

CORN CRAKE

DEC 2024
ISSUE 10



CELEBRATING
CHRISTMAS THROUGH
ENGLISH LITERATURE

Christ's Nativity

By Henry Vaughan

Awake, glad heart! get up and sing!
It is the birth-day of thy King.
Awake! awake!
The Sun doth shake
Light from his locks, and all the way
Breathing perfumes, doth spice the day.

Awake, awake! hark how th' wood rings;
Winds whisper, and the busy springs
A concert make;
Awake! awake!
Man is their high-priest, and should rise
To offer up the sacrifice.

I would I were some bird, or star,
Flutt'ring in woods, or lifted far
Above this inn
And road of sin!
Then either star or bird should be
Shining or singing still to thee.

I would I had in my best part
Fit rooms for thee! or that my heart
Were so clean as
Thy manger was!
But I am all filth, and obscene;
Yet, if thou wilt, thou canst make clean.

Sweet Jesu! will then. Let no more
This leper haunt and soil thy door!
Cure him, ease him,
O release him!
And let once more, by mystic birth,
The Lord of life be born in earth.





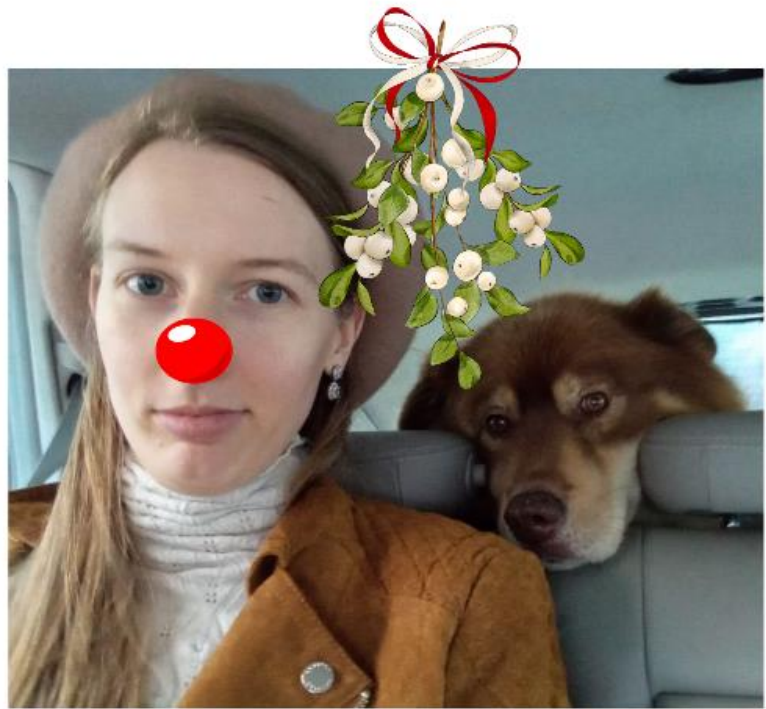
CONTENTS

ISSUE 10

Christ's Nativity	02
Editor's Note	04
A Midwinter Night's Dream	05
A Collection of Christmas Tales	12
A Christmas Tree	19
The Joy of Snow	23
The Little Match Girl	31
A Child's Christmas in Wales	33
Where Love is There is God Also	37
Twelve Days of Christmas	43
Druid Without a Home: Ritherhithe	45
Mistletoe	50

Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more. Dr. Seuss

Editor's Nose



MERRY CHRISTMAS EVERYONE!!!

This month we will get cosy and merry with the best of Christmas cheer. We have a collection of wholesomeness from authors past and present. The feature story is the brand new *A Midwinter Night's Dream* by Philip Wortmann. Look out for classic tales including *A Christmas Tree* by Charles Dickens, *Where Love is There is God Also* by Leo Tolstoy, Dylan Thomas' *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, and *The Little Match Girl* by Hans Christian Anderson. We include a collection of Christmas tales, various traditions from around England (and an ass-themed, multi-day, donkey-sound-producing celebration from France) and Nathan CJ Hood has written a scholarly introduction to the 12 Days of Christmas. We also bid Degore goodbye with the last installment of Shieldmaiden's *Druid Without a Home Chapter 10: Ritherhithe*.

We are ever grateful to everyone who continues to support the Corncrake, from donors to artists to writers to readers to those who gave advice and encouragement (and Guykings). See you next year!



Call of the Shieldmaiden
Editor-in-Chief

A dark, hooded robe, possibly a nightgown or a simple dress, is shown against a black background. The robe is made of a heavy, textured fabric and has a large hood. A white rope is tied around the waist, forming a knot. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the folds and texture of the fabric.

A Midwinter Night's Dream

Philip Wortmann

Drumming went the hooves upon the sodden, frosting road. The steaming clouds that billowed both from horse and rider were like the signal of a smithy. The straining muscles of the beast that bore its harrow master hence were like the tendons of a tree, but lithe and lively with the dance of fleet flight. Black and threatening, like sails on a moonlit night, the cloak of the horseman rent and wove upon the winds: a spectral apparition. All about him fell the backdrop of a snowy heath. And, rare yet present, as are mountains in a plain, stood aged oaks and beech spinneys that creaked and shook like ancients in the wind. In their shadow hovered the wolves that plagued this land, and watched. Beyond these, the glittering, cold Brine heaved and sighed with tidal boundedness upon the margin of the world.

The distant sunlight dwindled on the brink of that westering sea, whence rose the place for which the rider strained his mount. There stood a bastion: a hillock crowned with jagged stone. Yet jagged stone was crowned in turn with masonry less crude. A bleak fortress was set upon the fell. Its grey spires and red eyes were like the tombstone of a king, so tall and august; ever watched and lit by generations transient.

Atop its walls, above the gate, a watcher gave a signal to the other troops that kept their hour. Their lord had returned. The knight upon the horse was slowing now his pace and drew up to the winding path that clomb toward the entrance of the burg. The arching mouth of stone withdrew its teeth, unleashed its drawbridge tongue, and let its meal into its austere embrace, so that for but a while more the flickering winds would not yet weather it from mind and memory alike. Within the court the horse was reined in. The black-clad knight dropped from the beast, and left it to the deft stable hands with a brief exchange of words and nods, extracting his implement of death from the saddle. Behind this knight, the mouth into his fortress was drawn shut again — bound fast with iron and with oak.

The knight was dressed as though for war. The well-fitted steel was pressed upon a darkly tanned leather, which in turn was framed by lining of wolf's fur. From his saddle he had withdrawn his trusty blade, now glinting in the twilight — but another dangled narrowly from his belt: a dagger for times of hottest intimacy. Merely the master's head was not behelmed. It was shrouded with a heavy hood, which even now the man drew back to show a face like flint and bone. His eyes were cold as winter. His dark hair hung about his ears, and bearded with a squarish growth the knight observed the courtyard warily. His was a dangerous face that matched well the fur of wolves from which it had grimly sprouted. The

crunching of his metal frame underlined every movement made with dreadful purpose.

"Is all well, Ulwin?" asked he, when his horse had been taken to the stables and the marshal had emerged.

"All is well," the marshal said, and bowed. "And the weather, lord?"

"Splendid," said the knight, yet no splendour was in the lines about his eyes. The lines were hard as callouses, in fact, much resembling the cliffs that foaming breakers were battering below. "The wolves are still too many. If their numbers do not diminish, the merchants shall never pass through these lands again."

"Well, lord, banditry was never your *first* vocation," said Ulwin.

"No," said the knight. "But you are idling, Ulwin. Something more has happened here of which you leave me ignorant."

The marshal grimaced, and said: "There is a man of God in the hall, lord."

The knight in black looked at his marshal without a movement in his face. He sought only to drain whatever knowledge he might drink from the countenance of the other.

"How did he enter?" asked the lord finally.

"That is a mystery to us as well, lord. He says he 'walked in'," explained Ulwin carefully, turning to look in the direction of the main entrance to the dining hall.

"And my son?" asked the knight.

"He and the Lady Edith are entertaining the guest, lord," said the marshal.

"Thank you, Ulwin," said the knight, and began to stride toward the towering portal of the dining hall. "Send for Alfred. His work with the manuscripts must be delayed yet again, I am afraid."

Ulwin bowed, turned, and was swallowed by the shadows of the many stairs and passageways that led into the heart of Duncrag Keep. Yes, that was its name. The Hall of Grey Fells, some others called it once. Tonight was Christmas Eve, which never merited mention in the house of Duncrag before, but nevermore would be forgot hereafter.

The narrow doors into the dining hall shuddered heavily and yawned on iron hinges as Duncrag's lord pressed against them with the might of his broad gauntlets. Then the doors gave way to their master, casting down weak moats of dust in dying daylight, revealing the brazier that dimly lit the entrance hall beyond. There also stood the tarnished remnant of an ancient heirloom to this obscure house upon the strand. It stood in the very middle of the room: an effigy of idol. It was the image of a long-defeated god. This was the blackened, wooden remnant of ancient Irminsul. All about the walls of this heathen hall were painted — as with the blood of broken hearts — the tales of the fathers of Duncrag House, and how this relic had wandered from its ancient homeland hither over heights and deeps. Before this polished piece of wood Lord Duncrag bowed, laid his talons on his fluted breastplate, and said: "*Thrymcyning, hal abeode, Irmin!*"

Then he passed the image by, and entered into the hall whence roast meat's messenger was drifting on the air invitingly. Behind him, a servant closed the doors, then vanished into the shadows of a passageway again. The long table in the middle of the hall was richly set with a decorated venison roast, with bread and butter, and much beer. And at the far end, near the hearth, sat his beloved wife and their young son, who laughed at something recently said by a stranger, not old, who wore the colours of the church: black, as was the knight's own preference. But the master of the house shuddered at the thought of similarity.

"I am glad to see you laughing, my boy!" exclaimed the black knight to his son. "This man is some kind of fool or jester to enter here without leave of the lord of these high halls." He had said it with a playful tone, yet never did his gravity leave him. This playfulness betrayed the violence in his heart.

The boy, still bearing laughter in his eyes, now turned to follow his father with his sprightly gaze. The blue eyes widened as they saw the brutal armour with which his father's mighty form was framed.

"Cynewulf!" said the knight's wife, and rose from her chair, intending to meet her husband with an embrace; though she thought better of it when they stood aface of one another. Instead she laid her hands against his breast and pushed against the hardened steel somewhat. "So cold and cruel a greeting outstrips your prior insults to me by a mile!"

"I do try to keep you off me, my heart; but the colder my exterior, the hotter your flame seems to burn against me.

Soon not even steel will keep me safe, I fear," said her man.

"But what will keep me safe from you, I wonder?" she sighed. There was no winning here. They both then turned to observe their unexpected guest.

"This is Winfred," explained the lady of the house, indicating the man of the Cloth. "He says that he is looking for the Lord Duncrag. I have not seen the lord all day, however," said she, ironically. "So I have told him that there isn't much hope for that."

"*Knock and the door shall be opened*, says your holy book, priest," Cynewulf began, ever steady in his gaze, ever seeking out the flaws in the folds of his opponent's mien. "But *you* did not knock."

"It seems, lord, that one knocked before I came, for I found the doors swung wide, as though inviting me in. None hindered my passage. Three hours I sat in the courtyard, before a soul spoke to me. And then, when they wanted to show me out, they saw that the gates were fast shut, and thought, after some efforts on my part, that perhaps you would be interested in hearing what I've come to say," said Winfred of the Cloth.

"Then speak, and I will judge. But I will judge while eating, if you will join me," said the lord.

"Might I say a word of thanks for the meal?" asked the priest.

"You are welcome to the meal, thankful or no. Hospitality is a custom of my fathers," said Cynewulf, betraying a slight irritation.

