

Dave Dalton's Lady

Virna Sheard

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Dave Dalton's Lady

By Virna Sheard

He stood on the busiest corner of one of the busiest New York streets yet well back and in shadow of the bank, so that of the crowd only a few noticed him, and fewer still stopped to lighten his tray of its uninteresting contents.

To the casual observer resting a careless eye on the small crooked figure, pathetically still in a place where all was life and movement, he would have seemed a striking example of the survival of the unfittest. Yet in that cramped body of Dave Dalton's beat a heart worthy of his forefathers, who had been sons of battle for many generations. It was by reason of their calling probably that the lad had come upon evil days, for the country does not always remember her heroes' children.

That, however, did not worry Dave, and he stood quite cheerfully through all weather, with his burden of shoe strings, lamenting only, when he sold so few, it was not possible to buy Chappy a good dinner. For himself,—well, he was not often hungry,—so it did not strike him that his dinner mattered much. But Chappy's appetite was in perennial bloom, and all days were alike to him, or rather he observed no fasts, but kept the feasts religiously. Chappy was the thing Dave loved second best in the world. The other was a person.

Every Wednesday and Saturday at two exactly by the tower clock, the boy could count on her coming briskly around the corner and stopping with a little whirl of skirts and a sort of breathless haste beside him. Then she would buy his shoe laces. Whatever she did with all she bought was one of the mysteries, for a person—even the most extravagant—can only use a limited number, and they are not exactly the kind of things to make presents of.

Still he did not trouble over that either,—it did not seem worth while. The girl always looked his stock over carefully and made her choice with red lips tightened up, and fluffy yellow head a tiny bit to one side, as though it were easier so to decide whether she invested in leather or mohair, with

wire tags or shining brass ones. When this was settled, the hard roll tied up and the change dropped into her purse,—which, by the way, was a queer gold dangling affair whose screwed-on top glittered with letters set in frost-like white stones that Dave concluded couldn't be diamonds,—when this was done the girl would smile down into his face and flutter away, he watching her with a dazzled look in his eyes, till the crossing and recrossing throught hid her from view.

Chappy would watch also, standing up on his bandy hind legs and pulling frantically at his short rope, while an agonized desire to break away and bear her company found vent in short dismal yelps. Indeed, it was only when he realized that this fascinating young person was entirely beyond reach and 'twould be folly to pursue her, that he settled back upon his haunches, and with melancholy resignation resumed his habitual watching for flies, or fresh customers, or stray legs—it would be difficult to say which.

Every Wednesday and Saturday, all through the sweet spring months that even to the city brought a new and joyous tide of life, the girl came. And during the long hot summer Dave watched the tower clock on those charmed days, and when the great hands crept, with lingering, disheartening tardiness, down to the half hour, up to the quarter and then inch by inch to the number he longed for, his pale face would lighten and the sharp profile turn towards the corner with an alert expectancy stamped upon it. But she always came, and the little scene was enacted over and over again with a freshness and vivacity of enjoyment that would have led one to suppose it were for the first time.

Through the fall it was the same, and now that the wheel of the year had turned round to December, on this the day before Christmas, Dave watched the tower clock. He and Chappy saw her at the same moment, although this time she came from the opposite direction, and with her was a man, a tall, middle-aged man who walked stiffly. Chappy pranced about violently stretching the rope till it gave like elastic, and fairly sprung him back on the rebound. Dave kept his eyes on the girl as she came towards him.

“I must have some shoe laces, Uncle Jack,” she said. “I always buy them from this boy on my practice days. We are very good friends,” nodding at Dave.

“Oh, yes, Miss, thank y’,” answered the boy flushing. “Down, Chappy! Down.” Then apologetically, “He ain't never had no manners, Miss.”

“Oh! don’t mind about that,” she said smiling. “I fancy he just wants to let me know he likes me.”

“He likes you all right,” said Dave. “Yes, I’ve got a dozen o’ that kind with the thin tags. They’s the best kind, too. Y’ don’t want ’em all, do you? Yes, I kin let y’ have ’em.”

The man watched with a slightly amused expression.

“Where do you live?” he asked, as Dave wrapped up the parcel.

“Down to Sweeny’s,” replied the boy. “It’s called a model lodging house. There’s a big sign up outside. ‘Beds, ten cents,’ ‘Biggest dinner in town, ten cents,’ ‘Bath an’ hair cut, ten cents.’ ”

“Is it a comfortable place?”

“Well, it ain’t a uncomfortable one, sir, on a rough night. But I goes there because there’s some old soldiers stops there off an’ on. I like soldiers.”

