

"Thirty years is a long time," said the old woman. "An' 'e was only nineteen when 'e left me. P'raps 'e won't know the way back after all this time. I know they sometimes do come back, 'cause I've read in books an' stories."

She dropped the candles into her bag and fumbled with her change, making a pretence of counting.

"I always light the Christmas tree an' put it in the window, the same as when 'e was a nipper, so's it'll show 'im the way if 'e takes it in 'is 'ead to come back 'ome to his old mother. My! but we'll 'ave a do if 'e comes. I've always 'ad an idea 'e might come on Christmas Eve. 'E went on Christmas Eve."

She peered up again at the bulk of the Derelict.

"It's my boy I'm talking about," she said. "'E's left me. Every Christmas Eve I put the tree in the old window. I've got an idea 'e might come back on Christmas Eve. I bet 'e'd 'urry if 'e knew what a do we was going to 'ave when 'e got back. You don't think 'e can have forgotten me? Eh?"

"They don't ever forget," said the Derelict. "They don't ever forget."

"Thank you," she said simply. And then she went out without another word.

"Packet o' them fags at two-pence," said the Derelict huskily. "Spare us a match."

He lighted one of the cigarettes and went to the door. Along the little street the figure of Mother Brown was disappearing in the storm. He looked back across his shoulder.

"What did they call the old woman's nipper?" he asked.

"'Er?" said old Atkinson. "Lord!

You wouldn't believe it. Algernon Rutherford! Can yer credit it? She gave it 'im so's 'e'd get on in life a bit. You know the idea—fine feathers make fine birds. An' they did. They made a fine bird of Algy—Algernon Rutherford Brown."

"What d'yer call this city?" the Derelict asked.

"Eh? City? I don't know any city. This is Lavender Street."

"Lavender Street? Nice name."

Old Atkinson slipped the Christmas-candle box back on to the top shelf.

"Yes, 'e was a fine bird, 'e was, an' no error. He paid 'er before she was rid of him. Bashed her! 'Is own mother! She'd call 'im John next time, I'll bet—if she could 'ave a next time. An' that's the sort o' rubbish she sticks up the Christmas tree for! But what can yer expect—Mother Brown. You know."

Old Atkinson tapped, his forehead and made a mouth.

"Loopy!" he said—"but it's good for trade."

The Derelict shuffled back into the shop, his eyes blazing. With one sweep of his arm he cast the wares on the counter to the floor. Swiftly he flung the stool across the room. It caught the kitchen door and shattered the glass.

"'Ere!" protested old Atkinson. "What's the game? If I wasn't an old man—"

"This," bellowed the Derelict, pointing to the wreckage, "this ain't so good fer trade, is it? Another time, think twice and watch out. If you was a young 'un, 'ste'd of a old 'un, I'd bash in your precious face so pretty yer whole rotten family'd 'ave a chance to see if they looked well in black. I'd make it good fer trade at the 'am shop! That's all."

He turned and shuffled out of the shop, laughing.

Later in the evening he stood in

the storm at the other end of the village, staring at a lighted Christmas tree that showed from the window of a humble cottage. A friendless dog stood hopefully beside him. A homeless cat purred at his feet. Dogs and cats always seemed to know. With none of the art that had come of long practice, he tapped upon the door timidly, as if he were afraid or ashamed. And when the door was opened, he *was* afraid—so afraid that he fell back on his art to gain a little time.

"What is it?" asked Mother Brown. "If yer could spare a little somethin'," he said. "Not money—I'm not the sort—but a bite or a crust. It's Christmas Eve."

Mother Brown nodded and rubbed one wasted hand across the other.

"Well, you mustn't come in," she said. "I'm all by myself, an' you'll 'ave to wait outside. I'm expecting my son in any minute, but I'm all by myself now. If you'll wait I'll get you somethin'."

She went in, half closing the door. He saw inside, upon a battered dresser, a fading picture of a young man of another generation, a good-looking young man, but with a weak face. There was a sprig of holly upon the frame.

Mother Brown returned with a cup of steaming tea and a plate piled high with fresh bread and-butter.

*She was on her feet, trying to see with age-dimmed eyes, trying to think with tired wits. "Come," he said, "Mother!"*