"I meant give thanks to him that brings forth all fruit from the earth," said the priest with the same smile that never seemed to tire on his rosy face.

"In my lands that is not the same god as in yours, Christian," said Cynewulf with a sigh, and sat down between his son and wife.

"No, indeed, as I wondered the circumference of your country, I saw that it is truly barren, beset by wolves and bears, and ... even more dreadful things in summer, where the blood of monsters runs less cold," said the priest.

"I will have no prayer in this hall, other than to Irmin, the father that begat my race! If you must pray, do so silently. I have cut tongues from mouths before," growled Cynewulf then, his metal talons laid open upon

the table as though to emphasise their capacity for putting words to work.

The smile did not fade from Winfred's lips, it simply deepened and became sad. "From the mouths of wolves alone, I hope," said he.

"And from Athelrede!" said the boy of a sudden, looking cheerily at the priest.

"Athelrede is your pet hound?" asked the priest. Now his smile *had* faded.

"If dog's could speak, it would be equally as useless. I should have simply taken his head," said the black knight.

"His head he lost soon enough, as is," said the lady, who had lost the merry glow that had pronounced her youthful beauty upon her lord's entrance. She began to eat with sullen listlessness.

"Heavenly Father, bless this food and this family ..." the priest began to pray in earnest.

Cynewulf stared with growing resentment at the man of the Cloth — at his audacity. He was not surprised that he had suddenly begun to pray to his god, but disgusted. He rose, and marched with heavy steps toward the man, grasped him by the collar of his garb, and dragged him still babbling from his bench. Without hesitation, which betrayed his close kinship with well-trained violence, Cynewulf the black knight of Duncrag kicked back the heavy doors of oak, and cast Winfred of the Church of Christ out into his courtyard. There the priest sprawled over the snowy flagstones for a brief moment. Then he recovered, and stood up, brushing the powder from his robes. The smile had fled back into his face, though it was now telling of an emotion that was foreign to those that looked on.

"I banish you, Winfred, from my lands! You were untouched by wolves and bears heretofore. May your god continue to preserve you, if that is *his* will. Though, if he hears the prayers of strangers, let him make of you a filling meal for those beasts beyond my gate, if it should cost me a hundred men to kill them thereafter!" Cynewulf cursed.

Then the lord of Duncrag turned and entered once more the place where Irminsul's remains were cradled in the antechamber. To this fragment he said: "Irmin, hear me, do what I have asked, should this man's god be lesser than you!"

Then Cynewulf walked in again to his high hall, in which his son and wife did feed on the fruits of his labour. And yet the fruit was hard won. Scarce the deer of this land were grown, and all the talk of wolves had brought this fact to settle with grave consequence upon the black knight's soul. The wolves were too many, and they were far more dangerous to hunt for meat that was itself not good for eating. Finally, he removed his gauntlets from his hands. His wife arose at once to help him in removing the greater part of his armour, so that he might eat with them more comfortably.

They sat down again in solemn silence, and now the lord of Duncrag also tore the meat from a bone he took to hand. All the while, their son's eyes grew vacant, wandering far away through thoughts and visions of a world that was so very different to the one he had grown up in and been imprisoned by.

"What did the man do wrong, papa?" asked the boy of a sudden.

Cynewulf was stunned. A cold dread gripped his very middle, and the food turned to ash in his mouth. "You pity him? Hm... Perhaps I grew too angry with him, my boy," he said after regathering himself. "But a lord should not be disobeyed in his own home. Not even by a guest. Least of all after an explicit command. You would do well to do the same when you are lord here, Cyneward."

In silence they ate on a while. Cynewulf drank deeply from his cup, distracted once more by the bitter pain of the futures he saw darkly unfolding on the horizon of his fortune. His hungry body drove the machinery of his limbs to administer his mouth with steaming nourishment. And then a foreign mouth did speak.

A voice that none of those about the table knew said, *Are you lord in this house?*

The lady Edith sat up in her chair and looked about with a start. Cynewulf also looked about, but no body was seen anywhere to give rise to such a sound.

"Who asks?" bade Cynewulf know, and rising reached out and took up his glinting blade. "Who speaks without a tongue? Is it the lingering spirit of ... Athelrede?"

First a second silence benighted them. Then booming laughter, as though roaring from the stones themselves, thundered on the very air. *You may call me so, for as a king, and to the kings of this world have I oft given counsel*, said this voice.

“Show yourself!” demanded the lord of Duncrag. “Who are you?”

Suddenly, in the middle of the hall, above the narrow table, a flash as that of lightning painted white the dimness of the room. Then, as though climbing from beyond a veil, strode a form with wings upon its helm, upon its shoulders, and upon its booted heels. Brightly did its fearsome armour glint and bend to house its divine wearer, and to make of this high being the very stuff of beautiful horror. Like some angel of burning metal there stood a god upon the table, and the wooden board buckled, and gave way beneath the winged boots of this deity — withered as with fire, and broken. The little family of three scattered back a ways.

You would give one hundred men as an offering to a foreign god, Cynewulf, son of Cynebeorn? demanded this dreadful power in the middle of the hall. It wrapped itself in the twining smokes that now began to pour out from the hearth of glimmering coals at their backs.

The blade that Cynewulf held tilted somewhat to the floor as the weather-beaten warrior dropped to his knees. His eyes grew wide with wonder and dread. “Irmin!” whispered he in horror and in awe. “Oh, lord of heaven, what have I done to call you here into my lowly hall? I see now that my anger was too quick, and that I spoke too hastily!”

You spoke, Cynewulf, and I have heard, said the voice as though cinders burned with its resonance upon the very air. *But I will offer you a just reward for all the loyalty you’ve shown. Instead of a hundred, I shall take but one man from you, and make of the priest an example of my power. Through his death, you shall be set free from toiling here in desert corners of the world. Men shall know the name of Duncrag yet again, and shall bow before you, ere than to the king himself. For what king, I pray you, could stand before my glory?*

At this, the light that had before seemed only a reflection on the polished metal of the strange apparition’s frame now seared itself into their eyes with ardent jealousy, and grew to be the stuff of summer sun — its heat outstripped the hearth’s. Edith had run to hold her child against her breast as pulsing waves of wind buffeted against the small family. The boy stared without a word at this sleepless dream. The wings of the high being bent and stretched and seemed to grow to reach up to the rafters far above, brightening from raven’s black to seagull’s white with every passing moment as they did so, until it seemed that, truly! Apollo himself stood before them.

As he cowered on the floor, wracked with doubts regarding all he knew and wanted, Cynewulf begged this heavenly messenger, saying: “What are you, lord? For you are not what I had thought!”

You called me Irmin, and so have I been known by your fathers. Yet others named me Jörmunr, Odin, Wothan. I wrought a dreadful work amid my wolves here in the darkness. You, my Saxon children, and those in other lands. In Rome they named me Mercury. In Greece I was called Hermes. They thought I was but a messenger, yet the work of my hands became their dearest treasure, for I deal in bending words, and through words, the minds of men! And now I will bend your mind and memory to observe my purpose once again, Cynewulf, regal child of my cunning. I will take one man from you, and do for this price what you have bidden of me, and so much more.

“What man, great power?” cried out Cynewulf.

Your son.

The scream that issued from the throat of Edith then was like the rending of the heavens, but it made no impression on the gleaming giant in the middle of the hall. In this moment, memories and images passed before the eyes of the high hall’s lord, and he swiped at the air before himself, trying to clear them from his mind. He saw suddenly the ringing steeples of the towns and villages to which his duties had taken him, before he had fallen to banditry. He saw the priest, Winfred, whom he had cast out. Winfred! Why had he remembered this childish parson? What had come upon him now that he thought of the enemy? Was it Winfred, that cunningman’s conjury, which had sprouted from his table? No. This was an honour to his fathers! None of them had been so worthy as to draw the gaze of immortal Irmin onto themselves.

Unsteadily, Cynewulf arose, and marched toward his son. His claw reached out and gripped the slender arm of the boy, whose mother, weeping, held him fast a brief while, staring with a plea unlike any the black knight had ever witnessed. He had seen much pleading. The villages that remained in smouldering ruins at his back in memory now turned as if upon a wheel to stand before his inner eye again, and he froze. Within him something gnawed and ate away the manliness that he had spent the decades past refining. He looked upon his son and found himself a child in spirit; the child he had thought forgotten. He looked upon the ancient deity, and knew no awe, only terror — blind terror. And then he noticed also that the sword, which a moment prior he had held, lay where he had left it on the floor some paces away. A pretty thing, the way it caught the light. It was now like a specimen of flower to his nearly broken mind. It had no function here. What were the implements of a gardener

in the face of war? He looked again at Edith's tear-riven face. They had been wedded in a church with ringing bells not long ago.

The child belongs to me! The fiery god declared.

"It does not!" an elder voice cried from the entrance to the hall.

"Alfred?" gasped Cynewulf past tears he had not noticed. The steward of Duncrag had come down from the tower in which he worked with ancient parchments most of his days. At his back stood sheepish Winfred with that enigmatic smile.

Who dares intrude upon my covenant! The winged god of Grey Fells demanded.

"Begone, spirit! You have no power here!" said Alfred Steward from the doorway. Then he looked over his shoulder with a second thought, now back into the hall again. "I forget my place," he muttered through his beard.

Then it was Winfred who strode into the room, and already the great wings seemed to shrink like candles under flames.

"The boy is baptised in the name of another, wherefore you have no claim on him," said Winfred.

I am the god of this house. I am the god of his fathers! He is MINE! The glowing being then returned, but it shrank before the man in robes that so resembled Cynewulf's own black garb.

"You are cast out, fell spirit!" cried Winfred with a strange contortion of his child-like face. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, I command you! As a called and ordained servant of the Lord, depart from this abode, and never return! This place is sanctified to the Lord and to his holy purposes now."

The fiery being recoiled and shuddered with something akin to a sigh. Again it shrank away, waning small.

"Baptised?" whispered Cynewulf in surprise. He turned to Edith then. Turmoil raged within his breast. What could this all mean? His family had wrestled with great difficulty the right to stay unbaptised without having to suffer the consequences of the law. "Edith, you have betrayed me?"

"My lord!" she cried and crept up to his knee. "If this is betrayal, I know it not!"

"Lord? You call me *lord?*" repeated Cynewulf between heavy breaths. Then he bellowed: "You have *betrayed* me! Where now is my garden tool?"

"Papa, no!" cried his desperate son, cleaving to his arm.

"And you as well have fallen into the clutches of these Christians with their lies!" shouted the black knight, he cast the boy onto the flagstones at his steely boots as though he were no more than soiled clothes. "If you have indeed been stolen from me by this wench, what are you to me anymore... if not dead?" But the last words only left him weakly.

He is mine! Rumbled the voice upon the burning air.

"I could not take the horrid dreams any longer, my lord! Cynewulf, please!" his wife cried out.

As the knight beheld her, all composure having flown from him as from a punctured kettle, the words of Alfred came across the hall: "It was I that counselled her in this, lord!"

Slowly the knight turned to face the once most trusted servant of his house. What was he now become? The greatest of all traitors. A Judas, fitting for their Christian god.

"Lord Duncrag!" the strange man, Winfred, then called out, drawing Cynewulf's hateful stare onto himself. "Behold the so-called god of your fathers! He has no power here! The blood relations of a greater God are present, and these he cannot touch! That boy does not belong to him!"

"These are *my* blood relations!" exclaimed the lord of Duncrag Hall. "And you have turned them against me!"

"The waters that rebirthed them are thicker than your blood, lord!" the priest contradicted. "They are children of the most high God now."

