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A Romance of the London Streets

BY

MARIE CORELLI

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THE HIRED BABY

A dark, desolate December night--a night that clung to the metropolis like a wet black shroud--a night in which the heavy, low-hanging vapors melted every now and then into a slow reluctant rain, cold as icicle drops in a rock-cavern. People passed and repassed in the streets like ghosts in a bad dream; the twinkling gas-light showed them at one moment rising out of the fog and then disappearing from view as though suddenly engulfed in a vaporous ebon sea. With muffled angry shrieks the metropolitan trains deposited their shoals of shivering, coughing travelers at the several stations, where sleepy officials, rendered vicious by the weather, snatched the tickets from their hands with offensive haste and roughness. Omnibus conductors grew ill-tempered and abusive without any seemingly adequate reason; shopkeepers became flippant, disobliging and careless of custom; cabmen shouted derisive or denunciatory language after their rapidly retreating fares; in short, everybody was in a discontented, almost spiteful humor, with the exception of those few aggressively cheerful persons who are in the habit of always making the best of everything, even bad weather. Down the long wide vista of the Cromwell Road, Kensington, the fog had it all its own way; it swept on steadily, like thick smoke from a huge fire, choking the throats and blinding the eyes of foot-passengers, stealing through the crannies of the houses, and chilling the blood of even those luxurious individuals who, seated in elegant drawing-rooms before blazing fires, easily forgot that there were such bitter things as cold and poverty in that outside world against which they had barred their doors. At one house in particular--a house with gaudy glass doors and somewhat soiled yellow silk curtains at the windows--a house that plainly said of itself--"Done up for show!" to all who cared to examine its exterior--there stood a closed brougham drawn by a prancing pair of fat horses. A coachman of distinguished appearance sat on the box; a footman of irreproachable figure stood waiting on the pavement, his yellow-gloved hand resting elegantly on the polished silver knob of the carriage door. Both these gentlemen were resolute and inflexible of face; they looked as if they had determined on some great deed that should move the world to wild applause--but, truth to tell, they had only just finished a highly satisfactory "meat-tea," and before this grave silence had fallen upon them they had been discussing the advisability of broiled steak and onions for supper. The coachman had inclined to plain mutton-chops as being easier of digestion; the footman had earnestly asseverated his belief in the superior succulence and sweetness of the steak and onions, and in the end he had gained his point. This weighty question being

settled, they had gradually grown reflective on the past, present, and future joys of eating at some one else's expense, and in this bland and pleasing state of meditation they were still absorbed. The horses were impatient and pawed the muddy ground with many a toss of their long manes and tails, the steam from their glossy coats mingling with the ever-thickening density of the fog. On the white stone steps of the residence before which they waited was an almost invisible bundle, apparently shapeless and immovable. Neither of the two gorgeous personages in livery observed it; it was too far back in a dim corner, too unobtrusive for the casual regard of their lofty eyes. Suddenly the glass doors before mentioned were thrown apart with a clattering noise, a warmth and radiance from the entrance hall thus displayed streamed into the foggy street, and at the same instant the footman, still with grave and imperturbable countenance, opened the brougham. An elderly lady, richly dressed, with diamonds sparkling in her gray hair, came rustling down the steps, bringing with her faint odors of patchouli and violet powder. She was followed by a girl of doll-like prettiness with a snub nose and petulant little mouth, who held up her satin and lace skirts with a sort of fastidious disdain, as though she scorned to set foot on earth that was not carpeted with the best velvet pile. As they approached their carriage, the inert dark bundle crouched in the corner started into life--a woman with wild hair and wilder eyes--whose pale lips quivered with suppressed weeping as her piteous voice broke into sudden clamor:

"Oh, lady!" she cried, "for the love of God a trifle! Oh, lady, lady!"

But the "lady," with a contemptuous sniff and a shake of her scented garments, passed her before she could continue her appeal, and she turned with a sort of faint hope to the softer face of the girl.

"Oh, my dear, *do* have pity! Just the smallest little thing, and God will bless you! You are rich and happy--and I am starving! Only a penny! For the baby--the poor little baby!" and she made as though she would open her tattered shawl and reveal some treasure hidden therein, but shrunk back repelled by the cold, merciless gaze that fell upon her from those eyes in which youth dwelt without tenderness.

"You have no business on our doorstep," said the girl, harshly. "Go away directly, or I shall tell my servant to call a policeman."

Then as she entered the brougham after her mother she addressed the respectable footman angrily, giving him the benefit of a strong nasal intonation.

"Howard, why do you let such dirty beggars come near the carriage? What are you paid for, I should like to know? It is perfectly disgraceful to the house!"

