

Fenn George Manville

**Christmas Penny Readings:
Original Sketches for
the Season**



George Fenn

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Christmas Penny Readings: Original Sketches for the Season

Chapter One

Cutting Times; or, A Frost and Thaw

One – Freezing Sharp

Twenty years ago, Hezekiah Thornypath was in Luck's way – so much so, that Luck kicked him out of it. Hez went up to London to make his fortune, and he took his wife and children with him to help to make it: Hez meant "to make his crown a pound," as the old song says, but he did not. Either times, trade, or Hez's management was bad; things went contrary; and, as though it were a punishment for marrying against old Thornypath's wish, Hezekiah's few hundred pounds melted away, troubles came upon him, friends forsook him, and when he considered that his affairs could be no worse, he had to fetch the doctor, who came, shook his head, and in a few hours Hez and his wife were weeping bitterer tears than they had ever shed before, for the rigour of death was fast stealing away the beauty from the features of their youngest child.

The house looked sad and sombre with the blinds drawn down; footsteps were hushed, and voices were heard but in a whisper – how needlessly Hez too well knew, as he gazed, with his weeping wife, upon the little sleeper. The world looked in advance one dreary desert, while hope seemed to have parted from them for ever. No friendly word of comfort was spoken, no whispered consolation – they were alone in the great city, and the tears that fell had no earthly witness.

A few days dragged slowly past, and then the lid of the little painted deal coffin hid from aching eyes the tiny spirit's cast-off robe. Blinding tears, breasts heaving while the thrilling words of the Apostle fell upon the grieving parents' ears, a last long look at the deep cold grave, and a catching of the breath as the earth fell heavily upon their infant's breast, and then, slowly, sadly, hand-in-hand, away from the little grave.

Three months passed away, and the shabby mourning had grown more rusty – three months of sorrow and struggles for the bare necessities of life – and then again the slow, creaking step of the doctor; the same anxious faces watching the hard-drawn breath and fevered countenance of another little sufferer – watching with aching hearts, and moaning in the bitterness of their spirit at their helplessness, their utter impotence to give relief. Gazing with awe at the wild eye, unearthly look, and startled mien; ever and anon trying to soothe the child, whose spirit seemed to hold communion with another world. The same sad, sad scene: the creaking step departing, with the assurance, "nothing can be done;" and then, by the gloomy light of the wretched candle, the shades of that deepest night were seen to gather upon the little brow, as the eyes were closed in the sleep whose waking is into life eternal.

Through the crowded streets again, to the crowded habitation of the dead, a shabby funeral, with shabby mourners, hardly noticed but by the children, who cease their play and cling to the churchyard rails, or follow the sad procession amongst the mouldering graves. Another little coffin close beside the first in the cold, black earth, while hearts filled to bursting mourn for the lost ones, drinking deeply of affliction – of those bitter waters of Marah; and then on again, toiling through life's weary way.

Months of struggling – months of privation and misery; and after a day spent in a vain effort to gain employ, Hez slunk through the gaily-lighted streets of the West End, shrinking within himself as though it were dishonest of him to be poor, and to show his haggard face amid so much wealth. Christmas was at hand, and the gaily-decorated shops were thronged with merry faces; the streets, too, were crowded, vehicles were loaded, and railway-vans groaned beneath the weight of the presents they were bearing away. Boys home for the holidays, visitors from the country, busy purchasers and sight-seers, hurried through the teeming arteries of the mighty city; and the light of many a roaring fire danced upon the window-blinds, or sent its curtain-shaded radiance glowing across the road, telling of home and comfort, and the welcome awaiting those away. Soft flakes of snow were falling fast, and deadened the footfalls of those he met. A little farther on, strains of music greeted his ear, and a voice arrested him for an instant as he heard the words of a song well-known in happier days. Again onwards, to pass a merry party of young men, laughing and happy. Everything betokening comfort, wealth, and the festivity of Christmas, met his eye; but no misery save his own, for the bitter night had sent all others hiding down in courts and alleys, seeking in their darkness' for shelter from the winter's icy breath. Hez groaned; for he thought of past Christmas-days, and now of the present, with his one beggarly room in a court; of his patient, long-suffering wife, and half-starving children; of the dire pressure upon him, and his impotence to ward off the troubles. Want had him tightly in her clutches, and, with the thought of his misery, he looked down upon his wretched garb in despair. He had sold everything that the traffickers with poverty would buy; little by little, furniture, plate, watches, books, clothes, the little trifles interchanged in brighter days, all, all had gone; and now Hez hurried back to his lodging, knowing that he could not stir again in search of employment but as a shoeless beggar.

Hez and his wife supped that night upon the luxury he took in with him – a hot potato; the two children lay asleep in their corner when he returned; and bare and wretched as the back room was, lighted only by a rushlight, there was still one bright ray to illumine its darkness – love was there; and the same fond smile welcomed Hez back, as greeted him in brighter days; the same arms – albeit thin and attenuated – clung round his neck, and the same gentle face was laid to his, as when, in the full career of prosperity, he had returned to a comfortable home.

Christmas-Eve, and things at the worst: the tide of prosperity floated away, and Hez's bark stranded. A bitter night; no furniture to sell; no coals; no fire; and three weeks' rent in arrear. A few hours before, and a message came, that the landlady wanted to see Mr Thornypath; when the poor fellow encountered the storm of abuse in waiting for him; to listen to the threats of bailiffs, and finally, as no money was produced by the wordy warfare, to receive notice to quit. It was ten o'clock, and Hez sat by the empty grate upon a broken stool; the children with their mother were asleep upon a mattress stretched in the corner of the room. Poor things, they had cried with the cold, and their mother, trying to lend warmth to their little chilled forms, in her weariness and misery slept by their side. Hez had knelt down, and kissed away a half-dried tear from the pallid cheek, as he had added his ragged coat to his wife's scanty covering. It was a bitter, biting night, and Hez felt half stupefied with the cold; the pane of glass which the children had broken was badly stopped, and through it the chilly blast rushed in. Earlier in the night there had been an organ in the court; but the man gave in after playing half a tune, and shivered off, thinking of his own sunny land; some musicians, too, and a carol singer, had been to the public-house hard by; but their strains raised no response; and now, Christmas-Eve though it was, the occasional tramp of a policeman, and the hum of the distant street, were all the sounds that greeted the ear.

Hez sat upon his stool and mused, unmindful of the cold that crept beneath his ragged shirt, and pinched him until it left blue marks upon his flesh; unmindful of all but the half-muttered words and sighs of his sleeping wife, when he would lightly cross the room to re-adjust the wretched coverlet, and listen to her breathings, as though afraid that she might leave him in her sleep. Hez sat and mused: the bygone came back, and the thinker saw himself as child, boy, and man.

Then he recalled stormy interviews with his father; insubordination and defiance; the smarting of a blow upon his flushing cheek; and then, married life, and still happiness for a time; years of sunshine, and his barque floating gently along the stream, which now bore him for a time upon his way. Then the recollection of others' pains; the affliction, ruin, and distress he had witnessed, where adversity had been bravely battled with for long, long years.

A black cloud shrouding the man's soul: why should he suffer thus? what had he done? where was his sin? should wife and little ones bear the offence of the father? – suffer for his disobedience? Thousands around were in opulence; and he, willing to fight for his daily bread, eager to seize the work that should give him the labourer's independence, pushed to the wall by the hundreds striving to grasp the coveted food-procurer. Why should he not take what stern fate denied? must he sit and watch his little ones' agony, or apply as a pauper for parish relief? What was honesty to him now? he must have gold – gold – not to satisfy greed or the avarice of possession, but because it was the life of all most dear to him. Glittering stores of life-blood – wife's, children's life-blood – breath – lay in the windows close, at hand; could he not clutch the spoil, and let them live and be happy once more? "Thou shalt not steal!" What whispered of theft? It was no theft, but duty; the right of a strong man to grasp the possessions of the weaker, as kings made conquests. Gold, jewellery, wealth for the taking, and then in some country home to forget once more this hideous act in life's drama. "Thou shalt not steal!" Hush, conscience, hush! Man must live! But not by bread alone. Not one sparrow should fall to the ground without He willed it so! But life – life for the sleeping ones; life for his long, long-suffering wife – for his prattling children! Must he keep laws and see the famine-pinched cheeks, the blue lips, and listen to wailing cries for bread? Had he not waited and hoped – hoped still against the crushing desolation that pressed upon his weary brain? But why not die? Why should they not all sleep – sleep together? A little charcoal and the door well closed; the chimney stopped; and then, with them gently sleeping, without a struggle, wafted away from this weary life to eternal rest. His would be the sin; and they, poor, gentle, loving hearts, would be tenderly led by the hand of Mercy to their Father's home. Life! what was life but one great sorrow? They, poor sleepers, would not suffer. But what was that? A merry gentle laugh and a few half-muttered words from little golden hair, nestling close to her mother's breast; prattling words of playful glee; some happy dream playing round that little flame of life. And should he crush it out? slay as a murderer that tiny innocent? to hear no more the music of its mirth, the ringing silver of its laugh, and the broken, half-framed words and sentences of its lips – words so sweet and playful that the child itself would peer through the golden tangle that overhung its bright blue eyes, and laugh – merrily laugh – to hear its own attempts. Those blue eyes, pure in their light as the heaven reflected in their liquid depth. Must this be so? God – God forgive the thought! They should live – live to bless him yet, for his secret should be his own.

The grate bar – the broken poker! Enough: they would suffice. He would go – go at once; but stay, he must wait awhile; his wife had moaned in her sleep, the wind had rattled the window, and he felt numbed with the cold. He had thought too much; but he was now relieved and determined.