"How dare you, you churl!" bellowed Cynewulf. "What are you, but a fool and a player in garbs too solemn for your tenor? I will paint them red with *your* blood! Then speak to me of blood's consistency! This boy belongs to Irmin as have all the children of Duncrag!"

The knight in black strode to take again the fallen blade into his hands.

Turning to face the spirit of the house, Winfred cried: "In the name of Christ Jesus, who lives and reigns, a man

above all spirits, be gone from this place, you devil!" And, indeed, the diminishing deity flickered, and went out like a candle snuffed. With bold resolve, the priest stepped into the way between Cynewulf and his son. The wroth knight held his sword in hand again, glaring with intense vengeance at the weakling who barred his path.

"Lord Cynewulf," said Alfred Steward, also drawing nearer. "It is *I* whom you must slay, if you seek blood."

"I will," said Cynewulf, turning with feral precision to face his steward, spitting the words through bared teeth. "But you will witness first the consequences of your hypocrisy!"

"Lord, what will become of you, if you do this? It would mean the end of your house," Alfred begged.

"If I live, the house of my fathers lives on with me," said the knight with vehemence. "A rough life I do not fear. This manner of life — a life of lies, as you have all turned out to me — I cannot bear!"

"My Cynewulf!" sobbed Lady Edith tearily, arose, and went to embrace her man. But he stepped back from her, raising the blade. He was a master with the weapon and would not cut her; but he thrust her back with it at first, then with his arms. She would *not* find a hold on him!

She found a hold on him. She held him firmly, wracked with tears. "I could not suffer any longer those dreams! I could not bare the voices in these halls, and always our child was at risk! I had to seek out help, and you were oft away, or would not hear of it. I *could* not do otherwise! If you must slay me, slay me; but were I not to have done this thing, you would have mourned for my corpse, instead of hating it! I thought you would be glad to keep me by your side, but if I was wrong, then I want no further part of this life anyhow!"

The intensity of her weeping had now drown the words in her throat, and it was all she could do to cleave to the knight in black, and wait for his judgement.

The judgement was slow in coming. The black knight's eyes wandered from the shuddering waterworks at his breast to the wailing child on the floor. Why must all that he had held dear be turned against him?

Finally, after long a while, Cynawulf sighed: "Where is your god, then, Winfred?"

"He is here," said Winfred. He has moved your heart to mercy. Mercy is his work, and through it he heals the things that such fallen gods as Irmin wound."

"Is this why you have come? To finish what the great Charles of Francia began? To finally put an end to the ways of my fathers?" asked the knight irreverently.

"I am a servant," said Winfred. "I do what I am commanded, nothing less. I am not to stand in the way of you honouring your fathers. But it was not Irmin that begat your race, lord. Irmin held your people prisoner, like wolves in kennels. And so your fathers just as mine — as did all the fathers of men — walked in captivity as slaves beneath the cruel bonds of devils, but their bonds have been cast off. The right that was given the old gods to rule has been made void by the law of blood, which the king of heaven has paid. A man has been crowned to govern, as of old in the blissful garden. He has redeemed us men, so that the spirits have no claim over us any longer, though they move both winds and fire. In the records of my parish, I found the name of your son, lord. I wanted to meet with him, to see how he was being raised. It is what I am called to, lord."

Cynewulf turned his face away from the priest, and gazed a long while into the fire. His son had ceased weeping now, intently listening to what passed between the men. The woman had also grown calmer, though she held him no less close. Finally, he said: "Then tell me of this, your king of heaven, before whose least impressive servants even the most dreadful gods would flee like fortune from my lands."

Alfred Steward sighed, and collapsed into the nearest chair, cursing under his breath, and rubbing his face with both of his gnarled hands, relieved. A moment later, the chair broke under his weight, and he cursed again, tumbling backwards over the stone-laid floor.

Winfred, however, looked somewhat distressed, neared the family by the fireplace, and said: "I will begin, I think, with the story that the Church remembers on this night. It is the story that initiates the victory which you have witnessed this evening. Yes, in fact, I will begin with the gospel of how this king of heaven sent his son into the world, to save us men from the darkness by himself becoming a man, elevating our nature once and for all to the utmost heights..."

A Collection of Christmas Tales

Various Authors





Hodening in Kent -*A contributor to the Church Times, Jan. 23, 1891*

WHEN I was a lad, about forty-five years since, it was always the custom on Christmas Eve, with the male farm-servants from every farm in our parish, to go round in the evening from house to house with the hodening horse, which consisted of the imitation of a horse's head made of wood, life size, fixed on a stick about the length of a broom handle. The lower jaw of the head was made to open with hinges; a hole was made through the roof of the mouth, then another through the forehead coming out by the throat; pulled through this was passed a cord attached at the lower jaw, which, when pulled by the cord at the throat, caused it to close and open; on the lower jaw large headed hobnails were driven in to form the teeth. The strongest of the lads was selected for the horse; he stooped and made as long a back as he could, supporting himself by the stick carrying the head; then he was covered with a horse-cloth, and one of his companions mounted his back. The horse had a bridle and reins. Then commenced the kicking, rearing, jumping, etc., and the banging together of the teeth.

There was no singing by the accompanying paraders. They simply by ringing or knocking at the houses on their way summoned the inmates to the doors and begged a gratuity. I have seen some of the wooden heads carved out quite hollow in the throat part, and two holes bored through the forehead to form the eyes. The lad who played the horse would hold a lighted candle in the hollow, and you can imagine how horrible it was to any one who opened the door to see such a thing close to his eyes.



The Yule Clog -*T. K. Hervey*

AMID the interior forms to be observed, on this evening, by those who would keep their Christmas after the old orthodox fashion, the first to be noticed is that of the Yule Clog. This huge block, which, in ancient times, and consistently with the capacity of its vast receptacle, was frequently the root of a large tree, it was the practice to introduce into the house with great ceremony, and to the sound of music.

In Drake's "Winter Nights" mention is made of the Yule Clog, as "lying, in ponderous majesty, on the kitchen floor," until "each had sung his Yule song, standing on its centre,"—ere it was consigned to the flames that

"Went roaring up the chimney wide."

This Yule Clog, according to Herrick, was to be lighted with the brand of the last year's log, which had been carefully laid aside for the purpose, and music was to be played during the ceremony of lighting.

This log appears to have been considered as sanctifying the roof-tree, and was probably deemed a protection against those evil spirits over whom this season was in every way a triumph. Accordingly, various superstitions mingled with the prescribed ceremonials in respect of it. From the authority already quoted on this subject, we learn that its virtues were not to be extracted unless it were lighted with clean hands—a direction, probably, including both a useful household hint to the domestics, and, it may be, a moral of a higher kind:—

*"Wash your hands or else the fire
Will not tend to your desire;
Unwash'd hands, ye maidens, know,
Dead the fire though ye blow."*

Around this fire, when duly lighted, the hospitalities of the evening were dispensed; and as the flames played about it and above it, with a pleasant song of their own, the song and the tale and the jest went cheerily round.



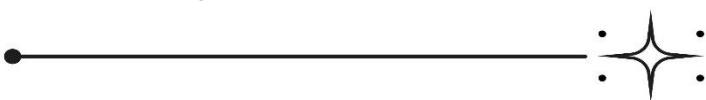
The First Christmas Carol -*St. Luke's Gospel*

FEAR not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger.

Chorus

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.



I saw Three Ships -*Old English Carol*

I saw three ships come sailing in,
On Christmas day, on Christmas day;
I saw three ships come sailing in,
On Christmas day in the morning.
And what was in those ships all three,
On Christmas day, on Christmas day?
And what was in those ships all three,
On Christmas day in the morning?
The Virgin Mary and Christ were there,
On Christmas day, on Christmas day;
The Virgin Mary and Christ were there,
On Christmas day in the morning.

Pray, whither sailed those ships all three,
 On Christmas day, on Christmas day?
 Pray, whither sailed those ships all three,
 On Christmas day in the morning?
 O they sailed into Bethlehem,
 On Christmas day, on Christmas day;
 O they sailed into Bethlehem,
 On Christmas day in the morning.
 And all the bells on earth shall ring,
 On Christmas day, on Christmas day;
 And all the bells on earth shall ring,
 On Christmas day in the morning.
 And all the Angels in Heaven shall sing,
 On Christmas day, on Christmas day;
 And all the Angels in Heaven shall sing,
 On Christmas day in the morning.
 And all the souls on earth shall sing,
 On Christmas day, on Christmas day;
 And all the souls on earth shall sing,
 On Christmas day in the morning.
 Then let us all rejoice amain,
 On Christmas day, on Christmas day;
 Then let us all rejoice amain,
 On Christmas day in the morning.



The Feast of the Ass -William Hone in *Ancient Mysteries*

AS this was anciently celebrated in France, it almost entirely consisted of dramatic show. It was instituted in honor of Balaam's ass, and at one of them the clergy walked on Christmas Day in procession, habited to represent the prophets and others.

Moses appeared in an alb and cope with a long beard and a rod. David had a green vestment. Balaam, with an immense pair of spurs, rode on a wooden ass which enclosed a speaker. There were also six Jews and six Gentiles. Among other characters, the poet Virgil was introduced singing monkish rhymes, as a Gentile prophet, and a translator of the sibylline oracles. They thus moved in a procession through the body of the church chanting versicles, and conversing in character on the nativity and kingdom of Christ till they came into the choir.

This service, as performed in the cathedral at Rouen, commenced with a procession in which the clergy represented the prophets of the Old Testament who foretold the birth of Christ; then followed Balaam mounted on his ass, Zacharias, Elizabeth, John the Baptist, the sibyl, Erythree, Simeon, Virgil, Nebuchadnezzar, and the three children in the furnace. After the procession entered the cathedral, several groups of persons performed the parts of Jews and Gentiles, to whom the

choristers addressed speeches; afterwards they called on the prophets one by one, who came forward successively and delivered a passage relative to the Messiah. The other characters advanced to occupy their proper situations, and reply in certain verses to the questions of the choristers. They performed the miracle of the furnace; Nebuchadnezzar spoke, the sibyl appeared at the last, and then an anthem was sung, which concluded the ceremony.

The Missal of an Archbishop of Sens indicates that during such a service, the animal itself, clad with precious priestly ornaments, was solemnly conducted to the middle of the choir, during which procession a hymn in praise of the ass was sung—ending with—

*Amen! bray, most honour'd Ass,
 Sated now with grain and grass:
 Amen repeat, Amen reply,
 And disregard antiquity.
 Hez va! hez va! hez va! hez!*

The service lasted the whole of a night and part of the next day, and formed altogether the strangest, most ridiculous medley of whatever was usually sung at church festivals. When the choristers were thirsty wine was distributed; in the evening, on a platform before the church, lit by an enormous lantern, the grand chanter of Sens led a jolly band in performing broadly indecorous interludes. At respective divisions of the service the ass was supplied with drink and provender. In the middle of it, at the signal of a certain anthem, the ass being conducted into the nave of the church, the people mixed with the clergy danced around him, imitating his braying.



