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CRATCHIT

A novel by David Jacklin

14th draught

63,584 words

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Acknowledgments

I am indebted to J. Redding Ware's marvellous **Passing English of the Victorian Era, A Dictionary of Heterodox English, Slang, and Phrase**, published by George Rutledge & Sons, 1901, for many of the more abstruse phrases found in this book. Also to Henry Mayhew's four volume, 5,000 page(!) **London Labour and the London Poor**, first published in 1851, for descriptions, phrases, and conditions that would apply to the London of Cratchit's day.

The delightful website **Cockney Rhyming Slang** (www.cockneyrhymingslang.co.uk/) has been a great source of authentic phrases, terminology and 'attitude' – the latter being very important. Without the proper cheerful but slightly belligerent Cockney attitude, "‘tain't the pukka gen, izzit,

mate?"
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The C. & J. Greenwood 1830 Map of London has been an invaluable resource, allowing me

to plan out and locate Cratchit's journeys across the often-frightening midnight landscape of early Dickens London, finding places that no longer exist – and ones that still should.

My thanks to Janice, as my patient first reader; to Daniel Rover Singer for his thoughtful analysis; and to David B., whose Dickens enthusiasm started me on this journey 27 years ago.

I borrowed a few paragraphs from Thomas Hughes's **Tom Brown's School Days**. There are even a few syllables from Bernard Shaw's **Pygmalion**. And, of course, my thanks to Charles Dickens. Not only are his words the inspiration for this story, but some of the words in this book come from **A Christmas Carol**, **Oliver Twist**, and **The Pickwick Papers**. Thanks, Boz.

NOTE: there is a glossary of London slang at the end of the story if, dear reader, you feel you need it.

Chapter One

The Beginning

The intelligent reader, such as yourself, will know, from *Mister Dickens's* rather whimsical and quite fantastical telling of the tale of *that* Christmas, that Marley was dead. Far be it from me, dear reader, to contradict Boz on that or, indeed, on any detail. It is quite true: Marley had been dead for seven long years.

That thought came, unbidden, into the mind of Bob Cratchit and he reflected ruefully on it while holding his frigid fingers out toward the candle which lighted his small cubicle. Just beyond, he could see Mister Scrooge, his counting-house, too, lighted by a single candle, scribbling with fervour in a ledger. Between them, the rooms of the firm of Scrooge & Marley were dark, so dark a visitor would have to grope his way toward light, like a drowning soul reaching for the surface. The darkness from outside, for the sun had set an hour since, dribbled in through the cracks and spilled out across the floor of the old warehouse.

Robert Cratchit, to look at, was nothing to look at. From balding top to boots much in

want of heeling, Cratchit was someone who, frankly, you would not look at. You could find any number of him, at any time, on any street in London, and you would never spare any of them a glance, either. In fact, dear reader, I'm sure you haven't. What hair remained on his head stuck up at odd angles that would never lie quite straight. His collars always seemed to belong to someone else, someone who was just a little larger. His cuffs, no matter how well scrubbed by Missus Cratchit, were always slightly stained by the ink of his travails.

He habitually wore as large a smile as his face would accommodate, not from any particular good-humour, but because he had found it the best way to forestall ill-humour in others. For the most part, it worked and he passed through life in a pleasant state of planitude, with no ups – but very few downs. He was a small man, but, to give him his due, there was nothing of the 'banty rooster' in him. He was content with being what he was, and, in truth,

Robert Cratchit was ... nobody. He was born nobody and, to any unprejudiced observer, it seemed likely that he would die nobody.

Which thought brought Cratchit full circle to his original thought.

Marley was dead and Cratchit felt he could trace the growing mound of troubles he faced to that event. He had been sixteen years apprentice and clerk in the firm of Scrooge & Marley before Jacob Marley had died, alone, on Christmas Eve seven years before. The anniversary was just two days away. Cratchit had not attended the funeral as the remaining partner, Mister Scrooge, would not hear of shutting up the business for even the hour that burying his partner, and only friend, would take, so Cratchit had been left in charge while Scrooge brushed off his black coat and beaver hat to stand over the grave as Marley was lowered into it. In point of fact, Mister Scrooge had been the only one to attend the funeral. Probably to assure himself that

Marley didn't get out, Cratchit thought, and then flicked his eyes toward Scrooge to reassure himself that Scrooge hadn't read the thought.

Marley's death meant that the intervening seven years had been even harder for Cratchit than the first sixteen. Scrooge & Marley, together, had been hard taskmasters; Scrooge, alone, was near to unendurable. Cratchit had married pretty, buxom Anne at nineteen, just days after he had finished his apprenticeship, and the first child had arrived not many months after (how many months, I will not enumerate, dear reader, as tongues do wag). The family had grown, as families do, but the firm had not increased his salary by a groat. In general, things were not more expensive than they used to be, but he needed more of everything to feed, and clothe, and house his family. Martha, the eldest, was now in the employ of Madam Guerin, a milliner in Stepney, living above her mistress's shop; a pleasant situation, she told them, where she had a view of the Wapping Workhouse, but the other five children continued to be hungry and cold – and sick.

That thought, and a growl from Scrooge, brought Cratchit out of his reverie and he dipped his nib into the inkwell, perforce breaking through the thin layer of ice that was forming on top of the ink before he could refresh his pen. Mister Scrooge insisted on using carbon ink in the office, as it was half penny the bottle cheaper than iron gall ink, despite the fact that it smudged easily and froze just as easily. He made a number of entries in his ledger-book and tried, surreptitiously, to glance at the clock in the corner of Scrooge's counting-house, failing in the attempt except to see that the minute hand was approaching its zenith.

At last, he decided that he could stand the cold no longer. The few coals in his brazier made a pretense of being called a fire, but the one small lick of flame that occasionally flicked

its impudent tongue from the clinker gave no more warmth than the ten-a-farthing tallow which lighted his work. When the chattering of his teeth grew louder than the ticking of the clock in Scrooge's cubicle, Cratchit quietly picked up the coal shovel and softly padded toward the other side of the cold, dark room.

He reached the door of the counting-house without attracting any attention from his employer, entered the space and leaned over the two-thirds empty coal-scuttle. No sound from Scrooge. He reached gently in and extracted three lumps of coal, placing them silently on the shovel. Scrooge continued to scratch with his pen. Cratchit turned about and reached the door on tip-toe.

"Cratchit!" The voice alone sent icicles up Cratchit's spine, freezing that part of him in mid-step.

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"Mister Scrooge, sir?"

"What are you about?"

Cratchit placed his raised foot down behind him and executed a slow about-turn.

Scrooge's eyes were fixed fully upon him, with a stare that seemed to lower the temperature of the already frigid room.

How to describe Ebenezer Scrooge? It was as if the cold around him came from within him. Even in summer, Cratchit was sure the temperature near Scrooge was noticeably cooler than elsewhere. It was most people's considered opinion that, no matter how old he actually was, he looked older than he was. His features looked frozen; his nose, which came to a sharp point and his pencil-thin lips were somehow blue, rather than red; his eyes, however, were perpetually lined with red; his shrunken cheeks were hollowed shadows. His pure white hair

appeared to be frozen in unruly licks on either side of his bald top, and the wintery theme continued to his upswept eyebrows, and the spiky border on his chin.

“About, sir?” Cratchit heard his voice squeak despite his best intentions.

“About, sir! What are you about, sir?”

“I was only going to put a few small coals on my fire, sir. It’s very cold, sir. The ink is freezing.” Cratchit accompanied the statement with his most ingratiating smile.

“You had three coals this morning, sir. What have you done with them? Wasted them, I suppose.” Scrooge laid his pen down slowly and steepled his fingers in front of his sharp chin.

“It’s a very cold day, Mister Scrooge. I am having trouble making legible entries. My fingers, you see, sir.” Cratchit’s smile was now as frozen as the ink in his ink-well.

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“I give you a day’s supply of coals each morning, Cratchit. How you squander them is your own look-out. I use no more coal than I give you.” It was true that Scrooge’s fire was only just larger than Cratchit’s. “If there is any more of this, sir ...” – and, here, Scrooge placed his hands, palms downward, on either side of the open ledger and leaned ever so slightly forward – “... if there is any more of this, it may become necessary for us to part.”

Scrooge’s stare became, if possible, even colder. Cratchit returned to the coal-scuttle, gently replaced each precious coal in the position from whence it had come, turned the shovel over and carefully patted any remaining coal dust back into the scuttle. As he straightened from this task, Scrooge growled once more and returned to his ledger.

Cratchit, defeated on all fronts, made the long retreat to his cubicle and regained his stool. He found himself shaking even harder than before, but, this time, it was not from cold.

He noted that the activity of shaking from fear had actually worked to make him slightly warmer than he had been, so the attempt had not been a total loss, after all.

The ice on his ink was a little thicker as he dipped his nib again and the ink itself flowed very slowly, so that he had to form each letter and numeral with more than his usual care. In the word “Guildford” for example, the second letter “d” became a problem for him, so that, at last, his final attempt resulted in a long, shaky line with an ovoid loop dangling below.

A hangman’s noose.

Cratchit stared at the figure for a moment, then, without knowing why, scratched a stick-man, suspended from the rope, head through the noose. He dipped his pen again and added a top hat to the stick-victim’s head. His mouth twitched slightly in the smallest of grins, then, as he lifted his eyes from his drawing, he found Scrooge staring at him from across the

black gulf between them.

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The clock in Scrooge’s room struck the hour with a sudden whir and clang, echoed closely by the chimes of St. Michael Cornhill. Without dropping his stare, Scrooge wiped his pen and closed his ledger with a bang. He licked his fingers and snuffed his candle with a hiss before looking away from his clerk.

Cratchit laid a blotting pad across the last entry of his ledger, covering the hanging figure of the stick-man, closed the book and slid from his stool. He snapped the lid of his ink-well closed, picked up that cheap pewter pot and placed it carefully on top of the brazier. What little residual heat there was in the bronze casting might keep the ink from freezing solidly over night. He pinched out his candle and groped his way into the centre of the office, winding his long, once-white, comforter (knitted for him in their first year together by his wife

Anne, and darned by her many times since with many colours of wool) around his neck. He watched Scrooge tuck his own, much shorter comforter under his chin, shrug on his heavy great-coat and crown it with his ubiquitous, rather old-fashioned beaver. Cratchit's own head-covering was also of beaver and considerably shabbier than Scrooge's but then Cratchit couldn't afford to think much about fashion – or about shabbiness.

Scrooge met his clerk in the middle of the darkness.

“December twenty-third.”

“Tomorrow, sir, yes.”

“There are three loans due on the twenty-fourth.”

“There are a good number of loans coming due on Christmas Eve, sir.”

“But three in particular I am concerned with: Tysoe, Latimer, Miller.”

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“Yes, sir. I have them noted.” One was a near neighbor of Cratchit's.

“Tysoe and Latimer can't possibly meet their obligation. Have a letter of complaint ready drawn up for each of them.”

“First thing, sir. And Mister Miller, sir? He's always been very punctual with payment.”

“Bah, he's a fool. Spending money he doesn't have on things he doesn't need. We'll see how that turns out. In the meantime, go 'round to each of them before you come in, tomorrow. Remind them of their obligations.”

“Before nine a.m., sir? One of them is a good way out, sir, in Bethnal Green. I don't know if I could be back by nine, sir.”

“Then, go 'round before eight a.m. if need be.”

“I’d have to walk out there in the dark, sir.”

“Business does not stop for darkness, Cratchit. Be here by nine. And, put the cash into the lock box in the safe before you go.”

Scrooge pushed his topper further down on his grey head and stepped out into the street. He turned toward Lombard Street and disappeared from view.

Cratchit watched him go, his face unreadable in the deep darkness of the office, but his stillness itself told a story.

“Yes, Mr. Scrooge. I’ll walk all the way to Bethnal Green in the freezing dark, Mr. Scrooge. Whatever you ask, Mr. Scrooge. Perhaps you’d like me to walk to bleeding Ireland, too, Mr. Scrooge!”

Becoming aware that he had spoken aloud, Cratchit made haste to close up the office.

He checked that the back door was secured, saw that the fire in Scrooge’s brazier was out,

copied the three addresses where he must visit next morning onto a slip of paper, tucking the slip into his pocket. The lock of the safe’s inner box was stiff and Cratchit struggled to turn it. Its hinges were rusted, as well, and creaked as he forced it open. In fact, the whole safe was well rusted, inside and out; Cratchit did not doubt that it had been here when Scrooge and Marley had bought the business from old Fezziwig.

The strong box was crammed with folded papers – contracts, statements, letters. Many were current, but a near equal number were quite old – some had gone yellow with age. The cash box needed more room than was available, so Cratchit decided to sort out the needed from the unneeded papers.

He was familiar with current contracts and separated them quickly. Most of the letters

were dated and did not need to be kept. The statements could all be filed in the back room.

Down at the very bottom of the pile, pushed to the back and long untouched, was a twice folded document, a blue ribbon around it, closed with a notary's wax seal. It was dated more than twenty-five years before and bore, on the face, the words:

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF

EBENEZER SCROOGE,

written in a generous and flowing hand. Not Mister Scrooge's, whose own hand was tight and cramped. Cratchit knew this because he had often imitated it for minor documents.

The outdated papers went onto the open shelves of the safe, the remainder back into the lock box, the cash on top, then the Last Will And Testament Of Ebenezer Scrooge was slid into the bottom of the pile. He forced the lock box door closed, and the safe itself after it.

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Finally, he locked the door to the counting-house, and exited to the courtyard, locking the creaking old front door as he did.

Chapter Two

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John Mead Cratchit was a costerman – a fish-monger, to be exact – and he had set his barrow in Whitecross and was loudly calling his wares: “Now’s your time! Beautiful whelks, a penny a lot. New Wall-fleet oysters.” Cratchit had rolled tallow dips in a thick wrapping of waxed brown paper that flared away with the taper, and hung them on string across the top of his barrow, so that his face was lighted by their flickering.

“Beautiful whelks, yannep a lot. Oysters – new Wall-fleet oysters! Haddock! New wolley haddock! What d’ye buy?” The fine clear voice of Cratchit’s wife joined his, rising above the noise. Maria was a year or two older than her husband, now beginning to show for the third time, although the second had died when only an infant. They were a rare couple among coster-folk: unlike most of their neighbours, their marriage had been blessed by clergy

and even performed in a church.

It is a Saturday night market in London, one of nearly forty such in the great city, where housewives and maids seek bargains for a penny, and where costermongers struggle to get a penny profit out of the poor man's Sunday dinner. Cratchit's is but one of hundreds of stalls, barrows, and trays set up on this street alone. Every stall has one or two lights; a row of candles; a string of hanging tapers; or else it is brightened up by the red smoky flame of the old-fashioned grease lamp. These, with the sparkling ground-glass globes of the tea-dealers' shops, and the butchers' lights streaming, pour forth such a flood of light that, at a distance, the atmosphere is as lurid as if the street were on fire.

"John! She'll take ha'p'orth o' the oyster! Pawr 'em up! There yous goes, missus.

Oysters – new Wall-fleet oysters!" Cratchit and his wife could not read or write; they had no idea of geography, did not care that, at that very moment, eight hundred miles away, the navy

of their gracious king George was raining fire down on the bewildered people of Copenhagen.

They knew what was important: the best price for whelks at market; what they must charge for a dozen; and how, by feel alone, to make the change for the half crown that was offered for nine-pence of haddock, without even glancing into their aprons filled with pennies and half-pence. They were fish-mongers and proud of it – didn't that profession go as far back as old Jonah? And, wasn't Jesus a fisherman?

Around them, the pavement and the road are crowded with purchasers and street-sellers. It is a carnival – a fair. One man shouts 'Tour-on-nops! Here ya want! Tour-on-nops', his stall green and red and white with his produce. "Here's ha'p'orths," shouts the perambulating confectioner. "Come and look at 'em! Here's toasters!" bellows one with a fat

sausage stuck on a toasting-fork. “Penny a lot, fine russets, yannep a lot” calls the apple woman: and so the Babel goes on. The housewife in her thick shawl, with the market-basket on her arm, walks slowly on, stopping now to look at the stall of caps, now to feel a bunch of greens; the kitchen maid, clutching in her hand the nine-pence entrusted to her, seeks the best bargain on butter; and the girl with her basket of walnuts lifts her brown-stained fingers to her mouth, as she screams, “Fine warnuts! sixteen a penny, fine war-r-nuts.”

Crouched between the wheels of his father’s barrow, Bobby Cratchit watched the fantastic scene with tired eyes. He had been here with his parents all day, and was heavy with weariness. He was seven and his father’s son in every way: not tall, not handsome, not brave – a boy, like so many others. At the beginning of the day, he had been delighted to be lifted onto the barrow to add his shrill treble to the din. Now, all he wanted was some supper and a

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The tinkling of an organ grinder competed with the shrilling of a flute for attention, but young Bobby’s eyes were not to be held open by something he had heard all day long. His head fell gently against the wheel of the barrow and he slept.

And came awake to screams, shouts, and the barrow wheel striking him to the cobbles and then lifting violently into the air, before slamming down again in a shower of whelks and oysters and yellow haddock. The whinnies of a horse in pain topped the din as Bobby, wiping his bleary eyes, looked about for his parents.

“Hold him down, there! Hold him!” More whinnies from the horse.

“Catch his head!”

“Watch the hooves! Take care!”

“Cut that trace, there!”

“Lift it off her! Lift now!”

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” This from several men’s voices, all together.

“There she goes!”

Another crashing, crunching sound and then hands lifted Bobby from his place on the paving and passed him, one from the other, through the press of the crowd, which had grown quieter.

More voices whirled around him, but in hushed tones, now. The pair of arms holding him at the moment said, “You’re all right, lad. You’re all right, son.”

“Is she hurt?” A woman’s voice.

“She’s dead, I think.” That was the man who often set up beside the Cratchits.

“Of course, she is.” Another man.

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“Cool t’ow. Reeh’s the yoib.” The woman, again. The ‘yoib’, born a coster himself, understood her backslang as well as the man she addressed – ‘Look out. Here’s the boy.’

The crowd began to make way for Bobby’s progress until the arms holding him were at the edge of a circle of people. In the centre of the circle was a big cart, one wheel and one of its shafts broken, the harness cut away, and the horse on its side on the paving, held down by several men.

“Cratchit! Here’s the boy.”

The arms passed Bobby to his father, who held him tightly, but never looked to him, instead staring into the circle. When Bobby looked where his father was looking, he saw their barrow, broken and shattered, their wares scattered and trampled underfoot – and he saw his

mother, her red dress the centre of a widening pool of red.

The babble around him slowly resumed, drifting away from the circle.

“Pippins, fine eating pippins!”

“Fair lemons and oranges; oranges and citrons.”

“Here, pertaters! Kearotts and fine brockello-o-o!”

“Here’s toasters! Come and look at ’em!”

“What d’ye lack? What d’ye need?”

Life moved on, as it always will. Days came; days went. Weeks on end stretched out.

Seasons passed and Robert Cratchit was nearly three decades older and had just removed the key from the lock of Scrooge & Marley’s front door.

As he did, a young man, coat-tails flying, the ends of his comforter flying even higher, came pelting around the corner from Portland Road, skidding slightly on the freshly frosted

cobbles as he danced his way around the few pedestrians on the street. His face was quite ruddy with the cold and the exertion, but still he was anxious and drawn, shadowed in the dim flicker of the oil light on the corner. Coming to a clattering halt before Scrooge & Marley’s, he glanced in at the darkened interior and then turned to Cratchit.

“Has Mister Scrooge gone, then?” Though winded, his voice was strong and clear. He had obviously heard the sound of Bow bells most of his life.

“I’m afraid he has. A few minutes gone.”

“I had hoped to have some words with him.”

“It’s an easy enough thing to have words with Mister Scrooge. You might not enjoy them.”

“I left my work and ran here as fast as I could, but ... well, it’s about our loan, due day after tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Cratchit’s fingers touched the slip of paper in his vest-pocket. “Then, it’s Mister ...?”

“Latimer’s my name.” The man was still winded from his sprint and bent with hands on knees to drag in the chilled air. He squinted upward at Cratchit. “Are you in Mister Scrooge’s employ, sir?”

“I’m afraid that I am. You’ve had a long run from Bethnal Green, Mister Latimer.”

Latimer straightened up to look at Cratchit. “I have, sir. I needed to speak to Mister Scrooge before tomorrow. It’s very important.” He pronounced the “v” as “w” and Cratchit heard his own childhood in the word.

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“Caroline and me, that’s the wife, sir – I’m sorry to say we’ll not have the payment on the twenty-fourth. I’m sure we can have it by Tuesday week, sir. I know we can. It’s just that, well, the baby’s been ill, sir, and what with a doctor and medicines ...”

“I understand, Mister Latimer. I really do.”

“Do you, sir? Truly? Oh, thank you, sir! You can’t know what this means!” In his excitement, he gripped Cratchit’s hand tightly with all the strength of youth and honest labour.

“I do understand, but I’m sorry to tell you that Mister Scrooge will never understand. Mister Scrooge takes a very dim view of anyone not being able to meet their obligations. Mister Scrooge has never *not* met his obligations – to the letter. He’ll have little sympathy for anyone, ill baby or not, who fails to do so.”

“He’ll not grant us more time?” The man’s face had lost its ruddy complexion and

looked quite ghostly in the ill-light street.

“I am most certain he will not.”

“But ...” the man struggled to find some straw to grasp. “Can you not intercede for us, sir? You seem a forthright man. Surely, if you explain to him that it is only a matter of a few days ...”

Cratchit gently withdrew his hand from the young man’s grasp. “It would do no good, my friend. It might even cost me my position. I have a family to think of, myself. In fact, I have a sick child, too.” There may have been a tiny catch in Cratchit’s voice at the mention of the child.

The young man’s face regained a determination that his first disappointment had erased. “Of course. Of course, you do. Thank you, sir.” The man turned his face back in the direction from whence he had come, but, now, his steps were much slower, indeed.

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Cratchit watched the defeated figure move off into the gloom.

“Mister Latimer!” The figure did not stop. “Mister Latimer!” Latimer’s head raised and he turned back toward Cratchit. “Do not lose hope, Mister Latimer! Do not lose faith! Miracles can happen, you know!”

“What sort of miracle?”

“I don’t know! Anything! He may have a change of heart, yet!”

“A change of heart? Yes, there’s always that. He may have a change of heart.”

Latimer’s feet turned once more toward his home – his home for the next short while, at least.

Cratchit watched the figure disappear into the gloom. A change of heart, he thought. He’d have to have a heart first. How old is that young man? Twenty-four? He’s got perhaps

five years left. Perhaps three. How old am I? How many years do I have left?

The squeal of rusted metal came from overhead. He looked up to the shadowed sign above the door of the old warehouse, swaying in the chill breeze. Scrooge & Marley, it read, for Marley's name remained on the weather-beaten shingle a full seven years after Marley himself had left this world. "Scrooge and Marley," Cratchit read aloud. "At least Marley, the old goat, had the grace to die. Why can't Mister Scrooge be so graceful?"

Cratchit turned up his collar and, face toward Camden Town, made his slow way home.

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Chapter Three

A Misstep and A Forward Miss

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Cratchit trudged the three miles to his home. He might have taken the new omnibus that ran from the City to Islington, but that would have taken nearly half of his weekly wages – and still have taken him only half-way to his home. He and Anne had lived in Camden Town, first in a one-roomed flat until too many children forced them out of it, then somehow finding their way up to his present four-roomed house when more children began to arrive.

He paid little attention to the way, for he had walked it, morning and night, six times a week for the past fifteen years. He paid little attention for he was deep in thought regarding his conversation with Mister Latimer and his own desperately-ill child.

It had begun when Tim had only just learned to walk; his breathing was often laboured and he became prone to coughs in the night. By the time his third birthday had come around,

his legs began to weaken and to bow. At six, he could no longer run as he was wont and, instead, took to sitting quietly by the fire and watching the flames.

It had taken Cratchit and his wife half a year to obtain a certificate from the relief office, and to present that certificate in the proper quarter, allowing them to have their boy seen by the parish doctor. Even that privilege was questionable. Many preferred resorting to quack remedies rather than place themselves in the hands of a parish doctor.

Mr. George Walker filled that function in the parish of St. Pancras – long, thin, sharp-nosed and point-jawed, styled ‘Graveyard Walker’ by the wags, he was a mere surgeon, rather than a grand *Medicinæ Doctor*. When they had at last managed to secure a ticket to see him, he stared long at the boy before concluding that it was ‘a low typhoid which tends to depress, impair and enervate the human frame’.

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The graveyard miasma, of course. It is the graveyard miasma, mark my word,” he said, wisely. “The boy is unquestionably daily in proximity to over-crowded burying-grounds which supply such effluvia most abundantly.”

“There is a church a few minutes’ walk from ...” began Cratchit.

“There! You see!” The surgeon fairly clapped his hands together at this proof of his theory. “Just as I have said in my pamphlet ‘Gatherings From Graveyards.’ You may purchase a copy at a penny as you egress the building. These intramural interments are laboratories of malaria. I say they must be eradicated – so many centres of infection, constantly giving off noxious effluvia. It is only the differences in locality, atmosphere and individual constitution that render such gases either a slow or an energetic poison.”

“But what do we do with our Tim?” insisted Missus Cratchit.

The surgeon took a moment to him before replying. “Pain in the head, heaviness, extreme debility, lachrymation, violent palpitation of the heart, universal trembling, with vomiting?”

“Yes, Mister Walker, yes!” affirmed Cratchit. “Apart from the vomiting.”

“I see, I see! Yes.” The graveyard walker pulled at his thin bottom lip as he considered the verdict. At length, the Word was delivered.

“Nothing to be done. Nothing to be done. It will be what it will be. The graveyard miasma, mark my words! I do not deny the influence of sewers, poorly ventilated housing, and the like – but the graveyard miasma is the predisposing cause of the disease.” And, with that, the Cratchits were dismissed from his presence.

It took another year and every farthing they had been able to scrape together (and more passed quickly from the generous hands of neighbours) to have the boy seen by a physician famous throughout London. The fee to afford them admission to the inner sanctum of Sir William Jenner, Bart., K.C. B., M.D. was something they could certainly ever do only once. That worthy, every corpulent fold of him, was an authority not to be contradicted, certainly not by the likes of Mister George ‘Graveyard’ Walker. Jenner was, after all, consulting physician to a famous hospital – a physician, mind you, to be addressed by the exalted title of ‘Doctor’ – and was famous enough to have grown fat – more from good living than from good-humour, Cratchit suspected.

“This is a very extraordinary thing,” said the Doctor, having peered at Tim for several moments from a distance of several feet. “It’s the fogs, of course. The fogs are to blame.”

The Cratchits stood in the inner-most rooms of that vice-regal palace of medicine, with

their youngest sitting on a small chair in the centre of the room. Several other doctors, or would-be doctors, or merely curious passers-by for all the Cratchits had been told, stood around the periphery of the room, while the Doctor circled the boy from a distance.

“Humph!” announced the Doctor. “Most extraordinary. There is nothing very alarming in his appearance.”

“He is not in danger, I hope?” said his mother.

“Why, that would not be an extraordinary thing, under the circumstances,” replied the Doctor, “though I don’t think he is.”

Sir William thrust his hands into his pockets, and took several turns up and down the room; stopped, balanced himself on his toes, and frowned frightfully. After various

exclamations and as many renewals of the walking and frowning, he at length made a dead

halt, and spoke as follows

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“You feel sleepy, don’t you?” he said to the Cratchit boy, who was sitting very upright in his chair.

“No, sir,” replied Tim.

“No,” said the Doctor, with a very shrewd and satisfied look. “You’re not sleepy. Nor thirsty. Are you?”

“Yes, sir, rather thirsty,” answered Tim.

“Just as I expected,” said the Doctor. “It’s very natural.”

“What must we do, Doctor? What is to be done?” Cratchit inquired with trepidation. The great man’s great brow turned toward the little clerk’s worried brow.

“Do? Do? What is to be done? You may give him a *téa infirma* and some *aemulantur*

tosti aridam. Why do you look at me like that? Weak tea and dry toast, of course – without any butter. Don't keep him too warm; but be careful that you don't let him be too cold."

"That's all, your Honour? That's all that's to be done?" pleaded the boy's mother.

"You must compose yourself," said the Doctor. "Be calm, and pray."

"I hope you don't mean to say, sir," said Cratchit, trembling, "that he's going to die."

"Pray, don't be hard, sir!" cried Missus Cratchit.

"You seem to think," retorted the Doctor, "that everybody is disposed to be hard-hearted to-day, except yourself."

"But, what is the matter with the boy, your Honour?" She was more and more desperate in her pleas.

"What's the matter with the boy!" cried the Doctor, all in a bustle. "Do you see anything – hear anything – feel anything – eh? We judge, and I can show the proof to the

satisfaction of even your reasoning, that he is a real and thorough bad one, and he shall be left to his fate, without any farther interference on my part, at all events."

The thorough bad one, from his small chair, looked at the large man without at all understanding what was going forward.

"Is there no way of preserving the child?" cried Missus Cratchit.

"Keep him out of the fogs. There is no other remedy," said the Doctor. "It's the fogs that are to blame, take my word for it. Fogs and dissipation!" With a stern glance at the boy, he firmly diagnosed, "Dissipation!"

The Doctor, after looking toward the child one last time and silently expressing an unqualified disapproval of fogs, dissipation and the child, hurried away, his boots creaking in

a very important and wealthy manner as he went downstairs. The several other doctors, or would-be doctors, or merely curious passers-by followed in his wake.

That had been last year and Tim's frail body had faded day by day since then. Cratchit and his wife could afford only the medicines to be had from the 'crocus' doctors who plied the streets of London, croaking of the wonders of their Egyptian ointments and Indian tonics. Despite the application of any number of world-renowned elixirs and unguents, the boy could now scarce hobble the length of a room before feeling too faint to continue. Yet they were sure, if only they could afford the proper medicines and the proper doctor's care for the child, that he could yet recover. If only ...

As I have noted at the beginning of the chapter, Cratchit, returning to Camden Town, had paid but little attention to the road home, trusting his feet to find their own way, while he considered the fate of his offspring. It was therefore of considerable surprise to him that, somewhere before St. Pancras, he found that he had gone astray.

He turned about and tried to re-trace his steps, but he must already have made two or three turns before noticing that he was in error. The streets looked as foreign to him as if he had been transported to Persia or, at least, Dover.

"Come now, Bob, this is plain silliness. It can't be five minutes since you saw the steeple at St. Pancras Old Church. Set your feet right and be about it."

He closed his eyes and tried to conjure up a picture of the way he should go, but when he opened them again, he still was in the dark. Very much in the dark, for, as he looked about himself, he saw that there were no street lamps in this neighborhood. Or, rather, that there had been street lamps, but they had long since been broken and rendered useless. Except for the

slight glare of a few lights from windows, the darkness was profound. The street was very narrow, with badly patched cobbles mixed with dirt, and buildings that seemed to lean perilously over the lane, threatening imminent collapse despite the fact that they had clearly been there since time immemorial.

He chose a direction and began to walk. His footsteps echoed back from the stone and brick around him, for he was quite alone on the street. After two blocks, he decided that he had come the wrong way and turned about decisively to retrace his steps.

“Hello, captain.”

Cratchit turned quickly, startled to hear a voice so close to his ear. In the darkness of a doorway, not two yards away, he glimpsed an arm draped in a shawl and a leg bared below lifted skirts.

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“I said, Hello, captain.”

The voice came from the doorway. It was a woman’s voice, but it was pitched low.

“Looking for someone, ducks?”

The owner of the voice stepped out of the deep shadow and revealed a face that, while not altogether destitute of good looks, was hard and shadowed. She was gaily, if not elegantly, attired in a red gown, green boots, and yellow bonnet.

“Looking for a friend, are you? I could be your friend. Me name’s Kitty. Willin’ Kitty, they calls me. What’s your name, captain?”

Cratchit tried to keep his distance. “Can you direct me? I’m looking for High Street.”

“High Street, captain? I knows where High Street is. But it’ll cost you. Shillin’.”

“I have no coin with me. I just need to get to High Street.”

“What are you doing here, if you’re going to High Street, then?”

“I’ve simply lost my way. I’m sorry to have troubled you. Good evening to you.”

Cratchit tipped his hat and tried to move on.

“Ooh, ‘Good evening’! Don’t he half bubble-around?” She reached out to him in the darkness. “What say, captain, you gets your shillin’s worth and then I’ll shows you to High Street? Sound good, eh?”

“Thank you, no.” Cratchit tried to disengage her hands from his wrist but she clung to him. “I’ll find my own way.”

“I don’t think so, captain. It’s an Abra’am, either way.”

Cratchit firmly pushed her hands away, at last. “No! I do not have a shilling! If I did, I wouldn’t give to you. Now, let me be!” Cratchit tried to walk away, but found the woman clinging to him again, with hands that were surprisingly strong. “Are you mad?”

“Listen, captain, if I doesn’t go back to my Jem, shillin’ in hand, I’ll cop a mouse, for sure. And then Stitcher’ll lays a batty-fang on you, proper.”

“Stitcher?”

“That’s his moniker, captain. Don’t ask why. Give us a shillin’, love, and we can be friends.”

“I haven’t a shilling!”

She tossed her head at that. “Don’t sell me a dog! Toff like you?”

By now, the scuffle had led them into a small alley between two buildings. It was even darker than the unlit street had been and within its depths was a promise of secrets as dark as the shadows between the boxes and piles of garbage. Cratchit, seeing the open street recede

further and further from his grasp, became desperate to divest himself of this harridan.

“Shillin’ now or shillin’ when Jem takes it from you, captain. It’s much nicer this way.”

She released his hand and began to dig at his buttons. Cratchit seized her by the shoulders, pushed her hard toward the wall, with every intention of fleeing directly down the street toward the nearest light he could find.

“STITCHER!” screamed the girl, for she had truly not yet a score of years behind her despite the haggard look of her face. Cratchit ran, intent on putting a great deal of distance between himself and the unknown Stitcher as quickly as possible. “JEM!”

A hand descended upon Cratchit’s shoulder as he exited into the street and hurled him back toward the alley. A great shadow loomed between him and the freedom of the street and a deep, grating voice rolled over the sudden silence of the darkness.

“What’s all this collie-shangles, then?”

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Chapter Four

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The man who growled out these words was a stoutly-built fellow of about five-and-thirty, in a black velveteen coat, drab breeches, lace-up half boots, and grey cotton stockings which inclosed a bulky pair of legs. He had a brown hat on his head, and a dirty belcher handkerchief 'round his neck. His countenance was broad and heavy with a beard of three days' growth, and two scowling eyes; one of which displayed various many-coloured symptoms of having been recently in contact with some solid object – a fist, perhaps. A white shaggy dog, face scratched and torn in twenty different places, skulked into view behind him.

“What are you about then, eh?” growled this ruffian.

“Nothing, sir. I’m simply trying to go home.” Cratchit had difficulty getting the words out, held, as he was, tightly against a brick wall.

“Going home, eh? Where’s home, then?” Jem’s breath revealed a supper of sausage and beer.

“Not far.” Cratchit smiled as broadly as possible, given the circumstances.

“How far?” with a push that drove the breath from Cratchit’s lungs and the smile from his face.

“Camden Town”, when he had got his breath back.

“If you’re a-going to Camden Town, what are you a-doing here, bothering of my Kitty?”

“I was not bothering her. I was lost. I simply asked the way to High Street.”

“That right, Kitty? He wanted to go to High Street?”

“Oh, no, Jem! He had his daddles all over me!”

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“No, sir. I certainly did not.”

The girl expressed her indignation. “Ah-ah-ah-ow! Call *me* a porkie, will you? He were a-pawing of me, Jem! Oh, the things he wanted me to be a-doing! Shocking, it were!”

“Shocking, were it?” Jem leaned in closely to Cratchit’s face. “I hain’t seen Kitty shocked since she were twelve year old. What kind of nose bagger are you?” Cratchit wasn’t sure whether his shortness of breath was caused more by Jem’s hand on his chest or Jem’s breath on his face.

“I think he’s a mutton shunter, Jem. Lousy peeler! Trying to trap innocent girls like me!” She made a pretense of adjusting her clothing, which effort resulted in slightly less coverage than she had before.

“Are you, chuckaboo? Are you a peeler? Going around, getting girls to say things they oughtn’t and then hauling them before the beak? ’Cause I don’t like peelers.”

Accusing Cratchit of being a peeler was a ludicrous calumny, as he was a number of inches short of the police force’s height requirement. A good number of inches.

“I’m a clerk, sir. Just a clerk. With a lending firm. In the City. Just a clerk.”

“What lending firm?”

“I’d rather not say, sir.” That five-word sentence took all the courage that little Bob Cratchit had in him. It’s not that he was a coward; he’d simply never been required not to be.

“I’d rather you did. What firm!”

“Scrooge and Marley.”

“Skrudge and Morley. Where’s that?”

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Mr Newman's Court, sir.

“And what’s your name, flapdoodle?”

Somehow, Cratchit managed to remain silent, although this brutish man terrified him to the very marrow of his bones.

“What’s your name!” This with a little shake of little Bob.

Again, Cratchit stayed silent. Jem drew back a fist. There were thick black hairs on the back of it and thick black lines of dirt in the folds of it.

Kitty broke her silence before the blow could be struck. “Wait, Stitcher! Look in his topper!”

“What do you mean?”

“A toff like that will have his name written inside his topper. They always do.”

Stitcher snatched Cratchit's beaver from his head and turned it over.

"Too dark. Come out here." He dragged Cratchit out into the street by his cravat, followed by Kitty and the dog. In the illumination of a beam of stray light from a window, he peered into the interior of the Cratchit family heirloom.

"There's scribbling here, right enough."

"Well, what's it say, Jem?" Kitty pressed close to her man to peer into the hat.

Jem struck Kitty a sharp blow with the hat which sent her back with a short cry.

"Owww! Jemmie! What'd you want to do that for? I didn't do nothing! I'll cop a mouse for a week."

"You knows I can't makes out words, girl."

Cratchit's mouth opened before his brain could close it. "You can't read?"

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Jem pushed him hard against the wall under the lighted window and put a forearm across his windpipe.

Breathing sausage, Stitcher shouted at the hapless little clerk. "I can read! I can read! I just can't makes out words, that's all. What's it say, Kitty?"

The girl retrieved the topper from where it had fallen into the gutter and squinted at the inside.

"It says 'Praw ... proper ... properly ... property! Property of Rob ... robber ... Robert ... Crack ... Crack-it ... Crat ... Crat-chit! Property of Robert Cratchit – Camden Town!'" She beamed proudly at her own literary excellence.

"Robert Cratchit! Cratchit? What kind of name is that? All right, listen, Robert

Scratchit of Camden Town. You owes Kitty a shillin' for fumblin' under her skirts ...”

“But, I didn’t!”

“Shut your blooming bib! A shillin' for the fumble. Plus a shillin' for all them shockin' things you wanted her to be a-doing.”

Cratchit remained silent.

“And an Abra’am for making me leave me supper and come out in the cold like this. So, that’s three shillin’s, innit? But, I tell you what, Robert Scratchit. I likes you, I do, so I’ll knocks off a tanner and make it half a crown. Give.”

Cratchit began to dig into his pockets, searching quickly and deeply: trousers pockets, waistcoat pockets, coat pockets. When he had finished, he began again, more frantically than before. However, the ransacking of his pockets was, as he knew before he had started,

hopeless. The whole content of Cratchit’s pockets amounted to a key ring and a worn handkerchief.