Two – Down to Zero

Fleet Street. The wind whistling down the river lanes and moaning through the courts. The night far advanced, and a thin section of the moon rising behind the distant cathedral. Stars bright, and sparkling like diamonds through the keen frosty air. The gas within the lamps quivering in the chilling draught, and the policeman passing a figure cowering in a dark alley near Temple-bar. The warder of the night passes, and a single vehicle rattles by directly after, the horse's breath rising like a vapour; and then wheels and footsteps gradually fade upon the ear as they pass, echoing down the long street. The bareheaded, coatless figure emerges from its concealment, and looks around. All still as death, and no eye upon its actions but the stars of heaven, as it were, spirits looking down to chronicle what passed. The rattling of a shutter bar – the grating noise as of iron upon iron, mingled with the crackling of woodwork; the figure wrenching and tearing with maniacal fury at the firm fastenings, while huge drops of sweat roll down his face. More resistance; more noise; but the figure, straining with the might of a giant, again and again, till the iron snaps in the frosty air; and then, wrenched out by its protecting bar, an iron-sheeted shutter lies upon the pavement. To dash in the thick glass, and, with bleeding hands, to seize watches, chains, trays of rings, and sparkling jewels, and force them into a bag, is but the work of a few moments, and, grasping with both hands all that he can clutch, the figure turns to flee, just as the sharp report of a pistol rings from the interior of the shop. The glass shivers, but the figure is untouched, and grasping the stolen treasure, darts along the pavement, hardly avoiding the blow aimed at him by a policeman. Away down the well-lit street, followed by sounds that lend speed to the enfeebled frame, for, joined to the shouts of the alarmed inmates of the house, the policeman's rattle sends its harsh whirring alarm-notes through the still night air. Onward, clutching the booty to his breast, and panting as the pursuing steps sound fainter; a race for more than life, and the street nearly passed, when another enemy darts from a side court, and grasps the fugitive's arm. There is a sharp struggle for a few moments, and the policeman falls, stricken to the ground by an iron bar, and the figure dashes on again. But the alarm has spread as he turns down Bridge Street, where the sharp air seems to numb the limbs of the runner. Battle after rattle and shrill whistles are heard, and the figure stands for a moment undecided, wiping the half-frozen drops from his brow. Again onward, with enemies springing up on all sides, and shouts ringing in his ears; panting up the steep slope of the old bridge, but at the top two more enemies. Beaten, wearied, fainting; no hope; escape closed; prison; felon's dock; transportation; a starving wife and children; and a dishonoured name – all crowding thoughts, rushing to the brain to add anguish to the moment, as, still clutching his ill-gotten booty, the despairing wretch, with a last look around, climbs the heavy stone balustrade, gives one wild shriek, and parts the air in a plunge down into the dark abyss of rushing waters. The waters part to receive him in their cold embrace, and then the struggle for life – for breath – above water – borne away by the swirling eddies, and dashed against the sharp buttress; gliding along by the slimy stone, and hurried through the arch, to be caught by the back eddy, and swept into still water, and borne down by the heavy booty. One glance at the bright stars, with the stream bubbling at his mouth; arms failing with beating the waves; and then the tide roaring in the drowning wretch's ears, spreading his long hair for a moment upon the surface, and then closing above his head – the concentric rings swept away, and all cold, dark, and familiar once more – the gas in the court shining up through the window upon the ceiling, and wife and children asleep upon the floor.

Cold and stiff, Hez staggered to his feet; a heavy dew was upon his brow; a deep groan burst from his breast; and, sinking upon his knees, he covered his haggard face with his hands, and, by the side of his sleeping ones, a prayer of thankfulness welled forth from the depths of his heart that it was but a dream. Overwrought nature could bear no more, and at last, sinking beside his sleeping wife, that happy oblivion, given alike to rich and poor, closed his eyes once more in rest.

Three – Rays from the Crystals

The bells rang forth merrily upon that Christmas-morn; the sun shone out in unclouded splendour, and danced in vivid flashes from the snowy covering of the house-tops. Water frozen in the bedrooms, and, far off in the country, the rivers ringing with the pick-axe blows to break the massive ice. Birds upon the house-tops setting all their feathers up perpendicularly, and looking as if they had put in an appearance against the cold by donning an extra suit. There was a crisp feeling in the air that sent the blood tingling through the veins, and gave a rosy hilarity even to the porters of the gate-ways about Lincoln's Inn; for they seemed to drop their pounce and parchment air for the time, and beat their breasts, and stamped about the fresh-swept pavement with such an air of jollity, that people turned round to look at them; and one wayfarer gave it as his opinion that the Court of Chancery was dead, and the porters had received the news of a pension from a grateful country. The policemen, too, for once looked good-tempered; and one was actually seen to smile upon a ragged urchin going surreptitiously down a slide.

It was Christmas-morning, but there was plenty of business going on: the poulterer's boy from round the corner showed ears that looked like raw beef; but he had a broad grin upon his countenance as he puffed along, sending his vapoury breath on high in little clouds, and evidently happy, although laden with a tray of "Aldermen hung in chains;" and fat and plump those turkeys looked; rich, too, those sausages, but freezing hard in the sharp air. The greengrocer up Hez's Court was doing a powerful stroke of business in potatoes and greens; oranges, parsnips, and sticks of celery and horse-radish disappeared like magic. "Taters at three pound tuppence" went off like shots; and, as for the penny a pound "flukes," there was great fear lest they should not last out, for the "floury Regents" were almost sold off. People seemed to have run mad after greens at "five-pence the market bunch;" and the master of the shop had been heard to say to his wife, that "if it hadn't ha' been Christmas-day, he'd ha' kep' open all church time!" But it was Christmas-day, as anyone might have seen by the bareheaded butcher-boys taking home the mottled beef that they could not find time for on the previous night; for trade was so brisk that there was no occasion to cry "What d'ye buy, buy, buy!" every moment being taken with weighing and cutting up.

It was Christmas-day; and, for once in a way, London seemed disposed to forget all the troubles of work-a-day life in the full enjoyment of the festive season. "Clang-clash" went the bells. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, and then backwards and forwards, and in and out, chopping and changing, dodging, bob-majoring, tripling and doubling, and rolling out their peals in every way connected with campanology; until they all went off together with a mighty clash, as though they had gone mad with delight because it was Christmas-day. Many were the puddings that, tightly bound in the well-floured cloth, had been plunged into the seething copper, as soon after six o'clock as cook could get the water to boil; and many were the happy hearts collected from far to eat of the tiresome old cloying, surfeiting, sweet, lovable, festive dish.

Saint Dunstan's church-clock had just pointed to half-past nine, when a stoutish old lady in a black silk dress, ditto bonnet, bright-hued shawl, a basket of the celebrated old check pattern, and bearing a genuine stag-horn handled gingham umbrella, secured round its waist by a piece of black tape, and much resembling its owner in bodily proportions – a stoutish old lady struggled between the knees of the passengers from the very bottom of the first "up" Kensington 'bus that morning; and then tried the patience of the key-bugle playing conductor to its fullest stretch while she sought for the money to pay her fare. Of course the 'bus had stopped before the stoutish old lady had expected it, or she would have been prepared, and she said so; while, by a series of the most terrible contortions she contrived to force her hand through the lumber-room full of pin-cushions, nutmegs, orris-root, scissors, bodkin-cases, pearl buttons, thimbles, stilettoes, etcetera, etcetera, which the stoutish old lady called her pocket, and extricated from its snug, warm place, at the very bottom, the flat tin-

box which was her purse; and also, as a matter of course, which would not open at any price, till the old lady grew almost purple in the face, when off flew the lid – “spang” – scattering sixpences and shillings half over the road. But it was Christmas-day, and the conductor must have had just such a jolly-looking old soul for his own mother, for he good-humouredly and nimbly hopped about and picked up the scattered coins, put the old lady “all square agin,” and then, upon the strength of its being Christmas-morning, gave the motherly-looking old soul a sounding kiss upon one of her puckered cheeks, and hopped upon his perch before the old lady could get her breath.

The passenger, who was no other than Mrs Cripps, clear-starcher and laundress, of Kensington Gravel Pits, had walked some distance up Fetter Lane before she had recovered her equanimity, when a pleasant-looking smile began at one corner of her mouth, at the side where she had lost most teeth, and gradually overspread her mottled old face, till she looked like what she was – such a true specimen of a comfortable old English dame, that a fat butcher standing at his door, with a face red as his own beef, looked as if he would have liked to take the old lady under the mistletoe hanging so temptingly with its pearly berries outside the greengrocers over the way. But he did not do it; and, directly after, a shade crossed Mrs Cripps’s countenance as she turned up a court to the left. She walked up and down it several times, as she said to herself, “to get breath,” but in reality to try and rid herself of a nervous trembling that would come over her, and make her old hands shake so that she could hardly hold umbrella and basket. Truth must out; and at last the nervousness so increased that the dame went into the “Rising Sun,” and again brought the tin-box into requisition to pay for a glass of gin; and thus fortified Mrs Cripps turned into the shabbiest house in the court, pointed out to her as Number 9, where she puffed and panted up the stairs until she reached the second floor landing, leaving out the customary summons of two rings at the second bell, so as “to take them by surprise.”

For three or four days Mrs Cripps had been in a state of great excitement; for she had found out that Master Hez, whom she had nursed when a baby, and her dear bairn, Miss Celia, whom she knew before the little darling was as tall as her umbrella, were in London and very badly off. The old lady, who had settled in the great city’s suburb at the death of her husband, an event which had taken place many years before, hugged herself with the idea that she could now repay an old debt, and determined to try and get them to dine with her on Christmas-day. A real north country goose was obtained expressly for the occasion; the raisins were stoned and the suet chopped over-night, and before starting that morning the old lady had seen the pudding in the copper, and left her *aide-de-camp* with full munitions and instructions for carrying on the management of the *batterie de cuisine* until her return with “company to dinner.”

In her homely way the world had prospered with the old lady. The best parlour was, though perhaps no example of refined taste, snug and comfortable; and if any one could brew a good cup of tea in the best china teapot it was Mrs Cripps. Rumour said something about dividends, and periodical visits to the Bank. Be that as it may, Mrs Cripps had a comfortable business of her own; and heavy was the load of linen – clean or dirty – that the man with the rough pony took backwards and forwards from “the squares.”

It was some time before the visitor to Pounce Court could summon up enough courage to turn the handle of the door and enter the backroom, “to take them by surprise;” but when by a mighty effort she did so, the surprise was not with them, but returned upon herself. Poor Mrs Cripps, she gave a sort of hysterical gulp as she closed the door behind her and hurried across the room to greet Hez and his wife; but she had not gone many steps ere she was overcome by what she saw, and, sinking upon her knees, she burst forth into a wild fit of sobbing and weeping, rocking herself to and fro, and moaning at intervals – “My poor bairns! oh, my poor bairns!”

She had cause; seated side by side, cold, gaunt, and hunger pinched, Hez and his wife watched with famished eyes their two children eating the bare crusts which their last pence had purchased. There was no fire in the room; scarcely a bit of furniture, and cold gusts of wind rushed through the ill-filled window. But Mrs Cripps, though fat, was gifted with energy; her hand dived into her

capacious pocket and brought forth a large blue cotton handkerchief, and in a moment her eyes were wiped; and as the astonished family gazed upon her she scuffled back to the door, and was gone. In a few seconds, however, she was back again to fetch her basket which she had left upon the floor; was gone again; but only to return and fetch the great gingham umbrella which stood leaning against the table, with its large stag-horn hook gazing in a pensive way into a broken saucer.

Few minutes elapsed before the silence was again broken, when heavy steps were heard ascending the staircase; the coal man gave his customary shout at the door, and half a hundred weight and some bundles of wood were deposited in the cupboard; while before Hez's wife had recovered from her surprise, in puffed Mrs Cripps, with a loaf under her shawl, and the big basket in such a plethoric condition that the handles would not half close.