A Scene of Mediæval Christmas -John Addington Symonds

LET us imagine Christmas Day in a mediæval town of Northern England. The cathedral is only partly finished. Its nave and transepts are the work of Norman architects, but the choir has been destroyed in order to be rebuilt by more graceful designers and more skillful hands. The old city is full of craftsmen assembled to complete the church. Some have come, as a religious duty, to work off their tale of sins by bodily labor. Some are animated by a love of art—simple men who might have rivalled with the Greeks in ages of more cultivation. Others, again, are well-known carvers brought for hire from distant towns and countries beyond the sea. But today, and for some days past, the sound of hammer and chisel has been silent in the choir. Monks have bustled about the nave, dressing it up with holly boughs and bushes of yew, and preparing a stage for the sacred play they are going to exhibit on the feast-day. Christmas is

not like Corpus Christi, and now the market-place stands inches deep in snow, so that the Miracles must be enacted beneath a roof instead of in the open air. And what place so appropriate as the cathedral, where poor people may have warmth and shelter while they see the show? Besides, the gloomy old church, with its windows darkened by the falling snow, lends itself to candle-light effects that will enhance the splendor of the scene. Everything is ready. The incense of morning mass yet lingers round the altar. The voice of the friar, who told the people from the pulpit the story of Christ's birth, has hardly ceased to echo. Time has just been given for a mid-day dinner, and for the shepherds and farm lads to troop in from the countryside. The monks are ready at the wooden stage to draw its curtain, and all the nave is full of eager faces. There you may see the smith and carpenter, the butcher's wife, the country priest, and the gray-cowled friar. Scores of workmen, whose home the cathedral for the time is made, are also here, and you may know the artists by their thoughtful foreheads and keen eyes. That young monk carved Madonna and her Son above the southern porch. Beside him stands the master-mason, whose strong arms have hewn gigantic images of prophets and apostles for the pinnacles outside the choir; and the little man with cunning eyes between the two is he who cuts such quaint hobgoblins for the gargoyles. He has a vein of satire in him, and his humor overflows into the stone. Many and many a grim beast and hideous head has he hidden among vine-leaves and trellis-work upon the porches. Those who know him well are loath to anger him, for fear their sons and sons' sons should laugh at them forever caricatured in solid stone.

Hark! there sounds the bell. The curtain is drawn, and the candles blaze brightly round the wooden stage. What is this first scene? We have God in Heaven, dressed like a pope with triple crown, and attended by his court of angels. They sing and toss up censers till he lifts his hand and speaks. In a long Latin speech he unfolds the order of creation and his will concerning man. At the end of it up leaps an ugly buffoon, in goatskin, with rams' horns upon his head. Some children begin to cry; but the older people laugh, for this is the Devil, the clown and comic character, who talks their common tongue, and has no reverence before the very throne of Heaven. He asks leave to plague men, and receives it; then, with many a curious caper, he goes down to Hell, beneath the stage. The angels sing and toss their censers as before, and the first scene closes to a sound of organs. The next is more conventional, in spite of some grotesque incidents. It represents the Fall; the monks hurry over it quickly, as a tedious but necessary prelude to the birth of Christ. That is the true Christmas part of the ceremony, and it is understood that the best actors and most beautiful dresses are to be reserved for it. The builders

of the choir in particular are interested in the coming scenes, since one of their number has been chosen, for his handsome face and tenor voice, to sing the angel's part. He is a young fellow of nineteen, but his beard is not yet grown, and long hair hangs down upon his shoulders. A chorister of the cathedral, his younger brother, will act the Virgin Mary. At last the curtain is drawn.

We see a cottage room, dimly lighted by a lamp, and Mary spinning near her bedside. She sings a country air, and goes on working, till a rustling noise is heard, more light is thrown upon the stage, and a glorious creature, in white raiment, with broad golden wings, appears. He bears a lily, and cries, "Ave Maria, Gratia Plena!" She does not answer, but stands confused, with down-dropped eyes and timid mien. Gabriel rises from the ground and comforts her, and sings aloud his message of glad tidings. Then Mary gathers courage, and, kneeling in her turn, thanks God; and when the angel and his radiance disappears, she sings the song of the Magnificat, clearly and simply, in the darkened room. Very soft and silver sounds this hymn through the great church. The women kneel, and children are hushed as by a lullaby. But some of the hinds and 'prentice-lads begin to think it rather dull. They are not sorry when the next scene opens with a sheep-fold and a little camp-fire. Unmistakable bleatings issue from the fold, and five or six common fellows are sitting round the blazing wood. One might fancy they had stepped straight from the church floor to the stage, so natural do they look. Besides, they call themselves by common names—Colin and Tom Lie-a-bed and Nimble Dick. Many a round laugh wakes echoes in the church when these shepherds stand up, and hold debate about a stolen sheep. Tom Lie-a-bed has nothing to remark but that he is very sleepy, and does not want to go in search of it to-night; Colin cuts jokes, and throws out shrewd suspicions that Dick knows something of the matter; but Dick is sly, and keeps them off the scent, although a few of his asides reveal to the audience that he is the real thief. While they are thus talking, silence falls upon the shepherds. Soft music from the church organ breathes, and they appear to fall asleep.

The stage is now quite dark, and for a few moments the aisles echo only to the dying melody. When, behold, a ray of light is seen, and splendor grows around the stage from hidden candles, and in the glory Gabriel appears upon a higher platform made to look like clouds. The shepherds wake in confusion, striving to shelter their eyes from this unwonted brilliancy. But Gabriel waves his lily, spreads his great gold wings, and bids good cheer with clarion voice. The shepherds fall to worship, and suddenly round Gabriel there gathers a choir of angels, and a song of "Gloria in Excelsis" to the sound of a deep organ is heard far off. From distant aisles it swells, and seems to come from heaven. Through a long resonant fugue the glory flies, and as it ceases with complex

conclusion, the lights die out, the angels disappear, and Gabriel fades into the darkness. Still the shepherds kneel, rustically chanting a carol half in Latin, half in English, which begins "In dulci Jubilo." The people know it well, and when the chorus rises with "Ubi sunt gaudia?" its wild melody is caught by voices up and down the nave. This scene makes deep impression upon many hearts; for the beauty of Gabriel is rare, and few who see him in his angel's dress would know him for the lad who daily carves his lilies and broad water-flags about the pillars of the choir. To that simple audience he interprets Heaven, and little children will see him in their dreams. Dark winter nights and awful forests will be trodden by his feet, made musical by his melodious voice, and parted by the rustling of his wings. The youth himself may return to-morrow to the workman's blouse and chisel, but his memory lives in many minds and may form a part of Christmas for the fancy of men as yet unborn.

The next drawing of the curtain shows us the stable of Bethlehem crowned by its star. There kneels Mary, and Joseph leans upon his staff. The ox and the ass are close at hand, and Jesus lies in jeweled robes on straw within the manger. To right and left bow the shepherds, worshipping in dumb show, while voices from behind chant a solemn hymn. In the midst of the melody is heard the flourish of trumpets, and heralds step upon the stage, followed by the three crowned kings. They have come from the far East, led by the star. The song ceases, while drums and fifes and trumpets play a stately march. The kings pass by, and do obeisance one by one. Each gives some costly gift; each doffs his crown and leaves it at the Saviour's feet. Then they retire to a distance and worship in silence like the shepherds. Again the angels' song is heard, and while it dies away the curtain closes and the lights are put out.

The play is over, and the evening has come. The people must go from the warm church into the frozen snow, and crunch their homeward way beneath the moon. But in their minds they carry a sense of light and music and unearthly loveliness. Not a scene of this day's pageant will be lost. It grows within them and creates the poetry of Christmas. Nor must we forget the sculptors who listen to the play. We spoke of them minutely, because these mysteries sank deep into their souls and found a way into their carvings on the cathedral walls. The monk who made Madonna by the southern porch will remember Gabriel and place him bending low in lordly salutation by her side. The painted glass of the chapter-house will glow with fiery choirs of angels learned by heart that night. And who does not know the mocking devils and quaint satyrs that the humorous sculptor carved among his fruits and flowers? Some of the misereres of the stalls still bear portraits of the shepherd thief, and of the ox

and ass who blinked so blindly when the kings, by torch-light, brought their dazzling gifts. Truly these old miracle-plays and the carved work of cunning hands that they inspired are worth to us more than all the delicate creations of Italian pencils. Our homely Northern churches still retain, for the child who reads their bosses and their sculptured fronts, more Christmas poetry than we can find in Fra Angelico's devoutness or the liveliness of Giotto. Not that Southern artists have done nothing for our Christmas. Cimabue's gigantic angels at Assisi, and the radiant seraphs of Raphael or of Signorelli, were seen by Milton in his Italian journey. He gazed in Romish churches on graceful Nativities, into which Angelico and Credi threw their simple souls. How much they tinged his fancy we cannot say. But what we know of heavenly hierarchies we later men have learned from Milton; and what he saw he spoke, and what he spoke in sounding verse lives for us now and sways our reason, and controls our fancy, and makes fine art of high theology.



New Year's Rites in the Highlands -Charles Rogers in *Social Life in Scotland*

NEW YEAR'S DAY was not in pre-Reformation times associated with any special rites. Hence Scottish Reformers, while subjecting to discipline those who observed Christmas, were willing that New Year's Day should be appropriated to social pleasures. Towards the closing hour of the 31st December each family prepared a hot pint of wassail bowl of which all the members might drink to each other's prosperity as the new year began. Hot pint usually consisted of a mixture of spiced and sweetened ale with an infusion of whiskey. Along with the drinking of the hot pint was associated the practice of first foot, or a neighborly greeting. After the year had commenced, each one hastened to his neighbor's house bearing a small gift; it was deemed "unlucky" to enter "empty handed."

With New Year's Day were in some portions of the Highlands associated peculiar rites. At Strathdown the junior anointed in bed the elder members of the household with water, which the evening before had been silently drawn from "the dead and living food." Thereafter they kindled in each room, after closing the chimneys, bunches of juniper. These rites, the latter attended with much discomfort, were held to ward off pestilence and sorcery.

The direction of the wind on New Year's Eve was supposed to rule the weather during the approaching year. Hence the rhyme:

*If New Year's Eve night-wind blow south,
It betokeneth warmth and growth;*

*If west, much milk,—and fish in the sea:
If north, much cold and storms there will be;
If east, the trees will bear much fruit;
If north-east, flee it, man and brute.*

A "Mystery" as performed in Mexico *-Bayard*
Taylor in Eldorado

AGAINST the wing-wall of the Hacienda del Mayo, which occupied one end of the plaza, was raised a platform, on which stood a table covered with scarlet cloth. A rude bower of cane-leaves, on one end of the platform, represented the manger of Bethlehem; while a cord, stretched from its top across the plaza to a hole in the front of the church, bore a large tinsel star, suspended by a hole in its centre. There was quite a crowd in the plaza, and very soon a procession appeared, coming up from the lower part of the village. The three kings took the lead; the Virgin, mounted on an ass that gloried in a gilded saddle and rose-besprinkled mane and tail, followed them, led by the angel; and several women, with curious masks of paper, brought up the rear. Two characters, of the harlequin sort—one with a dog's head on his shoulders, and the other a bald-headed friar, with a huge hat hanging on his back—played all sorts of antics for the diversion of the crowd. After making the circuit of the plaza, the Virgin was taken to the platform, and entered the manger. King Herod took his seat at the scarlet table, with an attendant in blue coat and red sash, whom I took to be his Prime Minister. The three kings remained on their horses in front of the church; but between them and the platform, under the string on which the star was to slide, walked two men in long white robes and blue hoods, with parchment folios in their hands. These were the Wise Men of the East, as one might readily know from their solemn air, and the mysterious glances which they cast towards all quarters of the heavens.

In a little while, a company of women on the platform, concealed behind a curtain, sang an angelic chorus to the tune of 'Opescator dell' onda.' At the proper moment, the Magi turned towards the platform, followed by the star, to which a string was conveniently attached, that it might be slid along the line. The three kings followed the star till it reached the manger, when they dismounted, and inquired for the sovereign, whom it had led them to visit. They were invited upon the platform, and introduced to Herod, as the only king; this did not seem to satisfy them, and, after some conversation, they retired. By this time the star had receded to the other end of the line, and commenced moving forward again, they following. The angel called them into the manger, where, upon their knees, they were shown a small wooden box,

supposed to contain the sacred infant; they then retired, and the star brought them back no more. After this departure, King Herod declared himself greatly confused by what he had witnessed, and was very much afraid this newly found king would weaken his power. Upon consultation with his Prime Minister, the Massacre of the Innocents was decided upon, as the only means of security.