“Well? Come on! Half a crown!” Jem shook him again. “Let’s see it!”

There was a pause, broken only by the quavering rasp of Cratchit’s breath.

“I have no money, sir.” It was a very small voice, even smaller than Cratchit’s usual.

“What you mean?” The words came from very far back in the ruffian’s throat.

“I have no money, sir.”

Jem slowly breathed his beer and sausage into Cratchit’s face three times before he spoke again.

“Does you knows what they calls me, chuckaboo? Does you?”

“Stitcher.”

“That’s right. I stitches ’em up. Or, rather, I makes the holes for the stitches. Know what I mean?”

“I do, sir.”

“Now, I hopes, for your sake, you digs a little deeper and comes up with half a crown.”

“Sir. I have no money. None.”

Jem, without loosening his grip on Cratchit an iota, turned his head to look at Kitty.

“Hain’t that just bang up to the elephant? What am I supposed to do with him, now?”

Kitty was feeling just a trifle uneasy over where this encounter appeared to be going.

“He told me at first that he hadn’t no shilling, Jem. He did.”

“Then what were you a-wasting of your time with him for? What are you a-wasting of my time with him?”

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“I hain’t going to hit you.” Stitcher’s black gaze turned back to Cratchit. “But, what am I going to do with him?”

“You don’t need to do anything with me, sir. I don’t know who you are or even where I am.”

“You knows Kitty’s name; you knows my moniker. Put them together and every duchess in six blocks will knows who yous means. Toss in a guinea for a reward and the peelers’ll have me in chokey quick as tanter go and no jaffa.”

“Please! I have a family – a wife, children.” Cratchit’s face had lost its habitual grin but Stitcher grinned for him and blew more sausage and beer into Cratchit’s face.

“A fambly? Don’t we all? I gots a wife – I gots three or four on ’em. And who knows

how many God forbids. But that don't change nothing right now, does it?"

"But, I'll never tell anyone! I can do you no harm." Cratchit's voice was squeaking higher than ever.

"Who's talking about harm? Damfino what harm you can do me, but am I supposed to let you off so's every villain around will know you can make a right garden out of Sticher and gets away with it?"

"Jem!" The girl put her hand on his arm. "Don't kill him! He didn't do nothing!"

"He should have! If you'd had a Abra'am in your pocket, Scratchit, you'd be a happy man, right now!"

Cratchit's legs had long since ceased to provide support for him. Only the pressure of

Jem's hand holding him against the wall was stopping him collapsing in a pile on the cobbles.

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Jem pushed his other hand – although, dear reader, if you had seen its large beefy shape, the

accumulated dirt on it, and the condition of his blackened broken nails, you'd agree with me

that the most accurate description would have been 'his other *paw*' – into his coat pocket and

withdrew a thin, long-pointed blade.

"See that, chuckaboo? That's my darning needle. For stitching up people like you."

"You don't got to kill him, Jem!"

"I don't got to, but I think I'm going to."

Jem's hand came up and the dagger was suddenly aimed at Cratchit's throat. Cratchit, unable to move, stared with open horror at the point, just a few inches from his face. Jem tensed and the dagger drew back an inch. Kitty opened her mouth to shriek. Jem began to lean forward.

‘I know how to get you money!’

Cratchit’s hitherto squeaking voice found strength and volume in this declaration, resounding strongly up and down the street. Stitcher stopped his forward motion and leaned back slightly, the better to observe his trembling victim.

“What does you mean, money?”

Cratchit had no other word for it. “Money.”

“How much?”

Quick thinking on Cratchit’s part was taking place. “Hundreds.”

“Hundreds?”

“Hundreds.”

“How many hundreds?”

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“A what?” Stitcher didn’t like it when the conversation turned polysyllabic.

Kitty, from long experience, had stayed well back from this exchange, but now she spoke up. “He means lots, Jem.”

“Then why didn’t he say so? I can’t tumble to that barrikin.”

“Lots, sir. Lots.”

“And where might this ‘considerable sum’ be?”

“At my place of employment, sir.”

“Skrudge and Morley.”

“Scrooge and Marley, sir.”

“In Newman’s Court?”

“Yes, sir.”

The knife was slowly lowered (it had not wavered the smallest fraction during the previous pleasantries) at the same time that a smile spread across Jem’s broad face.

“Let’s go get it, chuckaboo.”

Here was the problem. “It’s not there, now.”

The knife was suddenly in the air once more, pausing, just touching Cratchit’s throat.

Jem’s voice became very raspy indeed.

“When’s it going to be there?”

“On Christmas Eve.” Cratchit’s breath was again coming in ragged gasps.

“That’s two bleeding days from now. Anything can happen in two days. I think I’d

better just be a-doing of yours, right now, and have done with it.” Stitcher was a man of neither great patience nor imagination.

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“Hear him out, Jem! There’s no sense a-killing of him before you hears him out.” Kitty had seen Jem stitch men before now but, in her very humble opinion, this poor little Jake hadn’t done anything that required stitching.

Jem was facing a problem, his mind truly divided. He wanted the money, that was certain, but, of all the things in the world Jem Stitcher really liked, stitching was among the first few. It was a dilemma. Cratchit continued to stare at the knife until Kitty broke the silence.

“Bobby! Tells him why the money won’t be there until Christmas Eve.”

Still staring at the knife, Cratchit tried to put together his thoughts. He really didn’t know where he was going with the idea of finding money, ‘lots of money’. It was simply the

only thing that had come into his head. Yes, there would be money in Scrooge's safe, but it certainly wasn't Cratchit's to give away.

"Why won't the money be there until Christmas Eve?" insisted Kitty.

"Because ... because the firm won't take it in, at least not all of it, until the day before Christmas. We have two dozen loans coming due between now and then. Mister Scrooge would normally make his bank deposit the day after it all came in, but that would be Christmas Day and the banks are closed. So the money will be in the safe until the day *after* Christmas."

"A safe? I don't do adamses. Too much bother. Smash and grab's the ticket."

Inspiration, or perhaps desperation, sprang into Cratchit's head in a moment. "There won't be any bother! The safe'll be open."

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Cratchit smiled for real. "Because I've got the knobblies."

Kitty said, breathlessly, "The keys?"

Cratchit nodded. "Mister Scrooge always leaves me to close up, so I've got the keys. I can leave the doors open – and the safe."

Jem looked doubtful, still. "Where's this adams?"

"In Mister Scrooge's office." A plan was becoming immensely clear to Cratchit, moment by moment. In fact, he was beginning to astonish himself with the simplicity of it all, while Jem, not the most astute of men, was still trying to understand the change in direction of the conversation.

"So, Christmas Eve, we just toddles up the frog and toad, kicks in the rory ..."

“No! Not the road. And don’t kick in the door. Come up the back alley! And the *back* door will be open, along with Mister Scrooge’s office door and the safe.” Of course, it would. Back doors are always being left open. It was absolutely delightful to Cratchit how simple it was. Cratchit found himself suppressing a giggle.

Stitcher was still trying to get his slow brain to grasp the concept. “So, we goes through the back door then, into Mister Scrawge’s office ...”

“Mister Scrooge’s office...”

“... Mister Scrooge’s office, swings open the adams – and how much is lying there?”

Cratchit did some quick sums in his head. “About two hundred pounds.”

Kitty’s eyes grew big and round as half pennies, while Jem’s grew narrow and cunning.

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“Nearly so. It might be a little less” – the dirt-encrusted fingers tightened so hard on Cratchit’s throat, so that he had to choke out the next words – “but it might be a little more.”

“Then we just daisies on out?”

“Closing the safe, Mister Scrooge’s office door and the back door behind you. Yes. That’s very important. Close it up, so that the peelers don’t notice. There’ll be no one around for at least a day afterward.”

Kitty pressed in against the wall beside Cratchit and placed her hand on Jem’s arm.

“Two hundred quid, Jem! And all we have to do is slides in and takes it! Let’s do it, Jem!”

Jem shook his head, torn by indecision. “Naw, it’s still two days. What do we do, sit on him for two days? We keep him, his cows and kisses will have the peelers’ll looking for

him. His Mister Scrooge might even change the locks. We let him go, he'll pitch to the peelers, sure. No, I'm going to do him, right now."

"I can't go the peelers!" Cratchit squeaked.

"He can't, Jem! We knows his name – Robert Cratchit. We knows where he works –"

"Scrooge and Marley, Newman's Court." Cratchit couldn't stop his mouth from supplying that information.

Jem took Cratchit's hat from Kitty and placed it on the little man's head. "And, we knows where he lives – Camden Town. And, we knows where the cows and kisses lives, too, don't we?" Cratchit was silent. "I said, 'DON'T WE!'" Cratchit's nod was the final click of the key.

"Right then, off you goes. Kitty, sees him to High Street – and then sees him the whole way to the gates of Rome. I wants to know which rat and mouse he lives at. And, Kitty, you still owes me a shilling, tonight."

Cratchit slid sideways from Jem's grip, rubbing his throat where the bully's hand had pressed and headed quickly out of the alley and down the street. Kitty caught him.

"Here now, Bobby! Not that way! This way to High Street."

Jem's blade disappeared into his pocket and he shouted after them. "Watch how you go, now, Bob! Don't take any wrong turns; you might land a barney!" He kicked at his dog, who skipped aside with the nimbleness of long experience. "Come on, you. We got a nice bit of kate'n'sidney waiting."

Chapter Five

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~~The Journey to Camden Town~~

The girl stayed with him to the very door of his home. Once she had helped him to regain High Street, which was only four short blocks from where the encounter with Jem had taken place, Cratchit knew his way immediately and set off, as if determined to make up for lost time.

In truth, Cratchit was trying his best to out-stride the girl, in the hope of leaving her behind. He had no wish for Jem to learn the whereabouts of the Cratchit castle. Small and unassuming it may be, in urgent need of a lick of paint here and there, and with a broken window in the rear he had covered with best brown paper, it was his home – and because he was English, it was his castle, as well.

“Here, captain! Hang about! My legs hain’t so long as yours!” Which was patently

untrue, as she was nearly as tall as Cratchit. After the fourth turn (onto Pancras Place), when he had gained perhaps fifty yards on the girl, she lifted her skirts and, showing a shockingly immodest amount of green boots and bare limbs, and a surprising amount of speed, she pulled ahead of him, turned about and placed a firm hand on his chest. Rather than risk tumbling over with her in the middle of the pavement, Cratchit halted. He was actually happy to do so, as the pace was leaving him breathless.

“Now look, Bobby,” said the girl, taking hold of his cravat and pulling him close, “Stitcher hain’t a-goin’ to be takin’ of ‘he walked faster than me’ for a answer when I gets back to the rat and mouse. He’s going to want to knows where yous lives, dearie, and, if I don’t want a hidin’ like never before, it had better be all Irish what I gives him.”

His chest heaving slightly, for he was very unused to any kind of exertion, Cratchit glared at her defiantly. “You want the Irish? Here’s the Irish. I don’t give a damn what

happens to you! And I’m not going to help such a vile creature as Stitcher! Just stay away from me. Stay away from my home.”

“You think that just outrunnin’ me tonight will stop Stitcher? Yous doesn’t knows him, Bobby. He’s right wicked, he is, and if he thinks you’ve crossed him ... well, I don’t want to be there to lay my glims on it. Look, he’s friends with a old tiddler down Saffron Hill and *he’s* got little spies – horrid little bleeders off the street, fogle-hunters and prat-diggers and blaggers, they are – and worse – and he pays them ha’p’ny for the gaff. They’d find you, sure, Bobby – and then Stitcher’d find you, sure.”

“And, if I did go to the peelers?”

“He’d know – and he’d know where your god forbids will be. And, you can be sure,

Stitcher'd stitch 'em, proper."

Cratchit considered the many alternatives and, as he always did, took that of least upset. "Up here, past St. Pancras, onto Fig Lane, past Gloucester Place, to Bayham Street. Number 16."

"16 Bayham, near St. Pancras? See, that wasn't so hard, was it, captain?" She took his arm and snuggled in amicably. "Let's go, then."

"You don't trust that I told you the Irish?"

"Old friends like us? Why should you lie? Step out lively, now. It's a cold night; I've got to walk all the way back and – as you well knows, Bobby, 'cause I seen yours lookin' – I hain't wearin' no pantaloons."

The pair proceeded past St. Pancras Old Church and the Adam & Eve pub, the former closed and dark, the latter lighted and riotous, before crossing onto Fig Lane. The tumble

down buildings they had left just blocks before gave way to cleaner, more sturdy ones. The oil-lamps were burning at each street corner. The houses, mostly, had candles burning in a window or sometimes even two. By now, there were very few people about and the wind had turned distinctly icy. Kitty ducked her head into Cratchit's shoulder to keep the wind away. Despite her bold front, Cratchit could see that Kitty was more and more aware that she was not in a place where she belonged. The few passers-by greeted her brazen attire with frank stares and she clung to Cratchit's arm more tightly as they walked.

"Not much further. No need to be frightened," said Cratchit, helpfully.

"I hain't! I just never been in this kind of borough before. Not with proper houses and such. Not with toffs like you livin' in 'em, Mister Cratchit." To Kitty, Bob's fifteen bob a

week and his dilapidated beaver seemed the sheerest luxury.

“Have you never been out of Islington before?” asked Cratchit, for, indeed, that was where he had run into her – and where Stitcher had run into him.

“What do you mean, Islin’ton? I’m from the Angel.” When Cratchit thought about it, the section of Islington they had been in was that ill-famed one. “That’s where I was born. That’s where I’ll die. Why would I want to leave?”

“Ah,” was all Cratchit could think to reply.

“I did go to see the king oncet, though.”

“Did you? I’ve never seen him.”

“Took me half the day. I went to that new buckin’ place what he’s got; all towers with a great big black fence with gold tops on it. There was soldiers and flags and I seen the king in

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a great big carriage with six horses! At least, I think it was the king. I couldn’t see into the carriage, but everyone was makin’ an argle-bargle like billy-be-damned, so I thought it must be. I run back to the rat, quick as I could, but Stitcher still give me a right wallopin’ about for being gone.” She sighed happily at the memory. “Was worth it, though.”

By now, they had turned up Bayham and were nearing Castle Cratchit.

“How did you come to be ... walking the streets, Kitty?” Cratchit asked.

“What, you wants to hear my pathetic story, does you? Another do-gooder, are yous? I’ve had my fill of them type.” she said, impatiently. “Oh, I’m a tragically seduced milliner – anyfink you like.”

“Why haven’t you gone to anyone for help? The Midnight Meeting Association, have you heard of that?”

“Yeah, I went to one o’ them places, oncet. I begged ’em for help. They laid me down on a table and ... ‘examined’ me ... yeah – and then they said I hadn’t fallen far enough to deserve their help. My ‘moral character was not sufficiently depraved’ and they threw me back out onto the street! Bastards! But Jemmie took me in and he’s kept me ever since.”

“You need to get away from him, Kitty.”

“Nah. What for? He takes care of me, he does. Who else is goin’ to take care of little Kitty Fisher? ’Sides, I loves him.” Cratchit stopped in front of Number 16. “This it, is it? Well, I won’t come up. Expect a first visit tomorrow night then, maybe from me, maybe from one of Jem’s little friends.”

“Of course. Goodbye.” He turned away to mount the step.

“Oi! Bobby! We’re mates now, right?” Cratchit turned his head toward her, disbelief on his face. “Cause, see, I gots a extra shillin’ what Jem don’t be a knowin’ of, so s’ I can

goes back to him without findin’ a friend along the way, if you knows what I mean, and I’ll be all right – but I’ll have to hang about for a while, to make it look right, freezin’ me ... toes off.” She smiled archly toward him. “And, it’s a cold night ...”

Cratchit’s eyes got wider as he began to comprehend her meaning.

“... so, seein’ as I hain’t a-needin’ of the shillin’ this time, if yous wants to, you know, it’d be nice have a bit of a warm, and there’s a lovely dark spot over there.”

She was speaking to empty air and the door to Number 16 closed with a bang!

Chapter Six

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“Is that you, Robert? You’re late, today.”

Anne Cratchit was up to her elbows in sudsy children and had no time to verify who it was had closed the door with such force. A weekly bath for six children, her husband and herself, when it took half the day to warm water for the bath, didn’t leave any nights left over, so the twins got their bath together. The tin wash-tub was just big enough for that, provided they didn’t grow any more which, as they were just nine years old, seemed unlikely.

“Hold still while I do your ears. What are you growing back here, pataters?”

It was the same joke every bath-night, but it got the same pair of laughs. Over top of it, the sound of a pair of heavy feet could be heard, pounding up the narrow un-bannistered stairway. Anne looked up as she heard the door to the upper back room close. Robert was

home, but something was surely wrong.

“Dry yourselves, you two,” she said, handing a piece of ragged, stained – but clean – cotton to the pair. “Don’t get water all over the floor. Get yourselves dressed and ready for supper.”

She left the giggling pair in the lower back room, ascended the stairs and entered the upper room after her husband. To call it “their” room would be an untruth, as it was shared with each successive child until it was large enough to sleep on its own in one of the other of the four rooms in the house. Their youngest, Tim, still slept there, but it was the only place in the house where something like solitude could be found.

She found Bob braced on the bed, hands and feet wide, staring fixedly at the floor, breath coming raggedly. “Robert, what is it? Are you ill? What is it?”

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After a few more breaths, little Bob’s eyes were raised to hers. “I have had a day, my dear. I have had a day, indeed.”

“Are you ill? Robert? Are you ill?” The urgency in her voice said it all. The one thing that household did not need was more illness.

“No, my dear. Rest easy on that account. I am as hale as a man my age can be; as hale as I was the day I started working for Scrooge and Marley.” He had been twelve when he first walked into that pair’s office. For him to reach his current age still in robust health was a rare thing.

“Thank the dear Lord for that. But what is the matter, then?” Anne was a practical woman and got ‘right down to business’ as Mister Scrooge himself was fond of saying. “Is it trouble at work? What’s that man done, now?” Cratchit knew very well who ‘that man’ was.

“Not trouble at work – although he did threaten to sack me for wanting a few more coals for the fire. On the way home, though ...” He stopped to sort out what had happened for, until now, he had only had time to survive it, not to think about it.

“On the way home, though ...” she said. Count on Anne to keep him to the point.

“Well, dear, like the Prodigal Son, I fell in among thieves.”

“That was the Good Samaritan, Robert.”

“Perhaps he was a Prodigal Samaritan. It doesn’t really matter. I was on my way home, as usual, when, somewhere before Maiden Lane, I took a wrong turning.”

“How did you do that?”

“My mind was full, thinking about going to Bethnal Green tomorrow morning.”

“Bethnal Green?” To Anne Cratchit’s mind, Bethnal Green was akin to the moon – she

was just as likely to journey to the one as the other.

“Bethnal Green and then back to Greenhill Rents off St. John Street.” It was more than a two hour’s walk, at the best.

“I hope Mister Scrooge has given you the whole morning for that.”

“No, I’m not to be a minute past my usual time. Oh, and, before that, I must speak to Number 27 up the road.”

“Not Missus Tysoe?”

“Their loan falls due tomorrow.”

“Oh, Robert! They’ve not a farthing. They’ve been doing without meats and such all year.”

“I know it. And I also know I brought them to Scrooge for money in the first place.”

“You took a wrong turning.”

“I did. I should never have brought them to Scrooge.”

“No, silly. You took a wrong turning this evening.”

“Oh! Yes, and found myself alone, somewhere in the Angel.”

“Oh, Robert!” Anne’s eyes opened very wide. “Not the Angel!” If there was a place more notorious for crime and depravity in London, dear reader, pray do not tell me where.

“The very place and the very worst of them was waiting for me: a great brute known – I swear it is true, Anne – as Stitcher. He demanded money from me which, of course, I didn’t have.” Fifteen shillings a week plus the few shillings that Anne brought in from washing and mending and a shilling or two from eldest Martha did not go far when caring for five children and a house.

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“Did he hurt you at all?”

“No, my dear. He did not. It was a near thing for a short while, but nothing came of it, in the end.”

“How did you get away from him?”

“I suppose I talked my way out. Yes.” The idea surprised Cratchit as much as his wife.

“Yes, that was what I did. I talked my way out.”

Up until the moment he started in upon it, Cratchit had every intention of telling his wife the whole story. After all, they had never before had any secrets, one from the other. On the other hand, they had never had anything that needed to be kept secret.

“You must find a new way to walk to work. Don’t go back that way again. They may be looking for you.”

“I hope not, dear, I hope not.”

“Then we needn’t think of it again. Supper’s nearly ready.” She rose and walked to the door. “You’d best have a wash up before your supper. You’ve got the smell of the Angel on you – if I didn’t know better, I’d swear it were penny-a-bottle rose-water.” She went quietly back down the stairs while Cratchit sat with his mouth open. He bent his head to sniff at his coat.

Rose-water, and stale beer, and – gin, perhaps. The smell brought a memory from many years ago: a dirty room, curtains across a small bed, a drunken man.

“Come, Cratchit! Look at me! Look at me, man!” The beadle, wearing the cocked hat and cloak of his office, was shaking John Cratchit’s arm as he sat, head fallen onto the table.

Cratchit lifted his head and tried to focus on the man addressing him, but failed, dropped his head once more. Bobby pressed his eye a trifle closer to the gap between the curtains.

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“I’m sorry, Doctor Bell. He can’t pull himself out of it. He’s like this most times, now. It’s awful to see them, for they can’t right themselves; there’s too much against them before they start. They find enough for the gin, for a morsel of food, but they don’t find a living. And, it’s not living, is it? It’s only a slow way of starving – though the gin takes them first, most often.”

Doctor Bell, in ecclesiastical black, leaned over the drunken man in turn, and shook him.

“Come now, Mister Cratchit!” He spoke loudly into the man’s ear. “Pull yourself up! Call upon the Lord!”

“What’s that!” Cratchit cried, starting up. “Who’s there?”

“It is the beadle,” replied the first man, “ with Doctor Bell.”

Doctor Bell raised the candle above his head and Cratchit looked towards him.

“Put down the light,” said the man, turning away his head. “It hurts my eyes.”

The beadle and the doctor stood, waiting while the man recovered himself. At length, the Doctor shook his head, sorrowfully.

“Call upon the Lord for strength, Mister Cratchit,” offered the Doctor, “and it shall be given unto you.”

“God forgive me!” cried Cratchit, after a while, “I never thought it would be this hard.”

“How may we help you?” asked Doctor Bell. “*May* we help you? We will if we can.

We will, indeed.”

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The man beat his hands upon his knees, and his feet upon the floor and, suddenly stopping, shivered with cold. He rocked himself to and fro and, uttering a gurgling sound, gasped for breath.

“I don’t know what comes over me sometimes,” said he, at last. “It’s this damp dirty room, I think.” He focussed his eyes upon the two men. “What do you want? Why are you here?”

The beadle leaned in, now. “Cratchit, we spoke of this. The parish will take your boy and Doctor Bell has found a place for him at the voluntary school. Do you remember that?”

Cratchit looked from one to the other, and shook his head, trying to clear it. “Take my boy? What do you mean?”

The doctor spoke up. “The Society will take him under instruction, that he may have a

Christian upbringing and an education.”

“What society?”

“The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, of course,” said the man in the black robe.

“Does it need promoting? Who are you?”

“I am Doctor Bell.” And, he was, too.

The beadle spoke, again. “Cratchit, this has been agreed. You’ve signed the paper.”

“Paper? Can’t sign. Can’t write.” He was beginning to droop once again.

“You made your mark. You agreed, Cratchit. It’s for the boy’s welfare.” The beadle produced the paper, which may well have been the Magna Carta, for all Cratchit could read of it.

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Come, Mister Cratchit,” said the doctor. “The boy will be better off than here.”

“I made my mark?” The beadle pointed to the scratch of ink. “I remember. You’ll take care of him?” The two men nodded. “I remember. Bobby! Come here, boy.”

“God be thanked,” breathed the doctor.

Bobby came from behind the bed-curtains where he had been watching. He was not much taller than he had been the year before. His clothes were more ragged; his frame a little thinner. His eyes had sunk into his skull and he seemed very wary of the two men who now smiled upon him. He smiled his broadest smile at them, not from friendliness, but that they would think better of him.

His father took both of his hands and held them, shaking slightly. “Now, Bobby, dear, are you ready?”

“Am I to go with them?” asked Bobby.

“Yes. They have come ...” The man’s mouth trembled. “You are to go with them.”

“What for?” asked the boy.

“What for?” echoed the man, raising his eyes, and averting them again, the moment they encountered the boy’s face. “Oh! For no harm.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Bobby, who had watched him closely.

His father was near exhaustion. “I can’t help you. You can’t help yourself. I have tried hard for you, but all to no purpose. We are hedged round and round in this place. If ever you are to get loose from here, this is the way. This is the time. Go with them, Bobby.”

The boy stepped forward and said, somewhat hastily, that he was ready. His father

hugged him tightly, then released him. “Go with them, Bobby. Be good, and obedient, and

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attentive. Remember your father. Fa-ey-voll ois, yore.” Bobby knew well what the backward words meant.

The doctor put out his hand and Bobby took it, turning away from his father in the dirty, damp room.

“Where am I going, sir?” asked the boy, a friendly grin upon his face.

The doctor smiled down upon him. “To a place where you will learn many wonderful things, if you are attentive and obedient, where you will become a man and a good Christian.”

“Shall I see my father, again, sir?”

“Of course, my boy. Of course.”

But he never did, not from that day to this night.

Cratchit determined to leave his coat outside overnight to clear it of the smell. He

pushed himself wearily to his feet and made his way down the stair. The smell of cooking was rising from the kitchen. The door at the foot of the stair opened and Belinda and Peter came pushing in, letting in the cold air, fresh from the baker with a tup'ny loaf. Tim sat in royal comfort on his big brother's shoulder.

"Hello, father! We have returned bearing bread!" said Belinda, unwrapping the very tiny Tim from his woolen scarf, mittens and hat. Tim was still on Peter's shoulder while she did this, licking at a small boiled sweet.

"Tim was so good at the shop that the baker gave him a two-a-farthing sweetie, father!" Peter grinned upward at his younger brother with real affection.

Belinda took the fresh loaf into the lower back room, where her mother was laying the table. Cratchit took young Tim from his perch on Peter's shoulder and placed him on his stool by the fireplace where he could get the most warmth.

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Peter said "Oh, he's getting so big, father. It's all I can do to carry him down the road and back."

This was a patent falsehood, as Tim was very small indeed for his age, so much so that thoughtless people sometimes called him Tiny Tim, as if the name would not hurt.

Nevertheless, his father did not remonstrate with Peter for his untruth.

"He is, my boy. He certainly is. He'll soon be up and running about again. Just look at the colour in his cheeks!"

If there was colour in Tim's cheeks, it was overlaid with pallor, but the warmth of the rather small fire did go a long way toward making him cheerful as, truthfully, he was most of the time, despite needing iron supports on his legs and having barely the breath to raise his

voice above a whisper.

“Supper’s on, father. Come along, Peter. Where are the twins? Sit down, both of you, and wait your turn.”

Cratchit picked up his youngest from the corner by the fire and placed the boy on his stool beside him at the head of the table. Belinda brought plates in and laid them in front of each family member, while Peter cut the loaf and his mother stirred the contents of the pot that had been fetched from the cookhouse.

“What’s for tucker, mother?” Cratchit made that small joke every day at this time and his wife would bring forth the family repast. This time, she was especially proud.

“Just wait until you taste this, husband. You’ll see.”

She ladled a portion into each deep-dished plate while Cratchit handed round the bread. When all were seated, Cratchit lowered his head.

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“Heavenly Father, we thank you for this food you have provided for our use. We ask you to watch over us and help each of us to grow strong, and healthy, and better each day. Amen.”

“Amen”, said the rest of the family.

“Now then, father, tuck into that.” She seemed immensely pleased with herself.

Cratchit filled his spoon with the stuff on his plate, swirled it around, sniffed the contents and made a great show of evaluating it, to the delight of the twins. At last, he put the spoonful into his mouth, chewed slowly and swallowed.

“Well, let’s see, now. That’s beetroot and onion ...”

“Yes, yes,” said his wife.

“And, is that watercress?”

“Yes, yes.”

“And ... half a minute. That’s mutton or I’m a son of a sailor.”

“Mutton.” Missus Cratchit smiled proudly.

“Where did you get mutton?”

“I was at the butcher’s at just the right time. They were getting clear of some of last week’s and I got a half-pound of jenson for ha’p’ny.

“Ha’p’ny!”

The whole table rejoiced at this marvel of a price for week-old meat.

“Oh, my dear, that’s marvelous. Mutton, in the middle of the week!”

All the rest of the family echoed his praise and began spooning the stew into their

mouths, soaking up the residual with good fresh bread (not home-baked with flour that might

be cut with almost anything – and usually was – but good regulated bakery bread) and all

washed down with a bit of half-and-half – half small beer, half water.

Once the meal was done (and it did not take long, for it was a three-course meal only if you accounted the vegetables, the mutton, and the bread separately), the dishes cleaned and put up, the oilcloth wiped and the crumbs from it carefully dusted into the remains of the mutton stew, the chairs put back against the wall where they lived, while Cratchit sat by the fire with Tim on his lap, the family made ready for bed. There was no money for burning of candles to keep out the darkness unnecessarily and, besides, they had all to be up before first light in the morning: Belinda and her mother to spend the day on housecleaning for themselves and laundry for others, Peter to deliver coal for a penny a day, the twins to attend

the Industrial School where they learned a token amount of the Three Rs – and match-making. Only Tim, too feeble to move about easily, was allowed to rest, under his mother's eye. They were a busy family, an industrious family, and, in all, a happy family. How many of us, dear reader, can truly say that of ourselves?

The house had been quiet and dark for half an hour. Tim was sleeping soundly below the bed, worn out by the excitement of the day and the meal. Cratchit, himself, was closing weary eyes. As he turned onto his side, a thought struck him.

"I've just realised that I don't have to go out to Bethnal Green in the morning, dear. I've remembered that I spoke with the man while I was closing up. They'll not have the money by Christmas Eve. Goodnight."

It was a minute or two before Anne spoke from the darkness.

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"Before you drop off, Deb, you might tell me why you came in smelling of cheap rose-water and beer."

Cratchit was suddenly well awake.

"Rose-water and beer. Ah, well. There's a very simple explanation for that. Very simple. You see, when I had taken my wrong turns, my dear, and found myself in the Angel, I was alone on a very dark lane. A woman accosted me – you know the type, my dear – and, when I tried to rebuff her, she called for her ... friend for help."

"Her 'friend'?" Anne had been born in Islington herself and knew very well the 'type' and what the 'friend' was, but she had to keep up pretenses.

"I told you about him – the one called Stitcher. He leaned up against me very closely and had partaken of strong waters and that must be why I smelt of beer."

“You said he wanted money. How much?”

“At first, the woman – well, the girl, for she was very young, my dear, very young. She demanded I pay her a shilling – even though I’d not touched her!” Cratchit hastened to reassure his wife. “She was very loud and very demanding and when Stitcher – Jem, his real name is, apparently – arrived, he laid hands on me and threatened to ‘stitch’ me unless I paid, but now, he said, I owed them, not just one shilling, but three! Then he said he’d knock it down to half-a-crown because he liked me.”

“Very considerate of him, I’m sure. Surely he wasn’t in earnest about ... ‘stitching’ you?”

“In deadly earnest, Anne. From their talk, I’d say he’d done a deal of ‘stitching’ over the years. He was a very large brute and the knife was not an inch from me, but I managed to

persuade him not to do it.

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“However did you do that?” Anne certainly trusted her husband but even Cratchit had to admit this story was a little on the raw side to be easily digested.

There was an uneasy moment of silence in the darkness, as Cratchit struggled with how much to tell his wife, until finally:

“I appealed to his greed, dear. I told him I knew where he could find much more than half-a-crown. They decided to follow up on my suggestion and they let me go.”

“But wherever did he think you could find money?” Anne laughed quietly at the thought. If her husband knew where to find money, they’d have spent it years ago.

In the chilly blackness, it took Cratchit several seconds to supply an answer.

“I told him that, come Christmas Eve, there would be two hundred pounds or more he

could get at.”

“Two hundred! Where, man?”

“In Mister Scrooge’s safe, my dear.”

There was a very long pause. Tim stirred weakly in his sleep and Anne sat up to listen.

After a bit, she lay down once more.

“And they are just to go and get it?”

“On Christmas Eve, yes.”

“I suppose they could break down a door, or pick the lock, easily enough, but how are they to get into Mister Scrooge’s safe? I remember it being a solid block.”

“It’s all very simple. I’m to leave the doors and the safe open for them.”

“Robert! But that’s criminal, Robert! They could jail you or hang you or transport

you!”

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“I know, I know – but it was that or my life, Anne.”

“Well, of course, my dear, of course, but you surely don’t mean for them to go through with it, Robert. Shall you go to the police in the morning?”

Another long, black pause.

“I can’t go to the police, my dear. They know my name, they know where I work ... and they know where we live.”

He heard Anne’s sharp intake of breath from the darkness beside him. “How do they know that?”

“The girl I spoke of – her name is Kitty, by the by – followed me home.”

“Followed you?”

“Accompanied me, more like. Stitcher would have beaten her otherwise. She held onto my arm all the way from the Angel – which, I suppose, my dear, is why I smelt of cheap rose-water.” Cratchit realised that he’d forgotten to put his coat outside the back door.

Anne’s voice was very quiet. “You’ve put our children into danger, Robert.”

“He’d have killed me otherwise, Anne. And he’d have found us in any case. He has spies – street urchins he uses, a gang of them, running the streets. They spy for him and they steal for him and who knows what else they do for him.”

“What? A gang of children running the streets of London, committing crimes? Who’d believe a fantastical story like that?”

“Kitty swears it is true.”

“Oh, it’s ‘Kitty’, is it?”

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“I know who you mean, Robert. I just didn’t think you were on such intimate terms with her.” Anne rolled onto her side, facing the wall.

“It’s the only name I know her by. She’s not a bad girl, Anne.”

“Ha!”

“She’s not. She just has no chance, living where she does, and how she does. ‘I was born in the Angel and I’ll die in the Angel’, she said to me. If disease doesn’t kill her in a year or two, Stitcher will.”

Anne rolled back to Cratchit, her face an inch or two from his.

“But right now, Robert, our children are in danger!”

“They’ll be fine if Stitcher gets his two hundred pounds on Christmas Eve.”

“That’s two days from, now! Anything can happen in two days, Bob! Anything!”

Cratchit put his hand to her face and smoothed back a few hairs that had strayed from her nightcap. Anne began to smile slightly. Then she giggled outright, something Cratchit hadn't heard her do in years.

"You know, Bob, in a way, it's too bad you told him it was two hundred pounds in the safe."

"Why do you say that?"

"If you hadn't told him how much there'd be, we might have gotten some it for ourselves. Just a bit, you know. Think what we could do with it. Clothes for the children. Food for us all."

"Medicine for Tim."

"Aye, medicine for Tim."

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There's no end of what we might do with a bit of the goodful, my dear. A bit extra, you know."

"Aye, a bit extra," was Anne's wistful reply.

But, where would a man like Robert Cratchit, a faceless nobody of a man like Robert Cratchit, find himself a bit extra?

"Oh," murmured Cratchit, nearly asleep, "and I found Mister Scrooge's will, today, as well."

Chapter Seven

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When Cratchit reached the address in Greenhill Rents the next morning, the sun had, only minutes before, reached over the horizon. The shadows were long, but at least it was brighter than it had been the day before. He had already spoken with Missus Tysoe up the road, who, in her husband's absence, assured him that they had managed to scrape together enough to satisfy Mister Scrooge the next day.

The next on his list was Mister Frederick Miller, whose home in Greenhill Rents was trim and neat, if squeezed in by the narrow lane it was on. Unlike the Cratchit home, where most of the preparations for the day were done in the (cheap) darkness, there were candles lit in the home of Mister Frederick Miller. There was even, and Cratchit was astonished to see it, a real oil lamp glowing through a window, sitting on a table and lighting a whole room.

Also unlike Cratchit's home, this dwelling included a goodly number of rooms, as many as eight or perhaps even ten and, through the lights of the front door, a hallway leading from the front to the rear of the building could be seen. Cratchit had almost never seen a hallway.

All this Cratchit saw as he approached the home, walked up the step to the front door and raised the knocker. It dropped with a satisfactory 'clunk' and Cratchit noticed that it had a handsomely cast face on it, very open and honest. As he looked at the face, the door opened and he had to look down to find another face, quite as open and honest as the knocker's.

"Yes, sir?" said the face – or rather the girl to whom it belonged. "May I help you, sir?"

"Oh, yes. Is Mister Miller at home?"

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"It's very early, sir. Very early." Cratchit realised that the girl was a parlour maid. The Millers must be doing very well to have a parlour maid.

"Yes, I am sorry about the hour, miss. I was required to come today to speak with your master. I've come from the firm of Scrooge and Marley."

"I see. To see Mister Miller, is that it?"

"Yes, that's it. Is he at home?"

"Just a moment, sir. I'll find out."

The door closed quietly but firmly, and there was a pause while, around him, Cratchit saw the street beginning to wake. The lamplighter was moving along the street from pole to pole, snuffing out the oil lamps. Up and down the pavement, doors began to open as people put their heads out to see the day and catch their first breath of the crisp air. The nightsoil man

was making his slow way along the pavement, his horse, half-asleep, plodding ahead with the cart unattended, and stopping at each home as the collector went from house to house.

Somewhere in a hidden corner, a sparrow cheeped and warbled.

“What’s this, then? Scrooge and Marley sending to me?” The front door swung wide and a face, so freshly shaved that it still had soap adorning its outer extremities, replaced the knocker. “Well, sir? Bless me! Mister Cratchit?”

Cratchit stepped back a trifle, the better to focus on the countenance he had just encountered. “Good heavens! Mister Scrooge, sir?”

The partly-lathered face broke into a hearty laugh, a booming laugh, a cheery laugh – really, much too cheery for the early hour.

“Oh, dear! That’s the first time anyone’s mistaken me for my uncle! Ha, ha, ha! HA, ha, ha, ha!” The laugh was infectious enough to start others laughing and Cratchit would have joined in, had it not just gone seven in the morning.

Mister Scrooge’s nephew it was, whom Cratchit had seen any number of times at the office. He stood inside the door, in his shirt-sleeves and suspenders, a piece of toweling in hand.

“I am sorry, sir. It *is* Mister Miller, then, is it?”

“It is, Mister Cratchit. I do not carry the Scrooge family name. I thank my cards that I do not.”

“I see, sir. I am sorry.”

“Not at all, Mister Cratchit. Do come in, sir. Do come in. It’s a brisk morning, and I doubt not you have come a long way. Come in, come in!”

Cratchit, having wiped his feet most thoroughly on the small bit of carpeting laid down inside the door for that purpose (imagine that!), found himself whisked into a parlour, wherein were a table (upon it being the afore-mentioned oil lamp), a sofa, several chairs, a roaring fire in a fireplace with polished brass andirons and, wonder of wonders, a square piano, the lid open and a number of pieces of music upon it. Cratchit was unsure of whether to remove his hat or not – and unsure of where he would put it if he did.

Scrooge's nephew motioned Cratchit to a chair and wiped the excess lather from his face.

“Do, please, sit, Mister Cratchit, there's a good fellow. I assume this is about the loan. Due tomorrow, isn't it?”

