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Mrs. Kerrens's Christmas.

(By Mabel Quiller-Couch.)

Roscommon street lay off a side street which branched off from the Tottenham Court road. It was not a very heartening spot, nor a salubrious; in fact, even to those who sought its shelter most diligently, its sole recommendation was the retirement in which one could live in it, and to a great number of the inhabitants no other recommendation could have been so comprehensive.

As far as the houses themselves went, there was much that might be said for them. They were fairly large, and in decent repair, the roofs were sound, and the windows were large and made to open; but they were an eyesore, and their dingy drabness told on the spirits of even the most casual passer-by. The builder, or architect, if architect had ever been employed on such a monument to his own disrepute, had evidently aimed at making every house in the street an exact counterpart of the other, and had achieved his ambition with a completeness seldom allowed to anyone in this world, a completeness which defied every effort of the inhabitants to give the slightest individuality or homelikeness to their own particular homes, and there were homes innumerable, and presumably a great many tastes in Roscommon street. Almost all the houses were let out in floors to separate families, but the greatest demand was for the attic story or the basement. The attic story consisted of one room, with a large expanse of floor, though but little available space. In fact, there was only one small square in the middle in which you could stand upright; but to balance this inconvenience, one could occasionally get a breath of fresh air through the window in the roof.

Mrs. Kerrens occupied one of the attics, the one at No. 12. It had been in a very carping spirit that she had taken it, and only after many complaints and much contempt; but now, after nearly a year's occupancy, and when the probability of her having to leave it had become imminent, she told herself it was one of the most comfortable little homes in London, and shrank unutterably from the prospect of having to seek another.

Just over a year ago she had been the victim of one of those strange, almost reckless impulses which sometimes come upon old people, astonishing even those who know them best; an impulse which makes them tear up the roots of their lifetime, and begin life anew in a way and place entirely foreign to them, and, one would have thought, entirely distasteful. On such an impulse she had sold her belongings and left her home in the country, and sallied forth to find London and her son Jabez.

Certainly life had become for her very lonely and objectless after her husband's death; without Jabez, too, she had felt it intolerable. She had no ties and no particular friends in the place where she was, so she determined suddenly to leave it, and left it without a regret, thinking only of the comfortable home she would have with

Jabez, and how conveniently she could settle in by Christmas.

True, Jabez had not answered her last letters, but she blamed the postmaster-general for that, certainly not her son; so, never doubting that her letters had reached him, and that she would find him awaiting her at the station, she started off with a light heart, and Jabez's address on a scrap of paper in her basket. When she reached her journey's end and found herself alone on the platform, she had lost both. Fortunately, her memory was stouter than her heart, but she did not let her fear get the mastery of her, at least not until she had asked every porter she saw if Mr. Jabez Kerrens, of 127 Duke street, Highbury, was on the platform, and had been answered with many a smile and shake of the head, in the negative.

There was nothing left for her to do, she decided, but to go to 127 Duke street, Highbury. Fortunately for her she was ignorant of the hopelessness and danger of the situation. And with a firm shake of the head, and in a voice there was no doubting, she declined to take a cab. She would walk; on that point she was determined. 'On your own feet you know what you are about, but the minute you trust yourself

to anyone else, there is no knowing what the end of it may be,' she argued. After a great deal of advice, asked and given, she allowed her box, though with many misgivings as to her chances of seeing it again, to be deposited in the cloakroom. That done, she started off out into the cold and darkness.

By seven that evening she had—no one knew how—reached Roscommon street, Mrs. Tomes, who occupied the fifth floor back room in No. 12, and always went out in the evening to do her shopping, found a thin, old woman, dressed in black and clutching a basket, clinging in a fainting condition to the railings round the area of No. 17. Mrs. Tomes had a tender heart, and, fortunately for Lavinia Kerrens, an honest one, for Lavinia herself was not in a condition to doubt anyone who showed her kindness. Any voice addressed to herself, any look with any regard in it for her, was to her, in that great lonely waste of a city, heaven-sent.

A few moments later Mrs. Tomes was assisting the poor, worn-out traveller up the many flights of stairs which led to her own room. Worn out as she was, she was not too worn out to notice the dirty, untidy state of the stairs, and they filled her with



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