"Very sorry, miss!" said the footman, gravely; "I didn't see the--the person

before.” Then shutting the brougham door, he turned with a dignified air to the unfortunate creature who still lingered near, and with a sweeping gesture of his gold-embroidered coat-sleeve, said majestically:

“Do you ’ear? Be hoff!”

Then having thus performed his duty, he mounted the box beside his friend the coachman, and the equipage rattled quickly away, its gleaming lights soon lost in the smoke-laden vapors that drooped downward like funeral hangings from the invisible sky to the scarcely visible ground. Left to herself, the woman who had vainly sought charity from those in whom no charity existed, looked up despairingly as one distraught, and seemed as though she would have given vent to some fierce exclamation, when a feeble wail came pitifully forth from the sheltering folds of her shawl. She restrained herself instantly and walked on at a rapid pace, scarcely heeding whither she went, till she reached the Catholic church known as the “Oratory.” Its unfinished *facade* loomed darkly out of the fog; there was nothing picturesque or inviting about it, yet there were people passing softly in and out, and through the swinging to and fro of the red baize-covered doors there came a comforting warm glimmer of light. The woman paused, hesitated--and then having apparently made up her mind ascended the broad steps, looked in and finally entered. The place was strange to her--she knew nothing of its religious meaning, and its cold, uncompleted appearance oppressed her. There were only some half dozen persons scattered about like black spots in its vast white interior, and the fog hung heavily in the vaulted dome and dark little chapels. One corner alone blazed with brilliancy and color--this was the Altar of the Virgin. Toward it the tired vagrant made her way, and on reaching it sunk on the nearest chair as though exhausted. She did not raise her eyes to the marble splendors of the shrine--one of the masterpieces of old Italian art; she had been merely attracted to the spot by the glitter of the lamps and candles, and took no thought as to the reason of their being lighted, though she was sensible of a certain comfort in the soft luster shed around her. She seemed still young; her face, rendered haggard by long and bitter privation, showed traces of past beauty, and her eyes, full of feverish trouble, were large, dark and still lustrous. Her mouth alone--that sensitive betrayer of the life’s good and bad actions--revealed that all had not been well with her; its lines were hard and vicious, and the resentful curve of the upper lip spoke of foolish pride not unmixed with reckless sensuality. She sat for a minute or two motionless--then with exceeding care and tenderness she began to unfold her thin torn shawl by gentle degrees, looking down with anxious solicitude at the object concealed within it. Only a baby--and withal a baby so tiny and white and frail that it seemed as though it must melt like a snowflake beneath the lightest touch. As its wrappings were loosened, it opened a pair of large, solemn blue eyes and gazed at the woman’s

face with a strange pitiful wistfulness. It lay quiet, without moan, a pinched, pale miniature of suffering humanity--an infant with sorrow's mark painfully impressed upon its drawn small features. Presently it stretched forth a puny hand and feebly caressed its protectress, and this, too, with the faintest glimmer of a smile. The woman responded to its affection with a sort of rapture; she caught it fondly to her breast and covered it with kisses, rocking it to and fro with broken words of endearment. "My little darling!" she whispered, softly. "My little pet! Yes, yes, I know! So tired, so cold and hungry! Never mind, baby, never mind! we will rest here a little, then we will sing a song presently and get some money to take us home. Sleep a while longer, dearie! There! now we are warm and cosy again."

So saying, she rearranged her shawl in closer and tighter folds so as to protect the child more thoroughly. While she was engaged in this operation, a lady in deep mourning passed close by her, and advancing to the very steps of the altar, knelt down, hiding her face with her clasped hands. The tired wayfarer's attention was attracted by this; she gazed with a sort of dull wonder at the kneeling figure robed in rich rustling silk and crape, and gradually her eyes wandered upward, upward, till they rested on the gravely sweet and serenely smiling marble image of the Virgin and Child. She looked and looked again--surprised--incredulous; then suddenly rose to her feet and made her way to the altar railing. There she paused, staring vaguely at a basket of flowers, white and odorous, that had been left there by some reverent worshiper. She glanced doubtfully at the swinging silver lamps, the twinkling candles; she was conscious, too, of a subtle strange fragrance in the air, as though a basket full of spring violets and daffodils had just been carried by; then, as her wandering gaze came back to the solitary woman in black who still knelt motionless near her, a sort of choking sensation came into her throat and a stinging moisture struggled in her eyes. She strove to turn this hysterical sensation to a low laugh of disdain.

"Lord, Lord!" she muttered beneath her breath, "what sort of place is this, where they pray to a woman and a baby?"