A portion of the outer sunshine seemed to have crept into the room, or to have been reflected from Mrs Cripps's face; and what with attempted smiles, and the efforts required to gulp down an occasional sob, that lady's countenance was a physiognomical study. The umbrella was soon crowned with the big black bonnet, and stood up in a corner, the shawl hung up on a nail, the gown skirts pinned up all round, and the old lady bustling about the place as though she belonged to it. Twice only had she to run up in a corner to bury her face in the big blue handkerchief; but making a cheerful fire, and picking out the most nubbly coals, getting the kettle on in the most eligible position for heat, and fanning the blazing wood with the dust-pan, took up so much time that the old lady soon forgot to sob. The odds and ends of cups and saucers were then arranged upon the table; and the children, with eager eyes, watched the disgorging of the big basket, until they clapped their little hands with delight in anticipation of the coming banquet. Rashers of bacon, fresh butter, eggs, coffee, sugar, all were there; and then the kettle gave two or three premonitory snorts by way of clearing its throat, and to announce that it was going to sing; whereupon the elder girl was enlisted into Mrs Cripps's working committee, and set to do duty as toaster of a rasher of bacon before the now cheerful fire. Plates were put to warm; the small saucepan rummaged out, and a piece of rag drawn tightly through a hole in the bottom. "Tos it yuns!" as Hez's little one informed the dame after she had seen it herself and temporarily repaired the evil; and then eggs were placed in it, upon the hob, all in readiness; so that, what with the brightness of the fire, and Mrs Cripps's smiling face, the bare and not wretched room began to wear an aspect of unwonted cheerfulness.

Everything was progressing to a satisfactory state of readiness; and now the demands upon the old lady's time were multifarious: the kettle was sputtering and boiling over into the fire; the bacon was nearly done; the coffee required tossing in and out of a tea-cup; the eggs wanted watching while they seethed their prescribed three minutes and a half; and then there was the bread and butter to cut and the butter wouldn't spread, but kept coming off in great crumb-lined flakes. But perseverance overcomes all difficulties, and as Mrs Cripps had plenty of that virtue in her composition, she surmounted all her trials, and set the two children to work with an egg each, and some bread and butter, before she turned to the elders.

Hez and his wife had hardly moved since their visitor entered the room, but Mrs Thornypath was weeping tears of thankfulness upon her husband's shoulder; while the latter, with feelings of mingled gratitude and wounded pride, sat with head half averted, until his old nurse approached with so apologetic an air, such a union of respect and pity, withal such tenderly, motherly words, that Hez completely broke down, and burying his face in his hands, he wept like a child.

Poor Mrs Cripps, she was thirty years old when Hez was born, and she was thirty years older than he still; in her eyes he was but a boy, and, sobbing aloud, she knelt by his side, and parting the long hair from his forehead, the good old soul kissed him tenderly, and wiped his eyes with her big blue handkerchief. But the sun came out again all over Mrs Cripps's face, and dissipated the cloud that was lending gloom to the festive morn; whispering words of comfort to the stricken couple, Mrs Thornypath brightened up; and Hez, passive as a child, let them lead him to the table, where the old lady presiding beamed upon them all during the repast.

But it was Christmas-day, and Mrs Cripps's plans had not yet reached fruition; so, after the breakfast, she retired with Mrs Thornypath into a corner, where, during a long discussion, the latter lady seemed trying to beg off some arrangement that the other was proposing; but she was speedily conquered by her energetic adversary, who, watching her opportunity, attacked poor Mrs Thornypath in her weakest point, and carried the day by saying it would "do the dear children good." Mrs Thornypath then crossed over to her husband, who was leaning against the mantel-piece, and whispered with him for a minute; when he, poor fellow, glancing at his clothes, sorrowfully shook his head. But it was of no use; Mrs Cripps reinforced the attacking party, and poor Hez, completely beaten, gave a silent acquiescence to their entreaties.

There was now a busy interval of preparation, when a heavy footstep was heard upon the stairs. Hez gave an involuntary shiver as a loud rap was heard at the door, and then, without waiting for an answer, in stalked a stout, red-faced woman – the landlady – who, having gained scent of the new friend who appeared upon the scene, thought this a favourable opportunity for renewing her importunities. She had come with a speech all ready made up, and began: —

"Now, Mr Thornypath, about this here rent?"

Hez was about to reply, when Mrs Cripps confronted the intruder, and with the most cutting politeness said, "Pray, mum, have you brought your receipt?"

This was hardly what the landlady had prepared herself for, so she replied in the negative, when Mrs Cripps, with the same show of politeness, requested her to fetch it; and after backing the red-faced woman out, stood waiting her return; for Mrs Cripps was ready to face twenty Mrs Prodgers, and give them all a bit of her mind. This feeling was also strongly shared by the lady in question, who had determined also to make the second floor back a present of the above popular portion of a quarrelsome person's thinking apparatus; but upon her return, very much out of breath with her ascent, in spite of Hez's remonstrances, she was paid in full, and before a sufficiency of lung inflation had taken place, the closing door cut short all attempts at recrimination.

Mrs Prodgers was one of that class of householders who so abound in our thickly-populated neighbourhoods. She took a house with the intention of making all she could out of it, and not such a very unbusiness-like proceeding after all. But it is the cause of a vast amount of misery amongst those who are compelled to seek a house close to their daily avocation. They are obliged to live upon the spot, and so, in the scarcity of abodes, pay whatever rent is demanded, always a most exorbitant one, and this they contrive to pay while work holds out, but the first drawback places them at the tender mercies of their Mrs Prodgers, when their life becomes a burden, and too often that most real of all distresses, a distress for rent, sweeps away the little hardly-gained furniture. In many cases, however, Mrs Prodgers, through her over-reaching, finds that her tenants have left suddenly, leaving "not a wrack behind." Would it not be better to receive a moderate and well-paid refit?

A boy out of the first-floor back soon fetched a hackney coach, and into it Mrs Cripps hurried all her party, to be conveyed by her to the "Gravel Pits." There was plenty of delicacy, too, in the old dame, for she could not see anything upon the journey but the children, nor attend to anything but their wants, and so by degrees Hez's shame and wounded pride, that so far had covered him with an icy reserve, melted before the genial dame. The bright morning, and the merry faces of his children, listening to the details of the pudding that awaited them, these, too, tended to bring to his remembrance the dream of the previous night, and to show him that one loving, honest heart on earth was more than a match for despair. The streets were full of happy faces, and to Hez's eye everything appeared already to wear a brighter aspect. "Try again" seemed to ring in his ears, and during a temporary stoppage the greeting of one rosy-faced old man to another, "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to you, my boy," seemed to thrill through him. Why should it not be a happy new year to him too? And with the thought the saddening, vacant, helpless look vanished from his countenance, driven away by the spirit of energy and determination; his carriage became more erect, and this unwonted aspect was communicated to her who had divided with him the troubles of the past.

Mrs Cripps still kept too busy on the front seat with the children to observe what passed opposite, but somehow or other a very large tear trickled slowly down her nose, until it descended “plash” upon the hand of the child she held in her lap, making the little thing ask in her wonderment “what made it yain there?” There was too much to point out to the children for any notice to be taken of what took place, and when at last Hez and his wife each held out a hand to the dame, the former felt that there was no cause to fear humiliation, for the hearty, honest pressure, accompanied as it was by the motherly, loving smile, showed the full extent of the existing sympathy, and how little need there was for wordy thanks.

Four – The Sun's Influence

There never was such a goose before! never – brown, crimply, fragrant, and luscious, as – as – as – there; nothing else will compare with it – luscious as roast goose. The cooking too: one turn more would, nay must, have spoiled it; and as to the consequences of one turn less, they were not to be thought of. It was just, to do Mary justice, “done to a turn,” and Mrs Cripps was put out of her misery; for, as she had told Mrs Hez in confidence, she had had her doubts; but they were all cleared up, and the old lady’s face shone and looked for all the world like the pippins that had composed the sauce. Such mashed potatoes, beautifully worked all over the surface into elegant designs with a fork, and showing brown where they had been to the fire; while just under Hez’s nose, and sending forth a maddening jet of steam, was a tureen full of supplementary gravy, and sage and onions, in case the great levy that lay within the internal regions of the goose should fail. There was a big brown jug of the brownest stout; bread of the whitest; greens of the greenest; and the table had all the best cut glass on, so as to give the effect to Mrs Cripps’s six silver table-spoons. There was a real oak Christmas log upon the fire, crackling away and sending whole regiments of soldiers flying up the chimney, when poked for the gratification of little Goldenhair. Hez’s eldest child, too, had had a peep in the sideboard cupboard, where there were oranges, apples, figs, nuts, decanters, and all sorts of unheard-of treasures. But at last the whole party were settled at the table; Mr and Mrs Hez top and bottom, and Mrs Cripps and the children taking the posts of the visitors.

There never was such a goose before. “Ciss-s-s-s” at the first plunge of the carving-knife a fountain of rich brown gravy spurted right across the snow-white table-cloth, and right into the salt-cellar; and then there was such scraping and rubbing up of the mess, only ending in making bad doubly worse; but at last the carver’s duty was well performed, the choice morsels distributed, and Mrs Cripps idle, from the fact that she really could not force more mashed potatoes or gravy upon anyone.

At last, when summoned, Mrs Cripps’s Mary came in to change the plates, and brought with her such a fragrant scent as could only have belonged to a Christmas pudding; and, sure enough, it directly afterwards made its appearance, with sides bursting open to disclose the richness within. It had been on the boil for six hours; and what with the piece of holly stuck in the top, and the wine-glassful of brandy set blazing in the dish, there never could have been such a luxurious pudding before. As to the children, they again clapped their hands with delight, but otherwise gave silent testimony of their admiration by being helped three times, and eating as only children can eat pudding.

But the best of dinners must have a termination, and so did this one; and when the hearth had been swept up, and the treasures of the cupboard shone upon the little table; and whilst the fire-light danced in golden hues within the old-fashioned decanters, full of old-fashioned home-made wine, the chairs being all drawn up round the fire, Mrs Cripps began to tell her visitors of her savings; and how that she had two hundred pounds in the bank; and it not being likely that she would want it for many years to come, it was her wish that Hez – “dear Master Hez” – should take it to begin the world with afresh, and pay his old nurse again when he could spare it. And when Hez and his wife would not hear of such a thing, the old woman grew quite angry, and took the upper hand, saying, “that they were children and ought not to dictate to an old body of her years, and that she would do what she liked with her own money,” and last of all pretended to get in such a passion, that the visitors were obliged to be silent.

At last, when the early winter’s eve was closing in, when the ferny foliage began to appear upon the frosty panes, and before the candles were lighted, Mrs Cripps, who had been for a long time very silent, suddenly asked Hez if he remembered the story he used to read her, years ago, out of his little book, about the mouse helping the lion out of the net. Hez replied in the affirmative, and saw again within the glowing fire the image of his tiny, bygone self, perched upon a tall chair, reading to his comely nurse. While his nurse, old, but comely still, fondly putting her hand upon his shoulder,

reminded him, too, of the dreary Christmas-eve when she had come to his father's house – to her old master – wet, cold, and weary with her long walk from the distant village; how that weeping and sobbing she had come to beg the stern old man to lend her money to save her husband from ruin, and their little home from being broken up; how that Hez's father had refused – harshly refused – saying that he had too many ways for his money to waste it in helping idle people; and how, when turning heartsick to the door, a little hand had seized hold of old nurse's gown, telling nurse not to cry, for Hez would give her all his money; and forthwith thrust his little box, containing two new pennies and a lucky sixpence, into her hands, setting her weeping more bitterly than ever; bringing her upon her knees by his side to sob over and kiss the noble-hearted little fellow, till a stern voice had called him away; but only to come rushing after her again with the money she sought clasped in his little hands. "And," concluded the dame, once more sinking upon her knees by the side of Hez, "I thank God that I can show my dear boy how many years I have remembered his kind – kind act!"

