

BEHOLD, I SHOW YOU A MYSTERY.

Two nurse-midwives sat over the fire in their cosy sitting room on Christmas Eve.

Country midwives, whose duties took them out long miles in all weather, at all times of day and night, sometimes on foot, sometimes on a "push bike," and quite recently since times were prosperous, a motor bicycle had eased the situation, where such a mode of transit was possible. Beautiful, beautiful country, glorious scenery—hilly, wild—scattered farm-houses—lonely cottages that would enrapture the soul of beauty-loving holiday makers, *but* on a dark windy, rainy night, somewhere about 2 a.m., when the night bell rang shrilly out, it somehow failed to appeal.

They were friends, these two, since the *old* days—not so very remote—of their Training School.

Different in character, in appearance and temperament, they still lived happily enough together.

They were, however, both smart and modern young women, well trained, good at their work, attentive to their patients, cheerful, rather slangy, and more than afraid of not being considered "up-to-date" if they *were* buried in the country. Rather soulless in fact!

So they after all had much in common.

On this particular evening, being festively inclined, they had filled their pretty room with glossy holly sprays richly supplied with scarlet berries, which could be had for the plucking on their daily rounds. They had exchanged their uniform and serviceable shoes for dainty slippers and "nude" silk stockings, with very abbreviated frocks.

"Let's forget babies for an hour or two," said the girl with shingled dark hair and rather hard, bright eyes, "and pray to goodness we shan't get a 'call' to-night."

"O! don't mention such a thing, old dear," returned the blue-eyed, whose charming head was "bingled"—as she lit up a cigarette. "It's such a relief to powder one's nose like other girls and get rid of the smell of disinfectant."

"Why do you suppose, Lamb, old thing, that we ever took up work in this forsaken hole?"

"Beats me, my dear, to explain! Sort of independent, and being together, and not the sort of round Inspectors are keen on, which is rather great. Good payers round these parts, too. We haven't done too badly this year. That Mrs. Jackson at Oak Farm is about the only one owing. Poor beggars, they've had a bad time lately."

"Can't live on sentiment, my dear. We'll have to round her up. Nothing to be done without dollars. If we insist *she'll* pay up all right."

"It would be rather nice to let her off," said the other thoughtfully, as she blew a ring of smoke into the air. "A baby every year is rather rough, and—O! hang it all it's Christmas!"

"Don't get sloppy, and turn on the gramophone, or I'll throw something at you that will hurt."

Nurse Lamb rose with a laugh that was half a sigh, and did as she was ordered, and soon the "Charleston" obliterated all unwelcome considerations.

After a supper of unusual luxury the two friends decided to turn in early and hope for the best and prepare for the worst. The "worst" happened.

Nurse Lamb had folded her best frock with great care, and removed with respect her silk stockings that had cost a ruinous sum, when the long whirr of the night bell proclaimed a case.

Nurse Carter, who had tumbled into bed with incredible speed and was already half asleep, called out with great insincerity, "Shall I go, Lamb?"

"No, certainly not. It's my turn. It's Mrs. Brown, I expect, at the cottage through the wood."

Her voice was heard speaking through the window, "All right, I won't be a second. You'd better wait for me."

"Rotten luck!" murmured Carter drowsily, as the door closed on her friend.

"Why are we such fools as to do this job?" raged Nurse Lamb inwardly, as she trudged beside the lumbering form of the farm hand and listened politely to how "the Missus was tuk bad somewheres about tea toime, but was in 'opes she'd last out till mornin' but oi sez, 'Better by far fetch the nurse now' oi sez, 'than wait till too late,' oi sez."

A poor cottage, a poor mother bearing her seventh child to share the scanty earnings of the farm hand.

Not a "good case" but the midwife's heart went out in sympathy to the tired woman awaiting her trial.

All her professional instincts were aroused by the prolonged waiting, consequent on underfeeding and debility.

Somehow silk stockings, cigarettes and "Charleston" became infinitely remote, and she was just a "Nurse" in her trim uniform with capable hands that manicure had no connection with.

The delay seemed likely to last some time, the mother had fallen into an exhausted slumber in the old rocking chair, and nurse sat on a low stool before the fire to wait events.

There was silence except for the crackling of the wood fire, darkness except for its glow, which made even the sordid room picturesque.

Still, and somehow beautiful.

She crooned without knowing why the Christmas hymn.

"With the poor and mean and lowly
Lived on earth our Saviour holy."

Gradually she became aware of mystery, and lifting her startled eyes she saw the poor room drowned in soft effulgence. The worn figure in the old rocking chair appeared young and beautiful, and from the meagre cot where lay the ex-baby, streamed rays of unutterable glory. The homely little shift shone with a whiteness that no fuller on earth could achieve.

It stretched out its little hands to her with infinite appeal. Could it be? Yes! the room was full of angels.

Strange words rose to her mind. "The Word was made Flesh and dwelt among us." What exactly did that mean?

"She wist not that it was true but thought she saw a vision."

The sound of a moan from the rocking chair brought her to her feet, and she became at once alert and skilful.

At daybreak another little child was born into the world. The midwife knelt and kissed its tiny feet. . . .

She walked home presently through the wood sparkling with hoar frost, with the dry twigs crackling under her feet.

It was all wonderful and holy. She had never felt like it before.

Her friend had breakfast and hot coffee ready in their charming sitting room. Christmas letters and presents were piled on the plates, for they were a popular pair. It was all pleasant and attractive in great contrast to the scene she had just left.

But something she had experienced in the labourer's cottage was lacking.

"You are all moony, Lamb. What's the matter? Go to bed and get a sleep. I'll see to the dinner."

Miss Lamb looked up at her friend, "I found out to-night," she said "that every child born into the world is a little Christ. For the first time I realise that our vocation is very holy."

Nurse Carter flicked the ash off her cigarette.

"You're quite mad, old thing. I'll have to take your temperature. Get to bed and sleep it off."

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