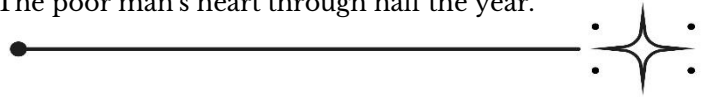
The angel, on hearing this, gave warning to the Virgin, who quickly got down from the platform, mounted her bespangled donkey, and hurried off. Herod's Prime Minister directed all the children to be handed up for execution. A boy, in a ragged sarape, was caught and thrust forward; the Minister took him by the heels in spite of his kicking, and held his head on the table. The little brother and sister of the boy, thinking he was really to be decapitated, yelled at the top of their voices, in an agony of terror, which threw the crowd into a roar of laughter. King Herod brought down his sword with a whack on the table, and the Prime Minister, dipping his brush into a pot of white paint which stood before him, made a flaring cross on the boy's face. Several other boys were caught and served likewise; and, finally, the two harlequins, whose kicks and struggles nearly shook down the platform. The procession then went off up the hill, followed by the whole population of the village. All the evening there were fandangoes in the méson, bonfires and rockets on the plaza, ringing of bells, and high mass in the church, with the accompaniment of two guitars, tinkling to lively polkas.

Old Christmastide *-Sir Walter Scott*

HEAP on more wood!—the wind is chill;
But let it whistle as it will,
We'll keep our Christmas merry still.
Each age has deemed the new-born year
The fittest time for festal cheer.
Even heathen yet, the savage Dane
At Iol more deep the mead did drain;
High on the beach his galley drew,
And feasted all his pirate crew;
Then in his low and pine-built hall,
Where shields and axes decked the wall,
They gorged upon the half-dressed steer;
Caroused in seas of sable beer;
While round, in brutal jest, were thrown
The half-gnawed rib and marrow-bone,
Or listened all, in grim delight,
While scalds yelled out the joy of fight,
Then forth in frenzy would they hie,
While wildly loose their red locks fly;
And, dancing round the blazing pile,
They make such barbarous mirth the while,

As best might to the mind recall
 The boisterous joys of Odin's hall.
 And well our Christian sires of old
 Loved when the year its course had rolled,
 And brought blithe Christmas back again,
 With all his hospitable train.
 Domestic and religious rite
 Gave honour to the holy night:
 On Christmas eve the bells were rung;
 On Christmas eve the mass was sung;
 That only night, in all the year,
 Saw the stoled priest the chalice rear.
 The damsel donned her kirtle sheen;
 The hall was dressed with holly green;
 Forth to the wood did merry men go,
 To gather in the mistletoe;
 Then opened wide the baron's hall
 To vassal, tenant, serf, and all;
 Power laid his rod of rule aside,
 And ceremony doffed his pride.
 The heir, with roses in his shoes,
 That night might village partner choose;
 The lord, underogating, share
 The vulgar game of "post and pair."
 All hailed, with uncontrolled delight,
 And general voice, the happy night
 That to the cottage, as the crown,
 Brought tidings of salvation down.
 The fire, with well-dried logs supplied,
 Went roaring up the chimney wide;
 The huge hall-table's oaken face,
 Scrubbed till it shone, the day to grace,
 Bore then upon its massive board
 No mark to part the squire and lord.
 Then was brought in the lusty brawn
 By old blue-coated serving man;
 Then the grim boar's head frowned on high,
 Crested with bays and rosemary.
 Well can the green-garbed ranger tell,
 How, when, and where, the monster fell;
 What dogs before his death he tore,
 And all the baiting of the boar.
 The Wassail round, in good brown bowls,
 Garnished with ribbons, blithely trows.
 There the huge sirloin reeked; hard by
 Plum-porridge stood, and Christmas pie;
 Nor failed old Scotland to produce,
 At such high tide, her savoury goose.
 Then came the merry masquers in,
 And carols roared with blithesome din;
 If unmelodious was the song,
 It was a hearty note, and strong,
 Who lists may in their mumming see
 Traces of ancient mystery;
 White shirts supplied the masquerade

And smutted cheeks the vizors made:
 But, O! what masquers, richly dight,
 Can boast of bosoms half so light!
 England was merry England, when
 Old Christmas brought his sports again.
 'Twas Christmas broached the mightiest ale;
 'Twas Christmas told the merriest tale;
 A Christmas gambol oft could cheer
 The poor man's heart through half the year.



The Doge's Christmas Shooting -F. Marion
Crawford in Salve Venetia!

AT certain fixed times the Doge was allowed the relaxation of shooting, but with so many restrictions and injunctions that the sport must have been intolerably irksome. He was allowed or, more strictly speaking, was ordered to proceed for this purpose, and about Christmas time, to certain islets in the lagoons, where wild ducks bred in great numbers. On his return he was obliged to present each member of the Great Council with five ducks. This was called the gift of the "Oselle," that being the name given by the people to the birds in question. In 1521, about five thousand brace of birds had to be killed or snared in order to fulfil this requirement; and if the unhappy Doge was not fortunate enough, with his attendants, to secure the required number, he was obliged to provide them by buying them elsewhere and at any price, for the claims of the Great Council had to be satisfied in any case. This was often an expensive affair.

There was also another personage who could not have derived much enjoyment from the Christmas shooting. This was the Doge's chamberlain, whose duty it was to see to the just distribution of the game, so that each bunch of two-and-a-half brace should contain a fair average of fat and thin birds, lest it should be said that the Doge showed favour to some members of the Council more than to others.

By and by a means was sought of commuting this annual tribute of ducks. The Doge Antonio Grimani requested and obtained permission to coin a medal of the value of a quarter of a ducat, equal to about four shillings or one dollar, and to call it "a Duck," "Osella," whereby it was signified that it took the place of the traditional bird.

A Christmas Tree

Charles Dickens



A. CHEVALER, PAINTED IN 1848

I have been looking on, this evening, at a merry company of children assembled round that pretty German toy, a Christmas Tree. The tree was planted in the middle of a great round table, and towered high above their heads. It was brilliantly lighted by a multitude of little tapers; and everywhere sparkled and glittered with bright objects. There were rosy-cheeked dolls, hiding behind the green leaves; and there were real watches (with movable hands, at least, and an endless capacity of being wound up) dangling from innumerable twigs; there were French-polished tables, chairs, bedsteads, wardrobes, eight-day clocks, and various other articles of domestic furniture (wonderfully made, in tin, at Wolverhampton), perched among the boughs, as if in preparation for some fairy housekeeping; there were jolly, broad-faced little men, much more agreeable in appearance than many real men—and no wonder, for their heads took off, and showed them to be full of sugar-plums; there were fiddles and drums; there were tambourines, books, work-boxes, paint-boxes, sweetmeat-boxes, peep-show boxes, and all kinds of boxes; there were trinkets for the elder girls, far brighter than any grown-up gold and jewels; there were baskets and pin-cushions in all devices; there were guns, swords, and banners; there were witches standing in enchanted rings of pasteboard, to tell fortunes; there were teetotums, humming-tops, needle-cases, pen-wipers, smelling-bottles, conversation-cards, bouquet-holders; real fruit, made artificially dazzling with gold leaf; imitation apples, pears, and walnuts, crammed with surprises; in short, as a pretty child, before me, delightedly whispered to another pretty child, her bosom friend, “There was everything, and more.” This motley collection of odd objects, clustering on the tree like magic fruit, and flashing back the bright looks directed towards it from every side—some of the diamond-eyes admiring it were hardly on a level with the table, and a few were languishing in timid wonder on the bosoms of pretty mothers, aunts, and nurses—made a lively realisation of the fancies of childhood; and set me thinking how all the trees that grow and all the things that come into existence on the earth, have their wild adornments at that well-remembered time.

Being now at home again, and alone, the only person in the house awake, my thoughts are drawn back, by a fascination which I do not care to resist, to my own childhood. I begin to consider, what do we all remember best upon the branches of the Christmas Tree of our own young Christmas days, by which we climbed to real life.

Straight, in the middle of the room, cramped in the freedom of its growth by no encircling walls or soon-reached ceiling, a shadowy tree arises; and, looking up into the dreamy brightness of its top—for I observe in

this tree the singular property that it appears to grow downward towards the earth—I look into my youngest Christmas recollections!

All toys at first, I find. Up yonder, among the green holly and red berries, is the Tumbler with his hands in his pockets, who wouldn't lie down, but whenever he was put upon the floor, persisted in rolling his fat body about, until he rolled himself still, and brought those lobster eyes of his to bear upon me—when I affected to laugh very much, but in my heart of hearts was extremely doubtful of him. Close beside him is that infernal snuff-box, out of which there sprang a demoniacal Counsellor in a black gown, with an obnoxious head of hair, and a red cloth mouth, wide open, who was not to be endured on any terms, but could not be put away either; for he used suddenly, in a highly magnified state, to fly out of Mammoth Snuff-boxes in dreams, when least expected. Nor is the frog with cobbler's wax on his tail, far off; for there was no knowing where he wouldn't jump; and when he flew over the candle, and came upon one's hand with that spotted back—red on a green ground—he was horrible. The cardboard lady in a blue-silk skirt, who was stood up against the candlestick to dance, and whom I see on the same branch, was milder, and was beautiful; but I can't say as much for the larger cardboard man, who used to be hung against the wall and pulled by a string; there was a sinister expression in that nose of his; and when he got his legs round his neck (which he very often did), he was ghastly, and not a creature to be alone with.

When did that dreadful Mask first look at me? Who put it on, and why was I so frightened that the sight of it is an era in my life? It is not a hideous visage in itself; it is even meant to be droll, why then were its stolid features so intolerable? Surely not because it hid the wearer's face. An apron would have done as much; and though I should have preferred even the apron away, it would not have been absolutely insupportable, like the mask. Was it the immovability of the mask? The doll's face was immovable, but I was not afraid of *her*. Perhaps that fixed and set change coming over a real face, infused into my quickened heart some remote suggestion and dread of the universal change that is to come on every face, and make it still? Nothing reconciled me to it. No drummers, from whom proceeded a melancholy chirping on the turning of a handle; no regiment of soldiers, with a mute band, taken out of a box, and fitted, one by one, upon a stiff and lazy little set of lazy-tongs; no old woman, made of wires and a brown-paper composition, cutting up a pie for two small children; could give me a permanent comfort, for a long time. Nor was it any satisfaction to be shown the Mask, and see that it was made of paper, or to have it locked up

and be assured that no one wore it. The mere recollection of that fixed face, the mere knowledge of its existence anywhere, was sufficient to awake me in the night all perspiration and horror, with, "O I know it's coming! O the mask!"

I never wondered what the dear old donkey with the panniers—there he is! was made of, then! His hide was real to the touch, I recollect. And the great black horse with the round red spots all over him—the horse that I could even get upon—I never wondered what had brought him to that strange condition, or thought that such a horse was not commonly seen at Newmarket. The four horses of no colour, next to him, that went into the waggon of cheeses, and could be taken out and stabled under the piano, appear to have bits of fur-tippet for their tails, and other bits for their manes, and to stand on pegs instead of legs, but it was not so when they were brought home for a Christmas present. They were all right, then; neither was their harness unceremoniously nailed into their chests, as appears to be the case now. The tinkling works of the music-cart, I *did* find out, to be made of quill tooth-picks and wire; and I always thought that little tumbler in his shirt sleeves, perpetually swarming up one side of a wooden frame, and coming down, head foremost, on the other, rather a weak-minded person—though good-natured; but the Jacob's Ladder, next him, made of little squares of red wood, that went flapping and clattering over one another, each developing a different picture, and the whole enlivened by small bells, was a mighty marvel and a great delight.