It was growing very dark in the little parlour, and Mary was getting very impatient to bring in the tea-things; but her patience was tried for some time longer, and when at last, unsummoned, she took them in, and lit the candles, the children had fallen asleep upon the sofa, and "missus's" eyes looked very red.

Five – What Followed

Hez had found the long lane had a turning in it at last, and the roadway of that turning was smooth and easy to travel upon – so easy that he soon left all the frost and thaw far behind, and got well on in his journey of life. He used to say that a blessing went with old nurse Cripps's money, for success attended his every venture with it. He is now a man of some note in his little country-town; and it is a fact patent to all that a helping hand can always be found with Hezekiah Thornypath by those who merit it.

I spent a few days with him at Christmas-time, some three or four years since, and there, in the snugest corner of the room, sat a very old, white-haired dame, pretending to be very busy knitting, propped up in her easy-chair, with one or another of Hez's numerous youngsters on the watch to pick up the constantly-straying worsted and needles. There was always a smile upon the old lady's face when any such act was performed for her – a smile that grew brighter still when Hez approached to say a few words.

Christmas-night had come, and a merry day had been spent. The old lady had smiled and looked pleased when Hez talked of never having been able to get such another goose as nurse Cripps gave them that day, years ago, for dinner; and that, for all his money, he had never seen such a pudding upon his table as the one he partook of at Kensington. She had sat in state, too, while having her health drunk by all the family; and feebly she bent forward to "wish Master Hez a merry Christmas." At last the party was collected round the fire, the evening was fast giving way to night, and quiet conversation was taking the place of the merry laughter and games of the afternoon. Hez and his wife sat on either side of Mrs Cripps, and had risen to once more wish the dame "a merry Christmas" before she left them for her early-sought couch. They had been talking of bygones; and, sitting with a hand grasped by those she had loved so long, the poor old lady suddenly lifted herself up, but only to fall back again in her chair as though asleep.

In the midst of the excitement, I aided Hez to carry her to her room, where she lay for days just gently breathing, but never again conscious. Watched night and day by loving friends, she passed away without a sigh during the still hours of the old year's death, with only a growing chill to show that her sleep had deepened in intensity, and that here she would wake no more.

Chapter Two

Corns

“Diet, sir; Diet, decidedly. Now you’ll take this to John Bell’s, in Oxford Street, and they’ll make up the prescription; then you’ll go on to Gilbey’s – crooked-looking place, you know; just as if they’d built the house somewhere else, and then when they wanted to put it in its place found it too big, and had to squeeze it in. Well, there you’ll order a few dozens of their light dinner claret. No more ’20 port or fiery sherry. Taboo, sir, taboo. Light wine in moderation. Diet, sir, diet. *Good morning.*”

I looked at the bristly-headed physician, who handed me a sheet of note paper with a big capital B, two long blurs, a rough blotch, a few spidery ink splays, and an ugly MD at the end of a few inky hooks-and-eyes, which I received in return for the twenty-one shillings I left upon the table; and then muttering the one word “diet,” I stood in the hall upon a horrible stony-looking piece of floorcloth that quite struck cold up my legs. Here I was confronted by the footman who ushered me into his master’s presence – a blue-coated, crestless-buttoned wretch with two round grey eyes that said “shillings” as plainly as any mute thing could; but I was angry, and determined to come no more: so giving the fellow only a sixpence, I hobbled away and stood in Saville Row.

Diet, indeed; why no man could be more moderate. And what’s half a bottle of port for one’s dinner? Why, my grandfather, sir, took his two bottles regularly, and, beyond an occasional fit of the gout, was as hale a man as ever lived. Why, he’d have lived till fourscore safe if bad management and country doctors had not drawn the regal complaint into his stomach, where it would stop. This was coming to a physician for advice. And then what did he do when I told him of the agonies I suffered? – smiled pleasantly, and said it was my liver; while when I hinted at my corns, what did he do then but metaphorically tread upon them, for he laughed.

Now, putting dyspepsia on one side, I appeal to my fellow-sufferers, and ask them, Is there any torture to be compared with the infliction of corns? Headache? – take a little medicine and lie down. Toothache? – have it out. Earache? – try hot onion. Opodeldoc for rheumatism; chlorodyne for tic; colchicum for gout. There’s a remedy for nearly every pain and ache; but what will you do for your corns? Ordinary sufferings come only now and then, but corns shoot, stab, twitch, and agonise continually. What is the remedy? Plasters are puffs; bandages empty promises; the knife threatens tetanus; caustic only makes them black and smarting; while chiropodists – . Mention them not in my hearing, lest my vengeance fall upon your devoted head. Where can you put your feet to be safe – at home or abroad? Why, your very boots are sworn enemies, and the battle at putting on or pulling off makes the thought of the operation produce beads of cold perspiration upon one’s ample brow. Who can be surprised at one’s lying long in bed of a morning when tortures await, and you know that just outside the door, by the side of the large white jug whose water grows less and less steamy, there stand two hollow leather cylinders loaded with fearful pains to be discharged at your devoted feet.

There isn’t a sensible shoemaker on the face of the earth. I’ve tried them one after the other until I’m tired of them. One recommends calf, another kid, another dog-skin, and another “*pannus corium,*” and my feet are worse than ever. I won’t believe in them any more, though they do show me lasts made to my feet, and insult me with hideous nubbly, bunkly abortions carved in wood, which they say represent my feet – my feet, those suffering locomotives. I’ll take to sandals, or else follow the advice of the Countess de Noailles, and go barefoot like the old hen in the nursery rhyme.

I could suffer the bodily pain if it were not for the mental accompaniment, and the total want of pity and compassion shown by people. Only the other day, going down one of those quiet cab-stand streets, one of the idle wretches that I intended to engage shouted out to his companions, —

“I say, old ’uns, here’s Peter Pindar a-coming.”

“Who?” shouted another.

“Cove as turned pilgrim, and went with peas in his shoes,” cried Number One; while, writhing with agony, and gnashing my teeth, I shook my stick at the rascal.

“You scoundrel,” I cried, “it’s my corn, – it’s not peas.”

“Then get it ground, sir,” groaned the fellow; when I was so vexed that I took the omnibus instead, or rather the omnibus took me, and as soon as I had entered, I was shot into the lap of a stout elderly lady who looked daggers at me, and revenged herself by putting her fat umbrella ferrule on my corn at every opportunity. I believe it was Mrs Saunders herself, the friend of Mrs Bardell, of Goswell Street. And oh! what I suffered in that vehicle! Would that I could have performed the operation recommended by the conductor – a man with a gash across his face when he laughed – to put my toes in my pocket, or go and dispose of my troubles at Mark Lane.

It was of no use to try: every one who came in or went out of that ’bus, either trod upon or poked my worst corn with stick or umbrella, and then in the height of my anguish, when my countenance was distorted with pain, a stout, wheezing old lady opposite must “Drat my imperance,” and want to know whether I meant to insult her.

I hobbled out of the place of torture as quickly as I could, and stepped into one of those mud trimmings the scavengers delight in leaving by our pavements, covering the glossy leather with the foul refuse, so that, naturally particular about my boots, I was reduced to the extremity of having a polish laid on by one of those young scarlet rascals, who kneel at the corners of the streets.

“Black yer boots, sir,” cried first one and then another, but I could not trust to the first I met with, for he looked too eager, the next too slow, while the third seemed a doubtful character, so I waited till I reached a fourth.

“Do you see that slight eminence, you dog?”

“Wot that knobble, sir,” said the boy.

“That eminence, boy,” I said, fiercely. “That covers a corn.”

“All right, sir,” said the boy, “I won’t hurt it. I’ll go a tip-toe over him, you see if I don’t. I often cleans boots for gents as has corns, and I’m used to ’em, and – ”

“Yah-h-h-h,” I shrieked, for it was impossible to help it, and at the same moment brought down my umbrella fiercely on the little scoundrel’s head. Fancy my feelings all you who suffer, for it must have been done purposely; just as the young ruffian was grinding away with an abomination of a hard brush – a very hard brush, so hard that there was more wood than bristles – he looked up at me and grinned while I was perspiring with fear and pain, and then with one furious stroke he caught the edge of his brush right upon the apex of Mount Agony, causing me to shriek, seize my half-cleaned boot with both hands, and dance round upon one leg regardless of appearances, and to the extreme delight of the collecting crowd.

“Don’t you do that agen, now come,” whimpered the boy, guarding his head with both arms, and smearing his black countenance where a few tears trickled down.

“You dog!” I shouted; “I’ll – I’ll – I’ll – ”

“Oh, ah! I dessay you will,” whined the boy; “I never said nothin’ to you. Why don’t you pull off your boots then, and not go a-knockin’ me about?”

Of course I hurried away with my boots half-cleaned, and so I have to hurry through life – a miserable man, suffering unheard-of torment, but with no one to pity me. Time back, people would ask what ailed me, but now they “pooh, pooh” my troubles, since it is only my corns. I would not care if people would tread upon me anywhere else, but they won’t, and I feel now reduced to my last hope.

Did not somebody once say, “Great oaks from little acorns grow – great aches from little toe-corns grow”? How true – how telling! But there, I give up, with the determination to bear my pains as I can, for I feel assured that no one will sympathise with me who does not suffer from corns.

Chapter Three

A Ghastly Deed

In Portsmouth harbour the good ship lay,
Her cruising ended for many a day,
And gathered on deck while receiving their pay,
The sailors most thickly were mustered.
The Jews on the wharves were all eagerly bent
On supplying poor Jack, while most likely by scent,
There were sharks by the score
On all parts of the shore.
Both he sharks and she sharks enough, ay and more,
To devour poor Jack,
When they made their attack,
And there on the land they all clustered.

Only think; from a cruise of four years returned,
And paid in clean money! No wonder it burned,
And Jack's canvass pockets were ready to give.
But, there: not so ready as Jack who would live
To the top of his income – the very main truck,
And when to the bottom of pocket, why luck,
Would never turn back
On poor happy-faced Jack,
Who never said die
In his life. And would try
To face any storm if his officers spoke,
Or the wildest of sights that the hurricane woke.