At that moment the lady in black rose; she was young, with a proud, fair, but weary face. Her eyes lighted on her soiled and poverty-stricken sister, and she paused with a pitying look. The street wanderer made use of the opportunity thus offered, and in an urgent whisper implored charity. The lady drew out a purse, then hesitated, looking wistfully at the bundle in the shawl.

"You have a little child there?" she asked in gentle accents. "May I see it?"

"Yes, lady;" and the wrapper was turned down sufficiently to disclose the tiny white face, now more infinitely touching than ever in the pathos of sleep.

"I lost my little one a week ago," said the lady, simply, as she looked at it. "He was all I had." Her voice trembled, she opened her purse and placed a half

crown in the hand of the astonished supplicant. "You are happier than I am; perhaps you will pray for me! I am very lonely!"

Then dropping her long crape veil so that it completely hid her features, she bent her head and moved softly away. The woman watched her till her graceful figure was completely lost in the gloom of the great church, and then turned again vaguely to the altar.

"Pray for her!" she thought. "I! As if I could pray!" And she smiled bitterly. Again she looked at the statue in the shrine; it had no meaning at all for her. She had never heard of Christianity save through the medium of a tract, whose consoling title had been "Stop! You are going to Hell!" Religion of every sort was mocked at by those among whom her lot was cast, the name of Christ was only used as a convenience to swear by, and therefore this mysteriously smiling, gently inviting marble figure was incomprehensible to her mind.

"As if I could pray!" she repeated with a sort of derision. Then she looked at the broad silver coin in her hand and the sleeping baby in her arms. With a sudden impulse she dropped on her knees.

"Whoever you are," she muttered, addressing the statue above her, "it seems you've got a child of your own; perhaps you'll help me to take care of this one. It isn't mine; I wish it was! Anyway, I love it more than its own mother does. I dare say you won't listen to the likes of me, but if there was God anywhere about I'd ask Him to bless that good soul that's lost her baby. I bless her with all my heart, but my blessing ain't good for much. Ah!" and she surveyed anew the Virgin's serene white countenance, "you just look as if you understood me, but I don't believe you do! Never mind, I've said all I wanted to say this time."

Her strange petition or rather discourse concluded, she rose and walked away. The great doors of the church swung heavily behind her as she stepped out and stood once more in the muddy street. It was raining steadily--a fine, cold, penetrating rain. But the coin she held was a talisman against outer discomforts, and she continued to walk on till she came to a clean-looking dairy, where for a couple of pence she was able to replenish the infant's long ago emptied feeding-bottle; but she purchased nothing for herself. She had starved all day and was now too faint to eat. Soon she entered an omnibus and was driven to Charing Cross, and alighting at the great station, brilliant with its electric light, she paced up and down outside it, accosting several of the passers-by and imploring their pity. One man gave her a penny; another, young and handsome, with a flushed, intemperate face and a look of his fast-fading boyhood still about him, put his hand in his pocket and drew out all the loose coppers it contained, amounting to three pennies and an odd farthing, and dropping them into her outstretched palm, said half gaily, half boldly:

“You ought to do better than that with those big eyes of yours!” She drew back and shuddered; he broke into a coarse laugh and went his way. Standing where he had left her, she seemed for a time lost in wretched reflections, the fretful wailing cry of the child she carried roused her, and hushing it softly, she murmured: “Yes, yes, darling, it is too wet and cold for you; we had better go.” And acting suddenly on her resolve, she hailed another omnibus, this time bound for Tottenham Court Road, and was, after some dreary jolting, set down at her final destination--a dirty alley in the worst part of Seven Dials. Entering it, she was hailed with a shout of derisive laughter from some rough-looking men and women, who were standing grouped round a low gin-shop at the corner.

“Here’s Liz!” cried one. “Here’s Liz and the bloomin’ kid!”

“Now, old gel, fork out! How much ’ave yer got, Liz? Treat us to a drop all round!”

Liz walked past them steadily; the conspicuous curve of her upper lip came into full play and her eyes flashed disdainfully, but she said nothing. Her silence exasperated a tangle-haired, cat-faced girl of some seventeen years, who, more than half drunk, sat on the ground clasping her knees with both arms, and rocking herself lazily to and fro.

“Mother Mawks!” cried she, “Mother Mawks! You’re wanted! Here’s Liz come back with you babby!”

As if her words had been a powerful incantation to summon forth an evil spirit, a door in one of the miserable houses was thrown open, and a stout woman, nearly naked to the waist, with a swollen, blotched and most hideous countenance, rushed out furiously, and darting at Liz, shook her violently by the arm.