Ah! The Doll's house!—of which I was not proprietor, but where I visited. I don't admire the Houses of Parliament half so much as that stone-fronted mansion with real glass windows, and door-steps, and a real balcony—greener than I ever see now, except at watering places; and even they afford but a poor imitation. And though it *did* open all at once, the entire house-front (which was a blow, I admit, as cancelling the fiction of a staircase), it was but to shut it up again, and I could believe. Even open, there were three distinct rooms in it: a sitting-room and bed-room, elegantly furnished, and best of all, a kitchen, with uncommonly soft fire-irons, a plentiful assortment of diminutive utensils—oh, the warming-pan!—and a tin man-cook in profile, who was always going to fry two fish. What Barmecide justice have I done to the noble feasts wherein the set of wooden platters figured, each with its own peculiar delicacy, as a ham or turkey, glued tight on to it, and garnished with something green, which I recollect as moss! Could all the Temperance Societies of these later days, united, give me such a tea-drinking as I have had through the means of yonder little set of blue crockery, which really would hold liquid (it ran out of the small wooden cask, I recollect, and tasted of matches), and

which made tea, nectar. And if the two legs of the ineffectual little sugar-tongs did tumble over one another, and want purpose, like Punch's hands, what does it matter? And if I did once shriek out, as a poisoned child, and strike the fashionable company with consternation, by reason of having drunk a little teaspoon, inadvertently dissolved in too hot tea, I was never the worse for it, except by a powder!

Upon the next branches of the tree, lower down, hard by the green roller and miniature gardening-tools, how thick the books begin to hang. Thin books, in themselves, at first, but many of them, and with deliciously smooth covers of bright red or green. What fat black letters to begin with! "A was an archer, and shot at a frog." Of course he was. He was an apple-pie also, and there he is! He was a good many things in his time, was A, and so were most of his friends, except X, who had so little versatility, that I never knew him to get beyond Xerxes or Xantippe—like Y, who was always confined to a Yacht or a Yew Tree; and Z condemned for ever to be a Zebra or a Zany. But, now, the very tree itself changes, and becomes a bean-stalk—the marvellous bean-stalk up which Jack climbed to the Giant's house! And now, those dreadfully interesting, double-headed giants, with their clubs over their shoulders, begin to stride along the boughs in a perfect throng, dragging knights and ladies home for dinner by the hair of their heads. And Jack—how noble, with his sword of sharpness, and his shoes of swiftness! Again those old meditations come upon me as I gaze up at him; and I debate within myself whether there was more than one Jack (which I am loth to believe possible), or only one genuine original admirable Jack, who achieved all the recorded exploits.

Good for Christmas-time is the ruddy colour of the cloak, in which—the tree making a forest of itself for her to trip through, with her basket—Little Red Riding-Hood comes to me one Christmas Eve to give me information of the cruelty and treachery of that dissembling Wolf who ate her grandmother, without making any impression on his appetite, and then ate her, after making that ferocious joke about his teeth. She was my first love. I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding-Hood, I should have known perfect bliss. But, it was not to be; and there was nothing for it but to look out the Wolf in the Noah's Ark there, and put him late in the procession on the table, as a monster who was to be degraded. O the wonderful Noah's Ark! It was not found seaworthy when put in a washing-tub, and the animals were crammed in at the roof, and needed to have their legs well shaken down before they could be got in, even there—and then, ten to one but they began to tumble out at the door, which was but imperfectly fastened with a wire latch—but what was *that* against it! Consider the noble fly, a size or two smaller than the elephant: the lady-bird, the butterfly—all triumphs of art! Consider

the goose, whose feet were so small, and whose balance was so indifferent, that he usually tumbled forward, and knocked down all the animal creation. Consider Noah and his family, like idiotic tobacco-stoppers; and how the leopard stuck to warm little fingers; and how the tails of the larger animals used gradually to resolve themselves into frayed bits of string!

Hush! Again a forest, and somebody up in a tree—not Robin Hood, not Valentine, not the Yellow Dwarf (I have passed him and all Mother Bunch's wonders, without mention), but an Eastern King with a glittering scimitar and turban. By Allah! two Eastern Kings, for I see another, looking over his shoulder! Down upon the grass, at the tree's foot, lies the full length of a coal-black Giant, stretched asleep, with his head in a lady's lap; and near them is a glass box, fastened with four locks of shining steel, in which he keeps the lady prisoner when he is awake. I see the four keys at his girdle now. The lady makes signs to the two kings in the tree, who softly descend. It is the setting-in of the bright Arabian Nights.

Oh, now all common things become uncommon and enchanted to me. All lamps are wonderful; all rings are talismans. Common flower-pots are full of treasure, with a little earth scattered on the top; trees are for Ali Baba to hide in; beef-steaks are to throw down into the Valley of Diamonds, that the precious stones may stick to them, and be carried by the eagles to their nests, whence the traders, with loud cries, will scare them. Tarts are made, according to the recipe of the Vizier's son of Bussorah, who turned pastrycook after he was set down in his drawers at the gate of Damascus; cobblers are all Mustaphas, and in the habit of sewing up people cut into four pieces, to whom they are taken blind-fold.

Any iron ring let into stone is the entrance to a cave which only waits for the magician, and the little fire, and the necromancy, that will make the earth shake. All the dates imported come from the same tree as that unlucky date, with whose shell the merchant knocked out the eye of the genie's invisible son. All olives are of the stock of that fresh fruit, concerning which the Commander of the Faithful overheard the boy conduct the fictitious trial of the fraudulent olive merchant; all apples are akin to the apple purchased (with two others) from the Sultan's gardener for three sequins, and which the tall black slave stole from the child. All dogs are associated with the dog, really a transformed man, who jumped upon the baker's counter, and put his paw on the piece of bad money. All rice recalls the rice which the awful lady, who was a ghoul, could only peck by grains, because of her nightly feasts in the burial-place. My very rocking-horse,—there he is, with his nostrils turned completely inside-out, indicative of Blood!—should have a peg in his neck, by virtue thereof to fly away with

me, as the wooden horse did with the Prince of Persia, in the sight of all his father's Court.

Yes, on every object that I recognise among those upper branches of my Christmas Tree, I see this fairy light! When I wake in bed, at daybreak, on the cold, dark, winter mornings, the white snow dimly beheld, outside, through the frost on the window-pane, I hear Dinarzade. "Sister, sister, if you are yet awake, I pray you finish the history of the Young King of the Black Islands." Scheherazade replies, "If my lord the Sultan will suffer me to live another day, sister, I will not only finish that, but tell you a more wonderful story yet." Then, the gracious Sultan goes out, giving no orders for the execution, and we all three breathe again.

At this height of my tree I begin to see, cowering among the leaves—it may be born of turkey, or of pudding, or mince pie, or of these many fancies, jumbled with Robinson Crusoe on his desert island, Philip Quarll among the monkeys, Sandford and Merton with Mr. Barlow, Mother Bunch, and the Mask—or it may be the result of indigestion, assisted by imagination and over-doctoring—a prodigious nightmare. It is so exceedingly indistinct, that I don't know why it's frightful—but I know it is. I can only make out that it is an immense array of shapeless things, which appear to be planted on a vast exaggeration of the lazy-tongs that used to bear the toy soldiers, and to be slowly coming close to my eyes, and receding to an immeasurable distance. When it comes closest, it is worse. In connection with it I descry remembrances of winter nights incredibly long; of being sent early to bed, as a punishment for some small offence, and waking in two hours, with a sensation of having been asleep two nights; of the laden hopelessness of morning ever dawning; and the oppression of a weight of remorse.

And now, I see a wonderful row of little lights rise smoothly out of the ground, before a vast green curtain. Now, a bell rings—a magic bell, which still sounds in my ears unlike all other bells—and music plays, amidst a buzz of voices, and a fragrant smell of orange-peel and oil. Anon, the magic bell commands the music to cease, and the great green curtain rolls itself up majestically, and The Play begins! The devoted dog of Montargis avenges the death of his master, foully murdered in the Forest of Bondy; and a humorous Peasant with a red nose and a very little hat, whom I take from this hour forth to my bosom as a friend (I think he was a Waiter or an Hostler at a village Inn, but many years have passed since he and I have met), remarks that the sassigassity of that dog is indeed surprising; and evermore this jocular conceit will live in my remembrance fresh and unfading, overtopping all possible jokes, unto the end of time. Or now, I learn with bitter tears how poor Jane Shore, dressed all in white, and with her brown hair hanging down, went starving through the streets; or



The Joy of Snow

Madison Square - Snowstorm
Childe Hassam



The Snowstorm
(Winter)
Francisco Goya





The Skating Minister - Henry Raeburn

how George Barnwell killed the worthiest uncle that ever man had, and was afterwards so sorry for it that he ought to have been let off. Comes swift to comfort me, the Pantomime—stupendous Phenomenon!—when clowns are shot from loaded mortars into the great chandelier, bright constellation that it is; when Harlequins, covered all over with scales of pure gold, twist and sparkle, like amazing fish; when Pantaloon (whom I deem it no irreverence to compare in my own mind to my grandfather) puts red-hot pokers in his pocket, and cries “Here’s somebody coming!” or taxes the Clown with petty larceny, by saying, “Now, I sawed you do it!” when Everything is capable, with the greatest ease, of being changed into Anything; and “Nothing is, but thinking makes it so.” Now, too, I perceive my first experience of the dreary sensation—often to return in after-life—of being unable, next day, to get back to the dull, settled world; of wanting to live for ever in the bright atmosphere I have quitted; of doting on the little Fairy, with the wand like a celestial Barber’s Pole, and pining for a Fairy immortality along with her. Ah, she comes back, in many shapes, as my eye wanders down the branches of my Christmas Tree, and goes as often, and has never yet stayed by me!

Out of this delight springs the toy-theatre,—there it is, with its familiar proscenium, and ladies in feathers, in the boxes!—and all its attendant occupation with paste and glue, and gum, and water colours, in the getting-up of *The Miller and his Men*, and *Elizabeth*, or *the Exile of Siberia*. In spite of a few besetting accidents and failures (particularly an unreasonable disposition in the respectable *Kelmar*, and some others, to become faint in the legs, and double up, at exciting points of the drama), a teeming world of fancies so suggestive and all-embracing, that, far below it on my Christmas Tree, I see dark, dirty, real Theatres in the day-time, adorned with these associations as with the freshest garlands of the rarest flowers, and charming me yet.

But hark! The Waits are playing, and they break my childish sleep! What images do I associate with the Christmas music as I see them set forth on the Christmas Tree? Known before all the others, keeping far apart from all the others, they gather round my little bed. An angel, speaking to a group of shepherds in a field; some travellers, with eyes uplifted, following a star; a baby in a manger; a child in a spacious temple, talking with grave men; a solemn figure, with a mild and beautiful face, raising a dead girl by the hand; again, near a city gate, calling back the son of a widow, on his bier, to life; a crowd of people looking through the opened roof of a chamber where he sits, and letting down a sick person on a bed, with ropes; the same, in a tempest, walking on the water to a ship; again, on a sea-shore, teaching a great multitude; again, with a child upon his knee, and other children round; again, restoring sight to the blind, speech to the dumb, hearing to the deaf, health to the

sick, strength to the lame, knowledge to the ignorant; again, dying upon a Cross, watched by armed soldiers, a thick darkness coming on, the earth beginning to shake, and only one voice heard, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Still, on the lower and maturer branches of the Tree, Christmas associations cluster thick. School-books shut up; Ovid and Virgil silenced; the Rule of Three, with its cool impertinent inquiries, long disposed of; Terence and Plautus acted no more, in an arena of huddled desks and forms, all chipped, and notched, and inked; cricket-bats, stumps, and balls, left higher up, with the smell of trodden grass and the softened noise of shouts in the evening air; the tree is still fresh, still gay. If I no more come home at Christmas-time, there will be boys and girls (thank Heaven!) while the World lasts; and they do! Yonder they dance and play upon the branches of my Tree, God bless them, merrily, and my heart dances and plays too!