“Do you, my lad?” returned the other, a smile curving itself around his set mouth. “Why?”

Into the little hunchback’s worn face flashed a strange expression, and he seemed for half a moment to straighten himself.

“Why?” he exclaimed, in his thin reedy voice,—“why! I belongs to ’em. I’m an American, born here you know, but my grandfather was in the charge at Balaklava; he got a medal afterwards. It only come the day before he died. He was shot most to pieces an’ never had no chance to wear it, you see. My mother kept it an’ give it to me, for I’m named after him, an’ I have it under my coat.”

“Ah!” said the man, his eyes lighting. “So your grandfather was in that famous charge?”

“Yes, sir, an’ his father fit at Waterloo,” said Dave, the color bright in his cheeks.

“Waterloo!” cried the girl softly. “Why you never told me about that. Really, now I think of it, I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Dave Dalton,” he said.

“Now that’s a good name,” she answered, stooping to pet Chappy, “and there are those who might envy you those grandfathers. To-morrow is Christmas, Dave, and I would like you to bring Chappy to our house in the

afternoon. I'm going to decorate him with a new collar. See, here is the address on this card. And tell me, why do you tie him up so fast? He is just wild to get away!"

"Dat's so!" chimed in a small boy, who was staring and listening. "Cause why? If Dave was jest to let him loose onct, he'd be into a fight wid de next dog on de street. But de cop'd run him into dat place wot dey keep fer dogs who ain't rich enough to buy tags. See? Wouldn't he, Dave? He ain't got no tag, has he, Dave? Say, de cop only lets him stay round here 'cause he's so woolly y' can't tell whether he's got one onto him or not. Isn't dat so, Dave?" he wound up, executing a double shuffle that sent his "looped and windowed raggedness" fluttering in the wind.

"That's so," said Dave.

Chappy beat a fierce tattoo on the slippery asphalt with his dilapidated tail.

The girl laughed lightly, and the man's gray eyes twinkled.

"That is another fighter you have an interest in," he said. "I like the breed. Good by, and a merry Christmas to you."

Dave looked after them, his face lit up, his deep eyes shining, the little card clutched in one thin hand.

"That's my lady!" he said, turning to the ragged boy. "The one that buys the shoe strings."

The ragged boy hopped up and down and winked one sharp eye. "Say," he remarked, quieting down, suddenly, "I knows her. She's de one wot sings in that big church round de corner with de cross on de top. Dat's where I've seed her, Dave. She'll be singing dere to-morrow, sure, an' you and me can take a sneak in an' listen—only what'll you do with Chappy? Look-a-here, couldn't y' tie him up at Sweeny's—he'd be all right. Give him his dinner. Fill him up chock full, an' den tie him under yer bunk. Eh?"

The little hunchback's eyes were big and wistful.

"Do you think he'd stay, Jimsey? I'd a heap rather take him along. I don't never leave him."

"Do I think he'd stay?" rejoined the other scornfully. "Well, yes; I'd lather him if he didn't. Dat dog ain't no good, he's so set on hisself. Dere is two things you hadn't ever ought to take to church, Dave, an' dey is kids and dogs. Dey get bounced every time. You see, dey have no respect for de

prayin' or singin' or preachin', an' jines in any old time. Now, are ye goin' to leave him out of it, or ain't ye?"

"I'll leave him," said the boy, reluctantly, rubbing his hand over Chappy's rough head. "I want to hear her sing—so I'll leave him. I suppose it wouldn't do to have no fuss. Look here, Jimsey," with swift eagerness, "y' ain't makin' a mistake about her; you're sure *she's* the one that sings?"

"Dead sure," retorted the other. "I knowed her de moment she spoke. I ain't goin' by her looks, though dere all right, but by her voice. I'd remember it anywheres I heard it, and dere ain't two of 'em."

"I don't see how you could be sure," said Dave. "It wouldn't be the same when she was singing."

The ragged boy chuckled. "Don't worry about that, Dave. It's got de same sound goin' through it, an' I ain't makin' no mistake. Why, one Sunday when I was at dat church, hid in one of de dark pews, where none of them chaps in long skirts can spy ye, she sang, 'Je-roosh-e-lem, de Golden.' Dat's de way it began, anyway. It was warm in there, Dave, an' a spicy smell kept on floatin' up, like there was cakes bakin' somewhere. The lights flickered over where the big cross stands, wid—wid—Him—on it, an' de organ wid de great yellor pipes was goin'—boom—boom—boom—like waves out on de beach at Coney Island. An' she was singin'. I wisht ye'd been there, Dave."