“Yes, sir. It is, sir.” said Cratchit, perched carefully on just the first inch of one of the chairs. “That is, yes, it's about the loan and, yes, it's due tomorrow.”

“Well, tell my uncle ...”

At that point, an exceedingly pretty young woman entered the room.

“Fred, dear, will you be ... oh! Good morning.” She looked as fresh as the morning did and was every bit as cheerful as her husband. She had also entered with her day-dress open down the back, revealing shift and stays and a good deal of her – your pardon, dear reader – shoulders.

Cratchit had jumped to his feet at the sight of her, then quickly turned his eyes heavenward. “Good morning, ma'am.” The patterns of the anaglyptic ceiling tiles seemed to be very interesting to him.

“I do beg your pardon!” said the pretty young woman, holding the front of her dress in

place with one hand. “Fred, I wanted to ask you to hook me up.”

Fred smoothly stepped behind her, as if his wife greeting gentlemen in such a state was commonplace *chez* Miller. “My dear, this is Mister Cratchit, who is an esteemed employee of my Uncle Scrooge.” His hands were efficiently putting hooks into eyes. He had obviously some practice with hooks, one way or another.

“Delighted to meet you, Mister Cratchit.” The woman, smiling, extended her hand to Cratchit, who, snatching the hat from his head, half-shook, half-bowed over the very feminine object.

“Mister Cratchit, my wife.”

Cratchit muttered a few syllables about delight and pleasing. At least, they may have been, had they been audible. His eyes had gone back to the ceiling. There was a slight pause until Missus Miller decided to break the ice.

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“So, Mister Cratchit, you work for Fred’s uncle, the ogre, do you?”

“Yes, ma’am. I have that honour.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“Not very much, ma’am.”

“I should think not. I think of Uncle Scrooge as a great ferocious bear, lurking in the depths of the City.”

Fred hooked up the last of the closures and patted his wife’s shoulders.

“There you are, dear. Right as a trivet.”

“Thank you, Freddie.” She began to rustle her way out of the room.

“Norah, couldn’t Elsie have done that for you?” Fred’s wife’s given name, by the by,

was Norah.

“I suppose she could, but then, I’d have missed meeting Mister Cratchit, wouldn’t I?
Do continue, gentlemen. I’m sorry to have interrupted. Fred, speak with me before you leave.”

“Yes, my dear.” Fred took the time to watch her leave, then turned back to Cratchit, who resumed his seat, or the edge of it at least, looking about for somewhere to put his hat.
“So, Mister Cratchit, Uncle Scrooge is sending you to check up on me, is he? Afraid he won’t get his pound of flesh?”

“Flesh, sir? No, sir. Good heavens, nothing like that, sir!”

“It’s from The Merchant of Venice, Mister Cratchit.”

“I don’t know anyone from Venice, sir. Is that near Cardiff, sir?”

“Not to worry. Twenty-four pounds, four and eight pence.”

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“Yes, sir. Before close of business, tomorrow, sir. Mister Scrooge has sent me round
to everyone, sir, not just yourselves, as it were.”

“Of course he did. He wouldn’t be Uncle Scrooge if he didn’t. May I offer you something, Mister Cratchit?”

“Oh, no, sir! I must get on to the office, sir.” Cratchit began to rise, but Fred stayed him.

“Do sit, please. I’ve some questions for you.”

“For me, sir? Why me?”

“Because you’re just the man to answer them.”

The parlour maid entered at that moment with Fred’s coat, waistcoat and cravat, all three of which he put on, first handing the towelling to the girl, who curtsied and left. Nice

girl, thought Cratchit, very. Fred followed her to the entry of the room and slid closed a pair of doors which had somehow been hidden in the walls. Cratchit had never seen such luxury.

“Mister Cratchit, you are a long-time employee of my uncle, are you not?”

“Twenty-three years, man and boy, sir. The first sixteen for Mister Marley, as well, of course.”

“And is the firm of Scrooge and Marley generous toward you?”

“Generous, sir? I don’t understand.”

“Do you feel sufficiently remunerated for your travails?”

“Travails, sir?”

“Does he pay you enough?”

“Oh, I can’t complain, sir. Can’t complain.”

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“Of course you can’t. Or you’d find yourself sacked on the instant by that hard-hearted old miser.”

“Oh, sir! Your uncle is a bit tight-fisted at the grindstone, but ...” Cratchit’s habitual smile got a little wider. He did not like where this conversation was going.

“My Uncle Ebenezer is a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping old ...” Fred was stuck for a noun.

“Sinner?” offered Cratchit.

“Oh, I wouldn’t go that far. But he’s certainly clutching and covetous. And everyone knows it – including you, Mister Cratchit. Especially you.”

“I think, sir, I’d best be on my way.” Cratchit rose again.

“Do sit down, Mister Cratchit. You know I speak truth. I have seen blind men’s dogs

tug their masters up alleys when my uncle went by.”

“Have you really, sir?”

Fred stood with his back to the fireplace, hands under his coat-tails and thought. “Did you know I am the only blood relative my uncle has?”

“Are you, sir?”

“My mother was his younger sister.”

“I see, sir.” It seemed a safe enough answer.

“She died giving birth ... to me.”

Cratchit could think of nothing more to say than: “Ah!”

“Twenty-four pounds, four shillings and eight pence.”

Cratchit said “Ah!”, again.

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Well, not to worry; he'll have it and on time, too, but he's been considering lately.

“Have you, sir? Considering ... ?” asked Cratchit and then continued “... flying across the ocean? Taking up knitting?” but only in his head.

“Up to now, it has been my hope to shake him from his oyster-like solitude by showing a happy and cheerful face to spite him. It isn't working.”

“No, sir. That it isn't.”

“And, therefore, I must find some more ... direct means of dealing with Uncle Scrooge.

“Direct, sir?” Cratchit was suddenly very anxious about the way this was going.

“What portion of Uncle Scrooge's yearly income would twenty-four pounds, four shillings and eight pence comprise, Mister Cratchit? Do you know?”

“I couldn't rightly say, sir.” Cratchit eased forward on his chair until he was using

hardly more than the first half inch.

“Come, Cratchit. You keep the books for him, do you not?”

“I do, sir. I keeps the books.”

“Then tell me! What portion of Uncle Scrooge’s income would my outstanding debt to him comprise?”

Cratchit blinked very hard several times before he answered. “Not the five hundredth part, sir.”

“Yet the old clutch-penny wouldn’t forgive me a farthing of it if I begged him – and I am the closest thing to family that he has. Now, here’s the thing, Mister Cratchit: I am almost certain my uncle is sitting on a large piece of my grandfather’s estate – worth thousands by now, I should think, perhaps more – money that was intended to go to my mother – his sister –

when she reached majority. However, she died before that. And being cheated, Cratchit? Is it

possible that Uncle Scrooge is holding on to an inheritance that is rightfully mine – that was my mother’s money, not Uncle Scrooge’s! And that, surely, is reprehensible, criminal – actionable.”

Cratchit cleared his throat with difficulty and said again, “Ah.”

“Of course, it’s my fault, Cratchit; as my uncle would tell you, as he has told me. My fault for being born, you see.”

Cratchit found some courage to speak up, a little. “But you do seem to have got on, sir. You do, indeed, sir.”

“My mother’s dying request of her brother, with nearly her last breath, as he has told me many times, was that he should see me well in the world. And, he lived up to his word –

gave me an education, steered me into business. Paid for it out of my own inheritance, I'm sure."

"Mister Scrooge was always a man of his word, sir. A good man of business."

"Business? Your pardon, Mister Cratchit, but counting coin in a money-grubbing hole is not the sum of a man's business. Surely, a man's principal business is the welfare and happiness of those around him – of the whole world! And what has Uncle Ebenezer ever done in that line of business?" Fred paused, then continued quietly. "He gave me an education, true, but he also gave me a name. Miller. Do you understand that name, Mister Cratchit?"

"Was your father, perhaps, a miller, sir?"

"No, Robert. When they entered my birth in the parish registry, under 'father's name', they put '*filius mullius*'. Do you know what that means?"

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"When the father's name is unknown, they list the child as 'son of a stranger'. And, for a last name, they turn '*mullius*' into 'Miller'. So, Uncle Scrooge made sure that I had no part of my family name; no part of my inheritance. And then, I committed the unforgivable sin: I married. And for that, Uncle Scrooge dropped me forever."

"It's a terrible shame, sir. I know you to be a downright gentleman, sir."

"Why waste money on a wife, he says. Why waste money on children? What good have a wife or children ever done anyone!"

Mister Miller's voice had risen above conversational levels during this and Missus Miller, who happened to be passing the door at that moment, and who happened to be some months gone already, slid the doors open and favoured her husband with a cool and steady

stare before sweeping on. She had added a delightfully pert morning cap to her attire.

“He does say some odd things, sometimes, sir, but I’m sure he don’t mean it.”

“He’s never married himself. One wonders why. What do you earn in a week, Robert?”

“Sir!” Cratchit’s outrage at Fred’s broaching of so delicate a matter was real.

“Never mind, milord, I withdraw the question and will rephrase it, my learned friend, for I’ve no doubt you earn far more than you are paid. Instead, I will ask: How much does the old skinflint pay you?”

“Well, I ... fifteen bob a week, sir.”

“Good lord! Fifteen shillings? A week! And you have a family! You can’t live on that!”

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“We gets by, sir. The wife does washing and brings in a few shillings, and the kids are a-getting of an age where they brings in the odd tanner.”

Cratchit wasn’t aware, but Fred certainly was, that, under pressure, Cratchit’s vocal pattern began to revert to its humble origins.

“You’ve been twenty-three years with my uncle, Mister Cratchit. Surely, you should be doing better than ‘getting by’, by now?”

“Well, I admits I am starting to feel my age, these days. I’m thirty-five. I’m no spring-chicken, anymore. I’m not sure how many good years I’ve got left. It would be nice to have a little put by. Just, you know, a little. And – ” He stopped and seemed to stare into the distance for a long moment. “ – my youngest, sir, little Tim. I’m sorry to say he’s ill, sir, very ill, indeed. And medicines cost money and doctors cost money – money we just never seem to

have. If I had just a little I could put aside, sir, but ... chance'd be a fine thing." Cratchit stopped, fearing he had said too much, fearing he had revealed too much.

"I sympathise with you entirely, my friend. I hadn't realised your child was ill." Fred crossed to a sideboard and withdrew a square-cut crystal bottle and two crystal glasses. "Do you know how old my uncle is, Mister Cratchit?" he asked, after pouring a generous dollop into each glass. He held one glass out to Cratchit. "How old do you think?"

Cratchit took the drink and held it as gingerly as if it were a smoking potion. "I've no real idea, sir. He's getting along, certainly."

"He is sixty-two years old. Sixty-two. Sixty-three come February. Your health, Mister Cratchit."

Fred lifted his glass in a toast to Cratchit, who perforce raised his own and swallowed some of the bottled lightning. Like most of his peers, he was not stout but his consumption

was based strictly on small beer and quarter-cut grog. The strength of Fred Miller's morning whisky caught at his throat, burned his lungs and opened his eyes wider than they'd been opened for a long time. Fred cheerfully pounded him on the back, then drew up a chair close by.

"All better? That's a morning wake-me-up, isn't it? Now, Bob, let's look at the hard facts. I say this man-to-man, now. You're being cheated – yes, you are! – cheated out of what you have long been working for very hard. Don't gainsay it; you are. You deserve better."

Cratchit said, between coughs, "I do. I do!" Cratchit felt a stirring in his heart, for the first time in his life, something which, because it *was* for the first time in his life, he failed completely to recognise for what it was: righteous indignation. "I don't mean to be out of my

place, Mister Miller, but, surely, after all these years, I should be able to look forward to more than just more years of more work and then ... then ... just ... dying. If you sees what I mean. I shouldn't be where I am at this point in my life! I've worked hard every day. I've given him loyalty and devotion and what's he given me, the old ... the old ... miser! There, I said it! He's treated me wrong and ... and I'd be a-deserving of better!"

"Well said! Let me fill your glass, my friend – and do put your hat on the table." Fred was as generous with his topping up as he was with his laughter. "It's an unfair life, Mister Cratchit. Unfair, indeed. You've been cheated; I've been cheated. Lord know who else he's cheated. It's time it was ended, don't you think? Now, drink up and let us, you and I, put our heads together and discover our best way to kill the old bastard."

It took some heavy pounding on Cratchit's back before he finished choking this time.

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His glass was spilled onto the floor and his hat had rolled far under the table.

"I don't think I should hear any more of this, Mister Miller, sir. It's ... it's criminal, is what it is!" Cratchit, still reaching for breath, stood and took a step or two toward the doorway, then turned and came back, bending to look under the table for his topper.

"Put yourself at ease, Bob. I didn't mean wringing his miserly neck."

"What did you mean, then? Putting a ball into his brain?" Cratchit's voice came from under the table, because that is where he now was.

"I meant just this," said Fred. "He has done us wrong, you and I. He has hurt us and harmed us. Are we not justified in finding some revenge upon him?"

"Oh, Mister Miller, sir, I doesn't like to hear that word revenge. It's a nasty word, sir."

"Squeamish, Cratchit? Very well, how about retribution? No? Justice?"

“Well, justice is all very well and good, sir, but it rarely means much in the real world, sir. And Mister Scrooge lives very much in the real world, sir.”

“Is that true, though? I think Uncle Scrooge lives in a world of his own, filled with his own bitterness. So let us set about to hammer some holes in his world. Tell me, Mister Cratchit. What is most likely to shake Uncle Scrooge out of his misanthropy and cupidity?”

Cratchit, having recovered his hat and his feet, now put the former on his head, stared at Fred and coughed a few times before answering. “I told you I don’t speaks no French, sir.”

“His anger at the world and his greed.”

“I’ve no idea.”

“What would knock the legs out from under him and shake him wide awake?”

“Losing his money, sir,” replied Cratchit without hesitation. “Mister Scrooge without his money would be lost. Lord knows he don’t spend any of it and he most certainly don’t

enjoy any of it, but it would strike him to the very heart if he lost any of it.” Cratchit stopped and thought as he recalled his agreement with Stitcher for Christmas Eve. That would have unintended consequences he hadn’t considered. He nearly chuckled. “Yes, if you wanted to kill the old gentleman, then attacking his money would do it.”

“It surely would. If we can find a way to come between him and his money, it might shake him up – and wake him up. So, how do we do it?”

“I’ve no idea, sir. It’s all safe in the bank. ’Cept his investments and loans and such and they’re not susceptible of tampering.”

“There must be some way to get to him. Do we find some way to take him to court over my mother’s bequest? Or do we just brain him with a flat-iron?”

The two men shared a long, thoughtful silence.

“I did find a will, this afternoon, sir. An old will. His will.”

Fred Miller looked extremely interested.

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Chapter Eight

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Cratchit's pen was making soft scratching sounds on the paper in front of him as Ebenezer Scrooge opened the door at precisely two minutes of nine. Scrooge stopped in the doorway and looked with surprise to Cratchit, then continued into the counting-house to divest himself of great-coat and comforter. He sniffed in disdain at the four-coal fire that Cratchit had lit for him, climbed onto his stool, opened his ledger, picked up his pen and dipped it into his ink-well.

Or, tried to. The ink had frozen solidly overnight. With a grunt, Scrooge climbed down from his stool, picked up the ink-well and placed it on the brazier.

That accomplished, he went to the safe, unlocked it (with effort) using the key on his chain, opened it (forcing the rusted hinges to open their jaws), opened the inner strong box

and extracted a handful of contracts, and carried them back to his desk.

“Cratchit!” he called as he climbed back onto his stool. Cratchit laid down his pen, blotted his work and crossed to Scrooge’s cubicle.

“Yes, sir?”

Scrooge turned his cold stare onto Cratchit.

“Latimer, Tysoe, Miller,” he said, laying a contract on his desk with each name.

“Yes, sir. I spoke with Missus Tysoe and Mister Miller this morning before I came in, sir.”

“And, Latimer? You couldn’t be bothered to go all the way to Bethnal Green to speak to Latimer? Too much for you, Cratchit?”

“Actually, sir, I spoke with Mister Latimer last evening, before I went home.”

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If there was anything Ebenezer Scrooge disliked more than being given reason to be angry, it was *not* being given reason to be angry.

“Why didn’t you say so, then? Do you think I can read your mind?”

“No, sir. I don’t think you can read my mind, sir.”

“Well, I can’t.” Scrooge checked his tirade for a moment. “What?”

“Missus Tysoe tells me her husband will be in tomorrow with the full payment, sir.”

“I was sure they’d be short. How can they not be short?”

“My wife tells me that Missus Tysoe says they went without most extras for the past year. Meats, wheelks, and that.”

“Ridiculous.”

“That’s what my wife thought, sir.”

Scrooge looked over the Tysoe contract and shook his head when he got to the value of the collateral. "How can they not be short?" Sighing, he put the contract to one side.

"Mister Miller, sir."

"Yes."

"Your nephew, sir."

"Not any choice of mine, Cratchit. I suppose he's short? Spending money on a wife, and a house, and who knows what else? I suppose he has a yard full of babies, by now."

"Not that I saw, sir. Mister Miller has the full amount ready, sir. He will send it 'round by ticket porter before close of business tomorrow."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that, sir."

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He had nothing else to say?

"Oh, he said several other things, sir."

"Things such as?"

"Such as 'Good morning, Mister Cratchit', 'Goodbye, Mister Cratchit'. Of that ilk, sir."

Scrooge laid the second contract on top of the first, then picked up the final one.

"Latimer. You cannot convince me that Latimer will have it. A lazier man I've never seen. A workhouse legger, if ever I saw one."

"Just as you say, sir. He tells me he'll not have the full amount by the twenty-fourth, but that he will, of a certainty, by Tuesday week, sir. He had come to speak with you last evening, sir, but missed you by a matter of a few minutes."

“There, you see! That proves it. As I said, lazy.”

“It’s a matter of being able to leave work early enough for him to get here before close of business. I’m sure he’ll be by today, sir. ”

“Humbug! He’s probably already high-tailing it with his slattern and his urchins in tow. Put these back.”

Scrooge handed Cratchit the Tysoe and Miller contracts and Cratchit placed them back in the lock box. The blue paper of Scrooge’s Last Will And Testament peeped at him from the bottom of the pile in the lock box. Scrooge had apparently disturbed the pile when he moved the cash box, heavy with the company’s receipts from the day before, to the bottom shelf.

Cratchit knew the contents to be £42/7/9. In one hour, when the banks opened, Scrooge would

take a well-worn leather wallet from the safe, place the £42/7/9 in it, carry it across Cornhill, up Cattle Alley, across Threadneedle Street, and deposit it safely in The Bank Of England. It

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was a ritual that Cratchit had observed every business day since he had come to the firm, although, up until seven years ago, both partners had made the journey, neither trusting the other alone with the money.

Scrooge looked over his ledger while waiting for his ink to thaw. Cratchit, his ink already thawed, draughted the letter of complaint against poor Latimer. Brought to the bailiff, it would result in Latimer being clapped up in Marshalsea Prison for debt – and in his family being expelled from their home. If Scrooge then brought before the Court of King’s Bench, it could end with Latimer’s transportation to New South Wales. Cratchit had the impression New South Wales was somewhere near Cornwall.

Fred Miller had wondered aloud, last night, about the possible contents of that

intriguing fold of blue paper in Scrooge's safe. Cratchit, wondering himself, dipped his pen, once more.

As he did, he became aware of a face at the window. It was a face of some character, although not good character, smeared with a week's growth of grease, grime, and dirt. The young gentleman to whom it belonged had pressed it tightly against the glass and was glaring into the gloom of Scrooge & Marley's. Across the whole of it was a broad, gap-toothed grin.

Cratchit was off his stool in a moment and pulled the door open with force but was only just in time to see coat-tails and heels disappear like a wraith around a corner toward Lombard Street. He looked both ways for others but saw only the usual morning traffic.

"Cratchit! What was that?"

"I'm not sure, sir." He stepped back inside and closed the door. "Just some street urchin, I think, sir." As Kity had said, watch for a visit from such a spirit. It had begun.

"The town is overrun with them. Diseased little monkeys. They need to be put down – by law!"

"Yes, sir. Put down, sir." Cratchit resumed his stool and tried to blot up the ink that had dripped from his pen when he put it down. As usual, most got on his cuffs.

The safe door hung open in Scrooge's office. Mister Miller had wondered whether there might be some hint in that sealed up bundle that gave a clue to how they could ... help Mister Scrooge overcome his disposition. Cratchit took a fresh sheet of paper and began a clean copy of the complaint against Mister Latimer.

At length, Scrooge stepped out of the counting-house, donning his great-coat as he did. He carefully placed the previous day's receipts into the brown leather wallet, closed it with its

leather tie, and tucked it all into his deepest pocket.

“Perhaps I should come with you, today, sir,” offered Cratchit, although he was not sure why he made the offer. Was he worried about the safety of Mister Scrooge’s deposit? Or was he trying to remove himself from temptation?

“Come with me? Whatever for?”

“Well, sir, with all the street urchins about, perhaps it might not be safe.”

“Humbug! As if I couldn’t beat off a scrofulous dirty ragamuffin. I’ve my cane and I could always call for the patrol.”

“They might not be about, sir.”

“Stay here and finish the complaint against Latimer, if you please, sir!”

While Scrooge was gone, three gentlemen came in, one after the other, to offer payment on their loans. Twenty pounds here and twenty pounds there began to build up to a serious sum. Cratchit carefully recorded each item, gave each gentleman a receipt for his payment, and placed the cash in the safe.

When the counting-house clock, echoed by the chimes at St. Michael, signalled noon and Scrooge had not yet returned, Cratchit decided that Scrooge had stopped at the Exchange to conduct business. There were those who felt that dealing on the Stock Exchange was mere speculation, but Ebenezer Scrooge did not speculate. For that matter, neither had Jacob Marley. Every transaction the two partners had made was guaranteed to return a profit and, indeed, the firm of Scrooge & Marley was known for solidity and foresight.

A fourth gentlemen came into the office and left Cratchit with a payment more than equalling those of the earlier three together. Given his encounters with Stitcher the previous

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night and the grinning urchin that morning, Cratchit began to feel a little uneasy about the sum that was sitting in the safe. He decided to place it in the further security of the safe's lock box.

The hinges were rusted and creaked as he forced it open. The money went into the lock box and Cratchit began to close the safe, but the siren call of the blue paper made him hesitate.

We all know, dear reader, that he who hesitates is lost.

"It would be wrong, Bobby. There's no excuse for you if you do. You might even be breaking the law, for all you know. Just don't do it." He was surprised to hear himself speaking aloud, but he repeated his words, speaking quite firmly to himself, and just as firmly closed the lock box and the safe, stood, and bent to brush the dust from his knees. As he did, he was surprised to find that the blue-wrapped bundle was in his hand.

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LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF

EBENEZER SCROOGE,

was still clearly written on the outside of it.

Well, the safe was closed up, now, so he would just put the will in his desk, until he opened the safe once more. For safe keeping, that was all. It would be quite wrong of him to attempt to look at the contents. Clutching the will in both hands, he peered cautiously from the counting-house door toward the street.

No Scrooge.

Without being aware that he was doing it, Cratchit crossed the open space to his cubicle on tiptoe, climbed onto his stool and laid the old, slightly faded document on his desk.

That Scrooge had a will at all was shocking to Cratchit. In his opinion, the old scraper

had never cared enough about any other human being to wish to leave them a farthing. Cratchit had always imagined that Scrooge intended to leave his estate to good works – a home for fallen debt collectors, perhaps. Here, however, was proof that Ebenezer Scrooge had thought about others at some point in his life.

He would just put it in his desk for now.

There was nothing readable when one corner of the folded cover sheet was lifted.

Time to put it in the desk.

Even turning it around and trying the other side yielded nothing. The wide margins the solicitor had used were doing their job of keeping out prying eyes.

“Mister Cratchit!”

Cratchit, intent on his ... putting away ... of the will, had not heard the door open and he

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hastily slid the incriminating pages under the ledger that was open on his desk.

“Mister Scrooge, is he in?” To Cratchit’s dismay, it was his neighbour from up the road.

“No, Mister Tysoe, sir. He has stepped out.”

“I see. Is he expected?”

“I couldn’t say, sir. Mister Scrooge is at ’Change and may be there for the rest of the afternoon.”

“I have a payment here.”

“I can take it and give you a receipt, sir.”

“I wanted to give it directly to Mister Scrooge. I have a few things to say to him.”

“Don’t we all, sir? Don’t we all? Perhaps you could give them to me and I could pass them along to Mister Scrooge.”

“I don’t think I could. No, I don’t think I could at all.”

“Very well, sir. Whatever you like. I’ll draw up a receipt in readiness, though. What name should I put on the receipt, sir? Tysoe, of course, but ... ?”

“Benjamin Tysoe, sir! 21 Bayham!”

“Of course. I spoke with your good wife this morning, Mister Tysoe.”

“You did, did you? Yes, I think you did. She’s not stopped crying since, the poor woman.”

“I’m dreadfully sorry, sir. I was not there of my own accord. Mister Scrooge insisted upon the visit.”

“Yes, as I thought. Scrooge’s man, running about doing his business, sitting there grinning at me like an ... ”

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“Mister Tysoe, sir, I don’t think this conversation is traveling toward any destination either of us would care to arrive at.”

“Very well, I shall address myself to you, sir, as to Mister Scrooge.” Tysoe drew himself up. “Mister Scrooge, you, sir, are a out-dacious, demogalized, wicious, white-livered thief! A ill-conditioned, ill-tempered, ill-disposed robber and no less. We asked you for some small relief, some small time to accommodate ourselves to you, but you would not hear of it. You would rather we relocate ourselves, wouldn’t you? – for you’d find it easier to bury us than to chase us. Well, here it is, sir, in full. Count it, keep it and much good it may do you!”

The man was near apoplexy by the time he had done, so much so, he did not hear the door open and Scrooge enter. Scrooge, for his part, only heard from “here it is, sir, in full”, which satisfied him immensely. He spoke from Tysoe’s elbow.

“Very good, sir. Cratchit, give the man a receipt and show him the door.”

The man was too angry to wait for Cratchit to complete a receipt and rushed out into the cold, leaving the door ajar on his way.

“Humph!” said Scrooge. “Close the door, Cratchit! I can’t afford to heat the whole outdoors.”

This was rather overstated on Scrooge’s part, as the coals in Cratchit’s fire were nearly extinguished and Scrooge had slammed the door to his counting-house as he spoke, keeping the heat from his (not much larger than Cratchit’s) fire in his cubicle. Nevertheless, Cratchit closed the front door.

As he did, he noticed a short figure lurking in the mouth of Bread Street, as dirty as the first had been, underdressed for the weather, and singularly out of place in the midst of the busy commercial traffic of the street. When the figure saw Cratchit looking at him, it shrank back into the shadows.

Cratchit regained his stool and completed the clean copy of the letter of complaint. Tysoe’s anger had been startling to him, who tried to weather life’s checks calmly. Tysoe had been right, of course; Scrooge had done himself out of another month’s interest by refusing an extension. It was sheer pig-headed meanness on Scrooge’s part. For Scrooge, life allowed no deviation, no change. For Scrooge, there was only one path and one destination. Looking across the room toward the old man, Cratchit knew that destination: the grave.

There was much more to life than that.

Checking that Scrooge was busy with his accounts, Cratchit slid the will out from under the ledger. The notary’s seal held it closed, safe from prying eyes. Time to put the document

away once for all; put it away – or admit to himself that he was going to open it.

With a slyness quite unlike him, he took the letter opener from the top of his desk, reached back, and laid it on top of the grate behind him. He opened his ledger book and made a number of entries in its columns, while he waited, keeping the ribbon-wrapped will concealed under his elbow.

A few minutes later, Scrooge was still occupied with numbers, muttering to help the figures add themselves up.

The warmed opener slid under the edge of the wax seal on the will. There was just enough heat in it melt a small portion, separating the seal from the paper underneath. He laid the opener on the brazier once more and returned to the ledger. It took four tries and twenty minutes to free the seal from the lower section of the paper, leaving it unmarred and still attached to the

upper edge.

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With infinite care, Cratchit unfolded the pages of the will. Three sheets comprised the document. Considering the many complexities of Scrooge's business enterprises, it should have taken far more sheets to dispose of it, but then paper and ink cost money and Scrooge wouldn't want to waste either. Cratchit saw that a fourth sheet, of a different paper, had been folded and pushed inside the sealed will; it had stuck to the other sheets with some residual wax from an old seal.

Cratchit carefully peeled the fourth page away and, pretending a keen interest in the ledger open before him, Cratchit slid it under the ledger for later consideration, placed a forearm on the will and pressed it flat. Keeping pen in hand as if actually working, he began to read.

"I, EBENEZER SCROOGE," it read, "being of sound and disposing mind and memory,

and not acting under duress, menace, fraud, or the undue influence of any person, whomsoever, do make, publish and declare this to be my Last Will and Testament.”

So far, so usual.

“I HEREBY DIRECT AND ORDER that all legal and just debts for whatever reason being accrued against my estate shall be ...”

And so on. Cratchit was surprised at that first provision. Younger Scrooge must have been a different man. The Scrooge across the way from Cratchit right now would try to cling to every penny from his coffin. He read quickly through the rest of the first page and flipped to the second.

“I HEREBY DIRECT AND ORDER that the bulk of my estate remaining, in all forms whatsoever, shall be bequeathed to my partner, Mister Jacob Marley ...” Of course, Marley was

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seven years dead. Scrooge had not given one thought to his will since Marley's death. ... of this Parish, to be used and disposed by him as he sees fit ...”

As Marley for Scrooge – in fact, Scrooge was still living in the old house in Brabant Court that Marley had left him. He lived in four rooms and let the rest out to a wine merchant.

“... with the following exceptions:”

Good heavens! There were people in Scrooge's will other than Jacob Marley. Cratchit tried to remember if Scrooge even knew anyone, outside of business, other than Jacob Marley.

“I HEREBY DIRECT AND ORDER THAT THE SUM OF ...” Here Cratchit involuntarily gasped, causing Scrooge to lift his eyes from his papers. Cratchit turned the gasp into a cough. Scrooge returned to his work. “... £15,000 from my own estate shall be given to my younger sister, Miss Fanny Scrooge, on the day of her marriage or on the day of her twenty-first

birthday, whichever should first occur. And, FURTHER, I HEREBY DIRECT AND ORDER that the full funds held in trust for her from our father's estate as outlined in the schedule here attached, on deposit with the firm of ...”

Here, Cratchit turned hastily to the last page, where the details of the trust were laid out. He read them over and went back to the second page.

“... being of whatever amount shall be accrued by that date, shall be at once transferred to her control ...” Generous of him, allowing money that had been left to her from her father to be transferred to her.

“... and, FURTHER, I HEREBY DIRECT AND ORDER that the sum of £500 from my own estate shall be bequeathed to Miss Belle Fezziwig, formerly of this parish, as a token of friendship, in the hope that she will accept it.”

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Miss Belle Fezziwig, Cratchit did not know. She was presumably a daughter of the Fezziwig who had once owned the building Cratchit was sitting in, but Scrooge had never mentioned any ‘friendship’ of any sort, certainly not one that might merit a £500 bequest. The thought of Scrooge having a ‘friendship’ gave Cratchit pause. What had changed him?

Miss Fanny Scrooge was, of course, Frederick Miller's mother. On her death, that is to say, on Fred's birth, he became heir to £15,000 – in addition to whatever funds were being held in trust from her father. That trust had been growing, untouched, for more than twenty-five years. Mister Miller was a rich man, did he but know it.

And, as Jacob Marley had died first, leaving his estate to Scrooge, there was no one left who might inherit the remaining bulk of Scrooge's estate, whatever that might be. Frederick Miller, perhaps, thought Cratchit, but then he thought again. Why should the nephew get it all?

What did he ever do to deserve it? Who deserved it more than ...

“CRATCHIT!”

He was pulled out of his reverie by Scrooge’s grating voice. The old man was coming out of the counting-house, buttoning his great-coat. The will disappeared beneath the ledger along with the mysterious fourth page.

“Are you going to work all night? I’ll not pay you a penny more for it.”

“Am I going to ... ?” Looking out to the street, he was startled to find that it had gone quite dark.

“It will be a busy day tomorrow. I expect we shall have a hefty deposit for the twenty-sixth. With Tysoe, over one hundred and twenty pounds in the safe, at the moment. Be doubly sure that it is locked up.”

“Yes, sir.”

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“Do you think we shall see Mister Latimer, at all?”

“I’m sure we shall, sir. He seems a forthright gentleman.”

“Gentleman? Humph! Good night to you.” Scrooge turned his collar up, tucked his chin into his comforter and walked out the door.

“Good night, sir.”

Scrooge had disappeared from view – the will and loose fourth page were folded, and placed once again in the lock box. He ensured that the safe was locked, the fires out. He closed the counting-house door and locked it. He went back to his desk, put away his ledger, cleaned his pen, closed the ink-well, and began to place it on the grate.

Then, he stopped.

And, thought.

And went back to the safe to retrieve the as-yet unread fourth page.

It was on a different type of paper from the will, somewhat newer-looking and not as faded. On it were written, on one side only, two paragraphs, and a date, all in a fine, old-fashioned hand which was neither that of Scrooge nor of the unknown lawyer who had penned Scrooge's will. There were also three signatures. The first signature, as testator, was that of Jacob Marley. The second, as witness, was unknown to Marley, possibly a lawyer. The third, also as witness, was that of Ebenezer Scrooge.

Cratchit smoothed the folds in the page and read.

"I, JACOB MARLEY, OF THE CITY OF LONDON, being of sound and disposing mind and memory, and not acting under duress, menace, fraud, or the undue influence of any person, whomsoever, do make, publish and declare that this Codicil to the Last Will and Testament of

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Jacob Marley, of the City of London, is effective on this date and shall hereby amend my Last Will and Testament dated the 24th of December, in the year of Our Lord Eighteen Hundred and Twenty-Five, as follows:"

A codicil – to Marley's will! Cratchit felt a breath of cold wind stir the hair on the back of his neck and he turned sharply, expecting to see old Marley, himself, standing there in his tail-coat, pigtail and breeches. But, of course, he was not, and it was just wind blowing down the chimney, rather than a ghostly spirit returned to haunt him.

Marley's will. Marley had been as solitary as Scrooge and had left everything *to* Scrooge. Why, then, did Marley attach a codicil? What possible other bequest did he have to make him want to modify his Final Testament?

Perhaps, Cratchit reasoned, if he continued to read, he would find out.

“... as follows: for his long and faithful service, the sum of £500 is bequeathed to –” Here, Cratchit’s heart began to thump within its container like a steam pump – “... the principal clerk of the firm of Scrooge & Marley, Mister Robert Cratchit, of the parish of St. Pancras in Camden Town.”

“You whirling bastard!” Cratchit screamed. “You farthing-faced chit! You pecksniffian, parlour-jumping stretcher! You ... ! You ... cheat!”

And, it was true. Mister Scrooge, on the occasion of Marley’s death, had, it would appear, removed the codicil’s single page from his partner’s will, a page he himself had witnessed; probably by simply melting the wax used to attach it, and quietly, conveniently, and, oh, so cozily

cheated his clerk from the largess bequeathed to him. £500. Five hundred pounds. Ten thousand shillings. One hundred and twenty thousand pennies. Cratchit’s yearly salary was but £59. It was

a fortune beyond comprehension to him. Yet, to Scrooge, it had been a mere trifle to be snipped, nipped and folded away.

Cratchit’s rage was unparalleled – for him. He swore, he roared, he wept, he slammed his fists upon his desktop. Finally, when he discovered that his fury had changed nothing, he quieted and thought for long minutes.

He then took the blue-folded will from the safe, fresh paper from his desk, re-opened the ink-well, dipped his pen and began to work.

He worked for more than an hour.

Chapter Nine

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At 'Change Alley, a boy stepped out of the shadows, walking up close by Cratchit's elbow: snub-nosed, flat-browed, common-faced enough; as dirty as one would wish to see; with rather bow-legs, and little, sharp, black eyes. His too-large hat, stuck on the top of his head, threatened to fall off every moment – and would have done so if the wearer had not given his head a sudden twitch now and then to bring it back to its proper place. He wore a man's coat, reaching nearly to his heels, the cuffs turned back three times to get his hands out of the sleeves; the hands themselves thrust deeply into the pockets of his corduroy trousers. He was, altogether, as roistering a young tough as ever stood four feet six in his stockings, which, from the state of his shoes, he nearly was.

“Hullo, me covey!”

Cratchit, pulled up short by the youngster's sudden arrival, tried to step around him, but the youth stepped into his path, once again.

"What's the row?" said the boy.

Cratchit resigned himself to his fate. "What row?"

"Goin' to the gates, are you?"

"I am."

"I don't think so. *He* wants to see yous."

"Who?"

"Whatcha mean 'oo? *Him. He* does."

"Who is *he*?"

"Ol' Joe wants to see yous.

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"I have no wish to see Old Joe. I don't know him and I don't care to, thank you."

"Well, I think you'd better have a wish to sees him. This way." The urchin took a few steps down the side alley where he had been lurking and waited for Cratchit to follow. At length, when it appeared that Cratchit wouldn't be following, he retraced his steps and, holding his hat on his head with one hand, stood looking up, but not that far up, at the clerk.

"Look, mister. You can stirs your bacons or the Badger can stirs them for yous. I think the Badger'd rather he did it, but yous wouldn't like it – not half."

The urchin inclined his head to the shadows further up the alley and a tall man, dressed all in faded black, stepped into the light, briefly. His hair was long and stringy, his face sharp and narrow, hands and fingers just as narrow – unlike the short fat club he carried.

"Take my word for it, mister. Yous doesn't want the Badger to be a-doing of it."

Cratchit sighed, bent his head and followed the scruffy youngster into the shadows. He'd followed strangers into dark places before – like the day when he'd been taken from his father, for instance.

They'd taken him directly to a building with many windows and a large room that was empty but for a table at the end and, behind it, three bearded men sitting in tall chairs. Bobby was both hungry and frightened, which made him tremble.

"What's your name, boy?" said the charitable gentleman in the centre chair.

The beadle gave him a tap behind, which made him cry. The trembling, and the crying, and the hunger made him answer in a very low, hesitant voice; whereupon the charitable gentleman in a right-hand chair said he was a fool.

"Boy," said the gentleman in the centre chair, "listen to me. Your mother is dead. You

know that, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," said Bobby, in as large a voice as he could. It was still a very small voice.

"And your father soon will be," said the same gentleman, in what he believed, to his dying day, to be a kindly, concerned tone.

"Will he, sir?" asked Bobby, in an even smaller voice.

"You know you're an orphan, or soon will be, I suppose?" said the gentleman on the left.

"What's a horphan, sir?" inquired poor Bobby .

"Hush!" said the gentleman who had spoken first. "You know you've got no father or mother, and that you have been left a burden on the parish, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," replied Bobby, weeping bitterly.

"What are you crying for?" inquired the charitable gentleman in the right-hand chair. And

all the charitable gentlemen at the table said it was very extraordinary. What could the boy be crying for?

“I hope you say your prayers every night,” said the left-hand gentleman in a gruff voice; “and pray for the people who feed you and take care of you – like a Christian.”

“Yes, sir,” stammered the boy. He would have been very Christian, and a good Christian, too, if Bobby had prayed for the people who took care of him. But he hadn’t, because nobody had taught him to.