Now Dick Sprit was a sailor,
Tight and bold in a gale or
A storm. He would cheer in a fight,
'Mid the bullets' flight,
And sooner than hear any praise or flattery,
Would have run his head in a "Rooshun" battery.
Now Dick his pockets had ten times slapped,
His fingers snapped, and his trousers clapped;
He had thought of his home and the Christmas-time,
The long shore days 'mid the frosty rime.
He had gone on shore, run the gauntlet well,
'Scaped the Jews' oiled words and the grog-shops' smell.
The night was cold and the way was dark,
What mattered when Dick was free of his bark,
And with kit on his back, and stick in his fist,
His pay in his pocket, and cheek full of twist,
He started off for his six miles' tramp

To his native spot, spite of snow or damp.

Dick twisted his twist, and he flourished his stick,
And vowed he could fourteen footpads lick,
For in war or in peace, a scrimmage or spar
Is heartily welcome to every tar.
The night was cold and the way was dark,
And the town lights shone here and there like a spark,
As merrily on through the snow Dick tramped,
Though he certainly wished that the way were lamped.
But what was that when with four years' pay,
And a leave of absence for many a day,
With the old folks waiting their boy to meet,
Their sailor lad who, now fleet of feet,
Hurried along o'er the crunching snow,
As the thoughts of home made his heart to glow.

Some three miles past, and the sailor now
Paused by a hedge where the holly bough
Grew thick and dense, and though dim the night
There were memories many within that sight,
For the days of old came hurrying by,
And that Christmas past when he said good-bye;
While then came the thoughts of years soon sped,
Of the distant climes and the blood he'd shed,
Of the battles with storms in the ocean wild,
Of the torrid heat or the breezes mild.
But now once more he was nearing home
After his four years' tiring roam;
And with bounding heart how the night he blest,
And thought of the coming days of rest.

Some three miles past, when his blood was chilled
By a shriek which through every muscle thrilled;
He stood for a moment, and then could hear
The sounds of a struggle and trampling near;
Panting and sobs, as of mortal fight,
While from over a hedge gleamed rays of light.
Dick's feelings were wrought to the highest pitch;
His bundle he dropped, gave his slack a hitch,
Then tightening his grasp of his sapling oak,
With a bounding rush through the hedge he broke,
When hard by a cottage a lanthorn's light
Cast its flickering rays on a ghastly sight:
With gory features and blade in hand
Two ruffians stooped and their victim scanned;
As over the struggling form they leant,
Dick paused no more, but his sapling went,
Cut one – cut two on each villain's head,

Thud like the fall of a pestle of lead,
And then they fell with a deep drawn groan,
While Dick leaned forward on hearing a moan,
But suddenly turning, he ran like mad,
And breathlessly muttered, "'Twas really too bad.
Be blest if he ever did see such a rig
As to topper two lubbers for killing a pig!"

And Dick was right, for 'twas really no joke,
Though our sailor lad here had no "pig in a poke;"
But though courage should merit the best of our praise,
There's a certain fair maiden whose limpid eyes' rays
Should be shed on our mind when we think to engage,
And not in our hurry go blind in our rage;
Discretion should lead us, or else every whit,
We may turn out as blind as the sailor – Dick Sprit.

Chapter Four

Come Back

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! ha-ha-ha!” laughed Shadrach – Shadrach Pratt, light porter at Teman, Sundry, and Sope’s, the wholesale and retail grocers in the City. “Ha-ha-ha!” laughed Shadrach, stopping, with one foot on the wet pavement and the other in the snowy slush of the kennel, to slap his thigh, and say: “That’s a good ’un, that is – ‘What do the Arabs of the desert live on? the sand which is there.’ That is a good one, rale grit. Ha-ha-ha!” laughed the little man. “I’ll ask ’em that after dinner to-morrow.”

Who’d have thought, to see the little fellow go skipping along through the wet, splashy snow, that there were holes in the sides of his boots, and that one sole had given up the stitches that morning and gone off, being not buried, but suffering the fiery ordeal of burning, curling about upon its funereal pyre as though still alive? Who’d have thought that he had had no dinner this Christmas-eve, and was now off, post-haste, to his home in Bermondsey (*pronounced* Bummonsey), to get dinner and tea together – a hot meal of bloater and bread-and-butter – with orders to be back in an hour at the latest? for it was busy tide with the firm, and whatever Shadrach’s duty may have been at other times, he was heavy porter now decidedly.

Over the bridge, round the corner, down by Tooley Street warehouses, famed for suffering from an ailment that must amongst buildings answer to the Saint Anthony’s fire of the human being; down past sacking, sailcloth, and rope warehouses; and down past marine stores, and miseries enough to give a man an ultramarine tint; and then home in the pleasant and unsalubrious locality of Snow’s Fields. Snow there was in plenty – muddy, slushy snow; but the only field visible was a large field for improvement; but then, as Shadrach said, “How handy for business!”

“Here’s father!” was the cry, as the little man rushed in, hugged his wife, and had his legs hugged at the same time; and then he was in the warm place by the tea-tray, toasting his steaming boots, and watching the water being poured into the hissing, hot earthen teapot.

“Now, then,” said Mrs Pratt, “they’ve all had their teas; and you’re not to touch them, or give them a scrap. But have you had your dinner?”

“No,” said Shadrach; “only stayed my stomach with half a pint of four ale and a hot tater, at one; but I’ve brought a bloat – There, bless my soul! I always did say the tail of your coat is not a safe place, and if I ain’t been setting upon it. What a good job it was a hard-roed ’un. Not hurt a bit. Who’ll toast it?”

“Me – me – me!” chorussed some six or seven voices; and then the most substantial-looking of the family was picked out, and she began toasting till the fish began to curl its head and tail together, when the toaster happening to turn her head to watch the distribution of “dog’s bits” (ie scraps of bread-and-butter), the bloater glided from the fork, and had to be picked from the ashes and wiped.

But it was not so very gritty when done, and only made Shadrach think about the Arabs and the sandwiches; though, after distributing so many scraps, father’s share of bloater, or grit, was not large; and then up jumped the refreshed head of the family, and prepared for another start.

“Tain’t much, eighteen shillings a week, with a family, is it?” said Shadrach, counting the money out in his wife’s hand; “but, never mind, there’s lots worse off.”

Mrs Pratt gave a shrug, as much as to say, “And lots better.” But, smiling again, she told what preparations had been made towards the next day.

“There, I can’t stop,” said Shadrach; “you must do it all. Goose, you know! Wait till it’s quite late at Leadenhall, and then you’ll get it cheap. They can’t sell them all out.”

Mrs Pratt seemed to think that the goose would make a fearful hole in eighteen shillings.

“There’s coals, and grosheries, and vegetables, and bread, and butter; and Ginger’s boots are in a sad state, and – and – ”

Certainly, Ginger's boots were in a sad state; but that was not of much consequence, according to the Countess de Noailles; and if she advocated bare feet amidst the aristocracy, she would have little pity for Ginger – domus name of Mr Pratt's fourth son; for Shadrach was given to nicknaming his children in accordance with the common objects of his life: hence "Ginger," "Pepper," and "Spicy" were familiar terms for as many children.

"But didn't I, eh? – the Christmas-box?" said Shadrach, pinching his chin and looking innocent.

"Why, an old cheat!" cried Mrs Pratt, rushing to the door, and finding a brown paper parcel resting behind the bulky umbrella upon her clogs; and then, amidst a volley of cheers, bearing it to the table, which was directly surrounded by chairs, climbed upon by an escalating party, and it was only by dint of great presence of mind that Mrs Pratt saved the brown paper citadel by hurriedly opening it, drawing out a pound of raisins, and bribing the attacking party by giving them a plum apiece.

"Ta ta! I'm off," cried Shadrach, with glistening eyes, as he hurried out and banged the door after him; but only to climb on to the window-sill by means of holding on to the water-butt and nearly pulling it over, when he could peep through a hole in the shutter and see his wife hold up to the eyes of the exultant children the Christmas-box regularly given by Teman, Sundry, and Sope to their *employés*. There was a pound of raisins, and a pound of currants, and a ditto brown sugar, a ditto lump, an ounce of spice, and a quarter of a pound of peel; which was the last packet opened, when Shadrach leaped down and hurried away through the dirty street.

But it was fine now overhead, and the stars began to twinkle brightly, while the slushy roads were fast growing crisp; but not crisp enough to prevent moisture from creeping through into Shadrach's boots.

"Because they live on the sand which – law!" cried Shadrach, "what a pity we can't live on sand; what a lot the little 'uns do eat." And then he stopped short for a minute to hear some street singers spoiling a carol, and heard the reference to a babe in a manger; and then somehow, as he trotted on, Shadrach could not see very clearly for thinking of two lambs lost from his humble fold: one sleeping in its little grave with the pure white snow covering its breast, and the bright stars like angels' eyes watching it; and the other – "My poor, poor bairn!" sobbed the little man, hurrying along; and then he was elbowing his way through the throng on London Bridge, eager to get back in time.

"That's the worst of music," said Shadrach; "it allus upsets me. Ah! yah! where are you running to, you young dog?" he cried to a boy who, yelling out "I would I were a bird," blundered on to the little man's favourite corn, and made him limp the rest of the way. "Not that sort of music, confound him. Would he was a bird, indeed! Pity he ain't got his neck wrung for him. Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Shadrach, taking a long breath; "how bracing the wind is off the river! why, I do declare if I couldn't over posts or anything to-night."

But there was no room for Shadrach to run or over posts, for the streets were thronged with busy, hurrying people. The roadway was crowded too; and everywhere it was plain to see that Christmas was here. It was quite a blessing that some of the laden railway-vans did not break down, for there would have been an absolute block; while, however it was possible for all the presents on the way to get to their destination in time, no one could say. Shops and people, ay, and weather too, all spoke of Christmas: people looked hearty and genial; the shops looked generous; while, though the weather felt cold, it was not a griping, nipping cold, but a warm, dry cold that made the slush hard and firm, and whispered of blazing fires and brave old English comforts.

God bless it! I love a Christmas-night; and, when I say a Christmas-night, I mean any night in that jovial, happy tide, when men sink the care and money-hunting to spread enjoyment around; when the hand is open, either for a loving, brotherly pressure, or to aid a poorer brother; or, better still, the fatherless and the widow. The hand open? ay, and the heart too; for there seems to be breathed around a spirit that softens the hard crust, so that it is open to any emotion, be it such as begets mirth or tears. Who can say what it is? – that loving, happy exhilaration that comes over us, and makes a man even kiss his mother-in-law roundly. Why, it's the very time to get your salary raised,

is Christmas; and now the secret is out, I know I shall never be forgiven by the heads of firms, who will be pounds out of pocket in future. Who ever kicked a dog at Christmas; or prosecuted a thief? who ever gave a beggar a penny without a blush for the smallness of the sum? God bless it! though it comes so soon year after year to tell us how by twelve months our span of life is shorter, and that we are nearer to the long sleep. God bless it! and may its genial breath softly waft the incense from every frugal hearth in our land, and rest in love where the poor prepare their humble feast – ay, feast; for the simplest Christmas dinner is a feast sprinkled by the torch of “Christmas Present.” There’s something stirring in the very air, and the bells sound as they do at no other time – they go home to the feelings, and call up from the past the happy emotions planted in our hearts by God; but which a busy life and rude contact with the world have caused to flee away and hide. Back they come though, till, in the wild delight, eyes sparkle, cheeks flush, and hands grasp hands in the fulness of heart to give a squeeze often accompanied by a twinkling eye, where a tear will force its way. Holy – sacred – are those reunions – those family meetings; and sad is it when a seat becomes vacant; but is not that loss a bond to bind those left the tighter, as wishing each other “a merry Christmas,” as I do, they say – “God bless it!”