“Where’s my shullin’?” she yelled, “where’s my gin? Out with it! Out with my shullin’ and fourpence! None of your sneakin’ ways with me; a bargain’s a bargain all the world over! You’re makin’ a fortin’ with my babby--yer know y’are; pays yer a deal better than yer old trade! Don’t say it don’t--yer knows it do. Yer’ll not find such a sickly kid anywheres, an’ it’s the sickly kids wot pays an’ moves the ’arts of the *kyind* ladies and *good* gentlemen,”--this with an imitative whine that excited the laughter and applause of her hearers. “You’ve got it cheap, I kin tell yer, an’ if yer don’t pay up reg’lar, there’s others that’ll take the chance, and thankful too!”

She stopped for lack of breath, and Liz spoke quietly:

“It’s all right, Mother Mawks,” she said, with an attempt at a smile; “here’s your shilling, here’s the four pennies for the gin. I don’t owe you anything for the child now.” She stopped and hesitated, looking down tenderly at the frail creature in her arms, then added almost pleadingly, “It’s asleep now. May I take it with me tonight?”

Mother Mawks, who had been testing the coins Liz had given her by biting them ferociously with her large yellow teeth, broke into a loud laugh.

“Take it with yer! I like that! Wot imperence! Take it with yer!” Then, with her huge red arms akimbo, she added, with a grin, “Tell yer wot, if yer likes to pay me ’arf a crown, yer can ’ave it to cuddle an’ welcome!”

Another shout of approving merriment burst from the drink-soddened spectators of the little scene, and the girl crouched on the ground, removed her encircling hands from her knees to clap them loudly, as she exclaimed:

“Well done, Mother Mawks! One doesn’t let out kids at night for nothing! ’Tought to be more expensive than daytime!”

The face of Liz had grown white and rigid.

“You know I can’t give you that money,” she said, slowly. “I have not tasted bit or drop all day. I must live, though it doesn’t seem worth while. The child,” and her voice softened involuntarily, “is fast asleep; it’s a pity to wake it, that’s all. It will cry and fret all night, and--and I would make it warm and comfortable if you’d let me.” She raised her eyes hopefully and anxiously, “Will you?”

Mother Mawks was evidently a lady of an excitable disposition. The simple request seemed to drive her nearly frantic. She raised her voice to an absolute scream, thrusting her dirty hands through her still dirtier hair as the proper accompanying gesture to her vituperative oratory.

“Will I! Will I!” she screeched. “Will I let out my hown baby for the night for nothing? Will I? No, I won’t! I’ll see yer blowed into the middle of next week fust! Lor’ a’m ussey! ’ow ’igh an’ mighty we are gittin’, to be sure! The babby’ll be quiet with you, Miss Liz; will it, hindeed! An’ it will cry an’ fret with its hown mother, will it, hindeed!” And at every sentence she approached Liz more nearly, increasing in fury as she advanced. “Yer low hussy! D’ye think I’d let yer ’ave my babby for a hour unless yer paid for’t? As it is, yer pays far too little. I’m an honest woman as works for my livin’ an’ wot drinks reasonable, better than you by a long sight, with your stuck-up airs! A pretty drab *you* are! Gi’ me the babby; ye an’t no business to keep it a minit longer;” and she made a grab at Liz’s sheltering shawl.

“Oh, don’t hurt it!” pleaded Liz, tremblingly. “Such a little thing; don’t hurt it!”

Mother Mawks stared so wildly that her blood-shot eyes seemed protruding from her head.

“’Urt it! Hain’t I a right to do wot I likes with my hown babby! ’Urt it! Well, I never! Look ’ere!” and she turned round on the assembled neighbors. “Hain’t she a reg’lar one! She don’t care for the law, not she! She’s keepin’ back a child from its hown mother!” And with that she made a fierce attack on the shawl and succeeded in dragging the infant from Liz’s reluctant arms.

Wakened thus roughly from its slumbers, the poor mite set up a feeble wailing; its mother, enraged at the sound, shook it violently till it gasped for breath.

“Drat the little beast!” she cried. “Why don’t it choke an’ ’ave done with it!”

And without heeding the terrified remonstrances of Liz, she flung the child roughly, as though it were a ball, through the open door of her lodgings, where it fell on a heap of dirty clothes, and lay motionless; its wailing had ceased.

“Oh, baby, baby!” exclaimed Liz, in accents of poignant distress. “Oh! you have killed it, I am sure! Oh, you are cruel, cruel! Oh, baby, baby!”

