

"MA."

Old "Ma" took her usual place for the night under one of the arches in Covent Garden Market. Her place, mark you, by right of long tenancy. A desirable corner, not so exposed as some other spots in this grim sleeping-place. Moreover, she was less likely to be spotted by the "Bobby" as he toured his beat, and more often than not she escaped the "Move on now," dealt out to those less fortunately located. Even if the order was only temporarily obeyed, still, when one had disposed one's frowsy rags to the best advantage, with unspeakable packages arranged as a pillow, it was most annoying to have to assemble these same belongings under the glare of the official lantern, and to slink away a few paces, until the sound of the heavy retreating footsteps made it safe to re-arrange oneself. Is there any other place that is so incongruously assorted as the Market? Where the ravishing beauty of rare and delicate blossoms, with their intoxicating perfumes, and bewilderingly seductive fruits, intermingle with the hoarse throaty cries of the traders, interspersed freely with language far from parliamentary—where from under the horses' hoofs, dodging among innumerable vans, through London slush and vegetable refuse, one emerges into a very fairy-land of beauty.

"Ma" one surmises—maybe incorrectly—was not affected by environment or atmosphere. God knows what attitude of mind she and her kind have towards existence.

At any rate, for her the Market at that moment was not the hub of the floral and vegetable commerce; it was a dark and chill doss-house for a few privileged habitués. One bitter night a kind but mistaken lady had endeavoured to persuade "Ma" to seek, at her expense, a night's lodging more suitable to her age and the inclement weather; but "Ma" hurled such a volley of epithets at the disturber of her slumber that the kind lady fled in dismay.

"Deprive her of liberty on Christmas Eve? Why, that was her 'arvest, that was. What did she mean by that? Why she sang 'No Hell, no Hell,' for a few 'a'pence, and she'd thank the intruder to let her get off to sleep."

That incident had taken place some years back, and now it was Christmas Eve again. The same old place. The same old "Ma."

The place had altered not at all, in spite of rumours as to its transfer; but "Ma" had.

She was, of course, older and feebler, more frowsy, if possible, and more obstinate.

It took longer to dispose her pain-racked limbs in their hard resting-place. "Can't get comfortable nohow." Policemen, you know, are quite human inside their tunics, and the particular P.C. on this beat turned a blind eye to the stubborn old woman in her corner.

"It ain't no manner of use to talk to 'Ma'," he said to himself, as he pulled up his cape against the searching wind.

The bells of St. Martin's must have said something to him—for he did a most unprofessional thing—which must on no account come to the ears of the "Yard"—he stopped at a coffee stall and purchased a hot meat pie. "Cold night," he said, carelessly, "one wants something hot to eat."

Concealing it under his cape, he retraced his steps, past "Ma's" sleeping place, and dropped it into her lap as he passed.

She swore fluently as the heat came into contact with her grimy hand, and proceeded to investigate the cause.

"A 'ot pie," she thought feebly. "'Ow did it get there? Must be Gawd." She began to cry weakly, "Thank 'ee, Gawd." She tried to think of long-forgotten prayers.

"Ding, dong," rang out the bells; then they changed into "While shepherds watched their flocks by night."

"I knew that toon," she muttered. "While shepherds washed their frocks." She essayed a note or two in her hoarse, cracked voice. "Used to sing that at school Christmas time."

Now the bells were ringing out wild peals of joy, resounding through the great city, where so much mirth and sorrow, goodness and sin, luxury and poverty, were mingled. The night and "Ma" were growing colder.

A starved black kitten came stealing up, and rubbed tentatively against "Ma's" unsavoury person. No doubt it had divined the "'ot pie."

The bells were saying all sorts of things to all kinds of people, and to "Ma" they said that the little furry creature was like herself, friendless and cold.

She fed it on morsels of the pie, and unchided it snuggled down beside her, and purred, while she, half unconscious, croaked with the bells. So they sang in their ignorance their duet of glory to God, Who had sent His dear Son into the world that needed Him so sorely.

Some hours later, P.C. X.Z. 004, on his last round, flashed his lamp into "Ma's" corner.

"Gosh, if old 'Ma' ain't dead," he exclaimed.

As a person of his calling has before all things to be practical, he hurried off to get a hand ambulance to remove the unsightly object to the mortuary, before it should offend anyone's susceptibilities. As they lifted her, a little stiff, furry body fell to the ground.

After having performed this unpleasant duty, and leaving poor old "Ma" in surroundings as inhospitable as the Market arch, P.C. Z. hurried home to keep the Christmas festivities with his own particular little budding police force.

Shouts of delight arose when Daddy entered his flat in the "Buildings," and having divested himself of his insignia of office, he laid aside with it all thoughts connected with his official duties.

Being Christmas Day, he yielded to the entreaties of his family, and consented to take his rest by the fireside instead of retiring to his bed.

The youngsters departed to compare notes and to exhibit the contents of their stockings to their cronies in the square below.

All was quiet in the parlour, except for the occasional dropping of a cinder or the crackle of the fire. Much against his will, as he sat there, the figure of old "Ma" rose up before his drowsy eyes.

Filthy, blear-eyed old "Ma," clad in her repulsive rags. In her arm she hugged the little starved kitten. She was talking in her hoarse croak, and an incredibly sweet Voice was answering her.

P.C. became aware of something unusual and he strained eyes and ears.

The voices seemed to float into space, and the figures became misty.

He couldn't catch the words that "Ma" was uttering through her sobs, but in the dimness he could see a Hand, stretched out and laid on the little cat in her arms, and the beautiful Voice said quite distinctly, "One of the least of these, My brethren."

He could just discern a kneeling figure—"Ma's," but transformed, and the Hand was now resting on her head, that was no longer frowsy, and the Voice was saying, "Poor old 'Ma.' Ye did it unto Me."

P.C. stirred in his chair, and rubbed his eyes. Childish voices were crying: "Wake up, Daddy. We're just going to light the Christmas Tree, and we want to put some chestnuts on the fire, if you will just move a teeny bit."

"Very rum, very rum, indeed," said Daddy; but he was not alluding to the chestnuts.

H. H.

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