

A CHRISTMAS STORY.

P.C. X.43 turned out on his beat on Christmas Eve.

It was what Christmas weather ought to be and seldom is, bright, clear and starlit, with more than a touch of frost.

Our P.C. was a philosopher with a human spot under his official uniform, which enabled him to keep kindly and tolerant, in spite of experiences which might well have extinguished these virtues.

Being what he was, he turned out of his cheery flat in the "buildings," where his comfortable wife was making the final preparations for the morrow, with good-humoured acceptance of his duty, without a touch of self-pity.

"Plenty worse, mother," he replied to his wife's lament that it was "too bad" to think that London couldn't look after itself for *one* night in the year.

"Mustn't grumble my dear, I mightn't have a home to come back to, like those poor wretches I see sleepin' rough, and afraid as even that cold comfort might be took from them. God gave us eyelids, mother, as well as eyes, which means you needn't see all as you sees, when it don't harm nobody." He gave his kindly chuckle, but his moralising was lost on "mother" who was not imaginative and was concentrating on mince pies.

He gave his better half a hearty kiss, took a last look at his sleeping children lying with unconscious blissful expressions in anticipation of to-morrow's joys.

His eyes twinkled with satisfaction as he noted the coveted gun emerging from Jack's stocking and the baby doll peeping out of Rosie's. Having adjusted his lantern and truncheon P.C. sallied out into the night.

He had a varied beat and soon found himself in the midst of a gay crowd of late shoppers. Laughing housewives with baskets who had come out to secure last moment bargains, and who lingered to admire and maybe covet the wares of the street hawkers who were vying with each other as to who could shout the loudest.

Mickey Mouse, Charlie Chaplin, motor cars, fascinating little dogs, tumbling clowns and other mechanical toys, jostled one another on the pavement, and were only retrieved by their owners just in time to avert disaster!

Flower sellers—"Lovely roses, dear, lovely lilies. Holly a penny a spray. Piece of mistletoe, dear, only a penny."

P.C. walked stolidly on with an occasional "Move on there," and an occasional movement to thrust back encroachers on the pavement, who surged forward again so soon as his burly figure had passed.

Passed the public bar, full to overflowing, men jostling with unkempt women, whose shivering children clustered round the doorway, looking wistfully at the light and warmth within and wishing they too could share it.

P.C. shook his head impatiently as the picture he had just left of his own children rose to his mind.

Passed the church, where the bells were ringing merrily to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child, whose birthday was being kept in such bewilderingly contradictory ways.

P.C. was a religious man and he looked in at the door rather longingly where the tapers were being lit and scent of lovely blossoms was wafted on the air. But to Labour is to Pray, and his solid footsteps led him along the path of duty.

Passed theatres just emptying, where the élite from the stalls, many charmingly dressed, waited in complacent certainty that their cars were somewhere in the vicinity, and where merry folk from pit and gallery made dashes for the nearest bus or tube, chattering, laughing, well content.

Passed the all-night restaurant, caught snatches of the latest popular air, and the smell of pleasant food.

Passed again down a side street on to the Embankment and regarded with a pang of compassion the miserable

figures huddled on the seats and recesses of the bridge. Young, hopeless faces, old hardened faces sharing the same hard fate.

"Beats me," he said to himself. "It's a problem, that's what it is."

Came along at this moment a travelling coffee stall, drawn by a small car, with shining urns which steamed attractively, and piles of meat pies and plum pudding.

P.C. as became his duty stopped to watch developments.

Out of the car emerged a hatless young man in a tweed coat and a scarf of his college colours wound round his neck. He was closely followed by another figure resembling his, but whose sex was determined by her slim feet.

"Here, old thing," said the male voice, "this seems a typical pitch; there seems some fair samples of the blokes you yearn after, but they all seem asleep. How do we get busy?"

"Leave it to me," replied a clear girl's voice. "You're sure to make a mess of it. You shove out the goods, and I'll hand 'em round."

She approached what appeared to be a feminine figure and laid a slim manicured hand on its shoulder.

"Hem! Missis!"

The bleary eyes opened and regarded her with hostile anger.

"Blast yer! Wot business is it of yours? If the perlice leaves me be, why do you come meddlin'? No, I ain't comin' to no missions. Yer can't fill your stummick with 'ymns."

"But I ain't *arstin* you to come to no missions" said the pretty voice. "Me and my young man here thought, as it was Christmas Eve," here the voice relapsed into its natural vernacular, "we would like to do something to help other folks, so we hired this van, and there's heaps of grub on it."

By this time the other occupants of the "bed-sitts" were aroused, and were looking curiously round at the two young figures as they stood in the light of the head lights.

Out of the darkness sounded a voice as if it belonged to a sometime actor. "I'm sure, Madam, I for one am very grateful to you. I assure you that this will be the first food I shall have tasted to-day. I'm sorry," he said, "the old girl was so unmannerly. We're not all like that."

The coffee and pies were by this time circulating freely, and so bountifully was the stall equipped that there was enough and to spare.

A chorus of thanks in different keys and culture, or lack of it, followed them as the depleted van moved slowly into the darkness—or was there a light hovering over it?

"No end of a rag," said the Hon. Richard, "a great scheme of yours, old dear. I wouldn't have exchanged the sight of those poor devils stuffin' themselves for the finest Cup Final."

Lady Mary manœuvred her cigarette to a more convenient angle for conversation. "Dick," she said, "don't laugh, but when we're married we'll do things like this sometimes, won't we. It's pretty rotten, isn't it, to dress and eat and amuse yourself *all* the time, when folks are so miserable."

"Bless you, my angel! You shall do what you jolly well like for ever and ever. And now what about a spot of slumber?"

"You're rather a darling, Dick, aren't you. Good night, and a Happy Christmas."

"Well," said P.C. as he stumped along in search of fresh experiences, "I must say they seemed a very nice young couple. Courtin' seemingly. Good luck to them. A pity there ain't more like 'em."

He turned once more into the more crowded thoroughfare, where the waits were carolling:—

"They who now will bless the poor
Shall themselves find blessing."

H. H.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)