

THE HIRED BABY.

A Romance of London Streets.

BY MARIE CORELLI.

"Oh, don't hurt it!" pleaded Liz, tremblingly. "Such a little thing; don't hurt it!"

Mother Mawks stared so wildly that her blood-shot eyes seemed protruding from her head.

"Urt it! Hain't I a right to do wot I likes with my hown baby? Urt it! Well, I never! Look ere!" and she turned round on the assembled neighbors.

"Hain't she a reg'lar one! She don't care for the law, not she! She's keepin' back a child from its hown mother!" And with that she made a fierce attack on the shawl and succeeded in dragging the infant from Liz's reluctant arms.

Wakened thus roughly from its slumbers, the poor mite set up a feeble wailing; it's mother, enraged at the sound, shook it violently till it gasped for breath.

"Drat the little beast!" she cried. "Why don't it choke an' 've done with it!"

And without heeding the terrified remonstrances of Liz, she flung the child roughly, as though it were a ball, through the open door of her lodgings, where it fell on a heap of dirty clothes, and lay motionless; its wailing had ceased.

"Oh, baby, baby!" exclaimed Liz, in accents of poignant distress. "Oh! you have killed it, I am sure! Oh, you are cruel, cruel! Oh, baby, baby!"

And she broke into a tempestuous passion of sobs and tears. The bystanders looked on in unmoved silence. Mother Mawks gathered her torn garments round her with a gesture of defiance, and sniffed the air as though she said, "Any one who wants to meddle with me will get the worst of it."

There was a brief pause; suddenly a man staggered out of the gin shop, smearing the back of his hand across his mouth as he came—a massively built, ill-favored brute with a shock of uncombed red hair, and small, ferret-like eyes. He stared stupidly at the weeping Liz, then at Mother Mawks, finally from one to the other of the leaders who stood by.

"Wot's the row?" he demanded, thickly. "Wot's up? 'Ave it out fair! Joe Mawks'll stand by and see fair game. Fire away, my hearties! fire, fire away!"

And with a checking, idiot laugh he dived into the pocket of his torn corduroy trousers and produced a pipe. Filling this leisurely from a greasy pouch, with such unsteady fingers that the tobacco dropped all over him, he lighted it, repeating with increased thickness of utterance, "Wot's the row? 'Ave it out fair!"

"It's about your baby, Joe!" cried the girl before mentioned, jumping up from her seat on the ground with such force that her hair came tumbling all about her in a dark, dank mist, through which her thin, eager face spitefully peered.

"Liz has gone crazy! She wants your baby to cuddle!" And she screamed with sudden laughter. "Eh, eh, fancy! Wants a baby to cuddle!"

The stupefied Joe blinked drowsily and sucked the stem of his pipe with apparent relish. Then, as if he had been engaged in deep meditation on the subject, he removed his smoky consolator from his mouth, and said, "W'y not? Wants a baby to cuddle? All right! Let 'er 'ave it—w'y not?"

At these words Liz looked up hopefully through her tears, but Mother Mawks darted forward in raving indignation.

"Yer great drunken fool!" she yelled, to her besotted spouse, "aren't yer ashamed of yerself? Wot! Let out yer baby for a whole night for nuthin'! It's lucky I've got my wits about me; an' I say Liz shan't 'ave it! There now!"

The man looked at her and a dogged resolution darkened his repulsive countenance. He raised his big fist, clinched it, and hit straight out, giving his infuriated wife a black eye in much less than a minute. "An' I say she shall 'ave it. Where are ye now?"

In answer to the query Mother Mawks might have said that she was "all there," for she returned her husband's blow with interest and force, and in a couple of seconds the happy pair were engaged in a "stand-up" fight, to the intense admiration and excitement of all the inhabitants of the little alley. Every one in the place thronged to watch the combatants and to hear the blasphemous oaths and curses with which the battle was accompanied.

In the midst of the affray, a wizened, bent old man, who had been sitting at his door sorting rags in a basket, and apparently taking no heed of the clamor around him, made a sign to Liz.