“Well! You have come here to be educated, and taught a useful trade, and to learn to be a good Christian,” said the gentleman in the left chair.

“So you’ll begin your trade to-morrow morning at six o’clock,” added the right-hand gentleman. “And, I warn you, learn well and be grateful for the charity you receive from your betters. Like a Christian.”

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The beadle took Bobby out of the presence of the charitable gentlemen and there had followed long days of filling tins with caustic, evil muck for the blacking of boots. The stuff was vile, burning fingers, catching lungs, making him cough and wheeze. His fingers throbbed and ached. His nails were broken and bleeding from the work of it. Then the beadle had again appeared and he was brought forward now to be educated like a Christian. As the newest of the forty boys in the room, it was Bobby who was chosen for special attention.

“Stand, boy.” Bobby stood. “*Triste lupus stabulis*,” said the master, tapping the book he had laid in front of the boy. “Now, construe.”

“Do what, sir?” ventured the luckless youngster.

“Construe,” said the master, again. “Do you not know what construe means, boy?”

“No, sir. I’m afraid I doesn’t.” Bobby, not wishing to give offence, began to smile, just a little.

“You are afraid you *don’t*, boy! A fool – I thought he was,” said the master. “Construe the meaning of the words.”

“Vat vords, sir?” His smile grew bigger.

The master tapped each word in the book with his cane as he spoke. “*Triste lupus stabulis, maturis frugibus imbres, arboribus venti, nobis Amaryllidos irae*. Construe!” With a final smack of willow on paper, the master turned and walked away.

“I dunno them vords, sir. I hain’t bin schooled, perzackly,” began Bobby, and a shudder ran through the whole room as every boy’s eyes (except Bobby’s) became fixed upon the floor.

Bobby remained smiling upward toward the master. The master's wrath fairly boiled over. He made three steps up to the construer, and gave him a good box on the ear. The blow was not

particularly a hard one, but the boy was so taken by surprise that he started back; the bench caught the back of his knees, and over he went onto the floor behind. The master surveyed his domain.

“There will be none of your disgusting, vulgar, gutter speech in this School! You are here to become respectable Christians and you will speak as respectable Christians do! This is the rule of the School, made for the good of the whole School, and boys who thoughtlessly or wilfully break the rule will not be allowed to stay at the School.” The master’s wrathful eye fell full upon Bobby, who, from the floor, smiled upward. “Are you a fool, boy?”

“I doesn’t fink so, sir.”

“You *doesn’t fink* so!”

Bobby thought hard. “*I don’t think* so, sir.” He smiled up at the man, who was looking down at him.

The master, who was only a temporary master at that, looked Bobby up and down as though the boy were a slug found under a bucket. “How old are you?”

“Eight, sir.”

“Then why can you not construe ‘*triste lupus stabulis*’?”

Bobby’s smile grew wider. “If you please, sir, I hain’t ... I *have never* been shown kinstrew, nor no letters, if you will.”

The master looked down at the boy’s idiot grin and somehow his anger faded.

“Sit, boy,” he said and Bobby resumed his place on the bench. The master addressed the room at large. “We shall now all become abecedarians, once again, and, by our example, young

Cratchit will learn the alphabet.” A collective groan from the boys. “You, boy, in the far row. Begin!”

“A *per se* a,” the child parroted.

“B *per se* b,” said the next.

“C *per se* c.”

The litany of boy’s voices rolled in Cratchit’s head as he and the youth crossed through Pater Noster Row to the back of the Old Bailey (the youngster kept to the other side of the street as they passed that fearful building); sprinted past Newgate, and the gibbet in front of it, and into Cow Lane; turned into the maze of small streets there, and ended at Vine Street and Hatton Wall, along which the youngster scudded at a rapid pace, Cratchit close at his heels, trying to keep his bearings. They struck down the small streets again, and finally into Portipool Street. Behind

Portipool, the laneways were very narrow and muddy, and the air was impregnated with filthy odours. Small children, even at that time of night, were crawling in and out at the doors, or screaming from inside dimly lit flats. Covered ways and yards here and there diverged from the main street and, from several, great ill-looking fellows emerged, bound, to all appearances, on no harmless errands. The ways were foul and narrow; the shops and houses wretched; the people half-naked, drunken, slipshod, ugly. Alleys and archways, like so many cesspools, disgorged their offences of smell, and dirt, and life, upon the straggling streets; and the whole quarter reeked with crime, with filth, and with misery. A dirtier or more wretched place he had never seen. This was Baldwin's Gardens.

Far in this den of infamous resort, Cratchit was considering whether he hadn't better slip away from his conductor when that gallant, catching him by the arm, opened the door of a

low-browed, beetling shop, below a pent-house roof, where iron, old rags, bottles, bones, and greasy offal were bought and, drawing Cratchit into the passage, closed it behind them.

"Wotcher?" came a low voice from the stinking depths.

"Plummy and slam!" was the reply.

The light of a feeble candle gleamed on the wall at the remote end of the passage; and a man's face peeped out, from where a balustrade of the old kitchen staircase had been broken away.

"Who's the t'other one?" Apparently, Cratchit's young guide was well known whereabouts.

"Where did he come from?"

"Greenland. Is *he* apples and pears?"

"Yes, *he's* up there. Up with you!" The candle was drawn back, and the face disappeared,

and Cratchit was conducted up two flights of perilous stairs and into a room at the end of a hall.

Cratchit glanced around. The walls and ceiling of the room were perfectly black with age and dirt and sin. Secrets that few would like to scrutinise were bred and hidden in this sepulchre of a building. Sitting in among the wares he dealt in, by a charcoal stove, made of old bricks, was a grey-haired rascal, near seventy years of age; who had screened himself from the cold air without by a frowsy curtaining of miscellaneous tatters hung upon a line. On a table before the stove, a guttering candle, stuck in a ginger-beer bottle, provided, with the glimmerings of the fire, the only light.

He sat without changing his attitude in the least or appearing to take the smallest heed of Cratchit and his guide, until, at last:

“At last,” *he* muttered, wiping his dry and fevered mouth. “At last!”

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“This is him,” said Cratchit’s guide.

“I sees that. Where’s the Badger?”

“He’s about.”

“Find him.”

Cratchit found himself alone in the cold and dark room with *him*. It was not a comfortable place to be.

“Now, then. Step this way, sir. Let’s have a look at you.”

Cratchit took a few hesitant steps toward the flicker of the candle and the man slowly revolved his head toward him, taking him in from bottom to top, bit by bit.

“I am wery glad to see you, my dear, wery,” said the old man, and smiled at him, disclosing among his toothless gums a few such fangs as should have been a dog’s or rat’s.

“What do you want? Everything will be in place tomorrow night. I told Stitcher it would be.”

“Stitcher!” The old man’s smouldering eyes blazed with sudden fire. “Don’t you mentions Stitcher around me! Don’t you ever mentions him!”

“I thought ... Kitty said there would be ... boys would come ... Doesn’t he – do you ... work with him?”

The old man spat in contempt. At that moment, new light spilled into the room and Cratchit turned to see that a door behind him had swung open. The door closed and the Badger was now standing just inside the room, the short club dangling from his fingers. This was the first close-up look Cratchit had of the man, and he hoped fervently for only more distant views in future.

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“Badger! Did you get her?”

“She’s waiting.”

“Who’s with her?”

“Charley.”

“Right, then. Now, Mister ... I’m sorry, my dear. What is your name?” The old man smiled once again, with toothless lips.

Cratchit was silent for a moment or two, until the Badger stepped toward him.

“Cratchit! Bob Cratchit!”

The conversation was beginning to have a very familiar tone.

“Very well, CratchitBobCratchit. We was having a chat with a very nice young lady who told me a friend o’ hers made your acquaintance in a alley a couple of nights since and that you

told her a nice little tale.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, come, CratchitBobCratchit. A lovely tale about a counting house and a safe and Christmas Eve. I knows you remembers.” The old man’s eyes flicked to the Badger and the heavy club slammed on the table near to Cratchit’s hand. “Does you remember, now?”

“Yes! Yes, I remember.”

“I thought you would, my dear. Now, what we wants to know is: when is Stitcher going to pick up this treasure; how will he be a-knowing of where it is – and *where is it?*”

The Badger placed one of his long-fingered hands on the back of Cratchit’s neck and began to squeeze – not much; just enough to lift him onto his tip-toes and twist his neck around.

“If I tell you and Stit ... and *he* doesn’t get it, he’ll kill me – and my family. He said so.”

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“Did he? That’s shocking, that is. Charley!” The door opened again and the old man spoke into the light: “Bring her in.”

The Badger twisted Cratchit’s neck around further, forcing him to turn to face the door. The light spilled into the room and across the floor as a shadow, or rather two shadows, stepped into it. The larger shadow pushed the smaller into the room and slammed the door.

“Now then, my dears. We’re going to have a bit o’ nanty narking, we are. Bring her here, Badger.”

The Badger released his hold on Cratchit’s neck and that article dropped to his knees and tried to rub some circulation back into his throat. The Badger lifted the girl, for it was a girl or, at least, a young woman, and deposited her in front of the old man. Turning, he resumed his grip upon Cratchit, lifted him to his feet and a little beyond that.

“Now, then, my dears. I thinks you had both best be a-turning about and having a good look, the one at the t’other. A very good look.”

Cratchit looked toward the girl. His gaze took in, first, untidy shoes and stockings, the hem of a dress, well muddied and ripped, a girlish waist, an immodestly low bodice, a good deal of hair, and, finally, a face.

“Martha! Martha!”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” The girl was barely able to lift her face to meet his and her eyes were wet.

“What has she to do with you – or with *him*?” Cratchit twitched his head as far he could toward the Badger.

“Why, this bit o’ jam is one of our girls now, don’t you know? And a sweet little girl, she is.” The old man reached out a soot-smudged hand to stroke Martha’s cheek.

“Leave your hands off her!” shouted Cratchit, and the Badger’s club crashed onto the table once more.

“Wotcher!” hissed the tall man to Cratchit and the old man pulled Martha to him. “Ah, she’s a clever girl, she is. She’s a h-honour to her sex,” said the old man. “I likes her, so I gives her too much, I do, but I’m always too generous towards the ladies, I am; it’ll be the ruin of me. But I’m wishing they was all like her!”

Cratchit dragged his eyes from his daughter to the old man. “What do you mean?”

“Why, just that this young lady, in the course o’ her duties, as it were, were rabbiting with another girl and got wind of a bit of queerness happening on Christmas Eve – and being a good girl, when she came to us, she up and let the Badger know t’oncet. A good girl, she is.”

Cratchit was in anguish. "She's my daughter, for god's sake! What do you want with her?

Why is she here? How is she here? She works for a milliner in Stepney."

"Ay, she did, until Jem Stitcher bought her from the old lady."

"Bought her?"

"Did you think it was all hats and froo-fraw what them girls is making for Guerin?" The old man's eyes widen and his toothless mouth hooted with delight. "He did! He thought they was making 'ankies, Badger!" The old man's hoot was harmonised by Badger's low chuckle.

"What were they doing, then?" Cratchit was terribly afraid he knew what they were doing.

"Why not tell him, girl? Go on, then. Tell your father how you pass your nights."

"I can't," was her low reply.

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"Of course, you can, my love. Go on. Give it a try."

There was a long pause, then, very, very softly: "She made us, father. She locked us up and took our clothes and wouldn't feed us and ... she made us do it."

Cratchit's ears rang; his vision went dark; his legs went numb and loose. Had the Badger not been holding him up by the back of his neck, he would have fallen to the floor.

"That's right, CratchitBobCratchit. She were entertaining gents, she were. All very high-class and refined, mind. It weren't until Jem got hold of her, she took to a-walking of the streets."

Martha pulled free of the old man and flung her arms around Cratchit.

"I'm sorry, father. I'm sorry."

"But, you sees, Mister Cratchit, we saved her. Badger and me. We saved her and pried her out of Jemmy Stitcher's hands, just today. And she told us how, last night, Willin' Kitty were

talking to her and told her all about your little talk with Jemmy. Well, she knew at once who it were and how to find you.”

“I’m sorry, father,” said the girl again, her voice nothing but a whisper, just barely heard above the sounds of the fire. “I thought they might let me go if I helped them.”

The old man chuckled. “What a lark, eh? That’s likely, hain’t it, Badger?” The Badger returned the old man’s chuckle.

When Cratchit found his voice once more, he gasped out: “What do you want with her, then?”

“Nothing except what she were already supplying Jemmie in full. Nothing except what she’s already been putting forth, my dear.”

Another broken whisper came from the depths of Cratchit’s arms. “I’m sorry, father. I’m

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There were no words in Cratchit’s mouth; no thoughts in his mind.

“That’s as what as may be, Bob. Let’s talk about Christmas Eve. You see little Martha here tells me her friend Kitty says there’s hundreds of pounds just waiting to be picked up. Now would Martha be lying to me – or would Kitty be lying to Martha? Or would you be lying to Stitcher?”

“Why would I lie? He was going to slice my throat.”

“That’s the thing, hain’t it? Would you lie to get away from him? Would you lie to get away from the Badger – or me? Now, I promise yous, what a chivvy cove like Stitcher’ll do to you is straight up heavenlies to what the Badger will do to you. Badger don’t use no chiv what cuts nice and clean. The Badger blunts ’em proper. Show him a bit, Badger.”

The Badger released Cratchit, caught Martha's hand and forced it flat onto the table. The girl's whimper grew to a shriek as he raised his short club over his head.

"I wasn't lying. There's hundreds of pounds!" It was wrenched out of Cratchit's mouth. The Badger paused as Old Joe lifted a hand.

"How many hundreds?"

"Two ... maybe three."

"And to get it, all we have to do is ... ?"

"Get there before Stitch ... get there before *he* does."

"That's all fine, then. We can sorts this out, can't we, without no circumbendibus?"

Cratchit had no idea what that meant. "Just let her go, please. She's just a girl."

"Well, I don't think we need her, for now. Badger, nark the titter. Apples and pears."

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"Right. I may help meself, while I'm there."

"'Tain't on the slate, Badger. Three shillings for her."

"Three shillings! What's she got that's special?"

"It hain't bin in commission so long, is what! She's got a months yet afore she's poxed out or become obvious. You pays your shot or talk to our Nan – but keep an over-eye on that one."

The Badger grudgingly, with a firm grip on her, led the girl out, and left Cratchit with the old man. I will leave you to imagine, dear reader, Cratchit's state of mind after hearing his daughter discussed in this way – and young Martha's, on hearing her fate laid out so baldly.

"Now then, Bob, my dear, suppose you goes over everything you was a-telling of Sticher and we'll sees whether we can climb in on it."

Chapter Ten

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~~An Interrupted Journey~~

For the first time in a very long time, Cratchit's body did not want to wake. He was dreaming of a day at the workhouse when he was not yet nine years old. Each moment was imprinted on his body; each thought was ingrained on his mind; each sound rang in his ears as if nearly three decades had not passed.

"Oo's fightin' wiv the li'le oik?"

"Slogger Williams.

There was a small ring of boys, applauding Williams, who was holding the smaller boy by the collar.

"Sneakin' wittle brute," shouted Williams, shaking Bobby roughly. "See if I don't punch yer 'ead."

Williams was not only bigger than Cratchit but probably a long year older, which made the ‘fight’ a very uneven contest. Bobby wriggled ineffectually in the bigger boy’s grip and looked left and right for help. None was forthcoming.

“There, you young sneak,” said he, giving Bobby a cuff on the head with his other hand; “when I says ’and it over, yous ’ands it over – ”

Bobby, despite his ears ringing, managed to put on a wide smile. “Hands what over, Slogger?”

“What cha mean ‘what’? Half yer bread, all week. That’s what.”

Bobby continued to smile. “All right, Slogger; all right. Half my derb, all week. Is half enough, though? Doesn’t you wants all of it?”

“Yeah! You what? What cha mean ‘all of it’?” Once Slogger got an idea in his head, it was very difficult to dislodge it with another.

Bobby’s smile was steady. “Well, what they gives me hain’t so much. Not so much as would fill a rat. You’ll probably wants it all or else you’ll be hungry.”

“Yeah, that’s right. I’d be hungry otherwise, I guess.”

“‘Course, *I’ll* be hungry, but that’s all right, Slogger. I’ll gives it to yer.”

“Here! Wot you smiling about?” The cheerful expression on the face of this cheerful little runt was upsetting to Slogger. None of his victims had ever offered to increase the rate of extortion – and they’d always been crying by this point in the ordeal.

The boys in the circle weren’t getting the fight they wanted and screamed out: “He’s funking!”, “Go in on him, Slogger!”, “Catch him up!”, “Finish him off!”

“Wait a minute!” shouts Slogger. “I wants to know what he’s smiling about. Wot yous

smilin' about, fidget?"

"I dunno, Slogger. I just smiles a lot, I guess." And, in truth, he did, so much so that many wondered whether or not the boy was simple.

"Well, stop it."

"I think what I can't. I just smiles, that's all."

This was no fun for Slogger. He didn't particularly want Cratchit's bread portion; he had just wanted to prove that he could take it if he wished.

Well, he could – but he suddenly didn't want to. He released the smaller boy's shirt front and stepped back.

"Come on, Slogger! Do him! Knock his teeth out!" The other boys were getting angry at the lack of fight in this fight.

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"Nah, I don't think so. No point, is dere? Wet's yer name, eh?" he said to Cratchit.

"Name's Bobby," said the younger boy, tucking in his shirt.

"Well, that's too long a name for a runt like yous. We'll calls you Bob. On account of yer bobbed off."

Bob's smile was genuine this time. "All right. Bob, it is."

"Keeps yer bread, Bob. Yer looks like yer needs it more'n me."

"Yer not takin' 'is bread?" demanded another boy, not quite as big as Slogger. "Right then, I'm going to!" He reached out for Bob's shirt-front, but Slogger struck down his arm.

"Leaves him alone!" said the erstwhile bully. "Hain't nobody touches Bob. He's a good 'un, he is."

And, with that, Slogger pushed his cap down over his brow and sauntered away, thumbs

hooked into his trouser-waist, the smaller boys clearing the way before him.

And, Bob Cratchit smiled. In his sleep. And became aware that he was smiling in his sleep. Then he was aware of noises in the dark around him, hands shaking him, his wife's voice calling his name, but it was only with the smell of fish frying over the fire that he finally came awake – and knew he must be well behind his usual time.

Rushing down the stair, he struggled into his shirt and waistcoat. Anne, seeing him awake, had gone to the back room, putting two-day old, twice-fried kippers onto a plate for him.

“You didn’t wake me. I shall certainly be late.”

“I couldn’t wake you. You must have been very tired.”

“I was. I am. Much has happened. I shall tell you another time.”

By now, he had shrugged into his coat, splashed water on his face, tugged his hair into some semblance of order, and decided it was too late to shave. He pulled on his boots with a morsel of kipper in his mouth, followed that with a couple of swallows of small beer. His coat was on in a moment, his comforter around his neck and his topper on his head.

Anne passed him, making her way upstairs. Cratchit, watching the stairway closely, went to the back room, opened the tea tin in which the household funds were kept; and extracted half a nicker from the small collection, leaving not much behind. He felt the weight of the ten coins in his pocket. Ten shillings should be enough, he thought, as he opened the front door.

“Robert!” his wife called, coming down the stairs. “It’s Christmas Eve. Don’t forget.”

“I am not likely to, my dear. I shan’t.”

Cratchit reached the end of the walk and stopped to look at his wife, standing in the doorway. He turned back and went up the two steps to the front door.

“There’s another reason I can’t go to the peelers about Stitcher, Anne.”

“What might that be, then?” Anne’s patience with this topic had come to an end.

“When Mister Scrooge leaves the office this evening and I lock up, there won’t be two hundred pounds in the safe.”

“Not two hundred! But, Robert! When he ... if that ... Stitcher finds out ...!”

“It’ll be closer to five hundred pounds.”

Anne’s face went white, despite the cold morning, and her mouth described a perfect ‘O’. Cratchit kissed her cheek, and plunged down the street toward the City.

So much to remember this Christmas Eve. So many things that had shaken Cratchit’s little world. So much that would still happen. So much that could still shake his little world even further. The first of those things was waiting for him where Fig Lane meets Crooks Road.

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“Oo, Bobby, you smell of kippers, you do,” she said, sliding her arm through Cratchit’s as she came up behind him. She was in the same red gown, green boots and yellow bonnet, although she did have a shawl around her shoulders against the morning cold. She also had a bright bruise, just turning yellowish, where Stitcher had hit her with Cratchit’s topper.

“My, don’t you look clappin’, this emma?” she said, companionably. “I was ’round your yard last night, but you wasn’t about, was you?”

“I was late getting home, yes.”

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t hang about. That won’t yarn a gal a living, will it?”

“I suppose. I have a living to make, as well. I’m already late. I must get to work.” He tried to disengage his arm from hers.

“Well, I’ll walk your way, then.” She snuggled in closer. “Just pretend we’re two-tvos. I

can be the kisses and you can be me fryer. Here we go, now. Step it out.”

“What do you want, Kitty?”

“Why should I want anything? Can’t I just be glad to sees you? Who was you with last night, Bobby, that you was home so late?”she said, smiling mischievously. “I hope it were nice for yous – but I promise I can be nicer. Willin’ Kitty, remember?”

“Never mind that. What do you want – or what does Stitcher want?”

“You sees, Bobby, it’s like this ...”

A gentleman in a topper and bottle-green great-coat stepped around the corner from Churchyard Road and nearly collided with the pair.

“I do beg your pardon, sir!” he said, tipping his hat. “A merry Christmas to you, sir. And, to you, madam.” He continued on, with a slightly puzzled look on his face.

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Kitty giggled. “You see, Bobby, hain’t we a right pair? We should have a couple god forbids in tow.”

“What do you want, Kitty?”

“It’s like this: Stitcher and me was having a bit of a gargle last night. Nothing too much, you understand, five or six annies, maybe, and he turns to me and he says ‘Here, Kitty, my love, get your clothes on and go sees our friend, Robert Scratchit of Camden Town.’ And, that’s you, hain’t it, Bobby?”

“Go on.”

“Go sees Bobby Cratchit and just reminds him to be having care not to forget what day it is, tomorrow’ – meaning, today, o’ course – ‘cause we’ve got han happintement, don’t we?’” All friendly, like, you sees. ‘We got han happintement, tomorrer.’ And, we do, don’t we?”

“We have an appointment, yes.” Cratchit was watching the people on both sides of the street as they passed Chichester Place and headed down to Gray’s Inn Road, well aware that he was half-way between Stitcher and his ilk, and Old Joe and his.

The farther they progressed toward the City, the brighter, the more jovial, the more under the influence of the season were the faces of the passers-by, despite the greyness and cold of the day, and he was greeted with “Merry Christmas, sir, madam” and “Best wishes to you, sir”, at each meeting. Oddly enough, the further they progressed, the more accepting the people were of Kitty’s bold appearance.

Cratchit looked at the girl beside him and wondered how long it would take Martha to become like this girl. Martha! Oh, gracious Heaven, what could he do about her? He picked up the question Kitty would not answer before. “Tell me how you started doing ... this.”

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“Oh, god, Bobby! What you want to know that for?” She fluttered her hand in front of her face, as if taken by a faint, and her voice quavered. “I was a virtuous lady’s maid, foully seduced by my master and cruelly thrown out to wander the streets ...” She dropped the mimicry. “Is that what you wants to hear?”

“Just tell me the truth.”

The girl was silent for a long while as they walked toward the City. “Well, I’ll tell you,” was her slow response. “Me dad was an ’ousebreaker and me mom was long gone. Dad was cuffing a bit o’ jam called Chousing Bett and she says to me one day ‘’ere, it’s time you was earning your own way’ and she grabs me by the ’air and drags me into a room with a man and locks the door. You need any more than that, captain? Get you all fussed and bovered, does it? Wants to save my soul, does you?” Here, Kitty slid her hand from his arm down into the button

front of his trousers. “Or was there something else you wanted?”

He disengaged her hand quickly. “Stop it! How old were you?”

She lifted her chin defiantly. “I were twelve, near enough.”

“And, you’ve been ... ?”

“On the bash – yeah, ever since.” She was daring him to make some objection.

“How have you survived?”

“Never mind that. A girl does what she gots to do, don’t she?”

“How much do you make?”

“Bobby!” She took three or four steps to decide. “Well, some weeks, I makes nearer on four pound nor three – sometimes five. I done eight, oncet. How much do you make, Bobby?”

“Not that. That’s a deal of money, Kitty. Where does it all go?”

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“Stitcher gets it, of course. He takes care of me, he does. And now, Stitcher’s wanting to know, when will our happintement be, Bobby? What time?”

“It had best not be until ...” Cratchit thought hard. “... until midnight. Yes, that would be best. When the last midnight bell tolls.”

“Stone me, you do like a bit of chunter, don’t you? All right, midnight, smack on the diddle.”

“The back door will be unlocked; the office open; the safe unlocked. Just take the money, but be sure to close the safe, close Scrooge’s office and close the back door – that’s important. Then, there’ll be nothing out of the usual for the peelers to notice.”

“Why don’t you do the closing up?”

“I’ll not be there.”

“’e hain’t going to like that, Bobby.”

“Everything will be set up for him. He doesn’t need me.”

“’e hain’t going to like it.”

“Just do what I’ve said and it will all work out. Is that all you want, then?”

“Listen, Bobby, I’m just handing yous the word from Stitcher, you knows. I doesn’t mean nothing by it. You and me is friends, right?” She still clutched his arm tightly.

“Oh, the best of friends.”

“Don’t be like that, Bobby. ’Cause I likes you, I do. You’re a gentleman, you are, and I don’t meets many such. And, I said it afore, but remember –” She slid her hand into his button front, again. “– if yous ever wants to, Willin’ Kitty’s willing.”

He again pulled himself free. “Good god, woman!”

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“No! All right, then. Yous doesn’t know what yous is missing, though. Oi!” She stopped walking and pulled him around to face her. “I nearly forgot. Stitcher wanted me to let yous know one other thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Stitcher’s got little Martha tucked away safe. If you don’t be a-keeping of your word, Stitcher won’t be ’appy with you. And, if ’e hain’t ’appy with you, ’e hain’t a-going to be ’appy with her, either. Merry Christmas, then, Bobby.” She leaned in to him to kiss his cheek quickly and turned to go. Cratchit called after her.

“He doesn’t, you know!”

Kitty turned to look at him.

“Stitcher doesn’t have her!” The puzzlement on Kitty’s face was pure pleasure to

Cratchit, who felt his breathing and his pulse quicken. "Old Joe's got her 'tucked away safe'. So, if Stitcher's not going to be happy, he'd best not be happy with Old Joe and the Badger. But, if he's going to do something about it, he'd better do it quickly, because I've just now decided something."

"What have you decided, then?"

"I've decided I'm going to kill them both. Merry Christmas to you!"

Cratchit turned and walked down Holborn Hill into the City, leaving Kitty wide-eyed and gape-mouthed. Cratchit was breathing heavily, face flushed, nerves a-jangle. It was an unusual feeling for him but, on reflection and all other things considered, having experienced it the night before, there was no doubt whatsoever in his mind: Robert Cratchit was angry.

His attempts to calm his racing heart lasted for the space of but four blocks, between

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Brook Street and Union Court, when a familiar voice chimed in his ear.

"Hullo, me covey!"

The lad's topper was as impertinent as ever, as was his attitude.

"And, merry Christmas to you." The boy's hat was just aching to be smacked from his head.

"What, is it Christmas?"

"Very nearly. What does Old Joe want, now?"

"He wants to sees you, o' course. Come on, the crib's just around the corner, here."

"Not this morning. I'm too busy."

"Oh, me heart, Old Joe won't be happy to hear that. He likes what he likes and he wants what he wants."

“Well, I don’t like – and I don’t want. Tell him everything is still happening, just as we discussed. Midnight on Christmas Eve. It’s important that it be right at midnight.”

“See, Old Joe wants things to happen faster’n that. He’s a trifle ... impatient, he is.”

“Well, I am getting a trifle ... impatient, myself. I can’t change the way this must happen. I can’t command the sun to set more quickly.”

“Yeah, but oncet it’s set, then there hain’t no reason to dawdle about it, is there?”

They were just passing the alley before Cow Lane, and Cratchit caught the youth’s shirt front and forced him around the corner and hard against a wall. Although it was daylight, yet the shadows in the alley were long.

“Look at me, you little gobshite!” The youth was so surprised by Cratchit’s sudden fury that he hardly thought to fight back. “Go on back to Old Joe and tell him it’s all planned for just what we talked about – midnight, not a minute later and not a minute earlier.”

“I will, Mister Cratchit, I will. No need to be throwing a wobbly.”

“And one other thing, you dodgy little git. You tell Old Joe, and you tell the Badger that if they lay their daddles on my Martha – if they so much as hangs a mouse on her –”

“What? You’ll go to the beak, will you?”

“I’ll pull their guts out – slow-like – and then, just for fun, I’ll pull yours out, too. Now, leg it.”

He pushed the boy up Cow Lane and conferred the Order Of The Boot to his fundament to help him on his way. The urchin dodged along between people for about twenty yards, then turned back to shout.

“I’ll tell ’em, Bobby! And won’t they just have a right giraffe at that? They nicked her for

a bit o' brass, they did, and they hain't a-going to wave bye-bye all that easy! I predicts the future's as black as your hat, Bobby!"

He ran off after that, artfully dodging pedestrians until he vanished around a corner. Cratchit stood trembling, breathing heavily, having astonished himself at his own audacity. Several passers-by gave him curious looks and one troubled to stop.

"Are you quite well, sir?" she inquired. Cratchit, after a deep breath, smiled and replied "I am, madam, thank you", tipping his hat. "Merry Christmas, then, sir," she said and continued on her way, while Cratchit continued his much interrupted way to work, arriving only a minute or two before Scrooge. In fact, he was just making up Scrooge's fire when the door opened.

"Merry humbug, sir!" the old man shouted to the world in general, and to one gentleman in particular, who had thoughtlessly offered him a season's greeting. His mood seemed as dark as the day, which, despite being near nine o'clock, was still quite dark from being thickly overcast and heavily fogged.

"Cratchit!"

"Did you want something, Mister Scrooge, sir?" Cratchit, despite his anger toward Scrooge still bubbling just beneath the surface, thought it a good time to be a trifle overly obsequious.

"I want fools to stop wasting my time with foolish wishes. Humbug, I tell you! Humbug! And then, I want every contract that is due today on my desk."

"Yes, sir. At once, sir."

He turned from the coal brazier and extracted the keys to the safe from his pocket. As always, the rusted lock argued long about being turned and the hinges screeched their protest at

being forced to do their duty and swing. So, too, the inner strong box was reluctant to disclose its contents, but eventually, Cratchit was able to bring out the documents, leaving only the few letters and other papers that remained after he had cleaned it out the day before. Less, of course, the will.

He put the sixteen contracts on Scrooge's desk, while Scrooge divested himself of his coat, hat, comforter, and gloves, and stared moodily into the flames of the brazier.

"Humph!" was the only acknowledgment of the papers, as Scrooge climbed onto his stool and prepared for another day. It was more than thirty-two years since he and Jacob Marley had bought out old Fezziwig's business, then a failing warehouser, and had transformed it into a thriving enterprise dealing in properties and companies – and the loans needed to purchase both.

Before he died, Marley had known to the penny what his share was worth; Scrooge, after seven years as the sole surviving partner, knew to the farthing. He didn't share that knowledge with very many, at all.

"Mister Scrooge, sir, the safe is becoming very rusted. It's very difficult to open."

"Can't afford to throw away money to replace perfectly good items. Push harder."

"Well, sir, I'm thinking that it may, more and more, lend itself to a situation where we will, one day, find ourselves unable to open it, and the company's ready assets locked up inside, sir – unable to be accessed, as it were – and that would be unfortunate." Cratchit looked inquisitively to his employer, who said:

"Humph," and began to open contracts.

"Perhaps, sir, just a drop or two of oil on the hinges, and the locks, might save us – your pardon – save you the trouble and expense of bringing in a locksmith one day to open it.

Ha’p’orth drop of oil, now; save two or three pound later, I should think.”

“I don’t pay you to think, Cratchit. I pay you to sit on your stool and scribble.”

“Yes, sir,” said Cratchit, and he returned to his stool to begin scribbling.

However, Scrooge was clearly weighing the anguish of parting with ha’p’ny now against the agony of parting with half a ‘godiva’ later. After ten minutes of silent debate, he called “Cratchit!”

“Mister Scrooge, sir?”

“Take ha’pence from the cash, go ’round to the ironmonger and fetch back some paraffin oil. Mind that you fetch back the change and a receipt.”

Despite the fog and chill, as soon as the door of Scrooge & Marley’s closed behind him,

Cratchit felt like a schoolboy on holiday. The nearest ironmonger was Will Gadsby in Little
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Eastcheap, toward the Thames from Scrooge & Marley’s, and Cratchit fairly skipped along on

his way there, delighting in people and pigeons and peripatation. At one point – and, dear reader, I tell you this in strictest confidence; you must not pass this to anyone – at one point, he actually leaped into the air and clicked his heels together – and on landing, he slipped upon a patch of ice and came down very hard, so that he had stopped skipping and was fairly hobbling by the time he reached his destination.

Unlike Scrooge & Marley’s, Gadsby’s Ironmongery was brightly lit against the day’s gloom and a small bell tinkled merrily when Cratchit opened the door.

“Good morning, Mister Gadsby.”

“Good morning, sir.”

Cratchit produced the half penny. “Paraffin oil, please. A pint.”

Mister Gadsby produced two pint tins of paraffin oil and set them on the counter.

“I’ve this at ha’pence the pint and this at farthing the pint.”

“I’ll have the farth ...” Cratchit stopped, then smiled even more broadly. “I’ll have the ha’p’ny tin, please.” Cratchit placed the half penny on the counter. Gadsby took the proffered coin, wrapped the tin in brown paper, and wrote up a quick receipt.

Gadsby smiled as he handed over the package. “Thank you very much, sir. A merry Christmas to you.”

“And, to you, sir. A happy New Year.” Cratchit tipped his hat and started to leave, then stopped suddenly, and turned back to the counter. “And, I think, one item more, Mister Gadsby.” He looked past Mister Gadsby’s shoulder to the shelf behind and pointed.

“The second one, please,” he said, extracting the handful of shillings from his pocket.

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Chapter Eleven

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~~Cratchit Opens A Door And Closes Another~~

Cratchit and Scrooge were again cloistered in the office of Scrooge & Marley. The quiet scratching of Scrooge's quill was echoed by the somewhat less rhythmic scratching of Cratchit's.

Outside, passers-by were quite clearly under the intoxicating influence of the Christmas season. It was like a delightful mime show on the other side of the window, as pedestrians hurried to and fro on their holiday business, jostling one another occasionally, helping to retrieve dropped parcels, and exchanging a laughing "Your pardon, sir" or an "Excuse me, my friend", always finished off with "And a merry Christmas to you!" Christmas must be a truly wonderful time, if you do not work for Ebenezer Scrooge.

That man was calculating the amounts coming due on the day. Of the sixteen contracts, two had been paid before Cratchit had made his trip to the ironmonger and four, including the

ticket porter from Fred Miller, had come in while he was buying the oil, which he had already applied to the locks and hinges of the safe. That left an even ten contracts still to be fulfilled, including Mister Latimer's, whom Cratchit knew could not possibly meet his obligation.

While Scrooge looked at contracts, Cratchit had, spread on his desk, the three pages of Scrooge's will and the three pages he was copying – and amending. One or two small amendments to the will, a clean copy carefully reclosed with the notary's wax seal and Tim would get his medicine when Mister Scrooge ... died. The anger Cratchit was feeling toward his employer helped his pen form a close copy of Scrooge's mean and cramped hand. As he worked, he kept a wary eye on his master in the counting-house and was ready at a moment's notice to slide some letters over top of the pages he was working on.

The clock had struck noon. Two more had come in with their loan payments, bringing the amount in the safe to something over three hundred pounds.

"Mister Scrooge, sir," said Cratchit, after the second had left, "did you plan to make your bank trip today?"

"No."

"Ah." Cratchit had counted on this. On this special day, with so many loans coming due at once, Scrooge would want to receive the full amount due on that day before he banked it, but that amount would not be collected until after the Bank closed at four p.m. "Very good, sir." And, of course, the bank would be closed from Christmas Eve until Boxing Day.

With Cratchit at his desk and Scrooge at his, the day drew into afternoon. Cratchit had finished his 'work' on Scrooge's will, folded it and the new version carefully, and slid them into his desk, then began real work on copying letters.

“A merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!” cried a cheerful voice. It was the voice of Scrooge's nephew, who had entered so suddenly that the startled Cratchit's inkwell was on its side before the door had closed.

“Bah!” said Scrooge from his counting-house. “Humbug!”

“Christmas a humbug, uncle! You don't mean that, I am sure?” Fred, on passing by Cratchit's cubicle gave him a wink and slapped his hand on the top of the desk, missing the puddle of ink by an inch. Cratchit scrambled for blotting paper to stem the tide.

“I do,” growled Scrooge. “Out upon merry Christmas!” Cratchit saw that Fred, on slapping the top of his desk, had left behind a folded paper. “... a time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer ...” Cratchit headed off a rivulet of ink with a piece of blotter, pulled

Fred's paper toward him and began to unfold it. “... through a round dozen of months presented dead against you?” The paper was a note with just two lines: “Cratchit” and “See me tonight.”

Scrooge, meanwhile, was warming up to his argument. “If I had my will, every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding ...” Cratchit's attention was distracted by the realization that his left cuff had been the principal casualty of the affair with the ink-well. It was stained black three inches up. Anne would not be happy.

Of all the things that Cratchit had to worry about at that moment, his wife's displeasure might be thought of as the least. I promise you, dear reader, it wasn't.

Cratchit hastily scribbled a reply on back of the paper Fred had left and refolded it, while the argument continued in the counting-house.

“Uncle!”

“Nephew, keep Christmas in your own way, and let me keep it in mine.”

Cratchit reflected that he was keeping Christmas by conspiring to commit burglary. It would have been a sobering thought, had Cratchit been unsober, which he rarely was.

Cratchit mouthed Scrooge’s standard reply to this along with his employer: “Let me leave it alone, then. Much good may it do you!”

Fred struck a very classic pose and began to speak.

“There are many things by which I have not profited, I dare say, Christmas among the rest.”

The speech went on, but Cratchit had ceased to listen to the words, and simply followed how it was expressed. Fred Miller was blessed with a goodly number of gifts: he was handsome;

he was congenial; he had a contagious laugh; he had a delightful wife. Had you been able to hear

him at that moment, dear reader, you would surely have shared the opinion of many, myself

among them, that his greatest gift was that of oratory. Cratchit was truly impressed by Fred’s

masterful command of phrase and tone. As Fred concluded his speech with a rousing “I say, God

bless it!”, one hand hooked on a lapel, one finger raised in the air, Cratchit simply could not stop himself from applauding.

That was a mistake.

"Let me hear another sound from you," said Scrooge, "and you'll keep your Christmas by losing your situation!"

Cratchit immediately picked up the ink-stained pieces of blotter paper and the poker, throwing the first upon the remaining sparks of the fire and poking furiously at it with the second. In no time, he had coaxed his fire from a mere few fitful flickerings into nothing at all.

Having accomplished that, he picked up his pen and applied himself assiduously to a letter declaring that the sum of two shillings, four pence had been expended on the client's behalf and prompt repayment was required. Being gainfully occupied, he missed the next few exchanges in the conversation, until a new outburst from Scrooge drew his attention.