And I do come home at Christmas. We all do, or we all should. We all come home, or ought to come home, for a short holiday—the longer, the better—from the great boarding-school, where we are for ever working at our arithmetical slates, to take, and give a rest. As to going a visiting, where can we not go, if we will; where have we not been, when we would; starting our fancy from our Christmas Tree!

Away into the winter prospect. There are many such upon the tree! On, by low-lying, misty grounds, through fens and fogs, up long hills, winding dark as caverns between thick plantations, almost shutting out the sparkling stars; so, out on broad heights, until we stop at last, with sudden silence, at an avenue. The gate-bell has a deep, half-awful sound in the frosty air; the gate swings open on its hinges; and, as we drive up to a great house, the glancing lights grow larger in the windows, and the opposing rows of trees seem to fall solemnly back on either side, to give us place. At intervals, all day, a frightened hare has shot across this whitened turf; or the distant clatter of a herd of deer trampling the hard frost, has, for the minute, crushed the silence too. Their watchful eyes beneath the fern may be shining now, if we could see them, like the icy dewdrops on the leaves; but they are still, and all is still. And so, the lights growing larger, and the trees falling back before us, and closing up again behind us, as if to forbid retreat, we come to the house.

There is probably a smell of roasted chestnuts and other good comfortable things all the time, for we are telling Winter Stories—Ghost Stories, or more shame for us—round the Christmas fire; and we have never stirred, except to draw a little nearer to it. But, no matter for that. We came to the house, and it is an old house, full of great chimneys where wood is burnt on ancient dogs upon the hearth, and grim portraits (some

of them with grim legends, too) lower distrustfully from the oaken panels of the walls. We are a middle-aged nobleman, and we make a generous supper with our host and hostess and their guests—it being Christmas-time, and the old house full of company—and then we go to bed. Our room is a very old room. It is hung with tapestry. We don't like the portrait of a cavalier in green, over the fireplace. There are great black beams in the ceiling, and there is a great black bedstead, supported at the foot by two great black figures, who seem to have come off a couple of tombs in the old baronial church in the park, for our particular accommodation. But, we are not a superstitious nobleman, and we don't mind. Well! we dismiss our servant, lock the door, and sit before the fire in our dressing-gown, musing about a great many things. At length we go to bed. Well! we can't sleep. We toss and tumble, and can't sleep. The embers on the hearth burn fitfully and make the room look ghostly. We can't help peeping out over the counterpane, at the two black figures and the cavalier—that wicked-looking cavalier—in green. In the flickering light they seem to advance and retire: which, though we are not by any means a superstitious nobleman, is not agreeable. Well! we get nervous—more and more nervous. We say “This is very foolish, but we can't stand this; we'll pretend to be ill, and knock up somebody.” Well! we are just going to do it, when the locked door opens, and there comes in a young woman, deadly pale, and with long fair hair, who glides to the fire, and sits down in the chair we have left there, wringing her hands. Then, we notice that her clothes are wet. Our tongue cleaves to the roof of our mouth, and we can't speak; but, we observe her accurately. Her clothes are wet; her long hair is dabbled with moist mud; she is dressed in the fashion of two hundred years ago; and she has at her girdle a bunch of rusty keys. Well! there she sits, and we can't even faint, we are in such a state about it. Presently she gets up, and tries all the locks in the room with the rusty keys, which won't fit one of them; then, she fixes her eyes on the portrait of the cavalier in green, and says, in a low, terrible voice, “The stags know it!” After that, she wrings her hands again, passes the bedside, and goes out at the door. We hurry on our dressing-gown, seize our pistols (we always travel with pistols), and are following, when we find the door locked. We turn the key, look out into the dark gallery; no one there. We wander away, and try to find our servant. Can't be done. We pace the gallery till daybreak; then return to our deserted room, fall asleep, and are awakened by our servant (nothing ever haunts him) and the shining sun. Well! we make a wretched breakfast, and all the company say we look queer. After breakfast, we go over the house with our host, and then we take him to the portrait of the cavalier in green, and then it all comes out. He was false to a young housekeeper once

attached to that family, and famous for her beauty, who drowned herself in a pond, and whose body was discovered, after a long time, because the stags refused to drink of the water. Since which, it has been whispered that she traverses the house at midnight (but goes especially to that room where the cavalier in green was wont to sleep), trying the old locks with the rusty keys. Well! we tell our host of what we have seen, and a shade comes over his features, and he begs it may be hushed up; and so it is. But, it's all true; and we said so, before we died (we are dead now) to many responsible people.

There is no end to the old houses, with resounding galleries, and dismal state-bedchambers, and haunted wings shut up for many years, through which we may ramble, with an agreeable creeping up our back, and encounter any number of ghosts, but (it is worthy of remark perhaps) reducible to a very few general types and classes; for, ghosts have little originality, and “walk” in a beaten track. Thus, it comes to pass, that a certain room in a certain old hall, where a certain bad lord, baronet, knight, or gentleman, shot himself, has certain planks in the floor from which the blood *will not* be taken out. You may scrape and scrape, as the present owner has done, or plane and plane, as his father did, or scrub and scrub, as his grandfather did, or burn and burn with strong acids, as his great-grandfather did, but, there the blood will still be—no redder and no paler—no more and no less—always just the same. Thus, in such another house there is a haunted door, that never will keep open; or another door that never will keep shut, or a haunted sound of a spinning-wheel, or a hammer, or a footstep, or a cry, or a sigh, or a horse's tramp, or the rattling of a chain. Or else, there is a turret-clock, which, at the midnight hour, strikes thirteen when the head of the family is going to die; or a shadowy, immovable black carriage which at such a time is always seen by somebody, waiting near the great gates in the stable-yard. Or thus, it came to pass how Lady Mary went to pay a visit at a large wild house in the Scottish Highlands, and, being fatigued with her long journey, retired to bed early, and innocently said, next morning, at the breakfast-table, “How odd, to have so late a party last night, in this remote place, and not to tell me of it, before I went to bed!” Then, every one asked Lady Mary what she meant? Then, Lady Mary replied, “Why, all night long, the carriages were driving round and round the terrace, underneath my window!” Then, the owner of the house turned pale, and so did his Lady, and Charles Macdoodle of Macdoodle signed to Lady Mary to say no more, and every one was silent. After breakfast, Charles Macdoodle told Lady Mary that it was a tradition in the family that those rumbling carriages on the terrace betokened death. And so it proved, for, two months afterwards, the Lady of the mansion died. And Lady Mary, who was a Maid of Honour at Court, often told this story to the old

Queen Charlotte; by this token that the old King always said, "Eh, eh? What, what? Ghosts, ghosts? No such thing, no such thing!" And never left off saying so, until he went to bed.

Or, a friend of somebody's whom most of us know, when he was a young man at college, had a particular friend, with whom he made the compact that, if it were possible for the Spirit to return to this earth after its separation from the body, he of the twain who first died, should reappear to the other. In course of time, this compact was forgotten by our friend; the two young men having progressed in life, and taken diverging paths that were wide asunder. But, one night, many years afterwards, our friend being in the North of England, and staying for the night in an inn, on the Yorkshire Moors, happened to look out of bed; and there, in the moonlight, leaning on a bureau near the window, steadfastly regarding him, saw his old college friend! The appearance being solemnly addressed, replied, in a kind of whisper, but very audibly, "Do not come near me. I am dead. I am here to redeem my promise. I come from another world, but may not disclose its secrets!" Then, the whole form becoming paler, melted, as it were, into the moonlight, and faded away.

Or, there was the daughter of the first occupier of the picturesque Elizabethan house, so famous in our neighbourhood. You have heard about her? No! Why, *She* went out one summer evening at twilight, when she was a beautiful girl, just seventeen years of age, to gather flowers in the garden; and presently came running, terrified, into the hall to her father, saying, "Oh, dear father, I have met myself!" He took her in his arms, and told her it was fancy, but she said, "Oh no! I met myself in the broad walk, and I was pale and gathering withered flowers, and I turned my head, and held them up!" And, that night, she died; and a picture of her story was begun, though never finished, and they say it is somewhere in the house to this day, with its face to the wall.

Or, the uncle of my brother's wife was riding home on horseback, one mellow evening at sunset, when, in a green lane close to his own house, he saw a man standing before him, in the very centre of a narrow way. "Why does that man in the cloak stand there!" he thought. "Does he want me to ride over him?" But the figure never moved. He felt a strange sensation at seeing it so still, but slackened his trot and rode forward. When he was so close to it, as almost to touch it with his stirrup, his horse shied, and the figure glided up the bank, in a curious, unearthly manner—backward, and without seeming to use its feet—and was gone. The uncle of my brother's wife, exclaiming, "Good Heaven! It's my cousin Harry, from Bombay!" put spurs to his horse, which was suddenly in a profuse sweat, and, wondering at such strange behaviour, dashed round to the front of

his house. There, he saw the same figure, just passing in at the long French window of the drawing-room, opening on the ground. He threw his bridle to a servant, and hastened in after it. His sister was sitting there, alone. "Alice, where's my cousin Harry?" "Your cousin Harry, John?" "Yes. From Bombay. I met him in the lane just now, and saw him enter here, this instant." Not a creature had been seen by any one; and in that hour and minute, as it afterwards appeared, this cousin died in India.

Or, it was a certain sensible old maiden lady, who died at ninety-nine, and retained her faculties to the last, who really did see the Orphan Boy; a story which has often been incorrectly told, but, of which the real truth is this—because it is, in fact, a story belonging to our family—and she was a connexion of our family. When she was about forty years of age, and still an uncommonly fine woman (her lover died young, which was the reason why she never married, though she had many offers), she went to stay at a place in Kent, which her brother, an Indian-Merchant, had newly bought. There was a story that this place had once been held in trust by the guardian of a young boy; who was himself the next heir, and who killed the young boy by harsh and cruel treatment. She knew nothing of that. It has been said that there was a Cage in her bedroom in which the guardian used to put the boy. There was no such thing. There was only a closet. She went to bed, made no alarm whatever in the night, and in the morning said composedly to her maid when she came in, "Who is the pretty forlorn-looking child who has been peeping out of that closet all night?" The maid replied by giving a loud scream, and instantly decamping. She was surprised; but she was a woman of remarkable strength of mind, and she dressed herself and went downstairs, and closeted herself with her brother. "Now, Walter," she said, "I have been disturbed all night by a pretty, forlorn-looking boy, who has been constantly peeping out of that closet in my room, which I can't open. This is some trick." "I am afraid not, Charlotte," said he, "for it is the legend of the house. It is the Orphan Boy. What did he do?" "He opened the door softly," said she, "and peeped out. Sometimes, he came a step or two into the room. Then, I called to him, to encourage him, and he shrunk, and shuddered, and crept in again, and shut the door." "The closet has no communication, Charlotte," said her brother, "with any other part of the house, and it's nailed up." This was undeniably true, and it took two carpenters a whole forenoon to get it open, for examination. Then, she was satisfied that she had seen the Orphan Boy. But, the wild and terrible part of the story is, that he was also seen by three of her brother's sons, in succession, who all died young. On the occasion of each child being taken ill, he came home in a heat, twelve

hours before, and said, Oh, Mamma, he had been playing under a particular oak-tree, in a certain meadow, with a strange boy—a pretty, forlorn-looking boy, who was very timid, and made signs! From fatal experience, the parents came to know that this was the Orphan Boy, and that the course of that child whom he chose for his little playmate was surely run.