And she broke into a tempestuous passion of sobs and tears. The bystanders looked on in unmoved silence. Mother Mawks gathered her torn garments round her with a gesture of defiance, and sniffed the air as though she said, “Any one who wants to meddle with me will get the worst of it.” There was a brief pause; suddenly a man staggered out of the gin-shop, smearing the back of his hand across his mouth as he came; a massively built, ill-favored brute with a shock of uncombed red hair and small, ferret-like eyes. He stared stupidly at the weeping Liz, then at Mother Mawks, finally from one to the other of the loafers who stood by. “Wot’s the row?” he demanded, thickly, “Wot’s up? ’Ave it out fair! Joe Mawks’ll stand by an’ see fair game. Fire away, my hearties! fire, fire away!” And with a chuckling idiot laugh he dived into the pocket of his torn corduroy trousers and produced a pipe. Filling this leisurely from a greasy pouch, with such unsteady fingers that the tobacco dropped all over him, he lighted it, repeating with increased thickness of utterance “Wot’s the row! ’Ave it out fair!”

“It’s about your babby, Joe!” cried the girl before mentioned, jumping up from her seat on the ground with such force that her hair came tumbling all about her in a dark, dank mist through which her thin, eager face spitefully peered. “Liz has gone crazy! She wants your babby to cuddle!” And she screamed with sudden laughter, “Eh, eh! fancy! Wants a babby to cuddle.”

The stupefied Joe blinked drowsily and sucked the stem of his pipe with apparent relish. Then, as if he had been engaged in deep meditation on the subject, he removed his smoky consoler from his mouth, and said, “W’y not? Wants a babby to cuddle? All right! Let ’er ’ave it--w’y not?”

At these words Liz looked up hopefully through her tears, but Mother Mawks darted forward in raving indignation.

“Yer great drunken fool!” she yelled, to her besotted spouse, “aren’t yer ashamed of yerself? Wot! Let out yer babby for a whole night for nuthin’? It’s lucky I’ve got my wits about me; an’ I say Liz *sha’n’t* ’ave it! There now!”

The man looked at her and a dogged resolution darkened his repulsive countenance. He raised his big fist, clinched it, and hit straight out, giving his infuriated wife a black eye in much less than a minute. “An’ I say she *shall*

'ave it! Where are ye now?"

In answer to the query Mother Mawks might have said that she was "all there," for she returned her husband's blow with interest and force, and in a couple of seconds the happy pair were engaged in a "stand-up" fight, to the intense admiration and excitement of all the inhabitants of the little alley. Every one in the place thronged to watch the combatants and to hear the blasphemous oaths and curses with which the battle was accompanied.

In the midst of the affray, a wizened, bent old man, who had been sitting at his door sorting rags in a basket, and apparently taking no heed of the clamor around him, made a sign to Liz.

"Take the kid now," he whispered. "Nobody'll notice. I'll see they don't cry arter ye." Liz thanked him mutely by a look, and rushing to the house where the child still lay, seemingly inanimate, on the floor among the soiled clothes, she caught it up eagerly and hurried away to her own poor garret in a tumble-down tenement at the furthest end of the alley. The infant had been stunned by its fall, but under her tender care, and rocked in the warmth of her caressing arms, it soon recovered, though when its blue eyes opened they were full of a bewildered pain such as may be seen in the eyes of a shot bird.

"My pet! my poor little darling!" she murmured over and over again, kissing its wee white face and soft hands; "I wish I was your mother--Lord knows I do! As it is you're all I've got to care for. And you do love me, baby, don't you? just a little, little bit!" And as she renewed her fondling embraces, the tiny, sad-visaged creature uttered a low crooning sound of baby satisfaction in response to her endearments--a sound more sweet to her ears than the most exquisite music, and which brought a smile to her mouth and a pathos to her dark eyes, rendering her face for the moment almost beautiful. Holding the child closely to her breast, she looked cautiously out of her narrow window, and perceived that the connubial fight was over. From the shouts of laughter and plaudits that reached her ears Joe Mawks had evidently won the day; his wife had disappeared from the field. She saw the little crowd dispersing, most of those who composed it entering the gin-shop, and very soon the alley was comparatively quiet and deserted. By and by she heard her name called in a low voice: "Liz! Liz!"

She looked down and saw the old man who had promised her his protection in case Mother Mawks should persecute her. "Is that you, Jim? Come upstairs, it's better than talking out there." He obeyed, and stood before her in the wretched room, looking curiously both at her and the baby. A wiry, wolfish-faced being was Jim Duds, as he was familiarly called, though his own name was the aristocratic and singularly inappropriate one of James Douglas; he was more like an animal than a human creature, with his straggling gray hair, bushy beard, and sharp teeth protruding like fangs from beneath his upper

lip. His profession was that of an area-thief, and he considered it a sufficiently respectable calling.

“Mother Mawks has got it this time,” he said, with a grin, which was more like a snarl. “Joe’s blood was up and he pounded her nigh into a jelly. She’ll leave ye quiet now; so long as ye pay the hire reg’lar ye’ll have Joe on yer side. If so be as there’s a bad day, ye’d better not come home at all.”