"Because you fell in love!" growled Scrooge. Cratchit wondered what had prompted that.

"Good afternoon!"

"Nay, uncle, but you never came to see me before that happened."

Before what happened, thought Cratchit. Before Fred Miller fell in love? Ah!, his thought continued. Before he married! – something Scrooge had never done. Cratchit tried to think of what life might have been like for a woman married to Scrooge – and failed. It was unthinkable.

He thought of the unknown Belle Fezziwig mentioned in Scrooge's will and wondered what sort of woman she might have been to carry on a friendship with Ebenezer Scrooge – and what sort of

woman she had become since.

"I'll keep my Christmas humour to the last. So a Merry Christmas, uncle!"

"Good afternoon!"

"And a Happy New Year!"

"Good afternoon!" Cratchit involuntarily ducked, expecting an ink-bottle to come sailing out of the counting-house as Fred, smiling at everything the old man said, left the room. On his way out, he crossed over to Cratchit to shake his hand and say:

"A merry Christmas, Mister Cratchit, and to your good wife." As they shook hands, the note was passed back to Fred, who slid it into his pocket and went out.

Scrooge was grumbling from his office, something that ended with: "I'll retire to

Bedlam.” That made no sense. Hadn’t they closed Bedlam twenty years before?

And, with that, Fred had left, leaving Cratchit to stare at his hand and at the door, where two other people were coming in. They were portly gentlemen with pleasant smiles and they now stood, with their hats off, in front of Cratchit and bowed to him.

“Scrooge and Marley's, I believe," said one of the gentlemen, referring to his list. "Have I the pleasure of addressing Mister Scrooge or Mister Marley?"

From the counting-house, Scrooge’s gravelly voice drew their attention. “Mister Marley has been dead these seven years. He died seven years ago, this very night.”

Cratchit pointed a finger toward Scrooge and the gentlemen moved to Scrooge’s door.

“We have no doubt his liberality is well represented by his surviving partner?”

Cratchit snorted quietly. It certainly was, for they were both as tight as an old door screw.

Cratchit had recognised the type when they came in: charitable gentlemen. He knew charitable

gentlemen. Cratchit had met charitable gentlemen before – all sitting in a row, like so many wise owls.

Bobby Cratchit was older when he visited the board a second time, but not bigger. He made himself as small as possible in a corner, as the board conversed among themselves, but in so low a tone, that the words “saving of expenditure,” “look well in the accounts,” “have a printed report published,” were alone audible. These were only understandable on account of their being very frequently repeated with great emphasis.

At length the whispering ceased; and the members of the board, having resumed their seats and their solemnity, the charitable gentleman in the centre chair said:

“We have considered your application, and we can’t approve of it.”

“Not at all,” said the charitable gentleman in the left chair.

“Decidedly not,” added the one on the right.

“So you won’t let me have him, gen’l’men?” asked the petitioner, who, by his dress and appearance, might have been a cess pit cleaner, but was, in fact, a night-soil man. The difference really only mattered to other night-soil men.

The board were stricken to point out that, as the man did happen to labour under the slight imputation of having bruised three or four boys to death already, it occurred to the board that, perhaps, this extraneous circumstance ought to influence their proceedings. It was very unlike their general mode of doing business but the petitioner twisted his cap in his hands, and walked slowly from the room.

“Petition for a boy to be taken into ’prenticeship from partners in the way of financial

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same man who had brought Bobby Cratchit before the board upon his admission to the Voluntary School five years before, now older and with a distinct limp.

The next pair of petitioners were prosperous-looking businessmen, who approached the committee, doffed their hats and bowed slightly.

“Now,” said the charitable gentleman in the centre chair. “Which boy is this? Ah! That one. As nasty a boy as we’ve had here for some time. We think you ought to take something less than the premium we offered for him.”

The two businessmen looked to each other without speaking, then back to the board.

“Excuse us, sir, we are of the opinion ...” began the taller of the two, but he was interrupted by the man in the centre chair.

“Your pardon, sir, but have we the pleasure of addressing Mister ...” Here he consulted a paper. “... Mister Scrooge or Mister Marley?”

The taller gentleman smiled tightly and bowed once again. “I am Jacob Marley, sir, and this is my esteemed partner, Mister Ebenezer Scrooge.” The shorter of the pair likewise bowed.

“Thank you, sir. Please, continue,” said the gentleman in the middle chair.

“We are of the opinion, gentlemen, that, if the boy is troublesome, the premium should be increased, rather than decreased. Shall we say four pounds ten?”

“I should say, three pound ten was plenty,” said the charitable gentleman in the right chair.

“Ten shillings too much,” said the charitable gentleman in the left chair.

“Come!” said Marley; “say four pound, gentlemen. Four pound, and you’ve got rid of him

for good and all. There?”

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“Three pound ten,” repeated the right chair, firmly.

“Come! Let us split the difference, gentlemen,” urged Marley. “Three pound fifteen.”

“Three pound ten and not a farthing more,” was the firm reply.

“You’re hard upon honest businessmen, gentlemen,” said Scrooge, breaking his silence.

“Pooh! pooh! nonsense!” said the centre chair. “He’d be cheap with no premium at all.

Take him, gentlemen! He’s just the boy for you. It’s taken five years, but he’s had the Cockney and the backbone knocked out of him; he knows his letters; and he’s very good with numbers.

He’s a bit of an idiot; grins all the time; and he never has learned to construe his Latin. Like all of these ragged boys, he wants the stick, now and then, of course, but use it, gentlemen, use it! It’ll do him good. And he needn’t be very expensive to board: he’s small, quite scrawny, in fact, for

his age and he hasn't been fed full since he was born. Ha! ha! ha!"

"I thought he had been at the voluntary school five years," said Marley.

"Correct. He has." The gentleman seemed to find no irony in that statement.

The two petitioners looked to each other again. Scrooge smiled. Marley smiled. The bargain was struck for three pounds, ten shillings. The beadle was at once instructed that Robert Cratchit and his indentures were to be conveyed before the magistrate, for signature and approval, that very afternoon. Robert Cratchit, now twelve but looking ten, was led away.

"Be thankful," said the beadle, in a tone of impressive pomposity. "You're a-going to be made a 'prentice of, Robert."

"A 'prentice, sir!" said the boy. He had a broad smile upon his face.

"Yes," said the beadle. "The kind and charitable gentleman who have been parents to you, when you have none of your own, are a-going to 'prentice of you, and to set you up in life, and make a man of you, although the expense to the parish is three pound ten! Three pound ten, Robby! Seventy shillin's! – one hundred and forty sixpences! – and all for a nasty orphan which don't nobody love."

Bobby Cratchit said nothing, but grinned his widest grin at the man. If there had been someone to look behind those eyes, they might have seen something lurking there, something quiet, smouldering, but biding its time – they might have seen it, but there was no one to do so.

Scrooge's voice, raised in dissension with his two visitors, intruded upon his thoughts. "It's enough for a man to understand his own business, and not to interfere with other people's! Mine occupies me constantly! Good afternoon, gentlemen!"

The gentlemen withdrew. Cratchit, stopping them as they left, passed the only tuppence

he had left from his earlier purchase into their hands. Scrooge picked up his pen and returned to work, so pleased with himself that he was actually humming.

Meanwhile, the fog and darkness thickened. Foggier yet, and colder! Piercing, biting cold. One by one, all but one of the remaining loan payments were made by men who stomped their frozen feet and rubbed their frozen ears vigorously as they came in – and even more vigorously as they went out.

Just before five o'clock, what little light from the street that was hitting Cratchit's desk grew dimmer. He turned to look and saw the same smiling, giggling guttersnipe from the day before pressed up against the window. As Cratchit watched him, the urchin fixed him with an idiot stare and, smiling and grimacing, bent down to the keyhole and began to sing.

'God bless you, merry gentleman!

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May nothing you dismay!

Scrooge, leaping from his stool, seized the steel ruler from his desk, rushed to the door, and flung it open with such energy of action that the singer, after one last grin to Cratchit, fled, so that, by the time Scrooge finished heaving the door open, there was nothing outside but the fog and the frost.

Scrooge mumbled his way back to his stool. "Ragamuffin monkeys! They should be put down. Put down! By law!"

"Yes," from his clerk. "Being poor and hungry and ill is surely something that should be punished." ...but he didn't dare say it out loud.

Cratchit went to the open door and looked up and down the street, especially into the dark corners between buildings, but did not see what he feared to see. He closed the door, made sure it

had latched, then returned to his freezing desk, putting on his comforter and trying to warm his hands. Just before five, the street door opened once more and Cratchit, whether through cold or fright he did not know, knocked over his ink-well again. This time, it did not spill and he returned the frozen pot to its proper orientation. A shadow loomed over him and he lifted his gaze to a familiar face.

“Ah! Mister Latimer, isn’t it? From last evening. Yes.” Cratchit’s stomach tightened at the scene he knew was about to ensue.

“Yes. It’s you then, is it? I want to thank you for your kindness, last night, sir. You gave me some hope, which I sorely needed at that time.”

“Cratchit!” It was inevitable.

“It’s Mister Latimer, sir. Here regarding the loan.”

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Very well. Stop this way, if you please, Mister Latimer.” Scrooge, thought Cratchit. As Scrooge thought Latimer was bringing him money, he might at least have come out of his tank, but such an action would never have occurred to the old grasper. Cratchit listened to the conversation he knew would develop.

“Mister Scrooge, sir, I’ve come about ...”

“Final payment, due today. Yes. Twenty pounds, sixteen shillings.” Without looking up, Scrooge held out one hand for the money, while staring at the document in question, laid in front of him on the desk.

“Well, that’s the thing, sir. The thing is ...”

“You don’t have it.”

“No, sir.”

There was an ominous silence, while Scrooge's eyes travelled from contract to contractee.

"What do you have?"

"Fourteen and nine. Here it is, sir."

"Fourteen and nine." Another pause as Scrooge took the money – oh, he took it all right, noted Cratchit, he took the money before anything else – counted it, jotted it down in his day-book and placed it in the cash box. He wrote out a receipt and proffered it to Latimer. "Fourteen pounds, nine shillings. That's not twenty pounds, sixteen, is it?"

"It's most of it, Mister Scrooge. We'll have the rest very soon, sir."

"Your contract is due by end of business today, sir. That is in ... less than one hour."

"We can't have it by then, Mister Scrooge. We're asking you ..."

"... for more time."

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"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. We'll have it by Tuesday, week, sir – somehow."

"Six pounds, seven shillings. Tuesday, week."

"Yes, sir. That's not long, sir."

"Tuesday, week. What can I say to such a reasonable request?"

"Thank you, sir. We've been trying very hard, sir."

"I have no doubt. Cratchit!"

Cratchit found the paper Scrooge would need and took it to Scrooge's office.

"Here it is, Mister Scrooge."

Scrooge took the single sheet of paper and held it up to Latimer. "This is a complaint, Mister Latimer, a complaint of bankruptcy and fraud. It will be laid on the desk of Sir David Salomon, the Sheriff of London. The bailiffs will come and evict you. They will place you in

Marshalsea Prison. You will then be taken before the Court of King's Bench, where you will be convicted. And then you will be transported, Mister Latimer. Do you hear me? Transported!"

Scrooge had risen to lean over his desk for that final word.

Cratchit could see Latimer's face pale, even in the gloom of Scrooge's office.

"For god's sake, Mister Scrooge, I've a wife! I've a sick child."

"That you were foolish enough to marry a jade of a wife and bring sickly children into a world overrun with sickly children is no concern of mine, sir! My concern is six pounds, seven shillings. Your concern is to bring it to me within ... fifty-four minutes. Good afternoon, sir."

"Mister Scrooge! You can't! I've given you fourteen and nine of it. You can't have me transported for six pound, sir!"

"Six pounds, seven shillings – and I can and I will. Good afternoon."

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"Fifty-three minutes."

The windows rattled as Latimer slammed the door behind him. Cratchit saw him stand, looking left and right, lost in a nightmare, before plunging off into the darkness.

"He'll never have it inside the hour, Mister Scrooge."

"Of course not." Scrooge clapped his hands and rubbed them vigorously together. "For the price of six pounds, seven shillings, I will have acquired a very nice property in Bethnal Green worth very much more than that."

"Court fees, sir?"

"It will never come to that. Rather than face the consequences, he will simply sign it away." Scrooge laughed a self-satisfied laugh that never reached farther down than his teeth.

“Back to work, Cratchit.”

At length, the hour of shutting up the counting-house arrived. With an ill-will Scrooge, dismounting from his stool, tacitly admitted the fact to the expectant Cratchit, who instantly snuffed his candle out, and put on his hat.

“You'll want all day to-morrow, I suppose?”

“If quite convenient, sir.” Every year for the last fifteen years, they'd had the same conversation on December twenty-fourth.

“It is not convenient, and it's not fair. If I was to stop half a crown for it, you'd think yourself mightily ill-used, I'll be bound?”

“Yes, sir.” As he was every day, Cratchit thought.

“And yet you don't think me ill-used, when I pay a day's wages for no work.”

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It's a dog's wages, not a day's wages, Cratchit thought, but said “It's only once a year, sir.”

“A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December! But I suppose you must have the whole day. Be here all the earlier next morning.”

“Thank you very much, Mister Scrooge. I'll be in very early on Saturday, sir.”

Scrooge fixed Cratchit with a baleful glare and walked out with a growl. As he disappeared, Cratchit thought of Scrooge's laugh as Latimer stumbled off into the night; he thought of Scrooge's retort to his nephew: “buried with a stake of holly through his heart!” He thought of the single page of Marley's will, torn from its place and hidden; the pallid cheeks and misshapen limbs of his little Tim. Cratchit thought of a great many things in the next few minutes.

The office was closed in a twinkling; closed, that is, except for Scrooge's counting-house and the safe. Cratchit went through to the back of the building and, hand shaking at his own treachery, slid back the two bolts and turned the key in the lock. He tested the door to be sure it still swung (for it had not been opened in years), brushed the dirt and frost from the small shingle reading 'Scrooge & Marley' that was fixed to the wall beside the door (forgetting entirely, as I am sure you have not, dear reader, that Stitcher could not 'make out words') and closed the door again. He collected the two versions of Scrooge's will from his own desk, along with the loose page of Marley's codicil.

He then went to the safe, opened the cash box, removed the cash and carefully counted out two hundred and five pounds.

That portion went back into the box. The remainder, which he knew was two hundred eighty-eight pounds, went into the leather wallet. Tucking wallet, quills and codicil into his inner pockets, he put on his hat, put out the candle and locked the front door behind him.

As the lock clicked firmly, he thought "There you go, you aris pole. I hope it chokes you."

Glancing along the street, he saw Scrooge, two blocks away, arguing with a chestnut roaster over, presumably, the price of his wares. Cratchit placed a hand on the wallet of banknotes tucked into his waistcoat. "Save a farthing tonight, Mister Scrooge," he thought. "You might need it in a few days' time." He stepped into the street, then leapt back as a carriage passed him. Recovering his balance, he looked up- and down-street before stepping out again, and saw, in a doorway across the road, Mister Latimer, hands in pockets, shivering, eyes fixed on Scrooge in the distance. He crossed quickly and placed a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Mister Latimer." My, how the man did jump. Cratchit was shocked to see the change in

him. His entire body shook; his eyes were red and moist with tears; his mouth grim and tight.

“Mister Latimer! What’s happened to you?”

It took time for Latimer to focus on Cratchit’s face.

“I can’t let him do it, Mister Cratchit. I can’t let him do it. My baby ... my baby will die!

My wife ... what will happen to my wife?”

“It’s not as bad as that, Mister Latimer.”

“How is being transported not as bad as that? How?”

“Mister Scrooge doesn’t expect it to come to that. He expects you’ll sign over the property to him, first.”

“He expects to steal my home then, does he? What kind of man is he? To take what I’ve worked for all these years? And, where do we go, then? How do we live? How do *they* live, for

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I’ll be in New South Wales!” His voice broke at this point. “Where is New South Wales, Mister Cratchit?”

“I’m not sure. Near Cardiff, I think. Come, Latimer, buck up. It can’t be as bad as all that.”

“It can. It’s ... it’s injustice, is what it is! It’s cruel and it’s heartless and it’s wrong! Look at him!”

Latimer pointed down the street to Scrooge, who had apparently won his argument with the chestnut vendor and was smiling as he picked up his journey, once again, a paper of steaming chestnuts in his hand.

“He’s got no feeling; he’s got no humanity in him. He’s a monster! Where does he live, Mister Cratchit? Where does the monster live?”

“Now, Mister Latimer, you’re not yourself, right now. Go home, please. Have a cuppa and sit with your wife. You’ll feel better in the morning.” Cratchit knew how ridiculous the words sounded, even as he said them.

“I’ve decided, Mister Cratchit. He won’t get my home. I may not keep it, but he won’t get it. What’s six pound to the like of him?”

“To him, perhaps more than to you and I, my friend. He thinks it has great value.”

“What kind of law is it lets a man’s whole life be taken away – his wife and children dragged from him – for nothing ... for a trifle?”

“And yet, it is the law. Bad as it seems, it is the law.”

“Then the law, sir, is a ass!” Latimer took Cratchit’s coat by the lapels and pulled the smaller man to him. “Where does he live, Mister Cratchit?”

Down the hill, Cratchit saw Scrooge turning in to Clement Street. He carefully prised

Latimer’s fingers from his coat.

“I won’t tell you where he lives, Mister Latimer, but I’ll tell you where he’s going to be for an hour or two.” He pointed after Scrooge. “The George & Vulture – go down the path beside St. Michael. You’ll find it. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking he won’t get my home. Not if it’s the last thing I do.”

“You’re not planning violence, are you?”

“I’m not planning no more violence than he’s planning for me and mine. The wheel turns, Mister Cratchit – the wheel turns!”

“Don’t do it, Latimer. You’ll hang. Sure as sunrise, you’ll hang. Don’t do it! Not where you can be seen!” Cratchit’s heart beat faster at his own words. He hadn’t intended to say them,

although he was thinking them.

“I’ll have it over and done with tonight! You hear? Tonight! Hanging’s better than being transported and ... and my wife and ... my baby ... !” His voice failed him completely at this point and he began to walk toward St. Michael Cornhill.

Cratchit had learned to be a good Christian, learned it better than he had learned to construe. The bundle of money in his waistcoat prodded at him. It seemed thick and inexhaustible, but who knew what the doctors and medicines for Tim might cost? Did being a Christian mean allowing his own child to die? The answer to that had been thundered into his ears and beaten into his back every day for five years.

“Wait! If I give you the money – !”

“What money?”

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“The six pounds you need.”

“Six pounds, seven shillings. We mustn’t forget the seven shillings.”

“If I gave it to you, perhaps, we can persuade Mister Scrooge ...” That was unlikely, at best.

“Is it past six o’clock?” Cratchit had to admit that it was. “Do you think he’ll take it, now? Keep your money. He doesn’t care. He doesn’t even want my home, not really . He simply *wants*.” And, Latimer turned once more toward the church alley.

“Wait! Don’t do anything ... anything mad, Latimer! Wait!” And Cratchit ran to catch up the younger man. “Listen! He goes home after he has a meal. Follow him home! Wait until then!” The words had come from Cratchit’s mouth before he knew he had said them. He clapped both hands over that orifice to stop it from making any further sounds. Latimer reached the St.

Michael church and turned down the path toward the little court where the George & Vulture lay.

After the man had passed from view, Cratchit felt dizzy. He bent over and tried to put his head between his knees. Not being a man who took exercise, he got not much lower than his waist.

What had he done? Had he really sent Latimer to commit some outrage upon Scrooge? What had Scrooge done to deserve that from him?

A page from a will; five hundred pounds; his son's withered limbs and pallid face. The dizzy spell passed. He straightened and breathed in the cold night air.

As he did, a movement at the alley to his left caught his eye. Two of the ragamuffin street children were walking toward him. He turned to his right and saw a much larger figure looming under the street lamp.

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It was shrouded in a deep black garment, head, face, and form concealed in darkest shadow and, in the gloom, nothing visible save one hand – from which dangled a heavy club. But for this it would have been difficult to detach its figure from the night, and separate it from the darkness by which it was surrounded.

It was the Badger, of course. The brute slowly, gravely, silently, approached.

Cratchit turned and ran pell-mell across the street, into the maze at 'Change Alley and up the two blocks to Cornhill.

Chapter Twelve

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Fred, Once Again

From the relative emptiness of the street in front of Scrooge & Marley's, Cornhill was alive with pedestrians, all of them happy and eager to be done with business and on their way home.

Searching the crowd intently for the Badger's unpleasant face, he found himself at the end of a line of boys, queuing for a turn at an ice-slide that had been made for just such fun. As the lads jostled each other, Cratchit was edged nearer and nearer to the slide.

"Away you go, mister!" cried some boys and gave Cratchit a shove that sent him spinning down the slide. As he turned about for the second time, he caught a glimpse of the Badger in the crowd, searching. At the bottom, he regained his feet and edged his way back up the hill. The Badger was nowhere to be seen. Once again the boys were jostling around him for position in the

line and, as he reached the top, a pair of them linked arms with him and ran for the ice.

“Here we go, mister!” laughed the boys and down he went again, feet over his head, topper miraculously staying on, the boys on each side of him laughing heartily at every bump and spin. At the bottom, the boys pulled him to his feet and began pushing him back up the hill.

“Come on, mister! Let’s do it again!” They hauled on his sleeves and tugged him back to the line. Down again, the ice hard beneath him, the legs of the crowd swirling around him – piercing the air, a shrill whistle and the gap-toothed rogue who’d stared into the office window was whistling with two fingers in his mouth and waving his other arm overhead.

At the bottom, he came up hard against a pair of sturdy boots and solid legs. Hands reached for him and he found himself looking into the face of – a stranger; a complete stranger

who laughed and helped him to stand, brushing snow off his coat. He was a young man in his

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20s, handsome, with curling hair, brown eyes and somewhat delicate features. Bob noticed, for some reason, that the man’s fingers and cuffs were ink-stained. Another clerk, like him?

“You are merry, today, sir!” said the man, laughing at Bob’s antics. “In honour of it being Christmas Eve?”

“Yes,” said Cratchit. “Christmas Eve – in honour.”

“I must write that up,” the man said, still laughing. “For my ‘Street Sketches’ – perhaps you’ve seen them in the Chronicle?”

The shrill whistle split the air again and, suddenly, there was no time for idle chat. Without looking back, he pelted back up Cornhill, leaving the young man to call after him “Do read them if you’ve a chance! Street Sketches! By Boz!”

Up Finch to Threadneedle; beside the Bank of England to Throgmorton and onward, as

hard as he could run until he had lost himself in the alleys of London. It was a game, wasn't it? A game of Blind-man's Buff – with death at the end of it.

Cratchit pelted down alley after alley, as fast as his legs would let him. At last, in the vicinity of London Wall, he was forced to stop and catch his breath. Around him were a goodly number of late pedestrians, but not nearly as many as had been on Cornhill. Gasping and shivering at the same time, he debated whether he should stay in the promised safety of the street lamps and the passers-by, or shrink into the shadows and disappear.

He thought of running again, but knew he couldn't keep up that pace. Proceeding at a nonchalant stroll, he moved along street by street, turning now and again. He tried to keep watch for urchins or the Badger, but realised that the fog had grown too thick to see much of anything beyond a dozen yards.

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The fear he had felt at the sight of the Badger had receded and was slowly being replaced by something – not new, but very old. He had come to recognise the anger that bubbled up at the thought of his master's duplicity; he had come to embrace the indignation that flared over Stitcher's and Old Joe's treatment of his daughter. This was neither; when he thought of it, he found it to be a burning, consuming hatred – kept buried behind smiles and servility all these years, but directed toward all those who had wronged him: masters and bullies; charitable gentlemen and parsons; doctors and beadles; even, perhaps, his own father. For now, he focussed it on the ones who were tormenting him on this Christmas.

At last, he stopped, his back pressed against a building; he was at a loss. To go west would take him toward home, right enough, but straight through Old Joe's domain, where the scoundrel was sure to have lookouts. North would take him into Stitcher's hands in the Angel,

and in between were the gang of boys from Saffron Hill. Sticher had to do his spying for him. To return south or east would take him into the arms of the Badger. But, looking desperately around him, he realised he was only one short block from a place he had been just the morning before.

He would visit Fred Miller, as requested.

Gathering his limited stock of courage, he sprinted across the road ahead of him, along the block of flats on the west side, around the corner into Greenhill Rents and, in a moment, was banging on the Millers' front door.

The same girl opened it. "Yes, sir? Oh, it's you, sir. I'll take you up."

"He is expecting me, then?" Cratchit was still trying to calm his breathing.

"Oh, yes, sir. He said you'd be along."

The girl took him up to the family sitting room, rather than to the formal drawing room

below. Fred was standing, his back to the fire once again, while his wife was seated in a

comfortable chair in one corner, feet up on a small stool, a blanket tucked around her limbs.

"Robert, my good fellow! Thank you for coming!" exclaimed Fred, crossing the floor to shake his hand. "I'd hoped you understood my communication."

"I did. Did you not read my reply? Good evening, Missus Miller." The room seemed to be extraordinarily hot.

"Mister Cratchit," and she smiled warmly as she said it.

"Reply?" was Fred's reply.

"I wrote it on the back of your note and pressed it into your hand on parting."

"Oh! I thought you had simply returned my note. I put it in my inside pocket, here."

Fred searched the depths of his coat and withdrew the note, turned it about until he saw

Cratchit's writing.

"Must ... speak? ... speak with you. Great ... no, I can't make it out. Atrocious ink you use at Scrooge & Marley's: blotches and spatters. Great ... anger?"

"Danger. Great danger." Surely, it was very hot.

"Heavens!" Missus Miller exclaimed. "Danger, Fred? What danger?"

"Danger, Cratchit? What danger? Good lord, the man will faint! Norah, have Elsie get him some water!" Fred had half-caught Cratchit before the unfortunate man hit the floor, and levered him onto a sofa.

Missus Miller directed the maid to produce the requested liquid and it was sprinkled onto Cratchit's face, creating the desired effect. Cratchit sat up on the sofa he had collapsed upon.

"I do beg your pardon, sir. I'm ... I'm not myself, I'm thinking. Or, I'm not thinking like

myself, I mean." **Perusal Copy Only - All Rights Reserved**

"You spoke of danger, Mister Cratchit. What danger?"

Cratchit tried to pull his mind together. It was whirling in a dozen directions, none of them pointing straight ahead. Neither was the room, for that matter.

"The Badger was chasing me, and the boys from the old man in Saffron Hill, I think, but Latimer might kill him and I might have told him how, but still there's Stitcher and Kitty, and Marley was to leave me a whole monkey –"

Missus Miller interrupted his recitation with an upheld hand.

"Mister Cratchit! It would be better to start at the beginning. Please."

Cratchit checked himself and tried to organise his thoughts in chronological order.

"The beginning. Very well, the beginning." He focussed his mind and began. "Well, the

beginning, that'd be Mister Marley, sir. See I found a page from Mister Marley's will and it says that he was a-going to be bequeesting of me with a monkey – five hundred quid, ma'am."

"Five hundred pounds? Well, surely, that's good news, isn't it?" She smiled encouragingly at him.

"But I never got it – never even heard of it. It seems like, seven years ago, when Mister Marley died, Mister Scrooge hid the page and took it all himself."

"Oh, Fred! I knew he was mean, but I didn't think he was a ... a ..."

"Thief, my dear? Nothing surprises me. Think of it! What could Mister Cratchit have done with that five hundred? But to Uncle Scrooge, what was another five hundred pounds?"

"But why, Mister Cratchit, did you arrive here in a state of collapse?"

"Well, the Badger was a-chasing of me. Every time I slid down to the bottom of Cornhill, there he was, looking about through the crowd."

"Why were you sliding down Cornhill?" The Millers spoke that sentence in unison.

"But, never mind that for now," Nora interrupted herself. "Why was ... Badger? ... looking for you?" Missus Miller was a very sensible woman.

"On account of my daughter. See, Old Joe, but, no, it goes back further than that. See, there's a man named Stitcher. He's ... " Cratchit found himself looking up into Missus Miller's face, a very pretty face, with a provoking little mouth and warm eyes. Altogether satisfactory, you know. "I'm sorry, Missus Miller. I fear me this tale is not meant for ladies' ears."

Fred put his arm around his wife's shoulders. "Heavens, man, what has happened?"

"Perhaps if I could whisper it in your ear, Mister Miller, you might better understand."

Fred leaned in to present his ear for Cratchit's use, who whispered for the space of some

twenty seconds, after which he drew his head back to look Cratchit in the eye.

“Pon my soul!” exclaimed Fred. “How extraordinary!”

“I’m afraid it’s a very ordinary story, sir. It happens every day in this city.”

“What does, Mister Cratchit? What does, Fred?”

“My dear, Mister Cratchit may be right. It’s a matter rather too rough for a woman’s ear.”

“My dear husband, perhaps you forget the condition I am in at the moment, and the very rough circumstances that will result from it.”

Cratchit, catching the meaning of her statement, blushed to the ears and stared fixedly at the ceiling.

“I don’t forget, my love, but Mister Cratchit’s story is ...”

“... one he brought to both of us – and one we can help him with together. Can’t we?”

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Fred blinked three or four times, rapidly, then raised his hands in surrender to his wife’s superior will.

“Mister Cratchit’s daughter, Marsha ...”

“Martha, sir.”

“Martha was, it seems, ahem!, ‘taken’ by a ruffian from the Angel ...”

“The Angel! I’ve heard of the place. It has a very unsavoury reputation.”

“Indeed, it has. Martha has been forced to ‘work’ for this man Stitcher ...”

“Why is he called Stitcher? Is he a tailor?”

Fred and Cratchit exchanged looks.

“No, dear. He’s a criminal – and the ‘work’ that Martha is forced to do ...”

“She’s walking the streets for him, is that so, Mister Cratchit?” Fred gasped at the thought

that his wife would know of such things. Seeing her husband's face, she added: "Elsie is a constant source of surprising information, Fred. Elsie is our maid, Mister Cratchit, the girl who let you in. So, this man is forcing your daughter to prostitute herself?"

Cratchit's brain scrambled to keep up with this turn in the conversation.

"Yes – or, that is, no – you see she's been 'taken' again by another ... criminal. A gang, really, from down Baldwin's Gardens ..."

"Even worse than the Angel, I'm told," supplied Missus Miller. Yes, dear reader, I know I had spoken of the Angel as the worst den of criminals in London, but, in my own defence, I didn't know about Baldwin's Gardens at the time.

"... and they want me to ... commit a crime for them in order to get her returned to my wife and me."

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"Have you told this to your wife, Mister Cratchit?" Cratchit could only shake his head.

"Why not? She should know. The girl is flesh of her flesh, you know." She laid a hand upon her own stomach as she said this.

Cratchit hung his head in shame.

"So, the first question is how do we get Martha back to her home? The police would be no use. A set of bobbies, with their truncheons and their boots, kicking in the doors, would be worse than useless, I'm sure. Fred, get Mister Cratchit a whisky."

Fred was feeling that he had lost control of the conversation. Indeed, he'd been feeling that he'd lost control of his whole household for some time – ever since the girl, Elsie, had moved in, in fact. He had no idea of what he could do about it. Cratchit spoke up.

"Thank you, no, ma'am. There's more. I'm being followed."

“Followed!” Fred exclaimed, then stepped to the door to shout: “Elsie! Lock the doors and windows! At once!”

“By whom?” asked his wife, more helpfully. Of the two Millers, she tended to be the more level-headed.

“By boys.” The Millers gazed at him without speaking. “By a gang of boys.” Still the Millers did not speak. “You don’t understand. Some of them are Old Joe’s gang, and some are of the Saffron Hill gang, and they follow me, and they report back to their masters with everything I do. And, then there’s Kitty! She’s a bit o’ brass ... that is, she works for Stitcher and, everywhere I go, there she is and I can’t be shut of her. But it’s Old Joe what has got Martha ...”

Missus Miller interrupted him. “Old Joe. He’s the one in Baldwin Gardens? How old is he?”

“I dunno. Seventy, perhaps.”

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“Does he have a last name?”

“I suppose. I dunno what it is.”

She pressed her palms together and touched her fingertips to her lips as she thought. At last, she said, “So a seventy-year old man with no last name, employing a gang of boys to do his bidding, has kidnapped your daughter to ... well, let that go by ... and is holding her somewhere near Baldwin’s Gardens? Is that it?”

Cratchit had to think through her summation before answering, “Yes.”

Fred tried to interject here. “I think the men should consider what to do from here, my love.”

“Piffle!” said Norah. “You’d be here all night considering, Fred. You know you would.”

Cratchit lowered his voice to speak to Fred. "There's one or two other things, Mister Miller, regarding the situation as we were discussing when last I was here."

Fred, surprised at the turn, had to think back to their last meeting. "What we were ... ? Oh! Yes! Of course. What we were discussing."

"What, Fred?"

"Nothing, dear, just money matters."

"Very well, Fred," she said, rising gracefully. "I shall leave money matters to your wise head," she teased, patting that article, "while I think on Mister Cratchit's problem."

She kissed Fred on the cheek, and left the room. Cratchit leaped to his feet as she did, while he searched through pockets filled with papers, until he found the item he was looking for and held it out to Fred.

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"This is the document I spoke of, sir. The one I found while I was clearing out old papers."

He handed Scrooge's will to Fred, who read the inscription with a puzzled, then a shocked look.

"Bugger me!"

"Fred ..." came Norah's admonishing voice from the next room.

"This is his will, is it? Really?"

"It's twenty-five year old, Mister Miller."

"It's unsealed," Fred observed, flicking at the open flap with a finger.

"It ... were like that, sir. The seal must have come loose over time, I expects."

Fred cocked an eyebrow toward Cratchit. "I expect, yes. It would be wrong of us to read

it, of course.” Fred opened it to the first page. “He’s left everything to old Marley!”

“Who is dead, to begin with. Most of the provisions don’t make sense any more, but he’s never renewed it. It’s this paragraph that you should read, sir.” Cratchit flipped over the page and Fred read the sentences that Cratchit indicated.

“I bloody well knew it! The old bastard’s been sitting on God knows how much all these years.”

“It was the clause before that struck me, sir. Fifteen thousand to your mother, which is to say, to you, sir. When the old gent dies, o’ course.”

Fred read the words once more, then shook his head. “No, I’m afraid not: ‘on the day of her marriage or on the day of her twenty-first birthday, whichever should first occur.’ Neither occurred, Mister Cratchit. She died at eighteen, before she married. The clause is null and void.”

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“I see. That’s unfortunate, that is. Still, the rest of the paragraph applies, don’t it?”

“It certainly does. I may not be his heir, but I am hers. Who knows how much? Ten, twelve thousand? More? ‘The firm of ...’” He looked at the third page. “Well, they’re reputable, at least.” Fred sighed, carefully re-folded the pages and handed them back to Cratchit. “However, it’s only a will and, given that the beneficiaries are either dead or unknown, it will never survive probate.”

Cratchit carefully returned the papers to his pocket. “But, as you are the only blood relative, sir?”

“My name is Miller, Robert, not Scrooge. I’m a real bastard, not the nephew of a nominal one. I have no legal rights.”

“I see. Well, there’s one thing more, sir.” Cratchit was looking in his pockets, once again.

“More! Good heavens, Cratchit, you do have adventures, don’t you?”

“Like a penny dreadful, sir, with highwaymen and robberies and murders and all.”

“What is this other item?”

Cratchit produced the page that had been folded into Scrooge’s will.

“Here’s a page was shoved inside that will. Mister Scrooge had hid it, sir. It’s what you call a codicil.”

“To my uncle’s will?”

“No, sir. To Jacob Marley’s will.”

Fred took the page and scanned it, looking thoughtful.

“Are you sure that’s Marley’s signature?”

“No doubt, sir. When I saw that, I couldn’t speak a thrup’ny bit.” You, dear reader, may

recall that event somewhat differently from Cratchit’s recollections.

“We might have him with this! If we could prove this genuine, take legal action to force my uncle to turn the amount over to you, that would shake him.” Fred chuckled triumphantly. “It certainly would. It might have other consequences, too – severe ones. There would be damages, substantial damages awarded. And more, perhaps. I’ve never had occasion to look it up, but what’s the penalty for falsifying a will? Such an action could take years, of course, and it will certainly be expensive. My uncle can afford a lot of lawyers.”

Cratchit cleared his throat and took the page from Fred’s hands. “Well, there’s a more direct approach than that, Mister Miller and you did say you was looking for a direct approach. It seems to me that Mister Scrooge has been just too busy these past twenty-five years to think about his will. He’s had a lot on his mind, and, perhaps, we should help him ... with a few minor

... amendments. Done right, it could be that you, sir, would get your rightful inheritance. And, if I may, I can receive what is due to me after working for him all these years – mind you, only what Mister Marley wanted me to have! – and then, my Tim might have his legs seen to, and his chest seen to, and get the medicines he needs, sir. It would just take a few ... amendments.”

“Amendments? What, you mean ... ah!” Fred cleared his throat in turn. “Amendments. Yes, of course.” He stared into Cratchit’s eyes. “Clarifications, you might say.”

“A very good word for it, sir. A name here and a name there, all carefully transcribed. I’m sure Mister Scrooge would be grateful for the help.”

“I don’t know, Robert. I mean –” Fred looked both ways and lowered his voice. “– altering a will. The same thing we would accuse him of doing.”

“Exactly, sir! Just doing what old Scratch hisself already done to Marley’s last testament.

Turn about’s fair play, hain’t it? And I think it’s high time that turn about happened.”

“Can you do it?”

“I can, sir. I am, sir.” Cratchit reached inside his coat again and produced the version he had created, handing it to Fred. “When he goes, who’s going to question it? There hain’t nobody might know, sir, nobody but you and me. He’s pushed everyone else away from him.”

Fred finished perusing Cratchit’s new document, re-folded it and handed it back. He laughed, grimly. “That’s the thing, of course. When he goes – if he goes. Because he shows no sign of it at the moment.” Cratchit, a dark look on his face, remained silent. “What? What is it? Not another adventure?”

Cratchit could not look up to Fred as he spoke. “I may have done something, tonight, to hasten that unhappy ewent along, sir. Not on purpose! Not strictly on purpose, as it were, but

more what you might call inadvertent-like. That's what it were: inadvertent." Fred noted, once again, that Cratchit's speech reverted to his roots under stress.

"Do tell me more, Mister Cratchit."

"Mister Latim ... that is, an unnamed client of ours stands to be a-losing of his home, perhaps in the way of being transported." – "Great heavens!" Fred interjected. – "All because Mister Scrooge is being ... firm. And he's following Mister Scrooge home tonight and may – just may, mind you – do him ... some great harm. Perhaps even ... yes, perhaps even that. And, I am ashamed to say, I didn't stop him, sir."

"Mister Cratchit, I am shocked. Shocked is the word. You say that something might happen to my uncle – tonight, perhaps. Perhaps as soon as ... tonight?"

"Tonight, yes."

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"That would certainly be ... a calamity. And, there is the will to be considered, of course. It must be kept safe."

"And, returned, of course, sir, to its rightful place. All sealed proper."

"Of course. Something might happen tonight, you say?"

"Tonight, yes. Possibly."

