

CAUGHT IN THE SNOW.

A NEW YEAR'S STORY.

BY M. A. PAULL.

WITH what soft yet pitiless beauty the snow came down that New Year's Eve!

New Year's Eve! After the joy and mirth of Christmas, men and the world they live in alike seem to take a quiet breathing time, an opportunity for reflection as the old year solemnly dies, and the new year steals into its place like a timid child, ushered into its untried existence by the pealing of the bells. But the bells were ringing out the *old* year as I, completely caught in the snowstorm, turned under an archway in the old cathedral City of Exeter to gain a shelter. It was a strange weird night. The moon was at full, and the heavy billowy snow-clouds drifted swiftly across her, driven along by the wild north wind.

"Bitter weather this, my friend, but only a shower of snow I hope," said I to a man who stood near me in the archway as I shook myself and my umbrella, and then stepped further into its shelter. He grunted some rejoinder, and shrugged his shoulders, but seemed in no mood for talking. This irresponsiveness on his part, left me at more leisure to look round at my other companions. I suppose every one has been caught in the rain or snow and taken shelter from it as I did that New Year's Eve, so every one knows the kind of average companions in misfortune one is likely to have. Little ragged boys and girls with very thin garments, to whom an additional wetting is a dire trouble in cold weather, ladies with neat clothes, unwilling to injure them by exposure; chance men of all kinds, women with babies, and poor old creatures of both genders who should be comfortably housed and warmed without the need of seeking such temporary refuge, but who, alas! are not.

As I looked round, my eyes were involuntarily attracted to two women who were standing very near each other, and yet who were, in appearance almost as differently circumstanced as it was possible to be. The one a pretty-looking young lady of almost any age between twenty and thirty, well dressed and warmly clad with cloaks and furs; the other, whose countenance was one of the sweetest and purest imaginable, stood shivering in her poor threadbare garments, and holding in her arms a bundle carefully wrapped in thick brown paper. Neither of them had any umbrella, and probably each had turned under the archway for this very reason.

The bells presently broke forth anew, at a church near by, and the wind played with the music in wild sportive glee, tossing it hither and thither in exuberance of fun. Sometimes the echo of the bells swept down the archway and away to the street beyond; anon it was broken, and only fitful snatches of sound, now soft, now loud, seemed to reach us.

"A pretty tangle of music," I said, looking round at the delicate lovely face of the young woman with the bundle.

"Yes, sir," she rejoined timidly, her eyes, sweet and playful, upraised to mine. At the same moment the young lady, accepting my remark as if it had been addressed to herself, began a conversation. I answered her, as in politeness bound, but will admit that I was not quite pleased by the turn which my talk had necessarily taken.

There was a lull in the storm soon, the moon shone out clear and cold and bright. There was a general movement under the arch; the children ran out, an asthmatical organ-grinder shouldered his instrument which he had rested on the ground, and before the snow had quite ceased to fall, we heard him in a neighbouring street patiently pouring out his music, such as it was, into the quiet ear of night. Women drew their shawls closer over their babies and hurried off, the young lady still lingered; I thought, but I will not be quite sure, that she looked meaningly at my umbrella, I am quite sure she thought me a bore for not volunteering the escort of myself and it. But I, with considerable hardness of heart in regard to her, had already decreed myself and my umbrella for other duty. A few flakes of snow would not endanger her health, comfortably wrapped as she was in sound warm garments, and if she caught a cold she might stay at home and nurse it by a warm fire; but what might not the snow, and the cold, and the exposure do for the sweet fair woman beside her? She was preparing to go, I saw her lift her bundle more securely into her arms. She drew near the mouth of the arch, glanced up at the moonlit sky and, with a gentle "Good evening, sir," to myself, the

only person who had spoken to her, she stepped out from her shelter.

"I beg your pardon," said I hurriedly, "my umbrella is at your service," and as I spoke I opened it, and held it over her, "and you must also allow me to give you my services as umbrella carrier."

The young lady beside me bit her lip at this, not because I was a particularly fascinating man by any means (all the fellows at my college told me I was persistently ugly), but because it is naturally mortifying to a pretty woman to find another—and as the world goes—an inferior style of person, preferred in any way to herself. The carrier of the bundle coloured deeply and looked confused.

"No, thank you, sir, the snow is scarcely worth an umbrella now."

"I must beg you not to refuse what I offered in sincerity and kindness," I said frankly, "it will be a real pleasure if you will let me do this little common-place service."

"I am very much obliged to you, sir."

So we started together; I lifted my hat to the young lady we left, and when I took the bundle from the arms of my companion, I was astonished at its weight.

"I hope you will trust me a little further," said I, "and let me carry this for you."

"You are very kind, sir," she said, and was again silent. I was only a curate when I was caught in the snow, and many years have intervened since then, but I often recall that quiet walk in the dying year, with the bells pealing around us from the beautiful Cathedral, and the many churches of that fair Devonshire city on its Exe River. My companion trod beside me with light steps, her gentle yet dignified bearing checked my curiosity. I should have liked to have asked her many things, but could not. We had turned into a rather low part of the city near the river, and I was regretting the hard necessity that compelled this far girl to make her home in such an ungenial neighbourhood when we met a little girl, poorly but neatly clad, who came up to us, rather shyly.

"Oh! Nanette, how came you out at this time of night, my dear child?" asked my companion.

"Oh! Aunt Lucerne, grandmother was so anxious," said the little maiden; "she could not think what detained you, so I said I would go and look for you."

"The snowstorm detained me, dear; but I wish you had not come out. Run on and open the door for us."

"You will come in, sir?" she said to me, as we came near a very small house, one of a row mostly occupied by poor people, in a narrow lane called Willow-lane, "I am so unable to thank people, but my mother will thank you for me."

"I should like to see your mother," said I, and entered the house after her.

The little parlour into which she conducted me was bright and pleasant; squalid as was the neighbourhood, a few plants stood in a stand in the window, and the articles of furniture in the room, though very old, had evidently once furnished a very different residence. An old lady, tidily and warmly attired, sat by a cheerful fire; two little boys, about four and six years old, played quietly on the hearth-rug at her feet.

"This gentleman has been so very kind, mother, as to lend me his umbrella; there has been such a storm, I was obliged to wait for it. And he has carried my bundle too; do thank him for me, mother, while I put the boys to bed. Nanette, set a chair by the fire, dear; and now, poor little sleepy ones, I am ready. Come, Tom; come, Charlie."

The boys kissed their grandmother and sister, and came round shyly to me before they went to their aunt, who stood in the open doorway. I was glad to remember that I had a paper of goodies in my pocket, with which to cement our newly-formed friendship, and they went off with it happily to bed.

"Sir, you are a clergyman?" said the old lady, inquiringly.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I cerne won't like it if I boast of her," she said, smiling, "but it is so seldom I see anyone besides my child of my own old position in life, that you must forgive a garrulous old woman if she can't help talking of that which concerns her most."

Whereupon I explained how I had seen her daughter under the arch, and had felt it a true pleasure to be allowed to help her even in the slightest degree. "Your daughter's sweet face and perfect manners are the index of a good, pure heart."