The Angel Child

by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932

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THE well-drilled organist waited with his fingers lightly resting on the keys; the admirably disciplined bell-ringer pulled with monotonous regularity at the furry rope, his eye glued to the American watch hanging on a nail. Exactly at the hour the ringer steadied the bell and the organist pressed forth the notes of his voluntary.

With the coming of the white-clad choir came also the newcomers—father, mother, and Angel Child. They tip-toed along the aisle, the mother leading, the boy in black, with a deep white Eton collar and new gloves, following, and the alert father bringing up the rear. They sidled noiselessly into a pew. Father and mother prayed conventionally; the boy surveyed the interior of the old church with approval.

He was a pleasant-faced boy with wide, unwinking blue eyes; and Mr. Stebbing, our respected fellow-townsman and grocer, marked him down for the Band of Hope, and a prominent position in Mrs. Stebbing‘s Bible-class for Small Boys.

Above the shrill cadences of the choir one sweet young voice rose dominant:

O come, let us sing unto the Lord;
let us heartily rejoice
in the strength of our salvation,

and Mr. Stebbing silently and reluctantly surrendered the new boy to the choirmaster.

In the little churchyard, all red and golden with the glory of departing summer, the churchgoers lingered to gossip, before dispersing to the serious function of Sunday dinner. Broad-cloth convincingly creased, and best silks faintly perfumed with the preservative sachets that keep at bay the week-a-day corruption, silk hats immaculate, and squeaky boots advertising their newness and within, under and above all these, souls refreshed and minds relieved by a duty well discharged.

The Vicar held his reception in the porch.

„Yes," he said, answering Mr. Stebbing, „beautiful voice, I was particularly struck by it. I think we shall be able to do something with that boy—they are the new people at the End House."

Mr. Stebbing shook his head gloomily. „Can't understand people of that class taking the End House." he said, severely, „They are not gentlefolk, and they are not—er—"

He almost said „trades people," but stopped himself. He was too near his own retirement from trade to wish to unduly emphasise the distinction.

„I'm making nearly a thousand a year," he added complacently, „and I couldn't afford the upkeep of the End House."

Later in the week the Vicar called on the new tenants, and was received by the lady of the house. He duly reported Mrs. Houghton to be a quiet, charming lady, who skilfully fenced questions, the answering of which might have enlightened the small town.

„An educated woman with a keen sense of humour," said the Vicar, remembering with some appreciation the ripple of laughter that greeted the repetition of his only joke. „The boy? No, he's away. Attends a day-school, I should imagine, somewhere in London. At any rate, his father takes him to town on Mondays, and brings him home on Saturdays. I'm afraid that upsets our idea of bringing him into the choir."

Little Malsey is not of sufficient size to warrant a daily newspaper. It shares with four other villages a weekly sheet, which is comprehensively called *The Westlawn Chronicle and Orkley Gazette* (with which is incorporated *The High Malsey Courier and Tingburn Despatch*). Once upon a time little Malsey boasted a weekly, in which, it is currently reported, Mr. Stebbing sunk no less than a hundred pounds. It lasted three weeks, and was worth every penny of the hundred pounds that Mr. Stebbing invested.

This was fourteen years ago, and Mr Stebbing still speaks about it

„Newspapers! Don't tell me anything about newspapers! Did I ever tell you about my newspaper venture? … Leading article on the High Church Ritualism of the Vicar … positively disgraceful … I said, ‹Look here, when I asked you to edit this paper…› He said, ‹But…› I said, ‹Never mind, you are well paid for your work, and you write scandalous things about my friends…› He said, ‹Thirty shillings a week…› I said, ‹And very good pay too; when I was your age…› So I sent him to the right-about, sir … dictate to me?"

There is really no need for a newspaper at Little Malsey, because everybody knows. And a newspaper would not dare to print the things that people say over tea-tables. There is of course no slander in saying that the End House people had a big brand new motor car, but I am of the opinion that the doubts, crudely expressed as to how they came by it are distinctly actionable.

So far as could be gathered, the Angel Child was the idol of his parents, and in the great garden that surrounded the End House there was a dear little toy railway that ran from the kitchen garden to the orchard via the rosary. And there were real little points and signals and tunnels and stations, and our small boy who was invited to play with Frankie came home in that state of ecstatic misery which poets associate with naughty angels excluded from Paradise.

Frankie did not always go to London on Mondays. Sometimes he was seen quite late in the week, a self-possessed, demure little man in knickerbocker suit and bowler hat and the inevitable Eton collar, sauntering along the High Street, gazing in shop windows. He had a bright smile for everybody, but was singularly uncommunicative for one so young.

„Good morning, Frankie," said Mr. Stebbing, „How is your father?"

„He's very well, sir," said Frankie, respectfully.

„Doesn't he find his work very trying?" asked Mr. Stebbing, artfully.

„No, sir," said Frankie with his innocent smile.

After which Mr. Stebbing could not well pursue the subject. Later, in the bosom of his family, our respected fellow townsman expressed his displeasure.