"Possibly, yes. Yes, well, I suppose we should do something to stop it, don't you?" Fred and Cratchit looked at each other with most peculiar expressions. If you had seen them, dear reader, I know that you would have sworn them to be expressions of great apprehension. Yes, I am sure it was apprehension. Or, perhaps, it was something else.

"And, one more thing, Mister Miller."

Fred simply covered his face with his palm and hung his head.

“I spoke of a ... a thing that Stitcher wants me to do for him. Well, here’s what it is, sir. In just about three hours time, Mister Scrooge stands to lose close on the amount on that paper from the safe in the office.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I told Stitcher where and how to get it – he’ll just have to daisy on in and help himself.”

“And there’ll be nothing to stop him?”

“Well, not quite. You see, I told him how to get it and I told him exactly *when* to get it – and then I told Old Joe and the Badger exactly the same thing – and they don’t get along no hows.”

It took Fred a few seconds to catch on. “Will there be blood?”

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“I hopes so. Whatever happens to any of ‘em, they deserves it – and more. But, sir, howsomever that turns out, should I go to and get my Martha away from Old Joe before anything happens? In case, sir. Or should I go and see about your uncle?”

“I suppose it would be more urgent to go to Uncle’s house, wouldn’t it? To ensure that all is well?”

Cratchit thought for a bit. “I suppose that’s so. That would be the proper thing. Yes, I suppose we should. My Martha, though, might be in a world of trouble if Stitcher gets her back.”

“Of course! Your Martha – she must be the first priority, here. We must find her, first, then think about Uncle Scrooge, afterward. Yes, that’s the way to do it,” Fred said, convincing himself perhaps, more than Cratchit.

At that moment, Norah Miller stepped back into the room. A casual observer might have

come to the erroneous conclusion that she was listening outside the door, but, of course, a true lady, such as she, would never entertain the thought. She held Fred's hat and coat out to him.

“Here are your coat and hat, Fred. Take this walking stick; it's the heaviest and the knob is solid brass. Elsie's just returned with the cab – the smart girl brought a growler, not a hansom. It's gone eight and Elsie says the girls will be out in force on the streets by now. Harris's Army, she called them.” Norah chuckled over the reference. “Off you go, both of you. And, Fred, the girl, first. There can be no question of that. Uncle Ebenezer will have to find for himself, tonight.”

Bless these women, they are always in earnest! And that, dear reader, is how, twenty minutes later, Cratchit and Fred drew up in a closed coach to the foot of Hatton Garden at Holborn Hill.

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Chapter Thirteen

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~~The Fruits of the Gardens~~

“That’s as far as I’ll go, sir, this time of night,” said the cabman. The horse was blowing slightly in the chill night air and the fog close in densely around them. Only a few points of light pushed their way through to fog to reach them.

“We’ll pay you extra, cabman,” replied Fred.

“No good to me with my throat cut, is it, sir?” The man leaned down from the seat at the front of the carriage. “This is a very dangerous place, sir. No gentleman should be in there, least of all, this time of night.”

“We’ve no choice, this night, my friend.” Fred and Cratchit climbed down from the hackney and stood on the wet paving.

“Are you determined on going in there?” continued the cabman.

“We are. I’ll tell you what. Go up the block and around Gray’s Inn Lane as far as ... as far as Baldwin’s Gardens and wait for us, there. It’ll be worth your while.”

“Yes, sir. Be careful, gentlemen.”

The cabbie gee-ed up the team and the growler clip-clopped along the cobbles as the two men strode, more or less resolutely, into the enemy’s lair. Hatton Garden was deserted for the first two blocks, but beyond, strolling ‘gentlemen’ began to appear out of the fog, pale and unsubstantial, flitting shadows of memories, shadows of things past, things that had been and were only memories now. Likewise, women, usually in pairs, were to be seen under street-lamps and in doorways. Occasionally, a ‘gentleman’ would stop to talk with one or more of the women, and they would usually stroll off together, disappearing into the fog in silent pantomime. There was virtually no other traffic upon the fog-damped way.

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Near a guttering street-lamp, the flares sending flickering shadows against the yellow fog, a female voice from a shadowed inquired “Shillin’?” She stepped from the doorway, and pulled her bodice open, jiggling her breasts toward the men. The mystical – or mist-ical – quality of the night was suddenly broken; suddenly, very real and very hard. Fred, not yet quite comprehending the task they had undertaken, was startled by both the action and the offer, but looked to Cratchit, who shook his head. Fred waved her off. “No, thank you, my dear. Not tonight.”

They had walked the length of Hatton Garden, been accosted several times, but, each time, Cratchit shook his head and they moved on. The women were sometimes loud, sometimes quiet, sometimes desperate with their offers. Twice, the spurned women had become abusive and threatened retribution but Fred and Cratchit moved past quickly.

“What cha looking to ’im for, love?” the last girl (for she was a girl) called after them,

when Cratchit again turned down her offer. “Need daddy’s permission, does you? Can’t make up your own mind?”

At the top of the street, they paused and looked through the fog, up the two short blocks to Mutton Hill and the police station there. Policemen moved in and out of the building, appearing out of the fog and disappearing into it, and Fred shook his head.

“Just two blocks away from them, and all of *that* goes on, and yet they do nothing about it. Nothing!”

“Because they can’t, Mister Miller. The peelers know the girls are in there; and the macks and gorillas know the peelers know. So they keep it in the rookery and no notice is taken. But if the peelers tried to put a stop to it, it’d be open war – and they’d lose. This way, I think.”

They turned left for a block, then left again onto Leather Lane.

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“We’re very close to this Old Joe’s abode, Robert. There may be toughs about. Fred had his heaviest walking stick with him, but Cratchit, it seemed to him, was unarmed.

“Down here,” said Cratchit and he led them into a lane where the buildings loomed over the paving and the way was unlit and rank. He groped forward, moving along about half the block and then stopped. Ahead were several women standing at the top of a courtyard down an alley that was narrow, dark and almost certainly deadly. “I’m going down there,” said Cratchit.

“Cratchit, is that wise?” whispered Fred. He was a stout fellow and willing to back Cratchit in the venture, but he knew well that the back alleys of London were no place for toffs who owned walking sticks and shiny silk hats – most especially once the sun had set.

“She’s my eldest,” was the simple reply. “You needn’t come.”

“And what would I tell my wife, if I didn’t? ‘The whole line will advance, cried the

Duke!”

“Sir?”

“It’s ... never mind. Lead the way, Bob.”

The courtyard led to a warren of small alleys and even smaller paths, none of them lit, all of them piled with refuse, filth and, likely, the end product of crimes committed over the past week or more. Raised voices, quarrels and the occasional sound of blows and a body falling heavily came from within the buildings surrounding the yard. The smell of the place was among the worst sensations Fred had ever experienced.

“How can this exist, Cratchit? An open cesspool would be an improvement on this.” exclaimed Fred, holding his handkerchief over his mouth and nose.

“It exists, sir – it always has, one way or t’other. Perhaps it always will.”

“How about it, captain? Need a friend?” The woman, breasts bared and skirt tucked up to

show an unstockinged leg, had stepped from a doorway and draped an arm around Fred’s shoulders. Fred stepped away quickly, shaking her off.

“Hain’t we ’igh and mighty, then?” she said. “What cha doing ’ere, then, eh? What cha want? Shall I call the Badger?”

Fred held up a placating hand. “No, no! Don’t call the Badger. I’m sorry. You startled me.”

“Startled, was you? No need to be startled, lummy! No one’s going to hurt cha, ’ere. What cha mean, insulting honest girls?”

“I didn’t mean to.” Fred held out six-pence. “Allow me to apologise.”

The coin disappeared quickly and the woman was suddenly all smiles.

“That’s all right, captain. ’ows about it, then?” She hiked her skirt to fully display her wares. It was an action of long custom to these women in the back alleyways, as natural as church on Sunday, which they would have looked on as shocking. Nonetheless, Fred was again shocked, but remembered to look to Cratchit, who, again, shook his head.

“I’m sorry,” said Fred. “Not tonight.” But the woman had hold of his wrist with strong fingers and refused to let him go.

“What cha looking for, then, captain? ’ang about. ’ere’s something yous might like.”

She reached back into the dark recesses of the doorway and pulled a younger woman into such light as there was. Fred looked to Cratchit and saw that the man’s face had lost all colour. Cratchit, with quavering breath, managed to nod his head.

“Oh, it’s for ’im, is it? What, do you just watch, then?” She laughed as though she’d made a fine joke, then pulled the younger woman behind her and held out her hand. “Three shillin’s.”

“Three?” said a surprised Fred. Inexperienced as he was in this sort of thing, in the short time he’d been engaged, however slightly, with the profession, he’d become familiar with the price structure of the back alleys of Baldwin’s Gardens. Three shillings was a lot.

“Look at ’er,” said the older woman, pulling the girl forward again and reaching out to jiggle the younger woman’s breasts. “She hain’t been on the street a month, yet. She’s practical still cherry, for all intents and purposes.”

The younger woman had not yet lifted her face. After a confirming glance to Cratchit once more, who nodded in desperate anguish, Fred placed three shillings in the first woman’s hand and reached for the second. The first woman slapped his hand away.

“And I goes with you.”

“Why?”

“To see she don’t get ’urt nor she don’t get lost. She’s just a new girl. She’s shy, she is.”

It was impossible to say how new to the trade she was, but that she was shy was painfully self-evident.

Cratchit was simply staring at the girl, who had still not lifted her head. Fred thought rapidly.

“Very well, let us be about it. Bob, where’s Gray’s Inn Lane from here?” No answer.

“Bob! Gray’s Inn Lane!”

Cratchit pulled his stricken gaze from his daughter and pointed down the short block of flats to the west. His eyes then went back to Martha.

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For her part, the older woman let her skirt fall, pulled her bodice up over her breasts, and hooked her arm through Fred’s. “Your friend ain’t ’alf anxious, is ’e? ’as ’e been at sea or somethin’?” It was surprising the amount of sea trade came her way, even this far from the docks over on the Thames.

Cratchit reached out to Martha and put his hand on her arm. She pulled back, whimpering, raised her eyes – and stopped.

“Let’s go, now, Martha,” said her father. “Let’s go.”

Martha put her arms around Cratchit, who placed a protective arm on her shoulders and the foursome walked down the alley to the street ahead.

“What we going down here for, then? ’ere! ’ow’d you be a-knowing of ’er name?” The older woman’s voice was raised in complaint, and Fred stilled her with another sixpence. Luckily

Norah, on Elsie's advice, had filled his pocket with coin.

"Is it really you, then?" whispered the girl.

"It really is. We're going home." And Cratchit felt a sense of peace build within him for the first time in days.

Fred and the first woman were six feet ahead, but Cratchit's words reached her ears.

"'ere! What's this? What's going on, then?"

Fred pressed yet another shilling into the woman's hand. "Nothing is happening that shouldn't be." They had reached Gray's Inn Lane and Fred looked up and down the street, saw the growler a block away, and raised his arm. "Cabbie! Here, my man!" The cabman clucked to his horses and they moved forward.

"What you got a cab for? What are you doing? Where do you think you're taking us?"

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"We're not taking you anywhere, my dear. You go back, five shillings to the good for your little stroll. We're returning this girl to her family."

"Ah—ah—ah—ow—ow—oo!" Apologies, dear reader, but there is simply no proper spelling to record the shriek the woman emitted at that moment. "'ere! 'e'll beat the daylights out of me if I comes back without her! BADGER!" From the folds of her clothing, she produced a small knife and lifted it now to strike. It would not be the first time she'd been forced to resort to the blade and, sadly, it wouldn't be the last, either. "BADGER!"

Fred knocked down her hand with the heavy knob of his walking stick, and then pushed her against the building on the corner with the end of it. "BADGER!" she screamed again.

"You've five shillings from this. Do you want me to take it all from you?" The woman fell silent as the hackney drew up behind them. "Get Martha inside, Bob. Quickly, now! I doubt

not the Badger will be joining us shortly.”

“And ’e’ll do you up a treat, ’e will!” shrieked the older woman.

Fred climbed into the cab with the father and daughter. He grinned at the woman who, rubbing her wrist where Fred had knocked it, was hurling fluent abuse at him. “Goodnight, my dear!” he called through the window. “It was a business doing pleasure with you. Driver! Back to Holborn! Whip them up! Quick as you please! Drive hard! Harder!”

Back into the fog, round the corner onto Holborn Hill, rather too quickly for safety, the steel tyres skidding on the wet cobbles. As the mist closed in behind them, Cratchit saw the Badger emerge from an alley and the woman waving her arm in their direction.

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Chapter Fourteen

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~~An Honest Man Must Be His Own Diggenes~~

The air on Cheapside was, to give it its due, at least free of the foul miasma of Hatton and Baldwin's Gardens, and the haunts of twisted men like the Badger – and desperate creatures like the women he and Fred had encountered there. This far into the City, there was little for such women to profit from on such a night as tonight – they were home in their beds, or, at least, plying their trade elsewhere. As long as he stayed on the lit streets, he avoided them.

Martha was safe at the Millers for the night. Missus Miller had insisted the girl stay with them, to be sent on home in the morning. Cratchit and his daughter had parted joyfully and tearfully and Cratchit had gratefully set his feet toward home.

And, stopped.

Cratchit had a problem. It was no fault of his own. It was deeply ingrained into him,

entrenched into the core of him.

You see, for all of his childhood on the streets amid the rough-and-ready costerfolk, for all of his childhood with a father fallen so far into drink, for all of his youth at the Voluntary School, facing beatings from boys and masters alike, for all of his experience as a man, helping his master extract money from every dealing, he had one basic character flaw.

He was an honest man. Now, honest men reap many rewards but, too often, few of them are found in this life. In this life, mostly, they face struggle and turmoil and frustration.

And now his honesty made him turn about, face toward the City and Scrooge's home.

Cratchit's honesty was pushing him forward, determined on reaching Scrooge's residence as quickly as he could. He had passed the fork between Cornhill and Lombard, moving at a pace

that was but little short of a run – his instinct was to turn up Bread Street to the offices of

Scrooge & Marley, restore the money to its proper place and move on but then he thought

himself once again of Tim and his crutch, Martha and her tormentors, and his own stolen legacy.

Like Pharaoh, his heart was hardened again and he would not let the pound notes go.

He thought, too, of Stitcher and his cronies and Old Joe and his, all of whom were slated to collide at Scrooge & Marley's in the not too distant future. Cratchit determined that he would not be there when they did.

He was angry. After all, Mister Scrooge had done him a great wrong in removing the codicil from Marley's will. The man's stone-hearted behaviour demanded some punishment, some retribution. That was honest (although he tried to push down any thoughts that intruded on him about the honesty of the steps he had taken). The money he had taken from the safe was only a part of the money that Scrooge had taken from him. All of that was right and proper – he

decided.

But Scrooge did not deserve the retribution that young Latimer might be about to inflict – might already have inflicted! – upon him on this Christmas Eve. His honesty made him admit that much, just as it had turned his steps toward his master's abode.

At Fenchurch Street, his steps began to slow and, by the time he reached Philpot, he was moving slowly enough that his old school master would have accused him of dawdling. He'd have been quite right, too; Cratchit was most reluctant to make the final turn into Brabant Court, so much so that he stopped at the arched entry into the court, leaning against cold brick, pressing his cheek into hard masonry. He knew where his duty lay; he knew where his conscience, his honesty, would push him. He simply had to persuade his feet to come along. And his feet were, perhaps, a trifle less honest than his heart.

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Brabant Court was deserted at the best of times. The few folk who lived in its constrained canyon were not ones who brought their lives into the street. At high noon on a summer day, it was so still even the pigeons avoided it as a place impossible for a self-respecting bird to earn a living. Brabant Court, on this Christmas Eve, had hours ago snuffed out its candles and laid its weary head down to rest.

Even the echoes had long ago gone to sleep.

Which is why he was doubly startled by a shriek just behind him and close to his ear that sent him skidding and scrabbling out into the middle of the courtyard.

It was a cat, running along atop a wall, stopping to spit at him before it disappeared. Just a cat. A black cat.

Standing in the midst of the courtyard, with not a light except the little escaping from a

new moon above him, Cratchit's heart was thumping and pounding so hard with the confines of his threadbare coat that he was afraid it might rip the seams, leaving Martha an eye-straining task in its repair. To be fair to Cratchit, his nerves and his heart had been through a tremendous amount in the last few days. And, there were still a few more tasks to be undertaken, so it was not surprising that Cratchit's nerves were jangling as he stepped toward Scrooge's home at the end of the courtyard.

It still seemed odd to him that his footsteps on the cobbles did not echo between the tall brick buildings on all sides of the court. Still, he argued, it must be some trick of night air and chill temperature that caused the phenomenon – certainly it was in no way attributable to any kind of supernatural cause.

The red brick house at the end of Brabant Court had been a very nice house when it was young, but years of neglect lost at the end of the courtyard had faded and naked its paint, rotted its woodwork, pitted its pointing, and begrimed its windows. As it was, it was a perfect example of the difference between Mister Scrooge and Mister Marley. Mister Marley had bought the house as a youngish man and had lived in it for the rest of his life. Mister Scrooge had inherited the house from Mister Marley, had paid not one penny for it, had immediately leased the two lower floors out to a wine importers and moved upstairs into four rooms for himself – and, Cratchit reminded himself, had lived in them for what, if Latimer arrived before Cratchit, might very well prove to have been the rest of his life..

Cratchit raised his hand to lift the knocker's brass ring, but stopped. He had no wish to announce his presence. He lowered the ring and, as the brass touched the anvil on the door, the boom that resulted seemed far out of proportion to the force of the action. Just as he had been

alarmed by the lack of echoes in the courtyard, the state of Cratchit's nerves were such that he was, in that moment, a man who could easily be frightened by the presence of echoes behind the door. Startled, he looked at the cast figure of the knocker and saw ... nothing but the weather-worn head of a lion, inexplicably holding a brass ring in its mouth.

The door was locked, but that was no deterrent. Scrooge had long ago entrusted him with a key to the house, just as he had entrusted Cratchit with a key to the business, and Cratchit had never betrayed that trust in the smallest degree – up until this Christmas. Now, he put his hand upon the key he had taken from his pocket, turned it sturdily, and walked in.

In turning to close the door, Cratchit turned his back on the darkness in the foyer and was startled to hear a long moan behind him. A long, drawn out moan.

“No-o-o-o-o!” it said.

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Whirling about, he again saw nothing – or nothing unusual at least. The sound, he was sure, had been real enough and it had come from behind him. Behind him, in the tall foyer of the building, was the grand staircase. To either side were doorways belonging to the offices of the wine-merchant who leased both them and the basement. Scrooge, typically for Scrooge, lived in four cramped rooms at the top of the stair.

Although Cratchit had been often enough to the building, he had never been in the rooms above or even stepped foot on the stair. Scrooge's trust had not gone that far. So, he had no idea of what to expect as he began resolutely to climb. At the top of the first flight, for there were two, the blood-chilling moan again sounded through the stair-well.

“No-o-O-O-O-o-o-o!” it said. And, this time, it echoed as well.

Cratchit's feet had taken him half-way down the stair before he could bring them to a

stop. “Nonsense!” he told his feet. “There’s nothing to fear. There are no such things as ghosts.”

Then he recollected the reason he had come to the house this night, and remembered there were worse things in the world than ghosts.

Nevertheless, he persuaded his pedal extremities to return and indeed to continue in their upward journey. This being Scrooge’s home, there was, of course, no carpet on the stair to soften his steps, so every footfall echoed up and down the stairwell. Being so long in disrepair, they creaked, too, loud enough to wake the dead – a phrase he realised was both apt and unfortunate.

At the top of the second flight, he realised that he had no idea of what rooms Scrooge was occupying, or where he might be at this time of night. He had the choice of a door on either side or of going on up to the third floor. There was no doubt in Cratchit’s mind on that. If a more

inconvenient choice could be made, Scrooge would make it, therefore, Scrooge’s rooms must be on the top floor. He went on up.

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And, at the top he heard, “I am in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come?” Scrooge’s voice, no doubt about that, and it came from behind one of the four doors along the landing. What the words meant, Cratchit could not even guess at.

Scrooge’s voice was oddly inflected, as if he were not in control of his tongue, or something was holding it. He mumbled, something he never did except when counting money.

“You are about to show me shadows ...” the voice began, before fading away. “Is that so, Spirit?” Scrooge said loudly. What Spirit or Ghost he was addressing was a complete mystery to Cratchit.

He tried the knob of the first door he came to, but it was locked. He put an ear to it, but heard nothing. The voice was coming from further along.

“I fear you more than any spectre I have seen!” came Scrooge’s voice, loudly and strongly, and not from either of the first two doors.

Someone else must be in the room with Scrooge, must have preceded Cratchit up the stair and into Scrooge’s presence. Who that may have been was a guess, but Cratchit was sure that it was a good one.

Locked up in a room with Scrooge, silent and threatening, probably armed, certainly dangerous, was young Mister Latimer, driven mad by anger and anxiety and fear.

The cries he was hearing were Scrooge, pleading for his life.

“Will you not speak to me?” came from behind the door – the second from the end.

Cratchit had a picture of Latimer in the room with Scrooge, hovering over him, threatening life and limb, saying not a word.

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He had a picture, too, of grey-haired Ebenezer Scrooge, crouching on his knees, crying out in terror as the dark figure before him threatened. He felt Scrooge’s fear at being hopeless and helpless in a situation where his life could be torn from him in a second. He heard the terror in his voice.

And he said to himself, “Good! Now you know how it feels, you old ... monster! For surely, how can a man be so hard-hearted, so bereft of all joy in life as you.”

“The night is waning fast,” said Scrooge, “and it is precious time to me!”

Time is precious to us all, Mister Scrooge. Each precious tick of the clock is one that we will never have back and everything moment you tear from us with your squeezing, wrenching, grasping ways is time we cannot recover. Live with that, Mister Scrooge!

“Bed-curtains!”

What? Why should Scrooge attach importance to items apparently so trivial?

“Merciful Heaven, what is this!” The cry was wrenched from Scrooge, and Cratchit, on the other side of the door, knew Scrooge was seeing Death itself approach. Oh cold, cold, rigid, dreadful Death! This was its moment!

Scrooge, though, was not dying right away. Scrooge was still talking. “I shall not leave its lesson, trust me ... go!” There were words that had been lost from that but Cratchit thought anything lost did not change its meaning.

Latimer must have said something for:

“I understand you,” Scrooge returned, “and I would do it, if I could. But I have not the power, Spirit. I have not the power.”

Still pleading; still bargaining. What weapon was Latimer holding that made Scrooge so

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At this point, Cratchit bethought himself that someone should do something to try to stop the desperate young man from doing whatever it was he was doing.

He stepped close to the door, put his ear against it and heard the sound of limbs thrashing among bedclothes, and the bed itself creaked in protest.

“I beseech you!” Scrooge had run out of options – the moment was at hand.

He put his hand on the knob, steeled himself to the task and readied himself to rush through the door and face whatever Latimer, in his mad desperation, was about to do.

He twisted the door knob and threw his shoulder against the door.

It did not budge – it was locked. He tried again, with the same result.

“No, Spirit! Oh no!” The final word rose to a shriek; “N-O-O-O!” and Cratchit knew the

knife or sword or axe or whatever blade Latimer held was descending on his employer on the other side of the door.

Coming to his senses and knowing it was too late for him to affect the outcome of what was happening, he did what any sensible man would do, under the circumstances.

He turned on his heel, tripled-stepped his way down to the foyer and fled the building and the courtyard with a clatter of heels that *did* echo this time as he ran past the cat, past the gate, and out onto Philpot Street.

He kept going until lack of breath forced him to stop on Cornhill, and, once his heart had calmed, his feet, less honest than his heart, finally, at long last, turned him toward home.

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Chapter Fifteen

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Cratchit And Tim Go To Service

The alley was dark, and he was nearly dragging little Tim, trying to outrun the milliner behind, who wanted to stitch his frayed cuffs, but he had to get Tim to the doctor before the London fog set in. Tim was dying, and he knew it, but Cratchit could do nothing about it until he reached the doctor.

Behind it all, a long, low moan haunted the vision: “No-o-o-o!”

Tim was crying now, and Cratchit tried to put him inside a building for safety, but all of the doorways were dark, and from each, arms reached out for him. Besides, it cost a shilling to open a door and Cratchit had no shilling – and even if he had, he’d have to give it to Slogger or he’d be beaten before lessons began for the day.

“No-o-O-O-o-o!”

The master wanted him to construe ‘*Summum bonum medicinoe sanitas*’, and he tried, but the doctor said he was wrong; it was the miasma and it would cost two and six but, no matter how hard he reached into his pockets, he could not find even one shilling. All he had was a tanner, and six pence would only buy a tin of Arabian Family Ointment, which can be used for chapped hands, lips, inflamed eyes, cuts, scalds, and sores and any diseases of the skin.

“No, Spirit! Oh no, no, NO-O-O!”

“It’s the fog! Mark my words, captain, it’s the fog.” The owner of the voice was lifting its skirt to show its leg. The leg was bound in iron supports. “Come on, love. Here it is. It’s here for the taking. For the taking, Robby! For the taking! Robert! Robert!” She reached out from the darkness, took Cratchit’s arm and began to shake it. “Robert! Robert!”

Cratchit opened his eyes.

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Surely, it was very quiet. Daylight was filling the room and he knew that he was very, very late. He hurled the blankets from him and pulled on his trousers and shirt, sitting again to push his feet into his boots (still wet from his antics the night before).

He stood and the room swayed, began to darken, so that he sat again at once and breathed deeply, but the air seemed stifling hot. At the front window, he flung the pane upward and thrust his head out. No fog, no mist; clear, bright, jovial, stirring, cold; cold, piping for the blood to dance to; golden sunlight; heavenly sky; sweet fresh air; merry bells. Oh, glorious! Glorious!

Martha was safe! That was the first thing that he recalled. After a night at the Miller’s, to avoid upsetting the Cratchit household at a late hour, Martha was now surely on her way home. Fred would see her safe.

A boy passed on the streets below him and he shouted down. “You, boy! What day is

this?”

The boy stared upward at the lunatic and offered him a wet raspberry. “Ph-h-hrrttt!”

“No, I’m in earnest! What day is it?”

“It’s Christmas day, you great berk!” And the boy went on his way, leaving his final words hanging in the air: “Bleeding wanker!”

Back at the bed, Cratchit dropped to his knees, sliding his hand between the ticking and frame of his bed, and feeling for the items he had placed there before going to sleep: the leather wallet, the papers, and the things he had purchased from the ironmonger – was it just two days ago?

By now, Stitcher and his friends had visited the office of Scrooge & Marley. If Cratchit’s plan had worked, the Badger and his friends had arrived at the same time. The survivors would have made off with the contents of the safe. Mister Scrooge would arrive tomorrow morning to find his office ransacked, perhaps a body or two on the floor, and a very substantial amount of money missing –

Cratchit stopped short.

Or would he? His heart pounded and he clapped a hand over his mouth as he realised that, if it had been Latimer on the other side of the door with Scrooge, he’d already have done ... whatever it was he intended to do. But, whatever that was, Cratchit told himself, he was, for his part, done with Stitcher, and the Badger, and Old Joe, and Kitty – and the rest of them. He had done his part and needed to think of them no more. He could breath easily, now. Pulling suspenders up over his shoulders, closing the window and picking up waistcoat and coat, he left the room and set out to enjoy a Christmas morning. Anything else, he would think of later. He

was going downstairs for a holiday ...

... and had reached the top of the stair when there was a loud knock on the front door.

Cratchit's heart raced once again and he froze, one foot raised. The knock was repeated and Anne came from the back of the house, wiping her hands on her apron, as always. The door was opened and the bright winter morning shone around the figure of ... a delivery man.

"Missus Cratchit?" He was short-ish, with not much hair, and with a round belly covered by a butcher's apron.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Delivery, ma'am." He held a card close to his face to read it. "For Mister Robert Cratchit, 16 Bayham, Camden Town."

"That's us, but what delivery? On Christmas Day, too?"

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"In here, Tom." Tom came up to the door carrying a largeish, lumpy-ish package, wrapped in brown paper.

"Here you are, missus," said Tom. "Merry Christmas."

He placed the package in Missus Cratchit's arms, weighing her down considerably, tipped his hat and the pair of delivery men walked back to their cart.

Anne stood in the doorway, staring after the men in astonishment. The package in her arms weighed nearly thirty pounds. It had begun to leak.

"What is it, my dear?" asked Cratchit as his legs, at last, began to move and he came down the stairs.

"I know what it is," said Anne, "but where did it come from?"

She took it to the back room and placed it on the table, untying the string that held it, and

opening the paper. Folding the edges back, she uncovered a turkey – a large turkey – a very large turkey. In fact, it had a blue ribbon wrapped around it. By now, Belinda, Peter, and the twins had all gathered around the table, while Tim stared at the miraculous bird from his stool.

“It’s a turkey,” said Belinda.

“It’s a large turkey,” said Peter.

“It’s a very large turkey,” said the twins, together.

“But where did it come from? Who could have sent it?” asked their mother.

“I know,” breathed little Tim from his corner. “I know who sent it.”

“Who?” asked his father.

“Mister Scrooge,” said Tim, his little face beaming.

There was a long pause as the family thought that over, then they all joined in a general

laugh that swelled and grew until tears flowed from the eyes of one and all. Even Tim joined in

the laugh, although he had to be careful not to set himself coughing. It was a glorious laugh and a wonderful Christmas present for the whole family. They all hugged the little bringer of mirth tightly.

When, at last, the laugh had subsided and the whole family stared in silence at the unfamiliar bird on the table, Cratchit spoke. “I know who must have sent it,” he said, wiping the tears from his eyes. “It’s from Mister Miller, Mister Scrooge’s nephew. I ... I spoke with him ... just yesterday. Yes, it must be from him.”

His wife sniffed. “That’s all very well, but what am I supposed to do with it? It’s bigger than Tim! The weather’s too up and down to freeze it outside. I can’t cook it to home and it’d cost ninepence to do it at the cookhouse. And, on top of that, we’ve already got a goose for

today.”

The children all shouted with glee at that thought.

“The thing will go off in two days and then all we’ll have is a great ... stinking thing.”

Cratchit tried to calm his wife. “I’m sure we can find something to do with it, dear.”

“I didn’t know there was any ‘we’ to it. Mister Scrooge’s nephew? Just like a man to send something as useless as that!”

Cratchit patted her arm. “My dear, Christmas day. I’m sure Mister Fred meant well, dear.”

“Perhaps, I can cut it up and make a bit of a battle. Turkey stew!” Anne sniffed again, re-wrapped the turkey and put it on a shelf in the pantry. “I don’t know though. Turkey! Why not a nice goose?”

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I shall take little Tim to Christmas mass. He enjoys it so and he does love the singing.

“Very well. Bundle him up; it’s a crisp, cold day. Merry Christmas, husband,” said Missus Cratchit, presenting her cheek.

“Merry Christmas, my dear.” He kissed her cheek softly.

It was not ten minutes to St. Pancras Old Church. To walk through the tumbled gates of that ancient edifice always brought awe to Cratchit. To see the time-blackened stones of its walls, crumbling as they were, was humbling. To stand at the back of a church that had been there since before Billy The Conqueror started conquering was inspiring. To hear the voices singing out the ancient hymns was uplifting. To look across the nave and see Stitcher’s baleful glare full upon him was terrifying.

How could the man be waiting her for him? He couldn’t be; he must have followed him

from the house and come into the church close behind him.

From the front of the church, he heard a voice begin to pray: “Oh, God, whose Name is excellent in all the Earth, and thy Glory above the Heavens; who on this day did miraculously preserve our Church and State ...”

If Stitcher was here now, it meant Old Joe and the Badger were probably lying on the floor at Scrooge & Marley’s. Whatever had happened at Scrooge & Marley’s, Jem Stitcher was now standing not fifty feet from Cratchit with his eyes fixed firmly upon him. Cratchit adjusted Tim’s slight weight and knew that he could never outrun Stitcher with Tim in his arms.

“... deliverance from the tyranny and oppression of the same Cruel and Blood-thirsty enemies; We bless and adore thy glorious Majesty ...”

Or had Joe and Badger prevented Stitcher from taking the money and he was now looking for retribution on Cratchit? Was there even a side door he could slip out of? He glanced around, trying to look as guileless as he could.

No, there was not. No side door. There were the doors behind him and a door at the front of the church to the vestry. There was really only one way out.

Stitcher was not tall, but Cratchit was even less tall. They both stood near the back of the un-aisled nave, between them some fifty or sixty attendees, the congregation having been swollen by the sacred day it was; some without chairs, were standing as he was; others who had chairs standing at the moment for the prayer.

“... which now again hast so wonderfully Rescued and Established a Blessing to us, and our Posterity. And this we beg for Jesus Christ his sake, Amen.”

Those who were able to sit, sat. Stitcher’s eyes wandered to the front, no doubt assessing

the value of the chalice, paten, cross, and candlesticks on the Holy Table. Cratchit did not know if they were gold or merely polished brass.

A canticle followed. Normally, Cratchit would have been enraptured by the sound of the boys' singing as, indeed, Tim seemed to be at the moment, but he was looking about himself for some means of eluding Stitcher and his darning needle.

The canticle ended and a long pause ensued, filled only with the echos of coughs and shuffling feet.

The priest turned to the congregation.

"Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

Around him, all the people stood to reply: "And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever. Amen."

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Cratchit, Tim in his arms, was running by "kingdom", ducking as low as he dared, and making for the vestibule and the entrance doors.

He flung open one of the great doors, knowing that Stitcher would surely be on his heels in a moment.

"Papa! What's wrong? You're hurting me!"

"Quiet, son! Quiet! He saw us! He saw us!" Cratchit was through the tumbled gate now; a white dog, tied up at the gate, barked furiously at him as he passed. Sprinting along the road past the pub known as the Adam & Eve, he knew it was hopeless. He couldn't begin to carry Tim fast enough and far enough to evade Stitcher.

"You're hurting me, Papa!"

"I'm sorry, son. I'm sorry." He slowed to a walk as he neared Fig Lane, trying to regain

his breath.

Behind him, he could hear pounding feet and he knew Stitcher was gaining on them. What could he do? He couldn't outrun Stitcher, for he had neither the legs nor the breath for it. He couldn't outwit Stitcher, for Stitcher had no wits. He could only face him and hope to talk him out of harming Tim.

"What's wrong, Papa?" The voice was breathless and small.

"There's a man coming, Tim. And, he's going to hurt me, but you mustn't worry. He won't hurt you. He won't hurt you at all." Cratchit prayed that his words were true.

Stitcher slowed to a walk as he approached them. He, too, was short of breath, but he still had more than enough for the task at hand.

"You snivelling little ink-bottle. What you want to be running like that for? You think I'd harm you inside the lean and lurch?" He hooked his thumb back toward the church. "Does you? You think I couldn't have done you anywhere along the frog and toad from here to the gates?"

"I think you'll harm me, one way or another."

"Oh, I will, all right. I'll harm you a treat."

"Why?"

"Why! Why do you think? Where is she? Where's the girl!"

"What girl?"

"You knows who I means!"

Martha. Stitcher didn't know that Joe had stolen her. "She's not for you, Stitcher."

"I say who's for me! Where is she?"

Still in red, yellow and green coming out of the Adam & Eve and, catching them up, she now put her hand on Stitcher's shoulder. Her voice was low and calm. "It hain't a back alley in the Angel, Jemmie. It's Christmas Day, in front of the lean and lurch there, in broad daylight. There's people about, Jemmie. There's witnesses." Indeed, people on the street were beginning to take notice of what was happening.

Cratchit had not before thought of Kitty Fisher as a friendly face, but now she certainly had become one.

"Time to ball it, Jem. It hain't no good here."

"Jem Stitcher hain't walking away from a poncey git like him! Get your hands off me, girl!"

"Jemmie, there's people about, watching!"

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"You think I care? I'll stitch him proper. And his little pug, I seen him there in the church, sticking his head up and peeping around like he weren't a disgusting little cripple!

What'd you bring him out for people to look at for? Why would they want to look at that?"

Tim's voice rang out, now, stronger than it had been, and clear, and brave. "I hope the people in the church *did* see me, because I *am* a cripple, and it's Christmas Day, and they should remember Who made cripples walk, and blind men see."

The ruffian ceased his ranting and looked at Tim with puzzlement. "What'd he say? Why'd he say that?"

"Jemmie, let it go. Let's go back, now. Where's the dog? Let's go, Jem. On your way, Bobby. Merry Christmas." She was pulling at Stitcher's knife arm.

Cratchit picked the boy up and began walking across to Fig Lane. "Goodbye, Stitcher.

Merry Christmas, Kitty.”

Stitcher suddenly bellowed with rage. “Where’s he going? What’s he think he’s doing?”

“Let him go, Stitcher. Hain’t no need for it, now.”

“Let go o’ me, girl!” Stitcher was in another of his rages. “Let go, I said!”

“Stitcher, don’t! Jemmie!” The girl’s cry was cut off.

Cratchit kept his face forward and tried to prevent Tim looking back. His pace was calm until the curve of the street took Stitcher out of view, then he began to run. By the time he had traversed a block, he was running full speed. Rounding the corner onto Bayham, he was gasping for breath but didn’t slacken until he reached the door at Number 16.

Behind him, a figure in yellow, green, and red – much, much more red than before – lay still on the pavement, while a crowd began to gather. When police arrived, several told of a man in a black coat, tan breeches, and a brown hat who was seen legging it toward Islington. He had

left a scarred, white, shaggy dog tied up at the church.

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Chapter Sixteen

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Flinging open the door to Number 16, he rushed inside, slamming it quickly behind him.

The horror of the past twenty minutes was striking home with him and his hands began to shake.

He leaned against the wall, still holding Tim, and tried to calm his breathing.

The home was a quiet contrast to the frenzy of the scenes he had lived outside. Anne was laying the cloth, reserved for special occasions, with the help of Belinda. Both had be-decked themselves with ribbons in honour of the day. In the back room, he saw Peter preparing to mash the potatoes in the saucepan. Cratchit realised his eldest son was wearing his own best collar and remembered that he had promised the lad the loan of it for the day. He set Tim down and the boy, using his tiny crutch, hobbled off to the fire. Cratchit was sure that, apart from the angry words with Jem Stitcher, Tim did not understand what had happened. The picture of poor Kitty Fisher

in a crumpled heap on the paving was his alone. At least, he prayed it was so.

Behind him, the door was flung open again and the twins came tearing in, screaming that outside the baker's they had smelt goose, and known it for their own. The pair then made a game of dancing around the table.

Cratchit was suddenly seized with fright. "Why, where's our Martha?" he cried, looking round.

"Not coming," said Mrs. Cratchit.

"Not coming!" he cried. His heart was pounding once again, for thoughts of what might have happened to her raced through his brain faster than the twins around the table. "Not coming – upon Christmas Day!"

Martha came out from behind the closet door, where her brothers and sisters had persuaded to hide, and ran into his arms. She whispered into his ear, "I'm sorry, they wanted me to hide. I didn't want to ..."

"That's all right, my dear, so long as you are here", and Bob hugged his daughter tightly to him.

The two young Cratchits had hustled Tim off into the washhouse, that he might hear the pudding singing in the copper.

"Really, Bob! What was you thinking? Our Martha not here for Christmas Day! What could possibly happen that would stop her being here, I asks you?" chided Mrs. Cratchit. "And how did little Tim behave?"

