



"Look!" said the constable. He flashed his lantern over the wall.

"You can stay on the step if you like," she said, "only you can't come in. I'm alone 'ere. My son may be in any minute, an' then you can come in. We shall be 'avin' a bit of a do. I don't like not to ask you in at Christmas, but you see 'ow it is. You can stay on the step."

He sat upon the step and ate greedily. Through the door he could see her sitting in the rocking-chair, gently rocking.

"Must be nice 'ere in summer?" he ventured nervously.

"Oh, it is," she said.

"Now 'ere's a nice bit o' garden," he went on, waving the cracked teacup. "A real nice bit o' garden—fruit-trees an' a dog-kennel. Any dog?"

"Not for many years."

"No? Well, I know a dog that'd just fit it. A garden like this, an' the 'ouse, not working too 'ard, 'ud keep a body just nice an' busy, eh? I mean without gallivantin' about everywhere, up an' down—just staying at 'ome. . . . You don't look after yer garden much. Now, that 'ole in the fence there—a horse could get through that."

He heard her sigh.

"I'm seventy-five," she said. "I've got past all that. It's a man's job, really. My son—"

She broke off and stared with unseeing eyes at the Christmas tree. He sat upon the step and leaned back against the open door, with the snowflakes falling all about him, looking at her with a look that the dogs knew. He was the kindest-hearted derelict on the lane, but only the dogs knew that.

The old woman rocked and rocked steadily to and fro, sighing and glancing at the picture under the holly sprig.

"It's my boy I'm talking about," she murmured. "Thirty years, you understand—I'd hardly know 'im. I might not know 'im."

The Derelict stood up and stepped into the room and laid the cracked cup on the table. The old woman watched him very closely.

"I said you wasn't to come in," she said feebly. "My boy isn't home yet. I've put the Christmas tree in the window, but . . . you really can't come in."

He came nearer to her and smiled.

"Yes. I seen the Christmas tree."

She stared at him and passed her hand across her mouth.

"I seen it," he went on, "an'—an'—yer boy *is* 'ome! Algernon Rutherford is 'ome! 'E seen the Christmas tree an' 'e come back. This is the last time ye're goin' ter light it. 'E come back for keeps ter you an'—an' the garden an' the old dog an'—an' all the lot of it. Fer keeps." She was on her feet, panting, trembling, trying to see with age-dimmed eyes, trying to think with tired wits. He smiled and threw his nervousness from him and held out open arms.

"Come," he said. "Mother!"

She lurched forward and clutched at his coat. She looked up at him. Then she seemed quickly to wither.

"Alg—"

Suddenly she screamed and fell towards him, and before he could catch her she was limp at his feet. He bent over her, and then stared round the room, with a crushed and beaten look.

"Strike me!" he said, "if I ever seem to do a thing that goes right."

And in truth the Christmas tree was lighted for the last time. Mother Brown was dead.

There was a considerable to do. The chattering neighbours filled the doorway, trying to forget the hard things they had said. The doctor could only say that she had died a natural death. The Derelict could only say that the shock of his return had killed her.

"It was me comin' back 'ome after all these years," he said, glancing round sadly at the "home." "Thirty years is a long time."

"You come off yer perch," said Policeman Merridew. "I want you to come along with me to the station for bashing up old Atkinson's place, an' to answer a question or two."

Policeman Merridew drove away the curious and marched the Derelict away down the street.

At the wall of the little churchyard he halted. Lights were shining through the coloured windows of the church, and voices were heard in song.

"Look here," said Policeman Merridew suddenly. "I seen you wallop them boys for snowballin' the old dame; and as for old Atkinson, I'd 'ave bashed him up myself, sooner or later. I 'ope I'm not too stiff. It's Christmas, after all. You skip, and I'll tell 'em you overpowered me. I can't do more than that. There'll be a row, but it *is* Christmas."

"You're a gent," said the Derelict. "May you be made a judge!"

"Tell me one thing," said the constable; "why did you kid yer was Mother Brown's boy?"

The Derelict saw that the little romance was faded.

"Oh, I dunno," he said. "I was always a mushy-earted sort of a fool."

The carol floated to them from the little church:

"Rise to adore

The Mystery of Love . . ."

"I reckoned somehow that she'd be going pretty soon," said the Derelict. "An' if she could be kidded 'er long-lost boy 'ad come back to 'er, it might cheer 'er up a bit for the last round. That's the way I looked at it. An' then it was a bit of a 'ome for me. It's thirty years since she seen 'er son. Well, it's a bit mor'n that since I seen the nearest I 'ad to a 'ome."

The carol ended. The Derelict rubbed his numbed hands together and laughed.

"What I should 'ave done if the original Algy 'ad turned up, I don't know."

"I say," said the constable. "Look."

He flashed his lantern over the churchyard wall, full on a plain wooden cross. The Derelict looked and saw the inscription:

To

THE MEMORY OF
ALGERNON RUTHERFORD BROWN,
WHO

DEPARTED THIS LIFE ON

CHRISTMAS EVE, 1889,

AGED

NINETEEN YEARS.