"Perhaps she'll sing that song to-morrow," he answered. "Yes, I'll go along with you, Jimsey. I'll tie Chappy up an' then afterwards we will go back and get him an' take him along to this place what has the number on the ticket."

"She never asked me," said the ragged boy.

"That don't count," said Dave. "She smiled at you."

"You bet she did," he returned, "an' she smiled at you, too, didn't she, Chappy? Well, I'll be up in de mornin' fer ye, Dave. So long."

The boy stood gently offering his wares to the passers-by, though people didn't seem to want shoe laces that afternoon. Now and then some one dropped a bit of silver on the tray and went past quickly, but the lad did not wish for such offerings, and while he knew they were kindly meant, they hurt him. Every piece of money given so would have been returned but that the people were so quickly gone. Always he would shake his head, and sometimes even cry, "*No! No!*" but they did not care or understand.

At evening a soft snow was falling, and, seen by the great swaying electric lights at the corner, it looked to Dave like a shower of silver flakes. He gazed at the marvellous feathery wheels and stars caught on his rough jacket, and thought how beautiful they were. His little crooked body was chilled through, but his heart was warm and happy, and to such a heart the whole world seems bright. "To-morrow! To-morrow!" he kept thinking. "To-morrow he would see her again, even perhaps hear her sing." Since his mother's death he had been quite alone in the world, so he the oftener said to himself that he belonged to those men who had died fighting. He was such a little fellow that the fight for daily bread took all his strength, but they had been strong and mighty and courageous, and the thought of them sent a warm flood to his heart.

The Christmas season had not been one of festivity to Dave for many a year, and he had come to regard it as a period when those others only, the rich of the earth, had a joyful time. For Chappy and him it meant long, bitter nights, short, dark days and unlimited shivering.

On this Christmas eve, though, when he went home to Sweeny's he lay long awake, like many another lad in the city, who could not sleep for very gladness. Children borrow no trouble, and one happy hour in sight is worth to them a heaven in the problematical future; so when at last Dave slept, his sharp, white face pressed against Chappy's woolly coat wore a smile.

As the mellow bells of St. Michael's rocked the steeple with their Christmas ringing, two odd little figures stole into the church and slipped warily into a high pew in one dusky corner. The ragged boy had been no false prophet; for there were the yellow mystical lights on the high altar shining down till they touched the sorrowful figure of the Christ. There were the dark, silent men moving about, and through the aisles floated a strange odor, heavy and sweet. Yes, and the organ pealed with that muffled fullness of sound one hears in the great waves after a storm, when they break upon a sanded beach. Presently the people gathered till the vast building was full.

Then suddenly a voice rose in joyful song.

Somewhere in the dimness of Dave Dalton's memory was the blurred and shadowy remembrance of a story of shepherds who watched their flocks upon the star-lit hills in a far away country, and of a company of angels who floated down upon the wings of the night singing, "Peace on earth."

It seemed that he, too, heard the angel—that bright one who stood apart from the others and said, "Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy!" for it was what the wonderful voice sang now.

The two lads gazed up into the organ loft and there they saw a girl standing by herself—and she was singing.

When it ended the ragged boy caught Dave by the sleeve and spoke in a hoarse whisper: “Ain’t dat great?” he said, his common little face shining. “Say, Dave, don’t dat jest give you a queer feelin’. I wouldn’t like to hear dat if I was in dis yer place alone at midnight, you bet! It’s too much like a spirit, an’ it’d rattle me to hear it in de dark.”

But the boy answered nothing, only watched the figure he knew till it was lost in the gloom of the distant gallery. They waited quietly through the short service—which was largely incomprehensible to them—hoping for “Jerusalem, the Golden,” but she sang no more. However, as they followed in the wake of the congregation down the aisle, she, leaning over the railing above, saw them and smiled a recognition.

“Look up,” whispered the ragged one, catching her eye first. “Cracky, Dave!” jerking him round, “she’s noddin’ of her head to us—she is, honest.” So the little hunchback returned her smile across the wide and empty church.

It was about two o’clock in the afternoon that a diminutive tattered boy mounted the steps of a house and rang the bell. He held a card tightly in one grimy hand, and he often glanced from it to the bright brass number above. His face looked scared, while now and then as he stood waiting his limbs shook with a chill. A maid opened the door and lifted her eyebrows at him by way of ascertaining his business, but he walked in and past her, not heeding the unspoken question.