“I know,” said Liz, “but she’s always had the money for the child, and surely it wasn’t much to ask her to let me keep it warm on such a cold night as this.”

Jim Duds looked meditative. “Wot makes yer care for that babby so much?” he asked. “‘Taint your’n.”

Liz sighed.

“No!” she said, sadly. “That’s true. But it seems something to hold on to like. See what my life has been!” She stopped, and a wave of color flushed her pallid features. “From a little girl, nothing but the streets--the long cruel streets! and I just a bit of dirt on the pavement--no more; flung here, flung there, and at last swept into the gutter. All dark--all useless!” She laughed a little. “Fancy, Jim! I’ve never seen the country!”

“Nor I,” said Jim, biting a piece of straw reflectively. “It must be powerful fine, with naught but green trees an’ posies a-blowin’ an’ a-growin’ everywheres. There ain’t many kitching areas there, though, I’m told.”

Liz went on, scarcely heeding him: “The baby seems to me like what the country must be--all harmless and sweet and quiet; when I hold it so, my heart gets peaceful somehow--I don’t know why.”

Again Jim looked speculative. He waved his bitten straw expressively.

“Ye’ve had ’sperience, Liz. Hain’t ye met no man like, wot ye could care fur?”

Liz trembled and her eyes grew wild.

“Men!” she cried with bitterest scorn--“no men have come my way, only brutes!”

Jim stared, but was silent; he had no fit answer ready. Presently Liz spoke again more softly:

“Jim, do you know I went into a great church to-day?”

“Worse luck!” said Jim, sententiously. “Church ain’t no use nohow as fur as I can see.”

“There was a figure there, Jim,” went on Liz, earnestly, “of a Woman holding up a Baby, and people knelt down before it. What do you s’pose it was?”

“Can’t say!” replied the puzzled Jim. “Are ye sure ’twas a church? Most like ’twas a moo’sium.”

“No, no!” said Liz. “‘Twas a church for certain; there were folks praying

in it.”

“Ah, well!” growled Jim, gruffly, “much good may it do ’em! I’m not of the prayin’ sort. A woman an’ a babby, did ye say? Don’t ye get such cranky notions into yer head, Liz! Women an’ babbies are common enough--too common by a long chalk, an’ as for prayin’ to ’em--” Jim’s utter contempt and incredulity were too great for further expression, and he turned away, wishing her a curt “Good-night!”

“Good-night!” said Liz, softly, and long after he had left her, she still sat silent, thinking, thinking, with the baby asleep in her arms, listening to the rain as it dripped, dripped heavily, like clods falling on a coffin-lid. She was not a good woman--far from it. Her very motive in hiring the infant at so much a day was entirely inexcusable--it was simply to gain money upon false pretenses, by exciting more pity than would otherwise have been bestowed on her had she begged for herself alone, without a child in her arms. At first she had carried the baby about to serve as a mere trick of her trade, but the warm feel of its little helpless body against her bosom day after day had softened her heart toward its innocence and pitiful weakness, and at last she had grown to love it, with a strange, intense passion--so much that she would willingly have sacrificed her life for its sake. She knew that its own parents cared nothing for it, except for the money it brought them through her hands, and often wild plans would form in her poor tired brain--plans of running away with it altogether from the roaring, devouring city, to some sweet, humble country village, there to obtain work, and devote herself to making this little child happy. Poor Liz! Poor, bewildered, heart-broken Liz! Ignorant London heathen as she was, there was one fragrant flower blossoming in the desert of her soiled and wasted existence--the flower of a pure and guileless love for one of those “little ones” of whom it hath been said by an All-Pitying Divinity unknown to her: “Suffer them to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

The dreary winter days crept on apace, and as they drew near Christmas, dwellers in the streets leading off the Strand grew accustomed of nights to hear the plaintive voice of a woman singing in a peculiarly thrilling and pathetic manner some of the old songs and ballads familiar and dear to the heart of every Englishman--“The Banks of Allan Water,” “The Bailiff’s Daughter,” “Sally in our Alley,” “The Last Rose of Summer,” all these well-loved ditties she sung one after the other, and though her notes were neither fresh nor powerful, they were true and often tender, more particularly in the hackneyed but still captivating melody of “Home, Sweet Home.” Windows were opened and pennies freely showered on the street-vocalist, who was accompanied in all her wanderings by a fragile infant, which she seemed to carry with especial care and tenderness. Sometimes, too, in the bleak afternoons, she would be