"Take the kid now," he whispered. "Nobody'll notice. I'll see they don't cry after ye." Liz thanked him mutely by a look, and rushing to the house where the child still lay, seemingly inanimate, she caught it up eagerly and hurried away to her own poor garret in a tumble-down tenement at the furthest end of the alley.

her breast, she looked cautiously out of her narrow window, and perceived that the connubial fight was over. From the shouts of laughter and plaudits that reached her ears, Joe Mawks had evidently won the day; his wife had disappeared from the field. She saw the little crowd dispersing, most of those who composed it entering the gin shop, and very soon the alley was comparatively quiet and deserted. By and by she heard her name called in a low voice: "Liz! Liz!"

She looked down and saw the old man who had promised her his protection in case Mother Mawks should persecute her. "Is that you, Jim? Come upstairs, it's better than talking out there." He obeyed, and stood before her in the wretched room, looking curiously both at her and the baby. A wiry, wolfish-faced being was Jim Duds, as he was familiarly called, though his own name was the aristocratic and singularly inappropriate one of James Douglas; he was more like an animal than a human creature, with his straggling gray hair, bushy beard, and sharp-teeth protruding like fangs from beneath his upper lip.

"Mother Mawks has got it this time," he said, with a grin, which was more like a snarl. "Joe's blood was up and he pounded her nigh into a jelly. She'll leave ye quiet now; so long as ye pay the hire reg'lar ye'll have Joe on yer side. If so be as there's a bad day, ye'd better not come home at all."

"I know," said Liz, "but she's always had the money for the child, and surely it wasn't much to ask her to let me keep it warm on such a cold night as this."

Jim Duds looked meditative. "Wot makes yer care for that baby so much?" he asked. "Tain't your'n."

Liz sighed. "No," she said, sadly. "That's true. But it seems something to hold on to like. See what my life has been!" She stopped, and a wave of color flushed her pallid features. "From a little girl, nothing but the streets—the long cruel streets! and I just a bit of dirt on the pavement—no more; flung here, flung there, and at last swept into the gutter. All dark—all useless!" She laughed a little. "Fancy, Jim! I've never seen the country!"

"Nor I," said Jim, biting a piece of straw reflectively. "It must be powerful fine, with naught but green trees an' posies a-blowin' an' a-growin' everywhere. There ain't many kitching areas there, though, I'm told."

Liz went on, scarcely heeding him: "The baby seems to me like what the country must be—all harmless and sweet and quiet; when I hold it so, my heart gets peaceful somehow—I don't know why."

Again Jim looked speculative. He waved his bitten straw expressively. "Ye've had 'perience, Liz. Hain't ye met no man like, wot ye could care fur?"

Liz trembled and her eyes grew wild. "Men!" she cried with bitterest scorn—"no men have come my way, only brutes!"

Jim stared but was silent; he had no fit answer ready. Presently Liz spoke again more softly:—"Jim, do you know I went into a great church to-day?"

"Worse luck!" said Jim, sententiously. "Church ain't no use nowhow as fur as I can see."

"There was a figure there, Jim," went on Liz earnestly, "of a Woman holding up a Baby, and people knelt down before it. What do you s'pose it was?"

"Can't say!" replied the puzzled Jim. "Are ye sure 'twas a church? Most like 'twas a mooseum."

"No, no!" said Liz. "'Twas a church for certain; there were folks praying in it."

"Ah, well!" growled Jim, gruffly. "Much good may it do 'em! I'm not of the prayin' sort. A woman an' a baby, did ye say? Don't ye get such cranky notions into yer head, Liz! Women an' babies are common enough—too common by a long chalk, an' as for prayin' to 'em—" Jim's utter contempt and incredulity were too great for further expression, and he turned away, wishing her a curt "Good-night!"