„Why on earth he" (meaning Frankie's father) „doesn't say out right what he does for a living, I cannot think. I must confess I do not like those mysterious people with motor cars. I was saying to Hackett at the Borough Council meeting yesterday, ‹he might be a kind of up-to-date burglar for all I know. Look at Charles Peace! He used to drive about in a trap or something, and played the fiddle too!›"

But none the less the Houghtons, with all their reserve, were popular, and people came from miles around to hear Frankie's one solo.

For the Vicar had persuaded the father to allow the Angel Child to don the surplice for Harvest Thanksgiving, and Frankie had come down specially from one London day to rehearse.

„You ought to allow the boy to take up singing," said the Vicar.

Frankie's father smiled enigmatically.

„My boy has special gifts which I am helping him develop," he said quietly. „Frankie is a good boy and a sensible boy, although he's only eleven. So far, his education has cost me four thousand pounds."

The Vicar permitted himself to gasp.

„I beg your pardon?" he said, striving to hide his incredulity.

„Four thousand pounds," said the other with a grim smile, „and on one occasion at the rate of a thousand pounds a minute."

The Vicar spoke the truth when he afterwards remarked to his wife that the Houghtons were altogether beyond his understanding.

It was at a concert given in aid of the new School Harmonium Fund that the Vicar made a discovery.

Frankie had been asked to sing. It was on a Monday night, and Mr. Houghton signified his willingness. So Frankie came, looking more angelic than ever in his boyish evening dress. He sang his song in a sweet sympathetic

treble, and received a vociferous encore. Also he was made a great deal of by charming young ladies, who brought him milk and pastries.

„It has been a most successful and pleasant evening," beamed the Vicar at the close. „Thanks in no small measure to you, Frankie." And he held out his hand to the boy.

As he took it he experienced a shock.

The childish hand that rested in his was unusually large and, what is more, it was hard and muscular, and the clasp that the boy returned was a grip like steel.

„Good gracious!" cried the astonished Vicar, and turned the palm of the boy's hand to the light.

It was as red and rough as that of a labouring man's.

The inspection was short, for the boy pulled his hand away, and the Vicar saw a red flush rise to his cheek.

The Vicar was a discreet man, but his wife was not so discreet, and Frankie's hands were the topic of the hour in Little Malsey the following week.

What was the secret of this strange disfigurement? A theory generally accepted was that the hardened palms were eloquent of excessive punishment with Frankie's father playing Sikes to his Oliver.

Mr. Stebbing did not take part in the discussion. He, poor man, was conscious of the horrible certainty that before another week had passed Little Malsey would have yet a greater subject to debate.

For Mr. Stebbing was insolvent. It came as much a surprise to Mr. Stebbing as it must to the reader. There was a son of Mr. Stebbing's who does not come into this story. The son is now in Canada, having been sent there by Mr. Stebbing, who in common with other foolish Britons, imagines that thrift and honesty is a matter for propinquity, and that there is something in the moral atmosphere of Canada that immediately makes thieves honest, idlers energetic, and the wastrels of the world suddenly useful members of society. This son, with a facile pen and a supply of blank cheques, brought a solid pillar of Little Malsey commerce crumbling to earth in so short a space of time that the victim was dazed and hypnotised by the magnitude of his misfortune.

From his wife he kept the dreadful news, and yet his poor old heart craved a confidant. What extraordinary inclination took him to the Houghton's we shall never know. Subconsciously he may have regarded himself as a criminal and sought the sympathy of what he believed to be a fellow, but to Houghton he went and poured forth the incoherent story of his terrible plight.

He remained with Frankie's father an hour, and came back more dazed than ever.

Next morning he journeyed to High Halsey and interviewed the bank manager; then he went to London, where Frankie's father met him. He returned home the same night alone.

The next day he was like a man demented.

Mr. Hackett, fellow councillor, who called in at the little office to discuss the remarkable problem of Frankie's hands, found a singularly erratic listener.

„…The extraordinary thing is," said Mr. Hackett impressively, „that the boy has got great corns on his palms, as if he were—"

Mr. Stebbing interrupted him with a burst of semi-hysterical laughter.

„Corns!" he cried, „Oh, Hackett, what dunderheaded babies you and I are by the side of that child! What innocent old fellows—"

Mr. Hackett left the office alarmed and puzzled.

He might well have been more perturbed had he watched the antics of Mr. Stebbing throughout that day.

How he walked aimlessly up and down the street and in and out the shop. How he haunted the telegraph-office, and how, when the telegram came, he shut himself up in his room to read it, and came out after a time looking ten years younger.

Little Halsey never knew of the big cheque that came to swell Mr. Stebbing‘s account and avert bankruptcy.

Little Halsey learnt all about Frankie later, but for many years before the discovery was made Mr. Stebbing carried in his pocket book a newspaper cutting which ran:

> „...at the Bushes, Whitelock was beaten, and Monna went on clear of St. Fax and Constance, but the winning post only a few strides away, Ambrosia came with a rush, and, magnificently ridden by little Frankie Houghton, our crack light-weight, snatched a victory by a short head.“