Cratchit breathed heavily three times before he answered. "As good as gold," said Cratchit, smiling heartily, "and better. I think, somehow, he gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so

much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard. He told ... me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember, upon Christmas Day, Who made lame beggars walk and blind men see.” Missus Cratchit smiled and clucked her tongue at her baby’s precociousness. “I do believe,” continued Cratchit, “he is, every day, growing strong and hearty.”

At that moment, back came Tim, escorted by his brother and sister to his stool before the fire. Cratchit, turning up his cuffs – not wanting to add more stains beyond their usual ink stains – mixed gin and lemons, sugar and a small amount of spice, stirred it thoroughly and put it on the hob to simmer. Peter and the two ubiquitous young Cratchits went down the street to fetch the goose from the baker, returning soon in triumph with steaming bird between them.

While this was going on, Missus Cratchit made the gravy hissing hot; Peter mashed the potatoes with incredible vigour; Belinda added just enough sugar to the apple-sauce; Martha dusted the hot plates with flour; and the two young Cratchits set chairs for everybody and stood behind theirs, with spoons in their mouths so, they said around the flatware, they wouldn’t shriek for goose before their turn came.

They were seated and Grace was soon said. “Heavenly Father, we thank you for this good food and for bringing us ... all ... all together, and we ask that you keep us so in the days to come. Oh, and we thank you for having Mister Fred send us that ... enormous turkey. Amen” At ‘all together’, Cratchit had looked to Martha and saw the tears on the girl’s face.

When Missus Cratchit plunged the carving knife into the bird, a murmur of delight arose all round the board, and even little Tim beat on the table with the handle of his knife, and feebly cried “Hurrah!”

The goose was a grand success. Despite its size, and cheapness, it was a sufficient dinner for the whole family; indeed, Missus Cratchit, picking up the one remaining small sliver of bird, said with great delight that they “hadn’t ate it all at that!” But now, Missus Cratchit went to the washhouse alone to take the pudding from where it was steaming in the boiler and bring it in.

A hush ensued as the family craned their necks to peer through the back door. A great deal of steam in the yard! And such a smell as made the children’s mouth water! Missus Cratchit returned to the house – as flushed as if she had fought a mighty battle – placed the pudding on a plate, proudly doused it with a carefully measured two tablespoons of brandy, placed a Christmas holly leaf into the top and lighted the whole. Oh, a wonderful pudding!

At last the dinner was done, and cleared away, and the fire made up. All the Cratchit family drew round the hearth, and Cratchit served out the hot stuff from the jug to all. Then he

proposed:
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“Mr. Scrooge!” he said. “I’ll give you Mr. Scrooge, the Founder of the Feast!” Cratchit thought of the new will under the bed and smiled his widest smile. Then he thought of Latimer behind Scrooge’s door, of Old Joe and Stitcher together in the office last night, of what may be found when all was found, and he took a large gulp of his punch.

“The Founder of the Feast indeed!” cried Missus Cratchit, reddening. “I wish I had him here. I’d give him a piece of my mind to feast upon, and I hope he’d have a good appetite for it.”

“My dear,” said Cratchit, “the children! Christmas Day.” Possibly the last Christmas Day he would ever make such a toast. He held his glass aloft, again.

“It should be Christmas Day, I am sure,” said she, “on which one drinks the health of such an odious, stingy, hard, unfeeling man as Mr. Scrooge. You know he is, Robert! Nobody

knows it better than you do, poor fellow!”

“My dear,” was the mild answer, “Christmas Day.”

“I’ll drink his health for your sake and the Day’s,” she said, “not for his. Long life to him! A merry Christmas and a happy New Year! He’ll be very merry and very happy, I have no doubt!”

The mention of Scrooge’s name cast a shadow on the party for fully five minutes but, at last, Cratchit told them how, last week, he had mentioned Peter to Mister Scrooge, by way of an inquiry, as it were, and Mister Scrooge had reluctantly admitted to having an acquaintance who was searching for a likely lad to be apprenticed to his business, a situation which would bring in, if obtained, full five-and-sixpence weekly for young Master Peter.

“Oh, Peter!” exclaimed his mother. “Five and sixpence a week!”

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The two young Cratchits laughed and Peter himself looked thoughtful, no doubt calculating the investments he would make with such a sum at his command. Cratchit thought of his own stipend, when he was first apprenticed to Scrooge & Marley. Five and six would have been sheerest luxury.

“Why that’s nearly as much as you gets paid, Martha!” said Belinda, who didn’t usually talk very much. “How much is it you makes, now?”

Martha looked uncomfortably away from her sister and appealed silently to her father.

“Now, let’s not bother Martha with such,” put in Cratchit. “I’m sure she’s very tired from a long week’s work.”

“I am tired. I believe I shall lie abed tomorrow, mother, for a good long rest, as I do not have to work tomorrow.”

“You have as long a lie-in as you wish, my dear,” said her mother, with a puzzled expression on her face, which the girl tried to distract from as quickly as she could.

“But, do you know, mother, I saw a countess and a lord, last week! Really, a lord! and he weren’t only as tall as Peter!”

“A lord!” exclaimed the twins, and Belinda, too, was excited.

“A lord! How did you see him, Martha? How?”

“Oh, he was a ...” She caught her father’s eye, once again, and her face fell. “He was a ... customer.”

“Buying something for the countess?”

“Yes. In a way, yes, that was it.” She fell silent, once again.

Cratchit hastened to intervene, holding his mug of punch aloft. “I say, a Merry Christmas to us all, my dears. God bless us!”

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Which all the family re-echoed.

“God bless us every one!” said Tim, the last of all.

He sat very close to his father’s side and Bob thought of the leather wallet upstairs, and the cost of doctors and of medicines for his youngest. Now, at last, he could provide for his boy, and for the rest of the family. Now, at last, truly his troubles were over.

“Oh, husband,” said Missus Cratchit. “I quite forgot. When I went to the wash-house for the pudding, someone was climbing the fence from our garden into the back-neighbour’s yard. There was no one there when I looked. I was worried they’d taken the pudding, but they hadn’t. I wonder what they could have wanted.”

“Someone in our back-yard? Children?”

“Not a child, exactly – a youth, I’d say. Tall and lanky and dressed rough. To be honest, Bob, he had the face of an idiot.”

One of Stitcher’s youngsters. He had found them. The spirits were visiting and it could mean nothing good.

Cratchit said nothing, but his eye caught Martha’s across the fireplace.

Missus Cratchit sniffed once more. “And I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with that turkey!”

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Chapter Seventeen

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A Villain Is Stitched In Time

Then came the night – to Cratchit, a dark, dismal, silent night. While others sang of Silent Night and Holy Night and were glad to hear the church bells strike, telling of life and coming day, to Cratchit, they brought only despair. What availed the noise and bustle of that cheerful morning, which echoed still to him? It was another form of knell, with mockery added to the warning.

He had failed. Martha was gone.

She'd gone to the back-yard and not come back. It was not until the family had prepared for bed that anyone noticed – Martha liked to sit quietly by herself as much as she could. When she was not found in the house or the yard, a search up and down the block had turned up nor hide nor hair of the girl.

Stitcher had come for her in the dark. Cratchit was sure that was the answer. After doing what he had done to poor Kitty in the morning, he had come, a thief in the dark, and taken Martha. If it had been simply to have some sort of revenge on Cratchit, they would have found her, lifeless, by now. Therefore, she was surely alive. Had Stitcher dragged her through the alleys and lanes into the heart of the Angel? Or worse, further south to his partner at Saffron Hill and the stews found there. How was Cratchit to find her? Wander the streets, peering into windows and doorways until he struck upon the right place? There were far too many windows and doors, and far too many secrets, between the Angel and Saffron Hill that he didn't want to discover.

There had been a scene with his wife, upstairs in the back room, whispering furiously as they tried to keep the argument from the children. He had been forced to lay before her the tale of

Martha being duped by Madam Guerin, her "milliner" mistress, forced into entertaining gents;

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how Stitcher had bought the girl from Guerin; how Old Joe had then stolen her from Stitcher;

and how he and Fred Miller had gotten her away last night. Anne had wanted him to seek out the nearest police officer and lay the problem at his feet, but Cratchit rejected the idea. What help would a peeler be, in a place like the Angel? Stitcher, and others like him there, had no respect for the uniform or the King's office. He'd simply join Cratchit in floating down the Fleet toward the Thames. But, something must be done and Cratchit had thought hard about it, and had done it – and was doing it.

While he was thinking all of this, he was trudging across town once again, heading away from the Angel. Inside his waistcoat there were bulges, such as Scrooge's leather wallet pressing against his waist and making it feel lumpy. There were also a lump in his throat, sweat on his hands and a small quaver in his knees as he walked. In short, Robert Cratchit was frightened –

frightened at what he was about to do, and frightened at his own audacity in trying to do it.

Cratchit had never been an audacious man.

But then, he'd never before been in a simmering rage such as he now was, determined that he would finish with the business once and for all.

He had gone back into the rookery of the Angel, walked narrow streets where he had never before ventured until – crikey, was it just three nights ago? Once in the Angel, he had searched the back alleys and lanes, looking for a face, hoping to find her. He had turned over piles of rubbish, hoping not to find her. When he had not, he walked among the people of that place, stopped at their doorways and windows, asked questions that sometimes got answers, but more often received closed windows, slammed doors and harsh words. The girls in the archways and on the street corners turned away or turned vicious; there had been insults and threats. He

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had cried out in despair and beaten his hands on walls, until one of the girls stepped out of her doorway to touch his arm.

“’ere, captain. H’it’s the Red Lion you needs to go to. ’e’s there, ’e is. ’Course, ’e is. That’s where they all go to ’ide after summat like that. The Red Lion at ’ockley-In-The-’ole – but careful, captain. Be very careful.”

“Why tell me this?”

The girl looked both ways and sniffed. “Jem Stitcher’s a brute, ’e is. ’e’s beat me purple a ’alf dozen times. And, I liked Kitty – and little Martha. She didn’t belong ’ere, she didn’t. The Red Lion on Turnmill Street. Be careful, captain. For God’s sake, be careful.”

Cratchit squeezed the girl’s hand gratefully and offered her a shilling, for he had come prepared, this time. She looked at it, sniffed, and moved away.

And now, he was walking toward the Red Lion tavern, a hell-hole within the Hole. His plan was horribly, frightfully simple. He was going walk into the Red Lion and announce loudly that he was looking for Jem Stitcher. The sordid tale, apparently true, of a sailor lured into the back rooms of that den, murdered, and thrown naked into Fleet Ditch through a hole in the back wall came to his mind, in lurid, penny-dreadful detail.

He turned down Coppice Row, after having stopped for a few minutes at Mutton Hill to consolidate his plan. The conversation there had begun, "I know where to find Jem Stitcher..." It had only taken a few minutes before he was on his way again.

A watchman was crying half-past eight, at the corner of the main thoroughfare and the dark passage down which Cratchit had to pass.

"Has it long gone the half-hour?" asked the clerk.

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"It'll strike the hour in another quarter," said the man, raising his lantern to Cratchit's face, who quickly thanked the man and passed on. The watchman watched him for a hundred paces or so, then, shaking his head, moved on, crying the peace and good order of the night.

It was nine o'clock at night, when Cratchit, steps slower and slower, passed the Sessions House at Clerkenwell Court. Cratchit looked about him, peering into shadows and listening for stray sounds. Each footstep, louder in the nighttime shadows than it would have been in daylight, echoed off the stone – if, indeed, they were echoes. It was said that, when Charles II was set on the throne and the tyrant Cromwell's mouldering corpse dug up and beheaded, his trunk had been stolen and secretly buried near this very spot. On dark nights, Old Ironsides, himself, now haunted these same streets, looking in vain for his head. Cratchit stopped – and the echoes stopped. He started up – and the echoes started. He ran, but the echoes ran as fast as he did. If it

were Cromwell following him, the old gent ran very well for someone without a head. In two short blocks, Cratchit was scampering as fast as his legs would take him.

Dashing madly around the corners, he came at last to Turnmill Street, and from there to an unpainted, unrepaired, unlit building with a low doorway in its front. From its chimney, smoke rose in a rapidly rising column, as if happy to be free of the buiding. Over its entry, just visible in the few beams of light that slanted into that street, was a weather-faded shingle with the sign of a red lion. Whether or not evil ghosts haunted the streets behind him, Cratchit knew that evil men were haunting the building in front of him. Of all bad deeds committed within wide London's bounds under cover of darkness since night hung over it, this was the place where their perpetrators would surely gather, for refuge, for safety. Of all the dark places that, with an ill scent, covered the rot that was the deepest and most secret part of London, this place was the fourest and most cruel. This was the place of refuge and resort for the like of Sticher.

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It was not, in appearance, so desirable a drinking-place as one might wish: mean and badly-furnished; lighted only by one small window in the shelving roof, and abutting on a close and dirty lane. Behind, in slow miasma belying its rapid name, Fleet Ditch, one of the last bends of the Fleet River not yet covered over as it all is now, flowed on its lazy, stinking, noxious way. On either side of the alley, butchers and animal rendering warehouses dotted the area, spilling offal and filth and stink into river and air alike. The Big Stink, they called it and even Parliament had taken notice. Yet, for all the stench rising from the river, it was the denizens of the Red Lion tavern who were the street's most foul constituent.

Cratchit lifted the latch on the low front door and entered.

As his eyes became accustomed to the glare inside, he saw that there was a fire in the

tap-room, and some creatures were drinking before it. Other men were gathered around tables, intent on card games. All were shrouded in blue halos of tobacco-smoke and stubs of candles and one hurricane lamp, its glass long gone, added both smoke and light to the place. A few women were also present, some withdrawn into corners; some very much in attendance on their man. Constant banter arose from each game.

“I’m low, and Ped’s high.”

“Tip and me’s game.”

“Fifteen four and a flush of five.”

“Bob for a yanepatine.”

“Jack for a gen.”

“Oi, Bill, I can stand for a top o’ reeb!”

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Down the length of the room, eyes, then faces, turned toward Cratchit, conversation slowed, then stopped, and the clicking of the fire in the grate became the only sound. They watched the stranger from beneath sullen eyelids, but he went quietly to the furthest corner of the bar, and waited for the landlord to recognise his presence.

That individual leaned over the bar to stare down at Cratchit. “What?” said a voice so crushed that it seemed scarce able to leave the man’s throat. “What?”

“Is his nibs in to-night?” Cratchit tried to keep the trembling he felt out of his voice.

“Who?”

“Jem Stitcher.”

“Who’s that?”

“I knows he’s here. What is he, apples and pears?”

“Are you taking the piss? Hop it.”

“I needs to see Jem.”

“Looking for a shiesting, are you? ’Cause there’s plenty here will do it for you will last you all your natural. Hop it.”

“I needs a rabbit with him.”

“If you hain’t on your way, you won’t be rabbiting with nobody never again, so push off.”

“Tell him it’s about the dosh he hooked from me.”

The landlord stared at him with open mouth. “I’ll pound it you’re either bleeding barmy or you’ve got the brassiest cobblers in London.”

“I’m probably barmy, but I still gots to see Stitcher.”

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Another long pause while the landlord stared at Cratchit. Finally: “Hang about.” The landlord went through a small door to the back, turning his head to say “Lushin’ Loo! Cool this tosser,” as he did, and shutting the door firmly behind him. The games slowly resumed, but eyes remained firmly on Cratchit. He sat as quietly as he could, looking neither right nor left.

One of the women in a corner turned her attention to Cratchit and began to move toward him. Cratchit assumed this was the ‘Lushin’ Loo’ the landlord had named. A careful scrutiny surprised him, for she was lady-like in appearance, although haggard. Her clothes were neat and tasteful, even if they were cheap. She sat beside Cratchit at the end of the bar without speaking, appearing much dejected.

“Are you Loo?”

“That’s right. I’m to keep an eye on yous. Don’t want yous to get in a scrape, does we?”

“That’s very good of you.”

“My pleasure, captain.”

The conversation lagged for a few moments, until, her mood having changed, Loo suddenly cried: “Cheer up; let’s have a song” and she began to sing, more to herself than anything. Her voice was as flat as her expression was.

“The first I met a cornet was

In a regiment of dragoons,

I gave him what he didn’t like,

And stole his silver spoons.”

She stopped singing and brought her eyes around to Cratchit. “Why don’t you sing?” she asked, then, abruptly, “Now, I could keep an eye on you out here, or ... we could go in back, where there ain’t so many,” she said, nodding toward the other inhabitants of this infamous

‘Bible mill’.

Despite her words, her eyes remained dull and lifeless. Nevertheless, she laid her hand on Cratchit’s thigh but he caught her wrist and moved the hand away. The hand was shaking and Cratchit guessed the cause at once. He reached into his pocket and extracted a tanner, placing the coin on the bar.

“Get what you like,” he said.

A new excitement came into her eyes and she called for the barmaid, with a smile of triumph.

“A drain of pale,” she termed it, which proved to be pale brandy when it came – half penny the glass. Glass after glass was ordered; glass after glass arrived; glass after glass was

drunk. This went on for a good fifteen minutes before the small door opened and the landlord returned, just as Loo had spent all the money Cratchit had given her.

As he stood, she laid a hand on his arm. "Thank you, love. You're a gentleman. Is you really going up to have a rabbit with Stitcher?"

"I am," said Cratchit.

"Then, what say you be a-giving me what else you got in your pockets, 'cause you won't be a-needing of it, no more. Come on, love."

Cratchit gave her another tanner and the landlord pushed her to the far end of the bar.

"Charley!" he said. "Be a-taking this cove to Stitcher. Mind he gets there." The landlord laid a lazy gaze on Cratchit. "Stitcher wants to sees him."

A figure extracted itself from the back shadows of the room – the same gap-toothed, idiot-grin ragamuffin who had pressed his face to the glass at Serfage & Marley's. He grinned at Cratchit again and said: "'mon." He led the way through the small door, Cratchit on his heels, and the door banged behind them.

"'sway."

"It's as dark as the grave," said Cratchit, groping forward a few steps.

"'urry!" mumbled the idiot.

The hallway was close and foetid, with lingering smells of waste and rot and decay.

"In the name of god, boy, open that window," pointing to one at the end of the hall "and let some air in here. I shall choke."

Charley grinned and giggled but lifted the sash and, indeed, a breeze replete with the fresh smells of Fleet Ditch, wafted into the passage. The breeze, the smells and most anything else

could come in through that window.

“mon,” repeated the boy and led Cratchit up a flight of stairs that threatened collapse at any moment. At the top, he turned down the hall and took Cratchit to the end. He stopped in front of the final door. “ere,” and left.

Cratchit began to lift the latch, but stopped, and knocked. There was the sound of something falling, a curse and a scraping of furniture.

“Wot!” came Stitcher’s voice.

Cratchit lifted the latch and entered the room.

If a man can change in a day, Jem Stitcher had. He was deep in his cups, but was suddenly listless, groggy, almost lifeless; his eyes, even in the gloom, deep shadowed. The room smelt close and unwholesome; the walls were discoloured by smoke and dirt; and the ceiling blackened. It was barely illuminated by the low fire and, though there was a candlestick on the table, the tallow in it was unlit. On the table were a tin mug and two bottles, one open and standing proudly, one on its side and quite empty – as empty as Stitcher’s stomach was full.

Stitcher took several moments to focus on his visitor before exclaiming:

“You! I’ll say this for you: you’ve got a gall. You think, just because we got the dosh, I still wouldn’t do you, right now?”

“You found the money, then, Jem?” Cratchit’s smile remained, but his hatred of the man was causing his hands to shake, once more.

“What, at Skrudge and Marrows? Oh, we found it. We went in two hours early, just in case you had an hale and hearty planned. Like you said, more’n two hundred quid.” He opened his coat and showed a pocket stuffed with bills. “Right there, every gen. We even closed the

place up for yous after. But now, I needs a safe place, dun I? Is that what you came here for? To inquire after my good fortune?" He drained the contents of the mug into *his* mug and poured himself another fortifier.

So, Stitcher and Old Joe had not met up on Christmas Eve. Stitcher had the money and Old Joe did not. There would be some nanty-narking over that.

"I only want to know where she is, Stitcher."

"Where she is? She's dead, you berk!"

Cratchit's vision swam red and he staggered back against the door-post.

"When?"

"This morning, you great divvy. You was there."

"This morning? No, she was ... Kitty? You mean, Kitty?"

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Who else?

"Not my Martha?"

"Your Martha? Who's that?" Stitcher put down his gin. "You made me do it!"

"Where's my Martha?"

"Who the bleeding hell is Martha?"

"My daughter, Stitcher! You bought her from Madam Guerin."

"Ho, ho! 'Madam' Guerin, so Frenchified, she is. She's from Spitalfields, you know. One o' her girls, was our Martha? Hain't that a high-class bit o' jam, then? I don't know what happened to her. On the bash, somewheres, I expects."

"Is she alive?" Cratchit's voice was dangerously quiet.

"Friared if I know! I hain't seen her in days."

“You didn’t come and take Martha away, tonight?”

“I bin ’ere all day, hain’t I? Since this mornin’ – since Kitty ...” He roused himself into rage. “If I wasn’t elephants, I’d break you in two, you divvy shite.” He suddenly slammed his hands on the table, knocking over the mug and spreading the contents onto the floor. “You made me do it! If you hadn’t been there, I’d never have done it!”

“Done what, Stitcher? What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about. It’s your fault.”

“How is it my fault?”

“You made me do it! If you hadn’t wandered into the Angel in the first place, she’d still be alive, wouldn’t she?”

“Who?”

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There was a long, dangerous silence. The spilled grog dripped onto the floor, each drop seeming louder in the silence. Cratchit continued very quietly. “Is Kitty dead, Jem?”

“You knows she is!”

“I do. That’s too bad, isn’t it? Well, at least, she didn’t die in the Angel, did she?”

“What are you talking about?” Stitcher seemed to focus on Cratchit for the first time.

“You! You made me do it! You made me kill her!”

The brute was on his feet now, unsteady, to be sure, but moving toward Cratchit. As he did, his hand went into his pocket and his stitcher appeared, shining in the flicker of the firelight.

“You cowson git! What you think I’m going to do to yous, now? You think you’re a-going to be walking out of here? Does you? You think I’m not going to stitch you?”

Cratchit was reaching behind him for the latch of the door as Stitcher advanced, slowly, but unsteadily.

“You killed Kitty, Jem? Did you kill her?”

“You bastard! Of course I did!” Tears actually formed in the brute’s eyes. “Oh god! I striped her – slit her throat right in front of the church. I didn’t means to be a-doing of it. I didn’t! But, she wouldn’t stop, would she? So, I did it. I slit her pretty white throat! Just like I’m going to be a-doing of yours, now!”

Stitcher raised his knife hand and lunged forward, as Cratchit lifted the latch on the door and sidestepped. The brute, off-balance, stumbled as three peelers rushed through the door.

“In the King’s name!” came the cry from all three as they came on, truncheons swinging.

In a surprisingly short time, Jem Stitcher was on his face on the floor with handcuffs on his

whists.
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“You minging bastard! I’ll do you up a treat, you bleater! Gerroff me!”

One of the peelers took hold of Jem’s collar, lifted his head an inch, and spoke softly in his ear. ‘Now, sir, it would be better if you were quiet, please.’ He emphasised each word with a gentle touch from his truncheon to the back of Stitcher’s head – just hard enough to tap Stitcher’s forehead against the floor each time.

The three officers hauled the now-quiet felon to his feet and one looked toward Cratchit, who was still shaking against the door-post. Cratchit, for his part, was thinking how reassuring it had been to open the door and see three rows of copper buttons outside it.

“That was well done, sir. We heard it all. His own words will hand him over to Jack Ketch.”

“Could you hold him tightly, please, officers?”

“Worried he’ll get loose, sir?” The peelers smiled at one another over that.

“No, I just need to recover something. Hold him, please.” Cratchit stepped close to Jemmy as the peelers grasped his arms.

Jemmy wasn’t quite finished, yet. “What do you want, you milky little queanie? I gets me daddles on you, I’ll stripe *you*, I will.”

“You’re making it worse, sir,” said the first peeler, tapping Stitcher’s head once more as a reminder.

“I simply want this, Jemmy,” said Cratchit. He pulled Stitcher’s coat open and extracted the sheaf of banknotes from the murderer’s inner pocket. “Is it all there, Jem? You said it was.”

“Up yours, you squidgy merchant.” Another tap with a truncheon caught his attention.

“Yeah, it’s all there.”

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“Officers, this belongs to the firm where I am employed. He stole it, last night. There should be two hundred and five pounds here.”

“Blimey!” was the unanimous reaction.

Cratchit held out the stack. “Do you wish to count it?”

After some exchanged glances, the first officer shook his head. “No need. If needs must, sir, we knows who you are, Mister Latimer.”

“Thank you. If you permit me, I shall return this to where it belongs.”

“That’s of no immediate concern to us, sir. We had no information regarding a robbery. We do want him on a charge of murder. And, he’s confessed to that, haven’t you, sunshine?”

The group left the backroom, Stitcher firmly held, and made their way down the stairs to

the hall. One went to close the window by which they had entered and Stitcher made one final attempt to break away from the peelers' grip but a swift application of two truncheons, quickly supplemented by another, ended it. With Cratchit in the lead, two of the officers half-dragging their quarry, and the third bringing up the rear with a cautious eye to the very surprised inhabitants of the tavern, they passed through the tap-room. From the end of the bar, Loo raised her drain of pale in Cratchit's direction. Once out onto Turnmill Street, the air, despite the miasma of the stew around it, was immediately cleaner and crisper.

"Where will you go, now, sir?"

"I will return this money, of course."

"Will you be needing an escort, sir? That's a load of the old bees, that is. Where would you be going, sir?"

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"Ah! Well, I'm afraid the Metropolitan have no authority, there."

"No, that's ... that's what I understood. It's not far, however. Where does he go?"

The chivvy-cove being spoken of stirred himself. "Straight to your rat, to do up the kisses and the kids, hain't I? But, first, I think I'll have a bit of a snog with little Martha. Cor, she likes it, she does!" He glared at Cratchit with pure hatred, a glare that Cratchit returned with interest.

The reminder with the truncheon was not nearly as gentle as some of the earlier ones had been. Stitcher was silenced, at least for a few moments.

"This article, here, sir, we first take to Mutton Hill Station. He'll be inside Newgate tonight and inside the Old Bailey, tomorrow. Then, I expects, he'll be hanging about outside Newgate, a few days later. Won't you, chuckaboo?"

“Gerroff.”

The senior peeler touched the brim of his hat with his truncheon. “Good night, then, sir. And thank you for coming to us, sir, and for your help – and your guts, sir. That took some, it did.”

Stitcher lifted his gaze to Cratchit once more and his voice was low and gravelly. “I’m not finished with you, me old. I’m not finished with you!”

“But, I’m finished with you, Jemmy. And, very shortly, I’ll be finished with all of it,”

Cratchit watched three rows of coppers glint in the street-lamps as the trio turned and hauled Stitcher off into the darkness. When they had disappeared, he pulled Scrooge’s leather wallet from his waistcoat, transferred Stitcher’s loot into it, tucked the whole away once more.

There was more to do this night. Eastward lay the rooms he had departed so abruptly the night before. Westward lay the only other people who might have taken Martha.

Who most needed help, right now? If what he heard through the door at Scrooge’s was what he thought it was, there was nothing he could do for the man, now. If it wasn’t, there was nothing that needed to be done.

He turned his face resolutely westward toward Baldwin’s Gardens, Old Joe and The Badger.

Chapter Eighteen

Cratchit Badgers Old Joe In His Hole

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The lad was smoking a small clay pipe and, as always, had his topper set on two hairs at the back of his head. He had stepped out of the alley at the end of Leather Lane, just as Cratchit turned into it. It seemed all of a piece to Cratchit – the night would not be complete without him.

“You hain’t exactly the birdies of summer ’round this yard, mate. The Badger’d like to lay hands on yous. Take a hinter and scarper.”

“Where’s Old Joe?”

“You got your ringers stuck in your lords? Scarper! The Badger’s wanting yous.”

“Listen to me, little man. I’ve had my fill of you, and Charley, and the Badger, and Old Joe. I’ve seen a young friend murdered today, and I’ve just finished dealing with the bastard who did it, and now I’m going to find my daughter. Don’t you get in my way.”

“What’re you rabbitting on about? Who’s murdered and who done it?”

“One of Stitcher’s girls. Little Kitty Fisher ...”

“Bloody hell! Willin’ Kitty? Who done it? Who!”

Cratchit saw anger in the boy’s eyes and heard hurt in his voice. Perhaps there was more to him than appeared on the surface.

“Jemmy Stitcher cut her throat in front of St. Pancras Old Church.”

“Blimey! There’s plenty will be looking for him, now. The manky shite! He hain’t going to live out the week. ”

“He won’t, either. He’s in Newgate.”

“Pull the other one.”

“The peelers pulled *him* out of the Red Lion an hour gone.”

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“Cor! Old Jee will be right chuffed to hear that. Out the Red Lion? Blimey, I didn’t think the peelers had it in ’em.”

“I didn’t think *I* did. Now, where is *he*? I’ll tell him myself. ”

The youth looked long at Cratchit and finally shrugged. “If yous insists on mounting the cart, it’s your chips, mate. He’s up there.” The top hat tilted toward a window at the top of the next building up the alley. “Plummy and slam’s your word. I’ll follow, but it’s your ticket.”

Cratchit went to the building that had been indicated. It was three storeys of squalor and misery, with groans, coughs, grunts, cries and smells coming from each door along its hall. Piles of rubbish lined the passageway and curious eyes peered from the gloom. The door creaked behind Cratchit and he turned to see the youngster in the topper behind him.

“Apples and pears, sunshine. Up you goes.” Cratchit was given a prod toward the

stairway leading to the top. As soon as he laid foot on the first tread, a voice called from above.

“Wotcher?”

“Plummy!” said Cratchit.

“You what now?”

“... and slam! Plummy and slam!”

“What are you on about?” A face leaned over the rail two storeys above. “Who is it?”

Cratchit looked to the youth, but that individual simply waved a hand toward him.

“I’m ... wanting ... I’ve got to see Joe!”

“Does Joe got to see you?”

“I’ve news for him!”

“I’ll tell him to buy The Times!” The face above seemed to think this the best witticism

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“It’s about Stitcher!”

The laughter shut off in an instant. The face disappeared and there was a rumble of low voices from above, then the face popped out over the rail again.

“Yeah, all right, come up!” Cratchit started up the stair, with the youth behind. “Is that you, then?” The youth replied, “You expecting the King, maybe? ’Course it’s me!”

At the top of the stair, Cratchit turned and walked the long hallway toward the next flight. A woman with a baby at her breast stared at him from a doorway. The infant seemed lifeless at first, but a faint stir showed that it was still in this world. The woman didn’t stir even to cover her other breast as he passed. An unshaven man reached out and pulled her into the flat, closing the door as he did.

Up the second flight of stairs then and, at the top, the face he'd seen over the rail stepped in front of him. The face, not a pleasant one, surmounted a body that was short, square and lumpy. Cratchit smiled widely at him.

“Yeah, all right. Let's go see Joe. This way.”

At the far end of the hallway, where boxes and old rubbish were piled, his guide stopped at the last doorway and knocked twice, firmly and loudly.

“Yeah,” was the word from within.

The door opened and the youth in the topper pushed past to enter first. “Jack!” was the surprised sound from the room, then Cratchit's guide pushed him through the doorway and slammed the door. Cratchit turned about and ran straight into a solid, immovable object. It was a badger – or rather, the Badger.

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He grinned and Cratchit, for the first time, noticed that the Badger was missing a number of his front teeth. “Welcome back, covey. Hain't we going to have a bit of narking, now?”

Cratchit put his hand on the big man's chest and shoved. It was like pushing a boulder. Nevertheless, he continued to push, exclaiming: “O soldiers! We can be a-doing of all that gators, you divvy berk. Old Joe needs a chin-wag with me, Isle of Wight now. Then, if he gives the nod, you and me can play nine pins and go roundy-rounds! But until then, bugger off or I'll stick that beater up your aris! Capishe?”

The Badger's eyes went wide at this masterful display of the language and a chuckle from further into the depths of the room made him step back.

“Don't be out of temper, my friend,” urged Old Joe. “I have not forgot you, CratchitBobCratchit. Not forgot you a bit. Come closer if you will.”

The room was long and bare and Cratchit's steps echoed. In the far wall was a door that might connect to the next flat. A few old chairs and a small charcoal stove made from piled up bricks were the furnishings. Old Joe was close to the latter, sitting in one of the former, with a small table by his side, on top of which was a large bottle. The old man coughed once, took a drink from some brew in a beaker he held, placed the beaker on the table, and looked Cratchit up and down.

"You told me there'd be half a monkey just sitting there, waiting, last night."

"There was. Or near it. More'n two hundred quid."

"But it wasn't there when I got there."

"You went yourself? Don't trust nobody else?"

"'Course I doesn't. My h'associates hain't quite the King's gentlemen, are they?" He

chuckled softly again and the Badger joined in with a rumble.

"We're more like the King's 'ighwaymen, hain't we, Joe?" The boy stepped in front of the fire to warm his hands.

"Gerroff!" shouted Joe, swinging a fist at the boy, who dodged the hand and skipped nimbly away. Joe held his own hands toward the low fire, as if trying to keep all the warmth to himself.

"So, I'm wanting to be a-knowing, Robbie, why it warn't there when I gots there at the h'appinted time. You got an answer to that?"

"A very good one."

"And what is it, if I may make so bold as to henquire?"

"You were too late."

“I were too late. How were I too late?”

“I told you Stitcher was coming for it. He got there first.”

“Stitcher!” The old man flung his beaker across the room toward Cratchit but his aim was off and the missile did no more than send a stream of liquid over Cratchit’s trouser-leg. From the smell, it was a remarkably strong gin.

“How did he get there, first?”

“Because you can’t trust him to do what he says. He turned up early. Hours early.”

“So, the dosh is gone – but you’re here. Hain’t that the ’ound’s rounds?”

“He’s got news to give yous, Joe,” said the boy, from a safe distance.

“What are you doing here?” The old man twisted in his chair and stared at the boy.

“You’re supposed to be out trolling.”

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“I was, Joe. I found him outside and he said he needed to see you. I thought I’d bring him ...”

“You thought! When did I ever asks you to think?”

“He’s got news for you, Joe.”

“What news? If I wants news, I’ll buy The Times.” The joke was not nearly so funny this time around. Joe looked to Cratchit. “What news?”

Cratchit stepped forward again. “This morning, Stitcher striped one of his girls, Kitty Fisher, up at St. Pancras Old Church.”

“What, right in the church?”

“Nah, outside. On the pavement. You remember Kitty Fisher? Willin’ Kitty? She’s the one what told my Martha about the dosh in the adams.”

“Girls is girls. They comes and they goes. How do you be a-knowing of Stitcher striping this girl?”

“I was there. It was me he was going to stripe – until Kitty stepped in.”

“More fool she, then. And, what’s all that to do with me?”

“So, tonight, the peelers dragged Stitcher out of the Red Lion and dropped him in chokey.

Three peelers heard him confess to killing her. He’ll swing by mid-week.”

“How does you knows this?”

“I was there.”

“When they nicked Stitcher? You was there? In the Red Lion?”

“That’s right.”

“Stone me!” This from the Badger, standing in the shadows.

Cratchit didn’t bother turning his head when he spoke. “You thought I was an’ mouth and

no trousers, didn’t you, Badger? You’ll find out different.”

“*You* was in the Red Lion?” The old man nearly laughed at the thought.

“I went there looking for Stitcher. I found him.”

“ – and lived to tell about it? Walk-er-er!”

“I’m standing in front of you, hain’t I?”

“If Stitcher was trying to stripe you, why’d you go looking for him?”

“Well, that’s the thing. You see, I thought he’d taken my Martha.”

“Your Martha? Oh, the girl.” Joe hooked a thumb over his shoulder toward the door in the side wall of the room.

“That’s it, the girl. I thought he’d managed to drag her right out of our yard under our

noses, as it were. 'Cause, of course, you done that to her from Stitcher's yard."

"From the street, Robby, where she were trolling."

"Let's not quibble, Joe. You took her from Stitcher."

"And then you and your friend got her away last night. Home for Christmas, eh? "

"That's right."

"You're going to owes us for our Nan not being able to work for a week or two."

"How do you reckon that?"

"The Badger got a little upset when she pointed you out in the cab and told him you'd taken little Martha. It'll be a while before she can pad the hoof, again. So, you'll owes us."

"Take it out of Badger's share."

"And we didn't get the dosh what yous promised us – but we got the girl, Bobby. *We* got

her, not Stitcher." **Perusal Copy Only - All Rights Reserved**

"I know that, Joe. That's why I'm here. Let her go and I'll tell you where the money is."

"But, we lets her go, first? My eye. I think you'll tell us, one way or another."

The Badger growled from his place by the fire. The boy in the top hat suddenly started walking to the door. "I don't think I wants to be here, now, Joe."

"What's the matter with you?" jeered the old man. "Squidgy, are you?"

"That's right, Joe. I'm squidgy. I'm going out to take the air, if you doesn't mind."

"Please yourself. Out you go. Quick as you like."

The youth passed Cratchit with a hard stare, then ran out the door, slamming it behind him. Cratchit heard his footsteps on the other side of the door, going down the hallway.

"Now then, Robby, let's sees what yous knows. Badger! Lay hands upon him!"

The Badger started toward Cratchit, who ducked around between Old Joe and the little brick stove, yelling “Wait!” The Badger kept coming.

“Why should I wait?” gloated the Badger. “I thought you wanted to go roundy-rounds? Or *are* you all mouth and no trousers? Well?”

“No need for this. I’ll tell you where the money is. I just want my daughter back.”

“She’s worth a lot, Robby. A girl like that – what is she, sixteen? A lot of the needful.”

“If she lasts, Joe. If she lasts. How long is she good for, on the street? Most girls last, what, three months, four? Even if she lasts a year, what’ll you get, a hundred quid, maybe?”

“There’s always more girls.”

“But this one can bring you two hundred quid – now! And you doesn’t even have to pays out to keep her. Just take the money and give her to me.”

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Cratchit had, literally, to think on his feet. “Do you know Stitcher’s crib in the Angel?”

“Course I doesn’t.”

“That’s no bother. I do. We’ll toddle up there; you takes the dosh; you gives me Martha. We never sees each other again.”

“And suppose there’s objections to us having a butcher’s at Stitcher’s crib?”

Cratchit spread his hands wide. “Who’s left to do that? Kitty dosed with him and he’s killed her, and *he*’s in chokey for it and hain’t getting out. The flat’s empty.”

That slowed Joe a bit. “How does you know where the money is?”

“He told me.”

“Bollocks. Just like that? Bob’s your uncle?”

“He was bleeding legless and near blubbing over his Kitty. He didn’t even know what he was saying.”

Joe considered this for a good three seconds. “So, the money’s there?”

“Yeah, I’m sure of it.”

“And you wants the girl?”

“She’s my daughter, Joe. She’s my daughter.”

“Well, that’s a new pair of boots, that is. Yeah, all right. We’ll do it. We’ll do it, now.”

“Can I have a drink, Joe? I sort of need one.” Cratchit’s smile was as wide as it had ever been.

“Knock yourselves out. There it is.” He nodded toward the bottle on the little table, pushed himself out of the chair and walked through the door in the far wall. Cratchit picked up the tall clear bottle, held it up to look at the colourless liquid in it, uncorked it and sniffed the

alcohol fumes. He lifted it to his lips, but, before the liquid could touch them, Old Joe roared from the next room and came running back.