"Good-night!" said Liz, softly, and long after he had left her she still sat silent, thinking, thinking, with the baby asleep in her arms, listening to the rain as it dripped, dripped heavily, like clods falling on a coffin-lid. She was not a good woman—far from it. Her very motive in hiring the infant at so much a day was entirely inexcusable—it was simply to gain money upon false pretences, by exciting more pity than would otherwise have been bestowed on her had she begged for herself alone, without a child in her arms. At first she had carried the baby about to serve as a mere trick of her trade, but the warm feel of its little helpless body against her bosom day after day had softened her heart toward its innocence and pitiful weakness, and at last she had grown to love it, with a strange, intense passion—so much that she would willingly have sacrificed her life for its sake. She knew that its own parents cared nothing for it, except for the money it brought them through her hands, and often wild plans would form in her poor tired brain—plans of running away with it altogether from the roaring, devouring city, to some sweet, humble country village, there to obtain work and devote herself to making this little child happy. Poor Liz! Poor, bewildered, heart-broken Liz! Ignorant London heathen as she was, there was one fragrant flower blossoming in the desert of her sordid and wasted existence—the flower of a pure and guileless love for one of these "little ones" of whom it hath been said by an All-pitying Divinity unknown to her: "Suffer them to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

The dreary winter days crept apace, and as they drew near Christmas, dwellers in the streets leading to the Strand grew accustomed of nights to hear the plaintive voice of a woman singing in a peculiarly thrilling and pathetic manner some of the old songs and ballads familiar and dear to the heart of every Englishman—"The Banks of Allan Water."

"The Ballif's Daughter," "Sally in Our Alley," "The Last Rose of Summer"; all these well-loved ditties she sang one after the other, and though her notes

were neither fresh nor powerful, they were true and often tender, more particularly in the hackneyed, but still captivating melody of "Home, Sweet Home." Windows were opened and pennies freely showered on the street vocalist, who was accompanied in all her wanderings by a fragile infant, which she seemed to carry with especial care and tenderness. Sometimes, too, in the bleak afternoons, she would be seen wending her way through mud and mire, setting her weary face against the bitter east wind, and patiently singing on—and motherly women coming from the gay shops and stores, where they had been purchasing Christmas toys for their own children, would often stop to look at the baby's pinched, white features with pity, and would say, while giving their spare pennies, "Poor little thing! Is it not very ill?" And Liz, her heart freezing with sudden terror, would exclaim hurriedly, "Oh, no, no! It is always pale; it is just a little bit weak, that's all!" And the kindly questioners, touched by the large despair of her dark eyes, would pass on and say no more. And Christmas came—the birthday of the Child-Christ—a feast, the sacred meaning of which was unknown to Liz; she only recognized it as a sort of large and somewhat dull bank-holiday, when all London devoted itself to church-going and the eating of roast beef and plum pudding.

But after Christmas had come and gone, and the melancholy days, the last beating of the falling pulse of the Old Year throbbed slowly and heavily away, the baby took upon its wan visage a strange expression—the solemn expression of worn-out and suffering age. Its blue eyes grew more solemnly speculative and dreamy, and after awhile it seemed to lose all taste for the petty things of this world and the low desires of mere

humanity. It lay very quiet in Liz's arms; it never cried, and was no longer fretful, and it seemed to listen with a sort of mild approval to the tones of her voice as they rang out in the dreary streets through which, by day and night, she patiently wandered. By and by the worsted bird, too, fell out of favor; it jumped and glittered in vain; the baby surveyed it with an unmoved air of superior wisdom, just as if it had suddenly found out what real birds were like, and was not to be deceived into accepting so poor an imitation of nature. Liz grew uneasy, but she had no one in whom to confide her fears. She had been very regular in her payments to Mother Mawks, and that irate lady, kept in order by her bull-dog of a husband, had been of late very contented to let her have the child without further interference. Liz knew well enough that no one in the miserable alley where she dwelt would care whether the baby were ill or not. They would tell her, "she more sickly the better: for your trade."

And so the sands in Time's hour glass ran slowly but surely away, and it was New Year's eve. Liz had wandered about all day singing her little repertoire of ballads in the teeth of a cruel, snow-laden wind—so cruel, that people, otherwise charitably disposed, had shut close their doors and windows, and not even heard her voice. Thus the last span of the Old Year had proved most unprofitable and dreary; she had gained no more than sixpence; she could see return with only that humble amount to face Mother Mawks and her vituperative fury! Her throat ached—she was very tired, and as the night darkened from pale to deep and starless shadows, she strolled mechanically from the Strand to the Embankment, and after walking some little distance she sat down in a corner close to Cleopatra's Needle—that mocking obelisk that has looked upon the decay of empires, itself impassive, and that still appears to say, "Pass on, ye puny generations! I, a mere caravan block of stone, shall outlive you all!"

