

BETHLEHEM EVERYWHERE.

"Ush-a-by, 'Ush-a-by," sang ugly little Norah Maloney, as she sat on the step of a doorway in the vicinity of Drury Lane. It was late one evening just before Christmas, but she was perfectly unconscious that it was dark, cold and damp, for she was only too well accustomed to such like conditions.

Mothers turn at the "Baths" was latish and she had not very long disappeared within its steamy portals with the family wash piled up on a ricketty push-car, which tried its endurance to the utmost.

"Rest me legs, dear?" she had that afternoon exclaimed to the Sister at the Hospital, "'ow can I with thirteen to wash for?"

It is not recorded that Sister made any attempt to solve the problem.

Norah, luckily brought up the rear in the family, so in lieu of "my baby" which is the doubtful blessing, but undoubted pride of the slum child, she sang to the make-shift in her arms.

With grave concern, she arranged to the best advantage the grubby piece of lace curtain, which was the one-piece suit of the object of her solicitude. Alternately she coaxed and scolded it, in quaint imitation of the mother in her particular circle. "Bless 'er 'eart. Who would 'urt 'em. They never 'arsted to come. 'Ere stop that noise, and 'ave yer dummy, my 'ead's fair splittin'."

A young man journalist who was out for "copy" for his article on "How the Poor Exist" was an amused and interested eavesdropper of the miniature mother, as she bent her smuggy face with its doubtful nose over the bundle in her arms.

"Well, I'm jiggered," he exclaimed forgetting he was a responsible journalist. "Poor little kid!" for a gust of wind suddenly revealed that the object in her arms, so tenderly nurtured, was nothing more "cuddly" than a ginger beer bottle. Leaving Norah in blissful ignorance of the realities, he disappeared into the gloom resolving to work on the public imagination in to-morrow's *Daily Inventor*.

He was not an ordinary young man, for he sometimes "dreamed dreams and saw visions," and occasionally thought of others before himself. So that after he had written his article, he sat down before his solitary fire, and fell into a reverie on the pathos of the Norahs of life—though he didn't know her name was Norah—and how unfair it was that their portion of dolls should be non-existent. Such a lot of dolls as there were in London too! Only yesterday he had been through the toy bazaar of a big store. Big dolls, little dolls, baby dolls, black dolls, French dolls, dolls in fancy dress. Dear me! Almost a nightmare of dolls!—Norah with a ginger beer bottle!

Dolls priced at £5 5s. Dolls at 6d.

Couldn't the child even have a sixpenny baby?

What a fool he had been not to have given one, but then of course the shops had been shut.

His imagination was beginning to play tricks.

The dolls were having a fancy ball. The Fairy Queen was dancing with Teddy Tail. Pipp and Squeak were getting up the Lancers. Norah was doing jazz with the ginger beer bottle and tripping over the lace curtain.

How silly she looked. It wasn't fair. Why should she be made to look silly? She ought to have had the little Scotch Laddie for a partner.

Hey presto! The dolls were all hanging on a Christmas Tree. The room was full of gaily dressed children and Father Christmas was distributing the dolls to them; who had many more at home. Among the crowd was little Norah in her shabby frock. Her nose still unpleasant.

Father Christmas seemed not to see her. She had eaten of the Tree of Knowledge and she held her ginger beer

bottle despondently, knowing it now to be a bottle minus the ginger.

The tears were running down her face as she stood a forlorn little figure in that butterfly crowd. "I did so want a baby," she sobbed. The room was empty now, save for Norah who still lingered. One by one the lights went out on the tree and all was dark. Gradually, however it became suffused with soft radiance. The loveliest Baby Child lay among the branches. Norah held her breath in ecstasy.

"Baby, O Baby!" she cried. "Are you for me?"

"I am the world's Baby," It said. "And for the joy of all the little Norahs of life, I came down from Heaven."

The young journalist roused to find himself rather cold in front of the dying fire.

"If I comb all Holborn out," he said. "I will find that kid and give her a baby doll for her Christmas stocking."

Mrs. Maloney was finishing the ironing for her thirteen on Christmas Eve; to be exact she was at Norah's "pinny" when a masculine figure filled up her doorway. She had an uneasy consciousness of being behind in her rent, Maloney having been unfortunate owing to the weather.

Behind her visitor trailed Norah, still hugging her make-believe baby.

"Look 'ere young man, if you've come after the rent it ain't no manner of use to expect it this side of Christmas. I've been 'ard put to it to get to-morrow's dinner for the children."

"What you got in that there parcel?" said Norah, who had edged her way past the man in the door-way.

"Don't be rude now. You'll have a good 'idin' me lady if you don't mind yourself."

"I haven't anything to do with the rent," assured the visitor hurriedly, "but I found your little girl, and er—I thought she'd like this, if you will let her have it."

He laid the parcel down by the clean pinny. Mrs. Maloney eyed it suspiciously for some seconds, and then gingerly began to undo the string.

The discarded wrappings gradually revealed a baby doll. "Now ain't that 'andsome?" exclaimed Mrs. Maloney. "But there ain't no sense fetchin' it 'ere. I ain't got money to waste on dolls."

Norah was performing a perfect war dance of suppressed desire, and burst into howls of longing. "Man," she cried. "Yer did bring it for me. Didn't yer? Didn't yer?"

"Yes, little girl," he said quietly. "Don't worry mother, there's nothing to pay."

Feeling that to linger would be superfluous, he turned and left hurriedly leaving his gift beside the pinny.

Mrs. Maloney on relating the incident to the lady upstairs, remarked that he seemed a "armless young man," but she should say "a bit barmy."

Norah was threatened with lurid punishments if she so much as laid a finger on the doll before to-morrow, when she would be washed and have on her clean pinny. She retired to the couch which she shared with various other Maloneys and cried herself to sleep with the ginger beer bottle in its lace attire clasped in her arms.

But she had lovely dreams! Soon too it was morning! She was dressed in her clean pinny with a pink bow in her red hair, and then O then—the baby doll!

She carried it, bursting with pride to the Children's Mass. The Padre, an understanding man, suffered her without rebuke, for he knew that the Blessed Lord whose Birthday it was, loved to see His little children happy, for He was a Child of poverty like them and played at Mary's feet with His simple toys.

"Hail Altar of Jesus!
Young men and old draw near
See in the Mystic Presence
Bethlehem everywhere.
Hail, gentle Jesus "

H. H.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)