seen wending her way through mud and mire, setting her weary face against the bitter east wind, and patiently singing on--and motherly women coming from the gay shops and stores where they had been purchasing Christmas toys for their own children would often stop to look at the baby's pinched white features with pity, and would say, while giving their spare pennies, "Poor little thing! Is it not very ill?" And Liz, her heart freezing with sudden terror, would exclaim hurriedly, "Oh, no, no! It is always pale; it is just a little bit weak, that's all!" And the kindly questioners, touched by the large despair of her dark eyes, would pass on and say no more. And Christmas came--the birthday of the Child-Christ--a feast, the sacred meaning of which was unknown to Liz; she only recognized it as a sort of large and somewhat dull bank-holiday, when all London devoted itself to church-going and the eating of roast beef and plum pudding. The whole thing was incomprehensible to her mind, but even her sad countenance was brighter than usual on Christmas eve, and she felt almost gay, for had she not, by means of a little extra starvation on her own part, been able to buy a wondrous gold and crimson worsted bird suspended from an elastic string, a bird which bobbed up and down to command in the most lively and artistic manner? And had not her hired baby actually laughed at the clumsy toy? laughed an elfish and weird laugh, the first it had ever indulged in? And Liz had laughed too, for pure gladness in the child's mirth, and the worsted bird became a sort of uncouth charm to make them both merry.

But after Christmas had come and gone, and the melancholy days, the last beating of the failing pulse of the Old Year throbbed slowly and heavily away, the baby took upon its wan visage a strange expression--the solemn expression of worn-out and suffering age. Its blue eyes grew more solemnly speculative and dreamy, and after a while it seemed to lose all taste for the petty things of this world and the low desires of mere humanity. It lay very quiet in Liz's arms; it never cried, and was no longer fretful, and it seemed to listen with a sort of mild approval to the tones of her voice as they rang out in the dreary streets through which, by day and night, she patiently wandered. By and by the worsted bird, too, fell out of favor; it jumped and glittered in vain; the baby surveyed it with an unmoved air of superior wisdom, just as if it had suddenly found out what real birds were like, and was not to be deceived into accepting so poor an imitation of nature. Liz grew uneasy, but she had no one in whom to confide her fears. She had been very regular in her payments to Mother Mawks, and that irate lady, kept in order by her bull-dog of a husband, had been of late very contented to let her have the child without further interference. Liz knew well enough that no one in the miserable alley where she dwelt would care whether the baby were ill or not. They would tell her, "the more sickly the better for your trade." Besides, she was jealous--she could not endure the idea of any one touching or tending it but herself. Children were

often ailing, she thought, and if left to themselves without doctor's stuff they recovered sometimes more quickly than they had sickened. Thus soothing her inward tremors as best she might, she took more care than ever of her frail charge, stinting herself that she might nourish it, though the baby seemed to care less and less for mundane necessities, and only submitted to be fed, as it were, under patient and silent protest.

And so the sands in Time's hour-glass ran slowly but surely away, and it was New Year's eve. Liz had wandered about all day singing her little *repertoire* of ballads in the teeth of a cruel, snow-laden wind--so cruel, that people, otherwise charitably disposed, had shut close their doors and windows, and had not even heard her voice. Thus the last span of the Old Year had proved most unprofitable and dreary; she had gained no more than sixpence; how could she return with only that humble amount to face Mother Mawks and her vituperative fury? Her throat ached--she was very tired, and as the night darkened from pale to deep and starless shadows, she strolled mechanically from the Strand to the Embankment, and after walking some little distance she sat down in a corner close to Cleopatra's Needle--that mocking obelisk that has looked upon the decay of empires, itself impassive, and that still appears to say, "Pass on, ye puny generations! I, a mere carven block of stone, shall outlive you all!" For the first time in all her experience the child in her arms seemed a heavy burden. She put aside her shawl and surveyed it tenderly; it was fast asleep, a small, peaceful smile on its thin, quiet face. Thoroughly worn out herself, she leaned her head against the damp stone wall behind her, and clasping the infant tightly to her breast, she also slept--the heavy, dreamless sleep of utter fatigue and physical exhaustion. The solemn night moved on, a night of black vapors; the pageant of the Old Year's death-bed was unbrightened by so much as a single star. None of the hurrying passers-by perceived the weary woman where she slept in that obscure corner, and for a long while she rested there undisturbed. Suddenly a vivid glare of light dazzled her eyes; she started to her feet half asleep, but still instinctively retaining the infant in her close embrace. A dark form, buttoned to the throat, and holding a brilliant bull's-eye lantern, stood before her.

"Come, now," said this personage, "this won't do! Move on!"

Liz smiled faintly and apologetically.

"All right!" she answered, striving to speak cheerfully and raising her eyes to the policeman's good-natured countenance, "I didn't mean to fall asleep here. I don't know how I came to do it. I must go home, of course."