Is there such a thing as a kind of magnetism in life by which spirit whispers to spirit, and by some occult warning we know that those we love are near? Or why should old Shadrach start and shiver as he passed some one in the throng, and then mutter to himself very thoughtfully – “Poor Polly!”

But it was a busy night, and what baskets did Shadrach lug about from Gracechurch Street. East, west, north, and south – here, there, and everywhere. Light porter, indeed! why, we won’t insult him. But he didn’t mind, bless you, though he groaned and grunted under his load of Christmas fruit; and there was something merry to say to every servant lass who lightened his basket. Toast and ale, and egg-flip too, were waiting when eleven o’clock struck, and though Mr Sope wanted to keep open another hour, and Sundry said half an hour, old Teman, the head, said “No! regular hours were the thing, and it was not fair to the young men; and that if the Queen herself came from Buckingham Palace and wanted a pound or two of fruit, she should not have it after the shutters were up.”

It would have done your heart good to have seen Shadrach rattle up those shutters, as the boy down stairs held them up to the roller ready for him to take.

“Ter-r-r-r-rattle” went the shutter as he dragged it over the roller, and then “flip-flap-bang,” it was in its place. “Ter-r-r-r-rattle” went another, and nearly knocked an old gentleman over, but he only gave a leap, skip, and a jump, and laughed. Two shutters up, and that big, nodding Chinese mandarin with the bare stomach is covered up. “Ter-r-r-r-rattle,” and part of the big China punchbowl covered. “Ter-r-r-r-rattle,” and the whole of it covered. At it again – and the squeezey almond-eyed lady hidden. At it again, nine shutters up. At it again, skipping about as though he had never walked a step that day, but just come fresh out of a lavender-and-clover bed ready for work, after lying by for a rest. “Ter-r-r-r-rattle-bing-bang-bump.” He did it that time: knocked the policeman’s helmet off, and sent it rolling along the pavement.

“God bless my soul,” said Shadrach, aghast at such an assault upon the law of the land, but the policeman only laughed, and old Teman only laughed, and called the bobby up to the door, while he fetched him a glass of egg-flip himself, and wished him “A merry Christmas.”

“Bang – slap – slip – flap – crack – jangle – jang – jink jonk – jank!” There they are; the twelve shutters up, and both iron bars; screws rammed in, and all tight; and Shadrach not a bit out of breath. Shop closed, and no Queen to beg for a pound or two of fruit and test old Teman’s loyalty, as he ladled out the flip to his dozen men, when, wishing he could have poured his share into his pocket, Shadrach said “Good-night!” and was off homeward.

Plenty of people in the streets yet, but London Bridge seemed empty on the west side when Shadrach reached it, and then stopped at the first recess to look over at the rushing river. A bright, calm, light night, with snow lying here and there in patches; here upon pier or barge, there upon roof, and all glittering in the light of the full moon. Lanthorns here and there where vessels were moored,

and lamps in lines upon the distant bridges. Frost laying hold of everything; but warmed with exercise and the genial draught, Shadrach felt not the cold, but knelt gazing over at the hurrying tide, and comparing it, perhaps, with his life. But there was something else upon his mind, something that kept bringing a shadow over him, and kept him from hurrying home.

At length he stepped down, and walked slowly across the bridge towards the Borough; but then, with a strange, thoughtful, undecided step, he crossed over and sauntered back towards the city again; and at last stood leaning once more over the parapet, gazing at the glittering river, till he started, for the clocks began to strike twelve. There were the faint and distant tones, and the sharp, clear sounds of those at hand, mingled with which came the heavy boom of Saint Paul's, till the last stroke had fallen upon his ear, when with a half-shudder of cold, Shadrach once more stepped down and commenced with some display of vigour his homeward walk.

There was scarcely a soul to be seen now upon the bridge, but as he reached the middle recess, Shadrach paused with a strange, tumultuous beating at his heart, for there, in the same position as that in which he had so lately leant, was the figure of a woman, evidently watching the rushing river.

"Could she be meditating self-destruction?" Shadrach thought. "Could he save her? But why should such thoughts come when he had often and often seen women of her class in the same attitude?" he asked himself the question, and could find no answer, except that it was so sad to see a homeless outcast there upon a Christmas-eve.

"Poor thing – poor thing!" muttered Shadrach to himself; and then, going up and speaking in a husky voice: "Had you not better go home, my girl?"

"What?" cried the girl, angrily; "home? There's no home for such as I."

"But the night – the cold – and – ah, my God! – Polly!"

Shadrach had advanced to the girl, and laid his hand upon her shoulder; when, starting, she turned hastily round and confronted him beneath the lamp; a mutual recognition took place, when, with a bitter cry, the girl darted away, while her father staggered and fell, striking his head violently against the granite seat.

But he soon recovered himself, slowly got up, looked hopelessly round at the deserted bridge, and then walked with feeble, uncertain steps in the direction of home.

The old Dutch clock upon the wall had given warning that it was about to strike one; the fire was low, and the candle burned with a long snuff, as Shadrach Pratt and his wife sat beside the fire silent and tearful. There was an open Bible upon his lap, and he had been essaying to read, but the print looked blurred and confused; his voice was husky; and more than one tear had dropped upon the page where it said – "I will arise and go to my father," and again where "his father fell upon his neck and kissed him;" and there was sorrow that night in the humble home.

The candle burned down, quivered in the socket, and then went out; the fire sank together again and again with a musical tinkle, and then ceased to give forth its warmth; but through the two round holes in the shutters the bright moonbeams shone, bathing the couple with their light, as slowly they knelt down, and Shadrach repeated some words, stopping long upon that impressive clause – "As we forgive them that trespass against us."

"And you'll leave the back door unfastened, Mary?" whispered Shadrach.

Mrs Pratt nodded.

"And forget the past if she should come?"

"Ah, me! ah, me! my poor girl!" cried the mother, thoroughly heart-broken, and for the first time since her child forsook her home showing any emotion; "what have we done that we should be her judges?"

The moonbeams shone brightly in as the couple rose, and after listening for a moment at the stair foot, Shadrach walked to the back door, opened it, uttered a cry, and then fell upon his knees; for there, upon the cold snow, with her cheek resting upon the threshold, lay the lost one of the flock – cold, pale, and motionless, but with her hands outstretched, and clasped together, as if praying for

forgiveness. Stretched upon the cold snow by the door she had stolen from two years before; lying where she had crept, with trembling hands, and quivering, fevered lips, whispering to herself that she would die there, for she dared ask no entrance.

Need the story be told of that Christmas-day, and of the joy in that poor man's home – of the sick one weeping in her mother's arms – of the welcome given to one the world called lost! I trow not; but let us skip another year, and then stand in the same room, in the same place, and at the same hour, as with a bright light in his humble, ordinary face, Shadrach Pratt, a man not addicted to quoting Scripture, takes his homely wife's hand, and whispers —

“More than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance.”

Chapter Five

Upon Christmas-Eve

And I've found that out that it isn't money, nor a well-furnished house, nor clothes that make a man happy, but the possession of a good wife; and it took me ten years to find it out. It took me ten selfish years – years that I had been spending thinking more about myself than anybody else, you know. And all that while I'd got so used to it that I never took any notice of the patience and forbearance and tenderness that was always being shown to me. It's all right, thinks I, and it's me that's master, and I've a right to be served. And that's the case with too many of us: we get married, and are precious proud taking the wife out for a bit; but then come the domestic duties, and mostly a few children, when it's hard work to make both ends meet, and so the poor wife gets lower and lower and lower, till she's a regular slave, while the husband looks on, and never stretches out a hand to save her a bit of trouble.

Well, that's measuring other people's corn by your own bushel, and that's right – that's just what it is: that's my bushel, and allowing for it being a bit battered and knocked about, it's surprising what a correct measure it is, and if ever I use that old measure to try any other man's corn, and I find as it don't do for it, I always feel as if I should like to shake that fellow's hand off, for I know he's a trump and a man worth knowing.

Now, I'm going to tell you how I found it all out, and in finding it all out as I call it, let me tell you I mean principally what a fool I had been for ten long years. I needn't tell you when it was, and Jane there don't care to be too nice about the day – very well, we'll say you do, but never mind now – only it was Christmas-eve, and I come home from work with my hands in my pockets, and a week's wage there too, and when I mounted the stairs and went into our shabby room, there was the wife down in the low rocking-chair, with two of the little ones in her lap, and though her head was partly turned away I could see she was crying, and another time I should have flown at her about it, for I don't mind saying as I was a regular brute to her – not hitting or anything of that sort, you know, but sending hard words such as she's told me since hit harder than blows. But I couldn't fly at her then on account of a strange chap as was there. Shabby, snuffy-looking little fellow, with flue in his hair and pits in his chin, where he couldn't shave into, so that, what with his face not being over well washed, and his old black clothes looking greasy, he didn't seem the sort of visitor as you'd care about having in your place, because, though I came home dirty with my trade, I always set that down as clean dirt, and don't mind it.

“Well, what's for you?” I says, precious gruff.

“Two pun fifteen and ninepence, with costs,” he says, bringing out a paper; and then you might have knocked me down with it, for I knew it was for rent. There'd been a bother about it several times, and no wonder, and as I'd promised again and again, and never kept my word, as I should have done, why this was come on me, and there was a man in possession.

There was only one thing to be done, and of course that I does at once; goes over the way to the landlord, and when I got into his room I began to bluster a bit.

“It's a deal too bad,” I says.

“Have you brought the money, my man?” he says.

“No, I ain't,” I says, “and I thinks – ”

“Now, look here, Roberts,” he says, quite quietly, and holding up his finger, “You're not the sort of tenant I want. You're no credit to the place. If you had been a decent fellow, struggling against the world, and you owed me twice as much, and I saw you meant to pay, why I'd never have put in the bailiffs; but when I see a man going on as you do, why I say if you've money to waste you can pay

your rent. Sorry for your wife, but if you can't pay the money now, there's the door. I'm not going to be annoyed in my own place."

He wasn't a big man, but he took me down twenty pegs in a minute in his cool, easy way, and before I knew where I was I'd backed out, and was going across the street, when I recollects the man sitting there at home, and of a Christmas-eve too, and I slowly went back and sent in a message to landlord, and directly after I stood before him again, and after no end of a hard fight he consented to let a pound stop on, and send the man off if I'd pay down one pound fifteen and ninepence.