“She’s gone! She’s gone! Do you hear me? That little man! He has been the – the – somehow the cause of all this! Take him out of it, Badger!”

Cratchit was in action long before the end of the sentence. He dashed the bottle to the floor in front of Old Joe, where it shattered and splattered its contents; at the same moment, he threw the old man’s chair toward the Badger; then kicked over the little stove in the next, scattering burning charcoal across the floor. The liquor roared into flame and Old Joe stumbled backward, shouting in alarm as some of the flame caught at his trousers leg. Cratchit outran the Badger the door, flung it open, and bolted into the passageway. Old Joe’s voice followed him as

he fled into the hallway.

“Cut his throat, Badger!” the old man screamed through his anger. “Never mind the girl – cut his throat as deep as you can cut. Saw his head off!” And suddenly the voice became a shriek that went on and on.

Surprised faces looked out at him as he pounded down the hall. He heard sudden heavy feet and a woman’s scream behind him and, without daring to glance back, knew it to be the Badger, striking at someone who had gotten in his way as he pursued.

Cratchit caught the newel at the top of the stair and spun himself around it. As he did, he glimpsed the Badger half-way down the hall, his club raised, and the stair-well guard who had challenged him coming up from below. Cratchit took the steps headlong, two at a time, catching the guard full in the face with his boot and tumbling him backward down the flight. As the

Badger passed by above him, he felt a rush of air as the club swished past an inch from his skull.

The Badger roared his anger and ran to the top of the stair, following down three steps at a time. His longer legs were closing the distance rapidly.

The guard lay, unmoving, at the bottom of the stair. Cratchit rounded the corner and headed down the first floor passage. One more flight to go, but the Badger was closer now. A man stepped from a doorway in front of Cratchit and flung up his arm. Cratchit instinctively put his arm across his own face and then pulled it back, his elbow connecting with the man’s nose. There was a crunch and the man spun backward, clutching at his face. Cratchit had hardly slowed. The Badger’s feet hit the hall floor behind him, closer than before.

Again, Cratchit spun himself on the newel post of the next stair and skipped down them. He saw the Badger above him, arm and club raised, and he fell onto his back, sliding down the

stairway as the club again swished over his head.

He banged hard down the stair, grasped desperately at the balusters as they flicked past, finally clutching one as the Badger reached the top of the stair, barely twenty feet behind him.

Without thinking, he rolled over the railing and fell to the floor below him, hearing the smash of the club on the rail above, landing on his feet but falling to his knees, scrambling up and running for the rear of the building, shaken but determined in his desperation.

Faces were peering out of doorways, but pulled back as he ran toward them, gasping for breath, now. As the Badger roared his anger again, the doors slammed shut.

The rear door of the tenement was partway off its hinges. The thudding feet behind him closed. Cratchit pounded through the doorway and, turning, flung the door shut with both hands,

catching the Badger full in the face before the rotten wood of the jamb gave way, and door and

Badger tumbled over one other.

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Cratchit was already in the alley, but the Badger was on his feet and running. He closed the distance rapidly and, just as a side alley neared, his hand closed on the back of Cratchit's neck, pulling him to a stop.

Cratchit tried to turn himself within the Badger's grasp to fight, but the killer shifted his grip, brought Cratchit around to face him and flung himself with crushing weight against Cratchit, crumpling him against the brick wall of a building. The Badger's club came down heavily, but somehow Cratchit twisted sideways and the blow landed on his shoulder as Cratchit kept twisting. The Badger cursed and struck again, but the club cracked against bricks. Cratchit, backing quickly, tripped among the dust bins on the other side of the alley, his habitual grin widened into a face-cracking smile, right hand groping in his coat's inner pocket, as the Badger

raised his arm for the kill.

The first barrel of the two-barrel pistol Cratchit had bought second-hand from the ironmonger two days before discharged directly into the Badger's face, placing a neat hole near the centre of the brute's forehead. Cratchit hadn't been sure the old gun would fire, but it had. The report was surprisingly small, a mere crack devoid of echo, but the Badger staggered backward a step and toppled, slowly at first but with a final surge, onto his back among the rubbish at the side of the alley. He did not move.

"Struth!" The voice came from deep in the alley's shadows.

The acrid smoke drifted down the alley and Cratchit raised his head toward the blackness of its depths. The youth in the topper stood at the corner, eyes fixed upon the scene. From the top floor of the building, smoke began to roll from windows and shouts and screams could be heard.

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Cratchit looked silently at him, eyes wide, breathing heavily. The pistol, still smoking from the fired barrel, suddenly felt very heavy in his hand. He stood and backed away, raising the pistol again, cocking its second barrel, as yet unfired. The youth shook his head and lifted his hands.

"Nah, nothing to worry about, chuckaboo. Well done! We'll make a villain of you, yet."

"He was ..."

"Course he was! He was the Badger, wasn't he? He'd have killed you, otherwise. I seen it." The youth cocked an eyebrow at Cratchit, sniffed, and tilted his hat a little forward. "Not to worry, me covey. You did us all a right Lambeth just there. Of all on 'em, the Badger was the worst. And ..." The youngster looked up at the burning building. "Well, that was a bit of a cock-

up but I think that's the end of Old Joe, innit?"

Cratchit looked to the top floor, flames coming now from every window. He uncocked and pocketed the pistol, shook his head with regret, and collapsed onto a crate, but instantly was on his feet again. He began to shout and run toward the building. "Martha! She's still in there! Martha!", but the youth held him back.

"Hang about," said the boy, who disappeared from view for a moment, then returned, leading Martha by the hand.

"Here she is, mate. I slid her out the winder and we shinned down the drain-pipe, three floors, while the argle-bargle was going on. Cor, she's a right game'un, she is."

Martha ran to her father and Cratchit put his arms around the girl. She looked down at the body of her late tormentor, sprawled awkwardly on the cobbles, timidly approached the dead man, looking upon him—then spat fiercely onto the corpse and kicked it in the face. People were beginning to emerge from the building and Cratchit thought, vaguely, that he hoped they would all get out in time.

"What do we do now?" Martha's voice was quaking as she spoke, but her chin was high.

"Yous could call for a peeler —," the boy said and winked at her, "— but I wouldn't." He turned to Cratchit. "Listen, me covey, it'll be days afore they finds him, here. End of the alley, there, two blocks, and you're on Gray's Inn Lane, takes you straight on to Camden Town and afore you knows it, you're at the gates."

"Where will you go?"

"Don't you worries about me none. I'll be all right; I always am. I think I'll take myself up Saffron Hill and talk to the old man there. If I can't get meself in tight with him, me name

hain't Jack Dawkins."

"And, is your name Jack Dawkins?"

The youngster smiled. "There's some as calls me that." He doffed his topper to Cratchit, gave a little bow to Martha, turned, put his hat on at an impossible angle and, hands in pockets, whistling a tune, made his way up the alley until he was lost among the shadows.

The bells of St. Mary Le Bow began to peal the midnight hour as the flames from the burning building broke through the roof. Cratchit and Martha, arms about each other, turned resolutely for the gates of Rome.

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Chapter Nineteen

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Newsboys on Cheapside cried the overnight news of four persons drowned on Christmas Day when the ice collapsed under the weight of skaters in St. James's Park; of the relief of St. Sebastien by our gallant troops under Col. Arbuthnot; of the horror in Gray's Inn Lane where two men were found dead in the ashes of a tenement fire, although, by the grace of God, no one else was hurt. Cratchit did not purchase a newspaper.

He was deep in thought as he came around the corner to Lombard Street. He felt the leather wallet inside his waistcoat tugging with each step. St. Michael Cornhill had chimed the hour long since, but he was in no great hurry to reach his destination. The offices of Scrooge and Marley would be cold and silent when he got there. Although they were cold and silent most mornings, this one would be different. It would signal an ending and a new beginning in his life,

at the very least.

There were a great number of people milling on the streets, eager to be about the business they had delayed being about while they were about the business of being about Christmas. They pushed past Cratchit, and each other, with no vestige in their faces of the good humour of two days before. Indeed, one or two jostled him as they went, but nowhere was a “Your pardon, sir” or an “Excuse me, my friend” to be heard.

In fact, he had no contact with a single soul, until a hand reached out and pulled him into the alley at Birchin Street.

“I done it! God help me! I done it!” It was Mister Latimer, sleepless, dirty, wild of eye.

“Done it Christmas Eve, after I saw you last. Didn’t take a minute, all done quick as you like, and neat as a pin. Over and done with. No taking it back, now! I’m finished I am. There’s no place

for me, no more!”
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He let go of Cratchit and ran up Birchin, stopping at the far end to shout: “And, it’s all your fault, Cratchit! All your fault!”, before rounding the corner and vanishing.

He walked slowly the rest of the way; there was no point in hurrying now. Latimer had “done it”, done it “quick as you like”. How soon after the words Cratchit had heard through the door on Christmas Eve had he ‘done it’? – for, try as he might, Cratchit could find no other earthly explanation for the words and sounds he heard. Was Cratchit responsible for that? Of course not. He hadn’t forced Latimer to do anything. He was guiltless. His hands were clean.

Then why were his hands shaking?

He turned into Newman’s Court and saw by a clock in a neighbouring shop-window that he was full eighteen minutes and a half behind his time as he reached the door at Scrooge &

Marley's. From habit, he pulled the key ring from his pocket and began to unlock the door, but stopped and tried the latch. The door opened at once.

Inside was nearly dark as night, but that was nothing new for Scrooge & Marley's. His plan was simple: put the wallet of money back into the safe, along with the will that he and Fred had forged (tucking the single page of Marley's codicil into it), lock it all and leave before anyone came in to find him. Afterward, he would simply inform the peelers that he had come in, late after a Christmas celebration, and, when Mister Scrooge did not arrive, had gone to his home and found, well, what was to be found.

His hat was off, almost before he opened the door; his comforter too. He was on his stool in a jiffy. Pulling the forged will from his inner pocket, he began driving away with his pen,

trying to finish quickly, but being as careful as possible with the carbon ink and the scratching

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19. It was a much warmer day than Christmas Eve had been, so at least the ink was unfrozen.

“Hallo?” came a more than familiar voice from the inner office. It couldn't be. It couldn't possibly be. Looking up, startled, Cratchit saw the office door wide open. Looking further, he saw the glaring face of Ebenezer Scrooge – not in his bedroom, not at his home, not dead! – but very, very much alive. Cratchit fell off his stool.

“What do you mean by coming here at this time of day?” Scrooge's voice was as harsh as ever.

Cratchit's jaw dropped open and he stared wide-eyed before finding his tongue. Fortunately, it was still inside his mouth and he stammered “I am very sorry, sir. I am behind my time.”

“You are. Yes. I think you are. Step this way, sir, if you please.”

Any thought of placing the false will in the safe had disappeared at the first sound of Scrooge's voice. He slid the incriminating papers into his desk as he stepped off his stool. He still had, however, the damningly conspicuous lump of the wallet inside his waistcoat. Scrooge must see it at once as he walked across the room.

"It's only once a year, sir," Cratchit managed, beginning to cross to the office. "It shall not be repeated. I was ... making rather merry yesterday, sir."

As he crossed, a thought began to grow in his head. The shades on Scrooge's office window were closed (indeed, they had not been open in years). He could accomplish the plan himself, without the help of Latimer or even of the now incarcerated Stitcher. He reached the door, stepped inside the office and stood in front of Scrooge's desk. From the corner of his eye, he saw that the safe was closed; Stitcher or Old Joe had done that, at least.

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"Now, I'll tell you what, my friend, I am not going to stand this sort of thing any longer. And therefore – "

Bob thought of the stolen codicil, and what it might have meant for him and his sick child; he thought of what he'd been through the past few days, none of which need have happened if he had the money Marley had wanted him to have; he thought of what Martha had been through. Hands trembling with rage, his eye fell on the heavy steel ruler on Scrooge's desk. If he could strike Scrooge a sudden hard blow, he could stun him; bring him down, and finish the deed at leisure. His fingers had just closed on the thick blade when Scrooge, in a feat of athleticism Cratchit would never have believed possible of him, leapt from his stool, and give Cratchit such a dig in the waistcoat that he released the ruler and staggered back.

" – and therefore I am about to raise your salary!"

Cratchit had his fists half-way up to defend himself when Scrooge's words penetrated through his fugue. "Raise my salary? Raise my salary! Mister Scrooge, what are you saying?"

"A merry Christmas, Bob. A merrier Christmas, Bob, my good fellow, than I have given you for many a year. I'll raise your salary, I'll assist your struggling family, and we will discuss your affairs over a Christmas bowl of smoking bishop at The George & Vulture this very afternoon, Bob. Now, make up the fires, and buy another coal-scuttle before you dot another 'i', Bob Cratchit."

"Mister Scrooge?" Cratchit stared hard at his employer, then actually rubbed his eyes before staring even harder. This couldn't be Ebenezer Scrooge. He began to entertain the thought that Latimer had done away with Scrooge after all and put in his place some congenial person who looked precisely like old Ebenezer.

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Scrooge shook his head with a rueful smile. "I am in earnest, Bob. I have been shown the folly and waste of the past thirty years – the folly and waste of it all. Have you ever committed a folly, Bob?"

"Very nearly, Mister Scrooge. Very nearly." The £493 tucked into Cratchit's waistcoat seemed to be burning into his skin. A phrase from Scrooge's previous statement struck him.

"When you say 'raise your salary', Mister Scrooge, is there a figure attached to it?"

Scrooge chuckled a very uncharacteristic chuckle, in that it wasn't brought about by beating someone up, or down, on a price. "Enough, my dear fellow. Enough to make up for many wrongs over many years, for which I am now heartily sorry, and for which, Bob, I beg your forgiveness. And not just wrongs toward you, either. I spoke with my nephew, yesterday over dinner, inviting him to become a partner, but the pair of you will need to meet. I have plans! How

does Scrooge, Scrooge, Cratchit ...” And, here, Scrooge chuckled, once again. “... and *Marley* strike your ear? But the first thing, my dear fellow, the most urgent thing, will be to get your little Tim the medical attention he needs so badly. He will *not* die, Bob Cratchit, I swear it! Say it, Bob! Tiny Tim will not die!”

“Tim will not die.” Cratchit repeated, adding “And, please, don’t call him ‘tiny’; it’s not his fault he’s small for his age.”

“Oh! And, while I am thinking of it – that fellow, what was the name – Latimer! The overdue fellow. I had a visitation on Christmas Eve!”

“At your home, sir? Upstairs, was it?”

“At home? No! The man visited me at the George & Vulture! Accosted me, rather! Stood there upbraiding me for full five minutes, while my supper got cold! Well, I know what I’m going to do about that. Where is that letter of complaint?”

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The blood drained from Cratchit’s face, not for the first time in the past few days. He laid a hand across the wallet concealed in his waistcoat.

“It’s in the safe, sir. Locked up in the safe. Safe in the safe.” For some reason, Cratchit found that very funny but managed to keep it to a small twitch of the corners of his mouth. If Latimer had not been on the other side of Scrooge’s door on Christmas Eve, who was Scrooge possibly talking to? Ghosts? Spirits? His own guilty conscience? He nearly laughed aloud. Cratchit wondered whether his nerves might be failing him.

Scrooge’s own eyes grew very bright and his own mouth twitched. “That seems a very good place for it to sit for a few days, say, until Tuesday week.”

Cratchit’s face must have been a complete study in surprise, for Scrooge began to chuckle

again.

“Mister Latimer, in a great lather, confronted me over my supper at the tavern. The man was near violence, absolutely shaking with anger. I’m afraid I was very abrupt with him but, to tell truth, not a word he said was misdirected; not a word was untrue. He became quite overwrought. I thought at first that he might commit some outrage, but, in the end, he hauled out the deed to his home and signed over his property to the firm right there at the table – ‘to get it over and done with’, he said. I thought long and hard, that night – thought over many, many things, long and hard, that night. I dreamed the whole night through and if I told you that dream, Bob, you’d never believe it – but, yesterday, in the bright morning light, I decided if ever there is a time to become a new man, Bob, it’s on Christmas Eve. So, I’m hoping, Bob, my good fellow, that you will accept me as a new man and forgive me for past wrongs. Can you do that, Bob

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Bob’s hand was still on the leather wallet in his waistcoat and the other on the forged will in his pocket. He thought of twenty-three years of suffering under Mister Scrooge – and nodded. “Of course, sir. Certainly, Mister Scrooge.”

“Now, here’s what we’ll do, Bob. We’ll send a ticket porter ’round to return the deed and tell him to see us on Monday and that we’ll take no action until Tuesday week. How does that sound?” Cratchit could only nod mutely.

Scrooge suddenly clapped his hands together and rubbed them briskly. “Bless me, Bob, I don’t want to wait until noon for my lunch. Let’s close up now. Be sure the back door is locked, will you? I’ll just write the note for Mister Latimer, first.” Scrooge went back to his desk to write, while Cratchit sprinted through the old storerooms to the back of the building, pushed

home the two latches and turned the key to lock the back door. He was back, hand pressed against the original will in his inside pocket, eyes sliding toward the safe, before Scrooge had done signing.

“I’ll need Latimer’s address from the safe,” said Scrooge, but Cratchit was quick to intercept him. “Allow me, sir,” said the clerk, picking up the freshly penned letter.

The key ring was out of his pocket as he moved, and Cratchit inserted the safe key into the lock and pretended to turn it. He swung the safe door open. The hinges groaned ever so slightly as they turned, but his oil had done the trick.

The door of the lockbox popped open at once and the leather wallet flashed soundlessly from Cratchit’s waistcoat and into the lockbox; the original and true will followed that, down at

the bottom of the pile, with Marley’s page folded within it; and the lockbox door was pushed

shut, the small key was turned in the lock with an even smaller “snick”.

Cratchit eased shut the door of the safe and turned the key. The oil he had put on the mechanism before Christmas was finally working; the lock slid into place with a quiet click. There was now no way to tell what had happened here just two nights before, and no one (still alive) who would care to.

At Scrooge’s desk, he pulled the slip of paper with the addresses of Miller, Tysoe, and Latimer on it from his pocket, folded the letter, wrote Latimer’s address on the outside fold, and sealed the letter with wax. “God bless us, every one!” he breathed fervently

“What was that, Cratchit?” Scrooge was still not in the habit of being pleasant and his voice sometimes reverted to its previous brusqueness. “What did you say?”

“I said, ‘God bless us, every one’, sir.”

“Did you? Isn’t that odd?” Scrooge looped his muffler around his neck and picked up his

hat. "I'm sure I've heard that somewhere before. What were you about at the safe, there?"

"Just checking that the safe is locked, sir. There's a deal of money in there."

"Money? Bah!" said Scrooge, and followed it up with "Humbug! Don't worry about money today, Bob! Get your hat and comforter, my man. A very important bowl of smoking bishop awaits us both!"

"It's just that I had a most peculiar sort of a night, sir, last night *and* Christmas Eve. Most peculiar."

Scrooge burst forth with the merriest laugh that Cratchit had ever heard come from his employer's belly. It began very low, deep inside and boiled up northward until it flooded out, as joyfully as the St. Michael bells which were, at that moment, ringing the half hour. Really, it was a tremendous laugh.

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The office of Scrooge & Marley was closed up in a twinkling and the two friends, master and man, departed for a celebratory lunch and glass at The George & Vulture.

As the door closed and the pair walked out into the courtyard, Mister Scrooge was heard to inquire "By the by, Bob, did your family receive the prize turkey I sent to you?" The rest of the conversation is, mercifully, lost to history.

For the rest of that day, and every Christmas Day for many years afterward, visitors wanting to see Mister Scrooge – or Mister Marley – were greeted with a sign hung on the door reading:

"CLOSED

due to

A MERRY CHRISTMAS".

And so it was, Lord bless it, so it was – and so, dear reader, is this tale.

THE END

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Appendix A: Some notes on London slang

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It is said that a Cockney is someone born within the sound of 'Bow bells', i.e., the bells of St. Mary Le Bow in Cheapside, London. In Dickens's time, they could be heard in the 'City' where Scrooge's office was and where Scrooge probably lived, and, in fact, in all the parts of London that feature in this story *except* the northern parts of Camden Town, where Cratchit lived. It is ironic that, of all the main characters in this story, the only one who is not actually living in Cockney territory is Cratchit, himself, often portrayed as the quintessential Cockney.

In the list below, the notation CRS indicates that the slang expression derives from Cockney Rhyming Slang. CRS probably began in the early 19th century as part of 'Thieve's Cant', a way to pass secret information among criminals. Although it wouldn't have been widespread in the general population when this novel is set, it would certainly have been in use among the underworld and the costers, where Bobby grew up.

The usual format of CRS is to invent a two or three-word phrase that rhymes with the

word to be slanged, add ‘that’s a’, then finish the expression with the word to be slanged, e.g., ‘bubble and squeak, that’s the beak’. Now, here’s the tricky part. Drop ‘that’s a’ and the slanged word. Then, to make it perfectly clear, drop the rhyming word from the new phrase. E.g., ‘bubble and squeak, that’s the beak’ becomes just ‘bubble’. It’s up to you to know what the beak is – and to be ‘in’ on the slang enough to know what the phrase used to be to start with.

To add another layer, slang changes very rapidly, using current celebrities and events for referents. Along with that is the way pronunciation has changed. For example, until about 1900, ‘v’ was often pronounced as ‘w’ in Cockney – someone might be ‘wery knackered’. Final ‘t’ sounds are changed to a slight glottal stop; final ‘l’s become ‘w’; and much more. And, of course, the ubiquitous dropping of ‘haitches’ – and the superfluous addition of them elsewhere.

To attempt to spell all of this phonetically would make it quite unreadable, so I’ve simply tried to

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keep the flavour of the dialect here, without getting too deeply into phonetics.

And, then there’s costermonger’s backslang, itself another part of ‘Thieves’ Cant’. Henry Mayhew, in the 1851 **London Labour and the London Poor**, estimated there to be more than 100,000 street sellers, street crafters and such in London. As with any large group, they developed their own slang. Costermonger’s backslang was a curious, improvised, almost non-repetitive art. Mayhew estimated that more than 80% of costers were illiterate, but they developed an amazing ability to, on the spur of the moment and without slowing the flow of the words, reverse the sound of a word and use it in a sentence. Mayhew makes a valiant attempt to phoneticize some of the cant. He offers ‘*kennetseeno*’ for ‘stinking’ (read backward from the ‘ts’; the ‘eeno’ is the suffix ‘ing’); ‘*flatch kanurd*’ for ‘half-drunk’ (note the ‘aitch’ sound for the unvocalized ‘h’); ‘*on doog*’ for ‘no good’, one of the few that is actually a reversed spelling. Akin in many ways to the Pig Latin of the 1920s, it was a way to keep costermongers secrets

among themselves. It seems that costermongers had secrets to keep, as there was a running war between them and the police that, in some ways, still persists to this day.

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Appendix B: A London Slang Dickens-tionary

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Abraham or Abra-am – (pronounced in two syllables only) a shilling; Abra-am's willing, that's a shilling; CRS.

All mouth and no trousers – a loud-talker who can't back up his talk.

Adams – a safe; Adam's faith, that's a safe; CRS. The 'th' in 'faith' is an 'f' in Cockney.

All your natural – all your natural born days; the rest of your life.

Annies – gin; Anne Boleyn, that's a gin; CRS.

Apples and pears – upstairs; Apples and pears, that's the stairs; CRS.

Argle-bargle – noise, commotion, roughness; today, argie-bargie.

Aris – arse; Bottle and glass, that's your arse BUT 'bottle' eventually was replaced with 'Aristotle', which then gets shortened to 'Aris', which, in common use, basically is pronounced as 'arse', so why bother?; CRS, but taking the long way around.

Bacons – legs; Bacon and eggs, that’s your legs; CRS.

Ball – walk; Ball of chalk, that’s a walk; CRS.

Bang up to the elephant – top-notch, the best. Probably of later origin, but I like it.

Barney – trouble. Currently, Barney Rubble, that’s some trouble, *but* the use of ‘barney’ to mean trouble predates The Flintstones television cartoon by more than a century; possibly CRS, possibly picked up from Irish dialect.

Battle – a stew; Battle of Waterloo, that’s a stew; CRS.

Barmy – crazy. From a mental institution in Barming-In-Kent.

Batty-fang – a heavy beating.

Beak – a magistrate. Also ‘bubble and squeak’ or just ‘bubble’ in CRS.

Become obvious – too pregnant to work the streets, to put it callously.

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Bedlam – an insane asylum, the original was closed in 1815 and the hospital moved to St.

George’s Fields, but its reputation was still a byword.

Bees – money; Bees and honey, that’s your money; CRS.

Berk – a very stupid person; Berkshire Hunt, that’s a — very crude word; CRS.

Bib – mouth.

Bible mill – a tavern, especially a lower class establishment.

Bit o’ jam – an attractive woman, but very coarsely put.

Blogger – a thief.

Bleater – one who informs to the police; from a sheep’s bleats.

Bleeding – akin to ‘bloody’ (q.v.), it is an intensifier of the insult or word to follow.

Blimey – May God blind me; often used with ‘Cor!’, q.v.

Bloody – see “bleeding”; from an old oath, “God’s blood upon me”.

Blooming – used to add emphasis, but it doesn't have a specific meaning (except as a replacement for ruder adjectives).

Bob's your uncle – there you are, all sorted out. Also used, but more rarely: 'Mary's your aunt.'

Bollocks – balls, as in testicles. An expression of extreme disbelief in another person's statement.

Brass – ass; Copper and brass, that's an ass; CRS, but the rhyming word has been retained, perhaps to avoid confusion with "copper", meaning a police officer.

British money – A sovereign is a one pound coin; a quid is a pound, either coin or note; a knicker is a pound when made up of smaller coins; one pound is divided into twenty shillings; one shilling (a bob) is 12 pennies; a penny is two half-pennies or four farthings. A guinea is a

coin worth twenty-one shillings. A florin is a coin worth two shillings (a two-bob bit). A crown is five shillings (one quarter of a pound); half a crown is two shillings, six pence. A tanner is

sixpence; half-a-knicker is ten shillings. A monkey is five hundred pounds; a pony is twenty-five pounds. A groat, mostly archaic by Dickens's time, was four pence.

Bubble-around – speak elegantly.

Bucking place – here, Kitty mistakes the then-newly inaugurated Buckingham Palace for a place where washing (bucking) was done.

Butcher's – a look; Butcher's hook, that's a look; CRS.

Capishe – do you understand. Just about the time of the story, the traditional heartland of Cockney London was being invaded by Italian immigrants, so much so that the area where Old Joe headquartered his operations was soon to become London's first 'Little Italy'. The slang quickly began to reflect that.

Captain – 19th century London prostitutes often referred to potential clients as "captain".

Chance'd be a fine thing – wouldn't it be nice to have a chance; just barely slang, but still.

Chin-wag – a conversation.

Chips – problem; in this usage, 'it's your dinner, not mine.'

Chit – a slightly more polite term for excrement.

Chiv – a knife; *not* pronounced 'shiv' as in modern slang.

Chivvy cove – a tough who uses a knife.

Chokey – jail.

Chousing – cheating.

Chuckaboo – a close friend; often derogatory.

Chunter – mystery, adventure.

Circumbendibus – unnecessary talking; just a nonsense word, really.

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Clapping – tired; 'clapped' out.

Climb on it – get in on something before others can.

Clinker – window; Clinker and cinder, that's the winder; CRS

Cobbler's – testicles; Cobbler's awls, that's yer balls; CRS.

Cock-up – a badly-managed situation; usually one that is directly attributable to someone; a right cock-up is even worse.

Collie-shangles – an upset; a fight between two dogs (collies).

Cool – look or watch; costermonger's backslang.

Cop a mouse – get a black eye.

Cor – an exclamation giving emphasis to what follows; the preface 'cor' adds strength, as in

"Cor blimey!" (q.v.); halfway between an explosive exhalation and the word "God".

Couldn't speak a thrup'ny bit – speechless; the threepenny coin was the physically smallest

coin, therefore, you couldn't speak much at all; pronounced THRUP-knee.

Counting-house – in an office, a small cubicle where ledgers are tallied and money counted.

Cove – a man, or a gentleman.

Covey – a little man.

Cows and kisses – a wife; Cows and kisses, that's the missus; CRS.

Cowson – bastard; literally, the son of a cow.

Crib – hideout, sleeping place. Oddly enough, reinvented today among hip-hoppers.

Crikey – mild surprise; from 'Christ bless me'.

Cuffing – f**king; costermongers' backslang.

Daddles – hands.

Daisy – to stroll pleasantly, as in a walk among the daisies.

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Damfino – 'I'm damned if I know', but squeezed into one word.

Diddle – midnight; Hey, diddle, diddle, right in the middle; CRS.

Divvy – fool.

Do you up a treat – do something special for (or to) you; a threat.

Dodgy – of questionable honesty.

Don't sell me a dog – don't try to fool me.

Dosh – money.

Dossed – lived with. From 'doss' - a place to live.

Duchess – housewife (lower class).

Ducks – sweetie, sweetheart; from slang 'ducky'.

Dun I; dunno – Cockney-isation of 'don't I' and 'don't know'.

Elephants – drunk; Elephant's trunk, that's drunk; CRS.

Emma – morning; probably costermonger’s backslang from A.M.

Farthing-faced – someone so mean their face is worth only a farthing.

Flapdoodle – a lot of noise or nonsense, hence someone who talks noise or nonsense.

Fogle-hunter – a pickpocket, specializing in handkerchiefs (fogles).

Friared – f****d; Friar Tuck, that’s a f**k; CRS.

Frog and toad – the road; Frog and toad, that’s the road; CRS. All three words usually used.

Froo-fraw – anything fancy, shiny, or elegant.

Fryer – the man in a couple; Frying pan, that’s my man; CRS.

Gaff – information.

Gardens – a fool; Garden tool, that’s a fool; CRS.

Gargle – a drink.

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Gators – later; possibly traditional CRS, but also possibly more modern.

Gates – home; Gates of Rome, that’s your home; CRS.

Gen – a shilling.

Gerroff – a Cockney mispronunciation of “Get off” that has become a slang word in itself.

Gigglemug – someone who grins or smiles a lot.

Giraffe – a laugh; What’s a giraffe, that’s a laugh; CRS. Here, the rhymed word is retained.

Git – an unpleasant, annoying little person.

Glims – eyes; from ‘glimmers’ for lights.

God forbids – children; God forbids, that’s the kids; CRS.

Godiva – five pounds sterling; Lady Godiva, that’s a fiver (five-uh); CRS.

Gobshite – someone with their mouth full of excrement (metaphorically speaking).

Growler – a four-wheel, enclosed carriage drawn by two horses; a type of hackney cab.

Guinea – a coin valued at 1 pound, 1 shilling. That is 21 shillings, or 132 pennies.

Hackney – a public cab; cabs in the U.K. are still sometimes called hackneys, after the borough where they originated.

Hang a mouse – give someone a black eye.

Hang about – wait.

Hansom – a two-wheel, two-passenger open-front cab pulled by one horse.

Harris's Army – every year from 1757 to 1795, the notorious Harris's List was published: a listing and review of all of the 'working girls' in Covent Garden, much as one might list and review restaurants; women who worked the streets became salaciously known as 'Harris's Army'.

Hale and hearty – a party; Hale and hearty, that's a party; CRS.

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Ha'p'ny – common pronunciation of half-penny. Pronounced 'HAY-p'nce'.

Ha'pence – a half-penny coin. Pronounced 'HAY-p'nce'.

Ha'p'orths – a half-penny worth; in this case, candies at ha'p'ny each.

Heavenlies – the sort of thing you might find in heaven; heavenly, but turned into a noun.

Hinter – a hint.

His nibs – someone who thinks themselves to be important.

Hop it - leave.

Hound's rounds – a dog's bollocks; strangely, meaning 'the best of the best.'

Humbug – fakery, foolishness.

Ink-bottle – a clerk.

Innit – Cockney-isation of 'isn't it'. Possibly the most quintessential Cockney word of all.

Irish – true; Irish stew, that's all true; CRS.

Ironmonger – a dealer in hardware.

Isle of Wight – right; coupled here with ‘now’ to mean ‘right now’.

Jack Ketch – generic name for a hangman; from a famous executioner of that name.

Jaffa – a mistake; Jaffa cake, that’s a mistake; CRS.

Jake – an unfortunate, hapless person.

Jenson – mutton; the only egregious anachronism I’ve knowingly allowed; I’m a Formula One auto racing fan; the rhyming slang is “jenson” and it means ‘mutton’ – work it out; CRS.

Kate’n’sidney – meat pie; Kate’n’sidney’s steak’n’kidney, innit?; CRS.

Kisses – missus; variant on Cows and kisses (q.v.); CRS.

Knobblies – keys; Knobbly knees, that’s the keys; CRS.

Lambeth – a favour; Lambeth graver, that’s a favour; CRS.

Landlord – the owner or operator of a pub.

Lean and lurch – a church; Lean and lurch, that’s a church; CRS.

Legging it – running away.

Legless – falling down drunk.

Lords – ears; Lords and peers, that’s your ears: CRS.

Lummy – lummo; a stupid person.

Macks and Gorillas – types of pimp, neither any better than the other.

Manky – worthless.

Merchant - one who masturbates (wanks); merchant banker, that’s a wanker; CRS.

Midnight Meeting Movement for the Rescue and Reclamation of Fallen Women – a society based in Bloomsbury, aimed at helping prostitutes leave the streets. It operated until 1891, to little effect.

Milky – cowardly.

Moniker – a name, especially a nickname or an alias.

Mount the cart – go for broke; all in.

Muck and ha’p’ny afters – a very poor meal; the main course is ‘muck’ and the ‘afters’ (dessert) is worth no more than a half-penny.

Mutton-shunter – a police officer who tries to trap prostitutes into an arrestable statement. I.e., ‘A peeler who tries to shunt the mutton in front of the bubble and squeak.’

Nanty narking – great fun.

Nark the titter – watch the woman.

Narking – a beating; from opposite slang meaning of ‘fun’.

Needful – money.

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New pair of boots – another question altogether.

Newgate – Newgate prison, where the accused were housed while awaiting trial and criminals were housed while awaiting sentence or punishment. At the time of this story, public hangings were held outside the prison on Newgate Street, to crowds of up to 40,000.

Nicked – arrested, put in ‘the nick’. ‘You’re nicked, mate!’

Nicker – a pound, but usually only when speaking of its value in smaller coinage. So, half a nicker is ten shillings in coin, but a pound coin or pound note is a quid.

Ninepins – a fight; to knock each other down like nine-pins in bowling.

Nose-bagger – someone who browses but doesn’t buy. From a horse’s nose-bag full of oats.

O soldiers! – an exclamation implying derision; in general, soldiers were not highly regarded.

Old Bailey – the Central Criminal Court of England and Wales; across the street from Newgate Prison, major cases were and are heard. The Old Bailey is still Britain’s central court.

On the bash – walking the streets as a prostitute.

On the slate – on credit.

Oncet – once; not really slang, just a quirk of dialect; pronounced ‘wunst’.

Pad the hoof – walk the street for criminal purposes.

Parlour-jumping – shifting property from its rightful owner to oneself; thieving.

Pawr – wrap; costermongers backslang.

Pecksniffian – someone who affects a high moral tone while lacking it. From Dickens.

Peeler – a member of the Metropolitan Police. The slang comes from Sir Robert Peel, who founded the force in 1829. Later they became known as ‘bobbies’, also after Robert Peel, and as ‘coppers’, after the rows of shiny copper buttons on their uniforms.

Penny-dreadful – sensational novels that sold for a penny, first popular in the 1830s; noted for their lurid descriptions of crime and murder.

Pitch – tell a story.

Plummy and slam – all right; possibly CRS but origin obscure. See Dickens, *Oliver Twist*.

Poncey – effeminate.

Porkie – a lie or a liar; Pork pie, that’s a lie CRS.

Pound it – swear to it. Perhaps from a justice pounding the gavel in court.

Prat-digger – a thief who digs in trousers pockets for coins, watches, etc.

Queanie – a homosexual.

Quick as you like – get a move on; despite sounding polite, it means ‘move yer aris!’

Quid – a pound sterling. Probably from Latin ‘Quid pro quo’ – ‘This for that.’

Rabbit – a talk (to talk).

Rabbitting – talking.

Rat – house; Rat and mouse, that's a house; CRS.

Reeb – beer; costermonger's backslang.

Ringers – fingers; Bell ringers, that's your fingers; CRS; the rhyming word is retained.

Rookery – a den of criminal activity.

Rory – a door; Rory O'More, that's a door; CRS.

Roundy-rounds – to go 'round and 'round like prize-fighters in a match; not real London slang,

I just made that one up, but it's not bad, is it?

Scarper – run.

Shiesting – a beating; from the German word for excrement.

Shite – what it sounds like.

Smoking bishop – a strongly-flavoured, spiced, hot drink based on port wine and cloves.

Snog – cuddling and kissing; **Stitcher** actually means "a shag" which is much more than a snog.

Squidgy - something soft that can be squashed easily.

Stretcher – a layer out of dead men; in this usage, one who takes advantage of a dead man.

Stripe you – slice your throat.

Stone me – an exclamation showing surprise at an event.

Taking the piss – having me on; joking.

Tanner – six-pence or half a shilling.

Tanter go – a fast end; perhaps from the Tantum Ergo, final and shortest division of Even Song.

Tap-room – the main part of a pub, where beer is tapped.

The birdies of summer – as welcome as ...

Toff – high class gentleman.

Topper - a top hat. About this time, silk hats were beginning to replace beaver hats as

fashionable accessories.

Tosser – idiot, wanker; see ‘merchant’.

Treadmill and Poor Law – the treadmill was a judicial punishment wherein the victim was forced to walk inside a revolving wheel, much like a hamster wheel, for up to twelve hours a day. The wheel was attached to nothing – labour with no result. The Poor Law was passed in 1834 to afford shelter for the poor, but effectively forced them into degrading and shockingly bad conditions in workhouses. It was widely despised and protested against.

Trolling – working the street to find marks from whom to thief.

Tucker – supper; Bread and tucker, that’s your supper; CRS.

Tumble to that barrikin – understand the fancy words.

Tup’ny – two pence; pronounced TUP-knee. Also tu’p’nce – a two-pence coin.

Two-tuos – a couple; husband and wife.

Union workhouses – nothing to do with labour unions. Parishes joined together into unions to build and maintain large workhouses to better accommodate the elderly and infirm. Conditions in these were often unbelievably bad and led to great suffering and death. Compare conditions in homes for the elderly during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-22.

Villain – a criminal.

Voluntary School – a form of charitable education for the very poor. Attendance at the Voluntary School was not voluntary, rather, they were funded by voluntary contributions from patrons. Those taken into Voluntary Schools were educated but at a cost in health and life.

Walker – an expression of disbelief. Always pronounced ‘waalk-er-er!’ The speaker is calling for someone named ‘Walker’ to witness the event. There are several versions of its origin. My favourite is that Walker was an easily gulled character in an 18th century play, and people would call for him in the same musical way that survived at least to Dickens’ day.

Wobbly – violent.

Workhouse legger – someone destined to “leg it” at the workhouse, ie., walk the treadmill.

Wotcher – what do you want, or, alternatively, watch yourself.

Yanepatine – nine pence; costermonger’s backslang; ‘penny’ backwards and distorted, with a distorted ‘nine’.

Yannep – a penny; costermonger’s backslang.

Yard – your home or house.

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