"Of course!" said the policeman, somewhat mollified by her evident humility, and touched in spite of himself by the pathos of her eyes. Then turning his lamp more fully upon her, he continued. "Is that a baby you've got there?"

“Yes,” said Liz, half proudly, half tenderly. “Poor little dear! it’s been ailing sadly--but I think it’s better now than it was.”

And, encouraged by his friendly tone, she opened the folds of her shawl to show him her one treasure. The bull’s-eye came into still closer requisition, as the kindly guardian of the peace peered inquiringly at the tiny bundle. He had scarcely looked when he started back with an exclamation:

“God bless my soul!” he cried, “it’s dead!”

“*Dead!*” shrieked Liz, “oh, no, no! Not *dead!* *Don’t* say so, oh, don’t, *don’t* say so! Oh, you *can’t* mean it! Oh, for God’s love say you didn’t mean it! It can’t be dead, not really *dead*--no, no, indeed! Oh, baby, baby! You are not dead, my pet, my angel, not *dead*, oh, no!”

And breathless, frantic with fear, she felt the little thing’s hands and feet and face, kissed it wildly and called it by a thousand endearing names, in vain--in vain! Its tiny body was already stiff and rigid; it had been a corpse more than two hours.

The policeman coughed, and brushed his thick gauntlet glove across his eyes. He was an emissary of the law, but he had a heart. He thought of his bright-eyed wife at home, and of the soft-cheeked cuddling little creature that clung to her bosom and crowed with rapture whenever he came near.

“Look here,” he said, very gently, laying one hand on the woman’s shoulder as she crouched shivering against the wall and staring piteously at the motionless waxen form in her arms, “it’s no use fretting about it.” He paused--there was an uncomfortable lump in his throat and he had to cough again to get it down. “The poor little creature’s gone--there’s no help for it. The next world’s a better place than this, you know! There, there! don’t take on so about it,”--this as Liz shuddered and sighed--a sigh of such complete despair that it went straight to his honest soul and showed him how futile were his efforts at consolation. But he had his duty to attend to, and he went on in firmer tones: “Now, like a good woman, you just move off from here and go home. If I leave you here by yourself a bit, will you promise me to go straight home? I mustn’t find you here when I come back on this beat, d’ye understand?” Liz nodded. “That’s right!” he resumed, cheerily, “I’ll give you just ten minutes; you just go straight home.”

And with a “Good night,” uttered in accents meant to be comforting, he turned away and paced on, his measured tread echoing on the silence at first loudly, then fainter and fainter, till it altogether died away, as his bulky figure disappeared in the distance. Left to herself, Liz rose from her crouching posture; rocking the dead child in her arms, she smiled.

“Go straight home!” she murmured, half aloud. “Home, sweet home! Yes, baby; yes, my darling, we will go home together!”

And creeping cautiously along in the shadows, she reached a flight of the

broad stone steps leading down to the river. She descended them one by one; the black water lapped against them heavily, heavily; the tide was full up. She paused; a sonorous, deep-toned iron voice rang through the air with reverberating, solemn melody. It was the great bell of St. Paul's tolling midnight--the Old Year was dead.

"Straight home!" she repeated, with a beautiful expectant look in her wild, weary eyes. "My little darling! Yes, we are both tired, we will go home! Home, sweet home! We will go!"

Kissing the cold face of the baby corpse she held, she threw herself forward; there followed a sullen deep splash--a slight struggle--and all was over! The water lapped against the steps heavily, heavily as before; the policeman passed once more, and saw to his satisfaction that the coast was clear; through the dark veil of the sky one star looked out and twinkled for a brief instant, then disappeared again. A clash and clamor of bells startled the brooding night--here and there a window was opened and figures appeared in balconies to listen. They were ringing in the New Year--the festival of hope, the birthday of the world! But what were New Years to her who, with white, upturned face and arms that embraced an infant in the tenacious grip of death, went drifting, drifting solemnly down the dark river, unseen, unpitied of all those who awoke to new hopes and aspirations on that first morning of another life-probation! Liz had gone--gone to make her peace with God--perhaps through the aid of her "hired" baby--the little sinless soul she had so fondly cherished, gone to that sweetest "home" we dream of and pray for, where the lost and bewildered wanderers on this earth shall find true welcome and rest from grief and exile--gone to that fair, far Glory-World where reigns the Divine Master whose words still ring above the tumult of ages: "See that you despise not one of these little ones, for I say unto you that their angels do always behold the face of My Father who is in heaven!"

THE END.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Obvious errors and inconsistencies in punctuation have been corrected.

[The end of *The Hired Baby* by Mary Mackay as Marie Corelli]