me, Johnnie," she whispered. He obeyed; the great drops rolling fast down his grimy cheeks, while the crowd, reverently conscious of the solemn approach of death, circled round these two young things and watched their parting with more passionate though unspoken sympathy than could ever have been expressed by the noblest poet in the noblest poem.

"I was wicked," said Angel softly, then. "You must tell them all, Johnnie—at class—that I was wicked, and—that I am—sorry I said I hated God; I didn't understand. It's all for the best—father's gone, and I'm goin'—an' I'm so glad, Johnnie—so happy! Bury me with father, please—and tell everybody—everybody—that I love God—now. "

There was a silence. The fireman supporting the girl's head suddenly raised his hand with suggestive gravity, and those who wore hats in the crowd reverently lifted them. The smothered sobbing of tender-hearted women alone broke the stillness; the stars seemed to tremble in the sky as the Greater Angel descended and bore away the lesser one on wings of light to heaven.

And the East End turned out from every grimy hole and squalid corner all its halt and blind, and maimed and miserable, and bad and good, to attend at Angel's funeral. The East End has a rough heart of its own, and that heart had been touched by an Angel's courage, and now ached for an Angel's loss. She and her father were buried together in the same grave on Christmas Eve; and the Reverend Josiah Snawley, realising perhaps for the first time the meaning of the words—

"Let your light so shine before men,
that they may see your good works,
and glorify your Father which is in heaven"

read the Burial Service with more emotion than was usual with him. Poor Johnnie Coleman, wearing a bit of crape in his hat, and carrying three penny bunches of violets, to throw upon his little sweetheart's coffin, was the most sincerely doleful of all chief mourners; desperately rubbing and doubling his dirty fists into his eyes he sobbed incessantly and refused to be comforted.

"Worn't she my gal?" he blubbered indignantly to a would-be consoler. "An' ain't I to be sorry at losin' 'er? I tell ye there ain't no one left alive as good as she wos!"

Even Miss Powser forgot for the nonce that she was a lonely spinster, whom nobody, not even Mr. Snawley, seemed disposed to marry; and, only remembering simple womanliness, shed tears unaffectedly, and spent quite a little fortune in flowers to strew over the mortal remains of the "mere insolent heathen"—the rebellious child who had said she "hated God." For in this one thing was the sum and substance of Angel's wickedness; she hated what seemed to her poor unenlightened mind the wanton cruelty of the inexorable Fate that forced her

father to starve and die! Forgive her!—pity her, good Christians all! You who, comfortably fed and clothed, go to church on Christmas Day and try to shut out every suggestion of misery from your thought, forgive her as God forgives—God who knows how often His goodness is mistaken and misrepresented by the human professed exponents of Divine Law; and how He is far more frequently portrayed to His most suffering, ignorant and helpless little ones as a God of Vengeance rather than what He is—a God of Love!