Well, I thought a minute, and hesitated, and thought again, and then recollected the dirty, snuffy fellow there, and that settled me, so that I paid down the money, took my receipt, and a note to the man, and directly after I was standing in my own place, with that chap gone, and only threepence left of my six-and-thirty shillings for a Christmas dinner; and now it came upon me hot and strong why it was that I stood there like that, and as I saw it all so plain I set my teeth and brought my fist down upon the table in a way as made the candlestick jump, and sent the children trembling up to their mother.

"It's because nobody ever said to me, 'Sam Roberts, what'll you take to eat?'" And then I banged my fist on the table again, and began walking up and down the room.

Nobody spoke to me, but the wife got the children off quietly to bed, and at last, when I was still striding up and down, I felt her hand on my shoulder, and she whispered quite low like —

"Don't mind it, dear."

"But I do," I said, quite fierce and loud, and the poor thing stole away from me again, and though I didn't look at her, I knew she wasn't able to keep the tears back, and that I'd been the cause again.

I took no notice then though, for something was working in me, and at last I told her to go to bed, and she did, while I sat before the bit of fire in the room and thought it over.

Now don't laugh at me when I tell you that I believe in bells, but I can't help it if you do, for they always seem to speak to me like music does, and if there's ever anything will act on me it's the sound of a peal of bells. It was bitter cold that night, and yet I didn't feel it; the wind howled along the street, and I could now and then hear the great flakes of snow come softly patting at the window, and then the sashes would shake, and the wind rumble in the chimney, while every now and then came the sound of the bells, not bright and joyful, but sad and sobbing and mournful. I knew it was a merry, rejoicing time with every one else. I could not attend to that, for I was gradually getting to see one thing that I kept on fighting against, and that was, what a fool I had been.

Fight against it I did, but it was no use, for as the streets got more quiet, and the wind sunk, the bells rang out clearer and clearer, and seemed to keep telling me of it. Now I knew of it by the threepence in my pocket; now it was by the shabby floor; then the beggarly furniture and the miserable fire; and though I didn't cross the room I had it in my mind's eye, and there it all was written plain enough in my wife's face.

And yet I wouldn't own to it, though the bells seemed to be speaking to me, and rang out plainer and plainer all my waste and carelessness, till all at once they stopped for a minute; when one big bell began to toll slowly, "boom, boom, boom"; and that did it, for the next moment I gave a wild sort of cry, and was down on my knees with my hands over my face, and the big tears, hot and blinding, bursting out from between my fingers. But the tears might blind, they could not hide that, though every one seemed like hot lead. They could not hide what I then saw, for the bell still went on, now swept away in the distance, now coming nearer and nearer, till it filled the room, and made the very place seem to tremble and quiver, as did every nerve in my body.

No; the tears could not hide that scene as the tolling bell brought up, and there I could see the snow upon the ground, and two mourners following a little coffin through the street of a country-town with their footmarks left black in the pathway, as though even they were marks of the funeral. And there, too, was the church, and the grey-haired clergyman meeting us at the gate, and me hard, bitter, and sullen, seeing it all unmoved, and listening to the words as came now to my ears borne upon the bells. There, too, was the little grave, and the earth thrown out all black round it, and every

spade-full of earth, too, black, just as though everything was in mourning for the little flower as the bitter winter had nipped. Yes; there it all was, with the poor wife sinking down at last upon her knees beside the open grave, and letting a few of a mother's tears fall silently upon the little plain, white coffin, and me – hard, bitter, and cold.

“Boom, boom, boom” – how it all came back, and how I saw it all now. How plain it all was that I had been a fool and my own enemy, and ready to blame every one but myself for my ill success; and at last muttering “pardon, pardon,” I held up my hands, and then started to my feet, for the bells had stopped, and my hands were taken by some one there in the dark, so that I trembled; till I heard my name whispered, and this time I did not turn from the offered comfort.

Just then out rang the bells again, bright, cheerful, and merry; and, though I listened attentively, and tried to make them go with my thoughts, they seemed now quite to have left me to myself.

And then, without thinking of the bitter night, or our poverty, or what we should do for a Christmas dinner, we sat there together wrapped up in one idea, and that was that there was a change come over me, for somehow I felt quite a different man; and, though no word was spoken, we seemed to understand one another, and that was quite enough for us.

All at once I turns to the wife, and I says, “I don't know what's come over me, lass; feelings have got the better of me; I'm almost choking.” And then we both started up, for it seemed hot, and close, and heavy in the room.

“Why, it's fire somewhere,” I says, and then I turned all over hot and trembling, and the wet stood upon my forehead, for I thought the place below was on fire, and we on the second floor with three children.

I ran to the window and opened it, and just then there was the rattle of a policeman going, and first one voice and then another shouting, “Fire!” while directly after there was a tremendous noise as shook the house from top to bottom, and made the plaster off the ceiling come rattling down on our heads, while the shop-front seemed to be blown out. Then there came another crashing explosion, and that was the jingling noise and falling of window-glass upon the pavement; and then came screaming and crying out, the sounds of people running and kicking at doors, shouting cries for help, and a hundred people outside shrieking, “Fire!”

For a minute I stood with my hands to my head, as though it was all a dream. I felt lost, and could not tell what to do, but the next moment I had two of the children in my arms; and, shouting to the wife, “Slip on a few things!” I tore open the door and darted down the stairs through the heat and smoke to the first-floor, where the rush of flame and smoke almost drove me back; but I knew it was for life, and I dashed down the rest of the way along the passage, and then fell staggering down with my load upon the pavement.

They had us up, though, in a moment, blackened, scorched, half suffocated, and smarting; and then, after casting one look up at our window, where the wife stood with one little one in her arms, I ran towards the blazing passage, but a policeman and two men had hold of me in a moment.

“Hold back, man!” said one of 'em; “it's madness to try it.”

“Certain death,” says another.

“Yes, if you don't let go!” I roared, feeling as furious as a wild beast at being held back. “Let go; I tell you they'll be burnt to death if I don't save them;” and then I fought with 'em to get away, but they were too strong for me; and, more coming to help, I could do nothing.

“Pray, let me go,” I cried at last, quite pitifully, for I could hear shrieks for help from up above, and felt that some one would think I had taken care of myself and left her to perish; and then, what with the shrieks and the thoughts, I felt almost mad, and strove and plunged so, that I got free and dashed at the door where the flames came pouring out.

I believe that I should have rushed in, but at that moment there was another loud explosion, and I seemed to be lifted off my feet, and thrown back into the road, where I lay quite helpless and half-stunned for a few moments. But I soon came to again, just as they were going to carry me through

the crowd, and begging of them not to take me away, I got them to let me stop, for the men wanted to see what was going on; for now the flames were mounting up higher and higher, and rushing out of the first-floor windows, while that one under where my poor wife stood shrieking for help was glowing with light, and I knew the fire would burst out there directly.

The gunpowder canisters in the shop as they exploded had all helped to make the fire burn more rapidly, and before the first engine came, the place was blazing furiously, while, instead of trying anything to save her who stood at the window, people did nothing but shriek and scream and wring their hands. I soon saw, unless something was done the fire would get the better of us, while in spite of all I could think of, there seemed no way to save her who stood crying there for the help we could not give – nothing but for her to jump out. I ran about through the crowd here and there, calling to the people to save her, and for the time quite mad and frantic that I could not get at her, when all at once there was a loud shout and cheer, and the people gave way, as along at full speed came the tall fire-escape.

I ran to help drag it along, and in a few moments they had it leaning beneath the window, but it was too short, and I groaned again, for it seemed only brought to raise our hopes, and then dash them down; but the next moment the fly ladder was pulled up by ropes, and before any one could stay me, I tried to get up.

But the escape man was before me, and up and up he went, till there came a fierce burst of flame and smoke right upon him and beat him back, so that he crept down again, till he reached where I was coming up, and then I got past him and past the flames where the escape was quite on fire, and then up to the window where my wife stood clutching the child, and leaned half-fainting from the window.

It was a hard matter to reach to them, but I got one foot upon the sill, dashed out a pane of glass to get a hold of the sash for my hand, and then began to wonder how I could save them, when I heard a cry from below and a regular yell of shrieks as the light escape ladder was burned through and fell to the ground, so that it was only by an effort I saved myself from felling; but I crept inside the room with a horrid sensation upon me, for I felt that our last hour was come, and a frightful one it was.

The wife just turned her horrified face to me once, and then fainted, while I could see but little of what was going on below, on account of the rising flame and smoke, and as to the heat it was awful – so stifling, that I was glad to hold out the heads of them with me, for the smoke came rolling through the door.

I knew that in a few minutes we must be burned to death, and how awful those thoughts were that came upon me is more than I can describe, and yet in spite of all there seemed a calmness, even when I heard a crackling behind me, and saw the flickering light playing through the smoke behind as the flames were creeping into the room.

Just then I heard a shouting below, and some one to the left cried to me. I looked up and found there were two men at the third-floor window of the next house, and one of them shouted: —

“Put her down and try and catch this,” and then he began swinging a rope towards me till I got hold of it; and without waiting for instructions made it fast round the wife’s waist, helped her out of the window, and held on till they had the rope tight, and shouted to me, when I left go, and saw her go clear of the flame and smoke with such a fearful swing that I felt sure they would let go, and I shrunk back, for I dared not look.

Before a minute was over I heard them shout again, and then I looked out trembling, and caught at the rope again two or three times before I could get it, for it was a hard matter to get it swung far enough. But I had it at last, and pulled in as much as they could spare, so as to tie it round the little child somewhere about the middle, when they saw me make a sign, for I could not shout, I was that choked, and then they hauled in while I kept hold too, so as to keep the little thing from swinging down so fearfully.

It was a good long rope, and even when they had the little one safe there was enough left for me to fasten it with a half hitch round my waist and climb out and hang by the window-sill till they were ready, for the room was burning, and the flames came over me, quite scorching my hands, so that in another few minutes I must have dropped. But the rope tightened, and I left go, swinging through the air right clear of the smoke and flame; and then I felt myself dragged up and in at the window, but I did not see or hear anything more for some little time.

It was a shocking fire, certainly, but it's when people are at the worst that they find out how neighbourly those around could be, for we found them as took us in; and in spite of being so frightened and scorched, after two or three hours' sleep we did not feel so bad but we could put on the things that were lent us, and I can't help thinking that we should have given thanks somewhere else for our escape besides in our bedroom, if it had not been for our burnt-off hair.

And in spite of all loss and care, that was a pleasant Christmas-day we spent, where everybody seemed as if they could not make enough of us; and, at the same time, there was a feeling in my heart that seemed to cheer me and make me look hopefully to the future. For the clothes and furniture that we had lost were none to be so proud of – rather different to what we now have round us, and when I tell the wife so, I get a pleasant smile, for she says there's light behind every cloud.

Chapter Six

Haunted by Spirits

“But what an out-of-the-way place to get to,” I said, after being most cordially received by my old school fellow and his wife, one bitter night after a long ride. “But you really are glad to see me, eh?”