For the first time in all her experience the child in her arms seemed a heavy burden. She put aside her shawl and surveyed it tenderly; it was fast asleep, a small, peaceful smile on its thin, quiet face. Thoroughly worn out herself, she leaned her head against the damp stone wall behind her, and clasping the infant tightly to her breast, she also slept—the heavy, dreamless sleep of utter fatigue and physical exhaustion.

Suddenly a vivid glare of light dazzled her eyes; she started, to her feet half asleep, but still insidiously retaining the infant in her close embrace. A dark form, buttoned to the throat, and holding a brilliant bull's-eye lantern, stood before her.

"Come, now," said this personage, "this won't do! Move on!"

"All right!" she answered, striving to speak cheerfully and raising her eyes to the policeman's good-natured countenance, "I didn't mean to fall asleep here. I don't know how I came to do it. I must go home, of course."

"Of course," said the policeman, somewhat mollified by her evident humility, and touched in spite of himself by the pathos of her eyes. Then turning his lamp more fully upon her, he continued, "Is that a baby you've got there?"

"Yes," said Liz, half proudly, half tenderly. "Poor little dear! it's been ailing sadly—but I think it's better now than it was."

And, encouraged by his friendly tone, she opened the folds of her shawl to show him her one treasure. The bull's-eye came into still closer requisition, as the kindly guardian of the peace peered inquiringly at the tiny bundle. He had scarcely looked when he started back with an exclamation:—"God bless my soul!" he cried, "it's dead!"

"Dead!" shrieked Liz, "oh, no, no! Not dead! Don't say so, oh, don't say so! Oh, you can't mean it! Oh, for God's love you say you didn't mean it! It can't be dead, not really dead—no, no, indeed! Oh, baby, baby! You are not dead, my pet, my angel, not dead, oh, no!"

And breathless, frantic with fear, she felt the little thing's hands and feet and face, kissed it wildly and called it by a thousand endearing names, in vain—in vain! Its tiny body was already stiff and rigid; it had been a corpse more than two hours.

The policeman coughed, and brushed his thick gauntlet glove across his eyes. He was an emissary of the law, but he had a heart. He thought of his bright-

eyed wife at home, and of the soft-checked, cuddling little creature that clung to her bosom and crowed with rapture whenever he came near.

"Look here," he said, very gently, laying one hand on the woman's shoulder as she crouched shivering against the wall, and staring piteously at the motionless waxen form in her arms, "it's no use fretting about it." He paused—there was an uncomfortable lump in his throat, and he had to cough again to get it down. "The poor little creature's gone—there's no help for it. The next world's a better place than this, you know!"

And with a "Good-night," uttered in accents meant to be comforting, he turned away and paced on, his measured tread echoing on the silence at first loudly, then fainter and fainter, till it altogether died away, as his bulky figure disappeared in the distance. Left to herself, Liz rose from her crouching posture, rocking the dead child in her arms, she smiled.

"Go straight home!" she murmured, half aloud. "Home, sweet home! Yes, baby; yes, my darling, we will go home together!"

And creeping cautiously along in the shadows, she reached a flight of the broad stone steps leading down to the river. "Straight home!" she repeated, with a beautiful, expectant look in her wild, weary eyes. "My little darling! Yes, we are both tired, we will go home! Home, sweet home! We will go!"

Kissing the cold face of the baby corpse she held, she threw herself forward; there followed a sullen deep splash—a slight struggle—and all was over! The water lapped against the steps heavily, heavily as before; the policeman passed once more, and saw to his satisfaction that the coast was clear; through the dark veil of the sky one star looked out and twinkled for a brief instant, then disappeared again. A clash and clamor of bells startled the brooding night—here and there a window was opened and figures appeared in balconies to listen. They were ringing in the New Year—the festival of hope, the birthday of the world! But what were New Years to her who, with white, upturned face, and arms that embraced an infant in the tenacious grip of death, went drifting, drifting solemnly down the dark river, unseen, unpitied by all those who awoke to new hopes and aspirations on that first morning of another life-probation!

THE END.

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