“My goodness! Look at him,” exclaimed the picturesque maiden. “Such cheek! You’d better trot out, boy, as quick as you came in, or I’ll call some one.”

“I wisht you would,” he answered, glancing about, “for I’m in a awful hurry. I want de lady wot sings. De one wot buys Dave Dalton’s shoe strings,—an’ I wants her quick. Catch on?”

At the moment there was a rustling of soft skirts, and Dave Dalton’s lady came swiftly down the hall, followed by the tall man, who walked stiffly. The boy ran to her.

“There’s—there’s been a axident,” he said, “an’ I come to get ye to go along wid me to de ’Mergency.”

“Why, you poor little fellow,” said the girl. “Who has been hurt? Any one I know?”

“You bet,” he cried. “Dave’s been hurt, and Chappy’s been hurt, too, some; but Dave’s the worst. Dere was a row down to Sweeny’s. You know Sweeny, don’t you?” to the man. “No? Well, he was a prize fighter onct,—a regular trained one. He stood to all de best of ’em—but now he’s too heavy. Well, ’twas like this. Us fellers we went to church to hear you,” with a nod towards the girl, “to hear you sing, an’ Dave he tied up Chappy, ’cause we’d a been hustled if we’d a-took him along. When we got back to de house, why he’d been howlin’ some, an’ jest as we come in Sweeny was a-givin’ him a thrashin’ wid a cane.”

“Yes!” questioned the man. “Yes?”

The boy’s eyes flashed. “Say,” he exclaimed, “I wisht ye could a seen Dave! He leapt right at dat feller an’ jerked de cane away; then he jumped up an’ hit him acrost de face wid it. A big ridge riz up where it lit.”

“The son of his grandfather!” said the man.

“Oh!” cried the girl, her hands clinging together. “Oh, Uncle Jack, I’m afraid that lodging-keeper did something dreadful to him.”

The ragged boy shivered. “Sweeny?” he said. “Why, Sweeny jest caught holt o’ Dave like as he was a rabbit, an’ he t’rew him down hard. He struck onto his head an’ first he didn’t know nothin’, then after when he come to at de ’Mergency he kept on askin’ fer you. I wisht ye’d come.”

“Wait a moment,” replied the girl. “I will go. You’ll come, too,” turning to the man.

“I rather think I’d better,” he answered.

Half an hour later the three entered a ward in the Emergency Hospital. On a pallet lay the little hunchback, and upon his face was the mark of coming death.

A woolly dog, whose tail beat faintly, but steadily, was sitting at the foot of the bed. He pricked up his ears as they approached, but did not move. The house surgeon went forward to meet them.

“There is an internal injury,” he said, in his low trained voice. “The lad is going very fast.”

Dave looked up adoringly at the girl who stood beside him, and smiled as she patted his hand.

“You’ve been awful kind,” he said. “I wanted to see you. There’s two things I want to give you. Here,” fumbling at his collar and pulling out a bit

of leather shoe string,—“here, tied to this, is the medal—he—he—hadn’t no chance to wear. It ain’t an American one, but it’s all right an’ you kin have it if y’ like; an’ there’s Chappy, y’ can have him, too.”

“I’ll take good care of him,” said the girl softly; “very good care, Dave.”

“Why,” he answered, speaking painfully, “I—knowed y’ would. There’s another thing. I guess as they won’t let me in—the angels. Y’ see I come to this by sort of *fightin’*, an’ they don’t let no fighters in—’cept soldiers. Do they?”

“Greater love hath no man than this, that he lays down his life for his friend,” said the man. “Chappy was your friend, lad.”

Dave looked up and glanced from one to another, restlessly. Then he turned his deep eyes upon the pretty figure by his side. “You’ve been awful kind,” he said, “awful kind. We used to watch for you Wednesdays an’ Saturdays, Chappy an’ me;” and as he spoke he drifted away into the sleep that is unbroken by dreams.

Then the girl with tender fingers untied the knotted lace and drew the medal from where it had rested.

The man exclaimed softly as he saw the bronze cross with its laurel-wreathed bar and faded red ribbon. “The cross!” he said. “Why, Letty, it is the Victoria Cross!”

“Yes,” answered the girl, looking at it with dim eyes as it lay in the palm of her hand,—“yes, Uncle Jack—the Victoria Cross—and it has been worn by one who was not unworthy. Come,” she said to the ragged boy, “come with us.”

Then she gathered the little shaking dog in her arms, and they went together out into the Christmas sunshine.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Dave Dalton's Lady* by Virna Sheard]