“Now, hold your tongue, do,” cried Ned and his wife in a breath. “You won’t get away again under a month, so don’t think it. But where we are going to put you I don’t know,” said Ned.

“Oh I can sleep anywhere, chairs, table, anything you like; only make me welcome. Fine old house this seems, but however came you to take it?”

“Got it cheap, my boy. Been shut up for twenty years. It’s haunted, and no one will live in it. But I have it full for this Christmas, at all events, and what’s more I have some potent spirits in the place too, but they are all corked down tightly, so there is no fear at present. But I say, Lilly,” cried Ned, addressing his wife, “why we shall have to go into the haunted room and give him our place.”

“That you won’t,” I said. “I came down here on purpose to take you by surprise, and to beg for a snack of dinner on Christmas-day; and now you are going to give me about the greatest treat possible, a bed in a haunted room. What kind of a ghost is it?”

“You mustn’t laugh,” said Ned, trying to appear very serious; “for there is not a soul living within ten miles of this place, that would not give you a long account of the horrors of the Red Chamber: of spots of blood upon the bedclothes coming down in a regular rain; noises; clashing of swords; shrieks and groans; skeletons or transparent bodies. Oh, my dear fellow, you needn’t grin, for it’s all gospel truth about here, and if we did not keep that room screwed up, not a servant would stay in the house.”

“Wish I could buy it and take it away,” I said.

“I wish you could, indeed,” cried Ned, cordially.

Half an hour after Ned and I were busy with screwdriver and candle busy in the large corridors, turning the rusty screws which held a large door at the extreme end of the house. First one and then another was twirled out till nothing held the door but the lock; the key for which Ned Harrington now produced from his pocket – an old, many-warded, rusty key, at least a couple of hundred years old.

“Hold the candle a little lower,” said Ned, “here’s something in the keyhole,” when pulling out his knife, he picked out a quantity of paper, evidently very recently stuffed in. He then inserted the key, and after a good deal of effort it turned, and the lock shot back with a harsh, grating noise. Ned then tried the handle, but the door remained fast; and though he tugged and tugged, it still stuck, till I put one hand to help him, when our united efforts made it come open with a rush, knocking over the candle, and there we were standing upon the portal of the haunted room in the dark.

“I’ll fetch a light in a moment out of the hall,” said Ned, and he slipped off, while I must confess to a certain feeling of trepidation on being left alone, listening to a moaning, whistling noise, which I knew to be the wind, but which had all the same a most dismal effect upon my nerves, which, in spite of my eagerness to be the inmate of the closed room, began to whisper very strongly that they did not like it at all. But the next minute Ned was beside me with the light, and we entered the gloomy dusty old chamber – a bed-chamber furnished after the fashion of the past century. The great four-post bedstead looked heavy and gloomy, and when we drew back the curtains, I half expected to see a body lying in state, but no, all was very dusty, very gloomy, and soul chilling, but nothing more.

“Come, there’s plenty of room for a roaring fire,” said Ned, “and I think after all we had better come here ourselves, and let you have our room.”

“That you will not,” I said, determinedly. “Order them to light a fire, and have some well-aired things put upon that bed, and it will be a clever ghost that wakes me to-night, for I’m as tired as a dog.”

“Here, Mary,” shouted Ned to one of the maids, “coals and wood here, and a broom.”

We waited about, peering here and there at the old toilet-ware and stands, the old chest of drawers and armoire, old chairs and paintings, for all seemed as if the room had been suddenly quitted; while inside a huge cupboard beside the fireplace hung a dusty horseman's cloak, and in the corner were a long thin rapier and a quaint old-fashioned firelock.

"Strikes chilly and damp," said I, snuffing the smell of old boots and fine dust.

"Ah, but we'll soon drive that out," said Ned. "But you'd better give in, my boy. 'Pon my word, I'm ashamed to let you come in here."

"Pooh! nonsense!" I said. "Give me a roaring fire, and that's all I want."

"Ah!" cried Ned. "But what a while that girl is;" and then he stepped out into the passage. "Why, what are you standing there for?" he cried. "Come and light this fire."

"Plee', sir, I dussent," said the maid.

"Here, give me hold," cried Ned, in a pet; "and send your mistress here;" and then he made his appearance with a coal-scuttle, paper, and wood; when between us we soon had a fire alight and roaring up the huge chimney, while the bright flames flickered and danced, and gave quite a cheerful aspect to the place.

"Well," cried Mrs Harrington, who now appeared, "how are you getting on?" but neither Ned's wife nor her sister stood looking, for, in spite of all protestations, dressed as they were, they set to sweeping, dusting, airing linen, bed, mattress, etcetera, we helping to the best of our ability – for no maid, either by threats or persuasion, would enter the place – and at last we made the place look, if not comfortable, at all events less dismal than before we entered. The old blinds came down like so much tinder when touched, while, as to the curtains, the first attempt to draw them brought down such a cloud of dust, that they were left alone, though Mrs Harrington promised that the place should be thoroughly seen to in the morning.

Returning to the drawing-room, the remainder of the evening was most agreeably spent; while the cause of my host and hostess's prolonged absence produced endless comments and anecdotes respecting the Red Chamber – some of them being so encouraging in their nature that Ned Harrington, out of sheer compassion, changed the conversation.

"Well, my boy," said Ned, when the ladies had all retired for the night, "you shan't go to bed till the witching hour is past;" so he kept me chatting over old times, till the clock had gone one – the big old turret-clock, whose notes flew booming away upon the frosty air. "Christmas-eve to-morrow, so we'll have a tramp on the moors after the wild ducks – plenty out here. I say, my boy, I believe this is the original Moated Grange, so don't be alarmed if you hear the mice."

"There's only one thing I care for," I said, "and that is anything in the shape of a practical joke."

"Honour bright! my boy," said Ned; "you need fear nothing of that kind;" and then I was alone in the Haunted Chamber, having locked myself in.

My first proceeding was to give the large fire an extra poke, which sent a flood of light across the room, and the flames gushing up the chimney; my next, to take one of the candles and make a tour of my bedroom, during which I looked under the bed, behind the curtains, and into armoire and cupboard, but discovered nothing. Next thing I tried the windows, through which I could just dimly see the snow-white country, but they were fast and blackened with dirt. The chimney-glass, too, was so injured by damp, that the dim reflection given back was something startling, being more like a bad photograph of life-size than anything else; and at length, having fully made up my mind that I was alone, and that, as far as I could make out, there were neither trap-doors nor secret passages in the wall, I undressed, put out the candles, and plunged into bed.

But I was wrong in what I had said to my host about sleeping, for I never felt more wakeful in my life. I watched the blaze of the fire sink down to a ruddy glow, the glow turn blacker and blacker till at last the fire was all but extinct, while the room was dark as could be. But my eyesight was painfully acute, while my hearing seemed strained to catch the slightest passing sound. The wind roared and

rumbled in the great chimney, and swept sighing past the windows; and, though it had a strange, wild sound with it, yet I had heard the wind before, and therefore paid but little heed to its moans.

All at once the fire seemed to fall together with a tinkling sound, a bright flame leaped up, illumining the room for a moment, then becoming extinct, and leaving all in darkness; but there was light for a long enough interval for me to see, or fancy I saw, the cupboard door open and the great horseman's cloak stand out in a weird-like manner before me, as though covering the shoulders of some invisible figure.

I felt warm – then hot – then in a profuse perspiration, but I told myself it was fancy, punched my pillow, and turned over upon the other side to sleep. Now came a long, low, dreary moan, hollow and heartrending, for it seemed like the cry of some one in distress; when I raised myself upon one elbow and listened.

“Old cowl on a chimney,” I muttered, letting myself fall back again, now thoroughly determined to sleep, but the moaning continued, the wind whistled and howled, while now came a gentle tap, tap, tapping at my window, as if some one was signalling to be admitted.

“Tap, tap, tap;” still it kept on, as though whoever tapped was fearful of making too much noise; and at length, nerving myself, I slipped out of bed, crossed the room, and found that the closet door was open, but a vigorous poke inside produced nothing but dust and two or three very sharp sneezes. So I fastened the door, and listened. All silent: but the next moment began the tapping upon the dirty window-pane again; and, impelled by a mingled sensation of fear and attraction, I crept closer to the sash, and at length made out the shadow of something tapping at the glass.

“Bah! Bah!” I exclaimed the next moment as I shuffled across the room and back to my bed, “strand of ivy and the wind.” But I was not to be at peace yet, for now there came a most unmistakable noise behind the wainscot – louder and louder, as if some one were trying to tear a piece of the woodwork down. The place chosen seemed to be the corner beside the cupboard; and at last, having made up my mind that it was the rats, I dropped off to sleep, and slept soundly till morning, when I heard the cheery voice of my host at the door.

“Oh, all right,” he said as I answered; “I only came because the girl knocked, and said that something must be the matter, for she could not make you hear.”

On descending to breakfast, I found that I was to undergo a rigorous cross-examination as to what I had seen and heard; but one elderly lady present shook her head ominously, freely giving it as her opinion that it was little better than sacrilege to open the haunted chamber, and finishing a very solemn peroration with the words —

“Stop a bit; they don't walk every night.”

This was encouraging, certainly; but in the course of the afternoon I went up to my room, and found that it had been well cleaned out, while many little modern appliances had been added to the dingy furniture, so that it wore quite a brightened appearance. The insides of the windows had been cleaned, and a man was then upon a ladder polishing away at the exterior, when I drew his attention to a number of loose ivy strands, which he cut off.

In the cupboard I found plenty of traces of rats in the shape of long-gnawed-off fragments of wood pushed beneath the skirting-board; while, upon holding my head against the chimney, the groaning of the cowl was plainly to be heard, as it swung round dolefully upon some neighbouring chimney.

A pleasant day was spent, and then, after a cosy evening, I was once more ushered into the chamber of horrors, this time being escorted by the whole of the visitors, the gentlemen affectionately bidding me farewell, but not one seeming disposed to accept my offer of changing rooms. However, Ned and Mrs Harrington both wished me to go to their room, when I of course refused; and once more I was alone.

It was now about half-past twelve and Christmas-morning, a regular storm was hurrying round the house, and a strange feeling of crepitation came upon me when I had extinguished the light; and

then on climbing into bed I sat and listened for a while, laid my head upon my pillow, and the next moment, or what seemed the next moment, I was startled by a strange beating sound, and as I became aware of a dim, peculiar light, penetrating the room, I heard a low, muffled voice cry appealingly —

“Your hot water, sir – quarter to eight!” while I could hardly believe my eyes had been closed.

Christmas-day passed as it generally does in the country, that is to say, in a most jovial, sociable way; and after fun, frolic, sport, pastime, forfeit, dance, and cards, I stood once more within the haunted chamber with the strange sensation upon me, that though I had met with nothing so far to alarm me – this night, a night when, of all nights in the year, spirits might be expected to break loose, I was to suffer for my temerity.

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