

THE HIRED BABY.

A Romance of London Streets.

BY MARIE CORELLI.

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 in 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 gaslight 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 its 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 windows. 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 to itself—“Done up for show!” to all who cared to examine its exterior—to 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. In 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 off!”

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 dropped 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 specks 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 sank 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 betrayor 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 unmingled with reckless sensuality. She sat for a moment 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. 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 wildness. It lay quiet, without a 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'll 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 cozy 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 ermine, and gradually her eyes wandered 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 odorless, that had been left there by some reverent worshipper. 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 baby?”

At that moment the woman 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 infinitely more 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 her astonished supplicant. “You are happier than I am; perhaps you will pray for me! I am very lonely!”

Then dropping her long ermine 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 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 mysterious 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! Any way, 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 outdoor 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 of 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 gayly, half boldly:—

“You ought to do better than that with those big eyes of yours!” She drew back and sniggered; 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 gal, fork out! How much 'ave you 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 your baby!”

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 fourcepence! None of your sneakin' ways with me; a bargain's a bargain all the world over! You're makin' a fortin' with my baby—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 anywhere, an' it's the sickly kids wot pays an' moves the 'arts of the kynd 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 change, 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 pence 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 to-night?”

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 impertence! 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-sodden 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 blown into the middle of next week first! Lor' a' mussey! 'ow 'igh an' mighty we are gittin' to be sure! The baby'll be quiet with you, Miss Liz; will it, indeed! An' it will cry an' fret with its hown mother, will it, indeed! And at every sentence she approached Liz more nearly, increasing in fury as she advanced. “Yer low hussy! Dye think I'd let yer 'ave my baby 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! G! me the baby; ye an't no business to keep it a mimit longer!” and she made a grab at Liz's sheltering shawl.

(To be Continued.)

The Schnapper of Australia.

The king of Australian fishes is undoubtedly the schnapper. We speak not now of the trumpeter of Tasmania nor of the blue cod of New Zealand, about which the inhabitants of these colonies are not unannaturally proud. Judging by his shape, the schnapper is an ugly fish. His color is good, but his proportions are not fair as he lies on the slab of the fishmonger. In your first introduction to a ten pound schnapper on the end of your line he strikes you as an interesting acquaintance of whom you would like to know more. On your subsequent intimacy at table you forget much of his unsightliness. He is, however, gibbous and unsymmetrical, having a strange lump on his head, which gives him a startled appearance. This fish is always caught with rod and line, and the manner of his taking is peculiar.

The home of the schnapper is in the deep sea, generally a considerable distance from the shore and in the immediate neighborhood of a shelving reef. Good schnapper fishing may, however, be had from the rocks of the mainland or an island. Every holiday in Sydney there are hundreds who go forth to fish for schnappers. For this purpose it is usual to club funds and charter a small steamer. By this means the expense is lessened, while the party is made more enjoyable. The bait is usually the flesh of mullet or other fish cut up.—Chambers' Journal.

How He Got There.

“So our friend Bushler went to the top of Mont Blanc!” said one man to another.

“Not at all.”

“But he said so.”

“True. Two months ago, when he returned from Switzerland, he said he had been at the foot of Mont Blanc. Since then he has gradually slid himself to the top.”

—Pink Me Up.

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