

Well named was Lavender Street. The scattered cots of many other villages were here come in to the roadside, and two lines of ancient buildings, stretching for a quarter of a mile, was all Lavender Street could show. Behind were bleak woods and bare fields hidden now by the night and the snow.

Twice in an hour had the Derelict's tracks marred the white of the little street, but he was unwilling to plunge again into the pits of dark to north or south. Fate had thrown him, this Christmas Eve, into this Christmas-card-like corner; and the man who had known no home for uncounted years was too weak at this time, too beaten now, to tear himself from the sight of the happy homes of others. The lights in the little shops were warming; the thumped-out pantomime songs from unseen pianos set his heart dancing. They reminded him. . . . Once he nearly danced himself. "Christmas comes but once a . . . lifetime. . . ."

The carollers returned.

"Rise to adore

The Mystery of Love . . ."

The mystery of love. The mystery of love! Ha!

A woman passed the Derelict, hurrying through the snow—an old woman, with a light in her eyes that the world does not care to see and mostly dims. A thin shawl was about her, held by thin hands. She clutched a cheap purse firmly.

"Rise to adore

The Mystery of Love . . ."

The woman echoed the carollers' song and laughed a shrill laugh. The Derelict saw that the snow and her hair were as one.

"Merry Christmas!" she called back.

"Merry Christmas!" he responded. And that reminded him. . . .

From out an alley slunk two boys. The thin laugh of age was strangled by the guffaw of youth. Four young hands swiftly dipped. Two snowballs cut the frosty air.

The old woman staggered back beneath the blows, then peered through the falling flakes without surprise. She wiped the snow from her cheek slowly.

"You shouldn't do that," she said feebly. "But ye're only young. It's yer fun. Yer'll never be young any more."

The Derelict shuffled across the road. No kinder-hearted derelict was on the lane. Dogs did not shun him. Sometimes boys did.

He was surprised to find so strong a grip left in his shaking wrist. The boy he held squirmed and cried



"If you could spare a little somethin'," he said. "Not money—I'm not that sort."

aloud. The other vanished back into the alley.

"It's only Mother Brown," protested the captive. "Get off my arm. Who are yer? I never touched you. She's only Mother Brown. It'll be worse for yer if yer don't let go my arm."

"Let him go," came the thin voice from over the way. "He's only young. Now, let him go."

The Derelict flung the boy, yelling, back into the alley and walked away. Mother Brown hurried along the street to Atkinson's, and here she went in.

Atkinson's had been established for three hundred years. The hand-written notice on the little window—where one of the panes was gone—said so, and for further proof, there was old Atkinson himself behind the counter. The place was a wonderland. There was nothing the heart of man desires—from the cradle on—that could not be found within its magic walls. Cigarettes (all chocolate or all saltpetre; take your choice), last year's almanacks at half-price, liquorice comfits, boot-protectors, kali "suckers," corkscrews, comic papers, fly papers, peg-tops, lemonade powder, mouse-traps—he was a sophisticated fellow who could not love it. Loving old Atkinson was another matter. He was a surly brute.

The two pennies in the Derelict's grip were not merely hot; they were burning a hole in his pocket. But

whether it was to be old Atkinson's, or the cake shop at the other end of the street, or the cottage where oranges were shown for sale in the kitchen window, he could not decide. An orange was twopence now—just for one; and a cake was soon done.

The "Red Lion" was, of course, out of the question.

His breath thawed the frosty fresco on the window pane. He saw that Mother Brown was buying fairy balls and cheap Christmas candles. Then he noticed that the Wizard Atkinson had cigarettes offered in very nice packets at twopence for ten. He had not bought cigarettes for—oh, for years. And Christmas comes but once. . . .

So the Derelict shuffled in.

Mother Brown was packing her purchases into her bag. She smiled a tired smile at old Atkinson.

"I always mean to save 'em every year," she said, "but somehow they get broke. It comes very expensive when yer don't manage to save 'em, specially when you've got to wait so long. I should think 'e won't be long, now. 'E'll have to 'urry, though. I can't 'old out much longer, and that's a fact."

She fondled a bunch of Christmas candles, and the Derelict saw that her eyes were wet.

"I'm seventy-five," she went on proudly. "Seventy-five. But yer can't keep on fer ever."

She turned and saw the Derelict lurking like a shadow in the doorway.

"Can yer?" she said, addressing herself to him. "Yer can't keep on fer ever. I'm seventy-five. Seventy-five, you know. I bet you wouldn't think it. I don't look it."

"No," said he.

She matched the colours of the little candles one against the other. Then she drew her hand across her mouth and sighed.

"They're for my boy," she explained. "'E went away from me when 'e was nineteen. An' I did love 'im, though 'e never thought so. I put 'is Christmas tree in the old window every Christmas, an' light it, just like when 'e was a nipper, to show 'im the way if 'e comes back 'ome. They do come back 'ome sometimes. I've read in books—an' then there's that 'ymn. . . . But it's a long time. Thirty years. D'yer understand?—thirty years, an' 'e ain't come yet. You think 'e'll come, don't yer?" she said suddenly, peering with failing eyes at the Derelict. "My sight ain't what it was. Ain't you Dilnot's lad?"

"No," said the Derelict, embarrassed.

"Well, don't you think 'e'll come?"

"I should think 'e'll come right enough," he replied.