

## Mrs. Kerren's Christmas.

(By Mabel Quilter-Couch, in 'British Weekly'.)

(Concluded.)

She remembered the scenes now grown so familiar to her, the scraps of furniture, the few poor pictures and ornaments carried out and placed on a hand cart to be wheeled away in all the unkindly light of day; she knew to a shade how meagre and forlorn her own poor little household goods would look.

'What is your master's name, and where does he live?' she asked, tremblingly.

'My marster!—don't own one. If you means your landlord—well, if you don't know his name, tisn't my biz'ness to tell you.'

'But I must see him.'

'Look here, missus, what's the use of going on like that? If the boss was to be hintervied by everybody what owes him rent, why, he'd never do nothing else—'

'But—I must explain, his rent will be paid. I have a son, a very wealthy man—'

The man began to be interested. His practiced eye had seen from the first the difference between this victim and those he usually had to deal with.

'Well,' he said, thoughtfully, after much meditation, 'of course I can't stop you from going to headquarters.'

'But I don't know where he is, or his name.'

'If I tell 'ee, mind, it must never leak out where you got the infermation from; it'd be my ruin, very likely.'

She promised eagerly.

'Well, I'm trusting 'ee, remember. The boss's name is Toms, and he lives a few streets off; leastways, his office is there. You goes out into Tot'n'am Court road and crosses straight over, and almost in front of 'ee you'll see Mawley street marked up. Well, his office is down there, at No. 30.'

In her nervous agitation she had taken her gloves off and put them on again at least half a dozen times. Now she drew them on once more, and hurried out of the room and the house, murmuring heartfelt words of thanks. Roscommon street was beginning to grow lively with the unhealthy life it alone knew. As she hurried on, she looked up at the dense blackness overhead. 'The twenty-first of December, the shortest day, the day I always made my Christmas puddings,' she muttered inconsequently. 'I wonder if Jabez remembers.'

When she reached the brightly-lighted Tottenham Court road her mind reverted to her errand, and the futility of it struck her for the first time. What had she to say—that she had a wealthy son? That—that she had been twelve months looking for him, and was no nearer finding him than she had been a year ago. But in spite of her perturbation, she found her way without difficulty to Mawley street and wandered down it, looking anxiously at house after house, trying to read the numbers. It took her some time to reach No. 30. Just as she found it, a clock near by struck five. 'He'll be gone,' she thought with alarm, and the fear braced her up to enter the gaslit passage without further delay, and, once inside, her fear of being found wandering about in, as she feared, a suspicious manner, quickened her movements, and in a moment more she was standing knocking peremptorily at a shabby door across which 'Mr. Toms' was painted in black letters.



A LANKY OFFICE BOY PERCHED ON A HIGH STOOL.

No one opened the door in answer to her summons, but a voice bade her 'Come in.' She felt quite relieved when she saw only a lanky office boy perched on a high stool, but the feeling was only momentary.

'Well?' he said, interrogatively.

'I want to see Mr. Toms,' she answered, nervously. 'Is he here?'

'Yes, he's here, but—' He finished with a yawn, which swallowed any end his sentence might have had.

'Is he engaged?' she asked. 'I must see him at once, it's most important.'

The boy moved to the door of an inner room, knocked, and opened it without a word. Lavinia, mistaking his action, stepped forward quickly and into the room before he could stop her.

A man was standing with his back to her, and facing him was a lady, to Lavinia's eyes most beautifully dressed. The lady, who had been speaking, ceased at sight of the trembling old woman so eagerly entering the room, and smiled at her kindly. And Lavinia needed encouragement, for at the sight of a third person all her little stock of courage vanished. She could not speak of her downfall before a third person. A sudden weakness of mind and body gripped her, and for the time she hardly knew where she was, or for what she had come. But after a moment, the kind face smiling at her gave her hope and fresh courage, she instinctively felt the sympathy in it, and suddenly, felt glad she was there.

'I think you are wanted,' said a voice as kind as the face. 'I will go and will—'

'No, no, don't go,' said Lavinia, nervously. 'I—I—' At the sound of her voice the man turned round from his writing table and the three faced each other. Lavinia stared vacantly for a moment, staggered, and vaguely stretched out her hand for some support. The younger woman stepped to her side and put her arms about her. 'Jabez,' she muttered at last. It was almost more than she could do to keep off the faintness which was creeping over her. Then a sudden thought flashed into her poor dazed brain. 'Is it you?' she gasped. 'Are you the Mr. Toms? Jabez, speak.'

Jabez stood by unable to utter a word. His expression at first had been full of utter confusion, then he stood with hanging head and his face hidden. The girl standing between them looked at him anxiously. She saw the eager questioning in the old eyes, the anxious longing for a denial, and knew that she would not resent even her interference if she but had the assurance for which her heart was breaking.

'He did not know,' she said, clasping Lavinia more closely. 'He will tell you so himself when the shock is past. He did not know what had become of you. Jabez, turning to him, 'tell her at once that she may not wonder at my interference, and set her poor mind at rest.' She led Lavinia to a chair and knelt beside her. 'He did not know where you were,' she said. 'Dear, taking one thin, cold hand in hers, 'I'm Jabez's wife, and your new daughter. Will you let me be one to you?'