Legion is the name of the German castles, where we sit up alone to wait for the Spectre—where we are shown into a room, made comparatively cheerful for our reception—where we glance round at the shadows, thrown on the blank walls by the crackling fire—where we feel very lonely when the village innkeeper and his pretty daughter have retired, after laying down a fresh store of wood upon the hearth, and setting forth on the small table such supper-cheer as a cold roast capon, bread, grapes, and a flask of old Rhine wine—where the reverberating doors close on their retreat, one after another, like so many peals of sullen thunder—and where, about the small hours of the night, we come into the knowledge of divers supernatural mysteries. Legion is the name of the haunted German students, in whose society we draw yet nearer to the fire, while the schoolboy in the corner opens his eyes wide and round, and flies off the footstool he has chosen for his seat, when the door accidentally blows open. Vast is the crop of such fruit, shining on our Christmas Tree; in blossom, almost at the very top; ripening all down the boughs!

Among the later toys and fancies hanging there—as idle often and less pure—be the images once associated with the sweet old Waits, the softened music in the night, ever unalterable! Encircled by the social thoughts of Christmas-time, still let the benignant figure of my childhood stand unchanged! In every cheerful image and suggestion that the season brings, may the bright star that rested above the poor roof, be the star of all the Christian World! A moment's pause, O vanishing tree, of which the lower boughs are dark to me as yet, and let me look once more! I know there are blank spaces on thy branches, where eyes that I have loved have shone and smiled; from which they are departed. But, far above, I see the raiser of the dead girl, and the Widow's Son; and God is good! If Age be hiding for me in the unseen portion of thy downward growth, O may I, with a grey head, turn a child's heart to that figure yet, and a child's trustfulness and confidence!

Now, the tree is decorated with bright merriment, and song, and dance, and cheerfulness. And they are welcome. Innocent and welcome be they ever held, beneath the branches of the Christmas Tree, which cast no gloomy shadow! But, as it sinks into the ground, I hear a whisper going through the leaves. "This, in commemoration of the law of love and kindness, mercy and compassion. This, in remembrance of Me!"



The Little Match Girl

A translation of Hans Christian Andersen's
"Den Lille Pige Med Svovlstikkerne" by Jean
Hersholt.



It was so terribly cold. Snow was falling, and it was almost dark. Evening came on, the last evening of the year. In the cold and gloom a poor little girl, bareheaded and barefoot, was walking through the streets. Of course when she had left her house she'd had slippers on, but what good had they been? They were very big slippers, way too big for her, for they belonged to her mother. The little girl had lost them running across the road, where two carriages had rattled by terribly fast. One slipper she'd not been able to find again, and a boy had run off with the other, saying he could use it very well as a cradle some day when he had children of his own. And so the little girl walked on her naked feet, which were quite red and blue with the cold. In an old apron she carried several packages of matches, and she held a box of them in her hand. No one had bought any from her all day long, and no one had given her a cent.

Shivering with cold and hunger, she crept along, a picture of misery, poor little girl! The snowflakes fell on her long fair hair, which hung in pretty curls over her neck. In all the windows lights were shining, and there was a wonderful smell of roast goose, for it was New Year's eve. Yes, she thought of that!

In a corner formed by two houses, one of which projected farther out into the street than the other, she sat down and drew up her little feet under her. She was getting colder and colder, but did not dare to go home, for she had sold no matches, nor earned a single cent, and her father would surely beat her. Besides, it was cold at home, for they had nothing over them but a roof through which the wind whistled even though the biggest cracks had been stuffed with straw and rags.

Her hands were almost dead with cold. Oh, how much one little match might warm her! If she could only take one from the box and rub it against the wall and warm her hands. She drew one out. *R-r-ratch!* How it sputtered and burned! It made a warm, bright flame, like a little candle, as she held her hands over it; but it gave a strange light! It really seemed to the little girl as if she were sitting before a great iron stove with shining brass knobs and a brass cover. How wonderfully the fire burned! How comfortable it was! The youngster stretched out her feet to warm them too; then the little flame went out, the stove vanished, and she had only the remains of the burnt match in her hand.

She struck another match against the wall. It burned brightly, and when the light fell upon the wall it became transparent like a thin veil, and she could see through it into a room. On the table a snow-white cloth was spread, and on it stood a shining dinner service. The roast goose steamed gloriously, stuffed with apples and prunes. And what was still better, the goose jumped down from the dish and waddled along the floor with a knife and fork in its breast, right over to the little girl. Then the match went out, and she could see only the

thick, cold wall. She lighted another match. Then she was sitting under the most beautiful Christmas tree. It was much larger and much more beautiful than the one she had seen last Christmas through the glass door at the rich merchant's home. Thousands of candles burned on the green branches, and colored pictures like those in the printshops looked down at her. The little girl reached both her hands toward them. Then the match went out. But the Christmas lights mounted higher. She saw them now as bright stars in the sky. One of them fell down, forming a long line of fire.

"Now someone is dying," thought the little girl, for her old grandmother, the only person who had loved her, and who was now dead, had told her that when a star fell down a soul went up to God.

She rubbed another match against the wall. It became bright again, and in the glow the old grandmother stood clear and shining, kind and lovely.

"Grandmother!" cried the child. "Oh, take me with you! I know you will disappear when the match is burned out. You will vanish like the warm stove, the wonderful roast goose and the beautiful big Christmas tree!"

And she quickly struck the whole bundle of matches, for she wished to keep her grandmother with her. And the matches burned with such a glow that it became brighter than daylight. Grandmother had never been so grand and beautiful. She took the little girl in her arms, and both of them flew in brightness and joy above the earth, very, very high, and up there was neither cold, nor hunger, nor fear—they were with God.

But in the corner, leaning against the wall, sat the little girl with red cheeks and smiling mouth, frozen to death on the last evening of the old year. The New Year's sun rose upon a little pathetic figure. The child sat there, stiff and cold, holding the matches, of which one bundle was almost burned.

"She wanted to warm herself," the people said. No one imagined what beautiful things she had seen, and how happily she had gone with her old grandmother into the bright New Year.

A Child's Christmas in Wales

Dylan Thomas



One Christmas was so much like the other, in those years around the sea-town corner now, out of all sound except the distant speaking of the voices I sometimes hear a moment before sleep, that I can never remember whether it snowed for six days and six nights when I was twelve, or whether it snowed for twelve days and twelve nights when I was six.

All the Christmases roll down towards the two-tongued sea, like a cold and headlong moon bundling down the sky that was our street; and they stop at the rim of the ice-edged, fish-freezing waves, and I plunge my hands in the snow and bring out whatever I can find. In goes my hand into that wool-white bell-tongued ball of holidays resting at the rim of the carol-singing sea, and out come Mrs. Prothero and the firemen.

It was on the afternoon of the day of Christmas Eve, and I was in Mrs. Prothero's garden, waiting for cats, with her son Jim. It was snowing. It was always snowing at Christmas. December, in my memory, is white as Lapland, although there were no reindeers. But there were cats. Patient, cold and callous, our hands wrapped in socks, we waited to snowball the cats. Sleek and long as jaguars and horrible-whiskered, spitting and snarling, they would slide and sidle over the white back-garden walls, and the lynx-eyed hunters, Jim and I, fur-capped and moccasined trappers from Hudson Bay, off Mumbles Road, would hurl our deadly snowballs at the green of their eyes.

The wise cats never appeared. We were so still, Eskimo-footed arctic marksmen in the muffling silence of the eternal snows—eternal, ever since Wednesday—that we never heard Mrs. Prothero's first cry from her igloo at the bottom of the garden. Or, if we heard it at all, it was, to us, like the far-off challenge of our enemy and prey, the neighbor's polar cat. But soon the voice grew louder. "Fire!" cried Mrs. Prothero, and she beat the dinner-gong.

And we ran down the garden, with the snowballs in our arms, towards the house; and smoke, indeed, was pouring out of the dining-room, and the gong was bombilating, and Mrs. Prothero was announcing ruin like a town crier in Pompeii. This was better than all the cats in Wales standing on the wall in a row. We bounded into the house, laden with snowballs, and stopped at the open door of the smoke-filled room.

Something was burning all right; perhaps it was Mr. Prothero, who always slept there after midday dinner with a newspaper over his face. But he was standing in the middle of the room, saying, "A fine Christmas!" and smacking at the smoke with a slipper.

"Call the fire brigade," cried Mrs. Prothero as she beat the gong. "They won't be here," said Mr. Prothero, "it's Christmas."

There was no fire to be seen, only clouds of smoke and Mr. Prothero standing in the middle of them, waving his slipper as though he were conducting.

"Do something," he said.

And we threw all our snowballs into the smoke—I think we missed Mr. Prothero—and ran out of the house to the telephone box.

"Let's call the police as well," Jim said.

"And the ambulance."

"And Ernie Jenkins, he likes fires."

But we only called the fire brigade, and soon the fire engine came and three tall men in helmets brought a hose into the house and Mr. Prothero got out just in time before they turned it on. Nobody could have had a noisier Christmas Eve. And when the firemen turned off the hose and were standing in the wet, smoky room, Jim's Aunt, Miss Prothero, came downstairs and peered in at them. Jim and I waited, very quietly, to hear what she would say to them. She said the right thing, always. She looked at the three tall firemen in their shining helmets, standing among the smoke and cinders and dissolving snowballs, and she said: "Would you like anything to read?"

Years and years ago, when I was a boy, when there were wolves in Wales, and birds the color of red-flannel petticoats whisked past the harp-shaped hills, when we sang and wallowed all night and day in caves that smelt like Sunday afternoons in damp front farmhouse parlors, and we chased, with the jawbones of deacons, the English and the bears, before the motor car, before the wheel, before the duchess-faced horse, when we rode the daft and happy hills bareback, it snowed and it snowed. But here a small boy says: "It snowed last year, too. I made a snowman and my brother knocked it down and I knocked my brother down and then we had tea."

"But that was not the same snow," I say. "Our snow was not only shaken from whitewash buckets down the sky, it came shawling out of the ground and swam and drifted out of the arms and hands and bodies of the trees; snow grew overnight on the roofs of the houses like a pure and grandfather moss, minutely ivied the walls and settled on the postman, opening the gate, like a dumb, numb thunderstorm of white, torn Christmas cards."

"Were there postmen then, too?"

"With sprinkling eyes and wind-cherried noses, on spread, frozen feet they crunched up to the doors and mittened on them manfully. But all that the children could hear was a ringing of bells."

"You mean that the postman went rat-a-tat-tat and the doors rang?"

"I mean that the bells that the children could hear were inside them."

"I only hear thunder sometimes, never bells."

"There were church bells, too."

"Inside them?"

"No, no, no, in the bat-black, snow-white belfries, tugged by bishops and storks. And they rang their tidings over the bandaged town, over the frozen foam of the powder and ice-cream hills, over the crackling sea. It seemed that all the churches boomed for joy under my window; and the weathercocks crew for Christmas, on our fence."

"Get back to the postmen."

"They were just ordinary postmen, fond of walking and dogs and Christmas and the snow. They knocked on the doors with blue knuckles...."

"Ours has got a black knocker...."

"And then they stood on the white Welcome mat in the little, drifted porches and huffed and puffed, making ghosts with their breath, and jogged from foot to foot like small boys wanting to go out."

"And then the presents?"

"And then the Presents, after the Christmas box. And the cold postman, with a rose on his button-nose, tingled down the tea-tray-slithered run of the chilly glinting hill. He went in his ice-bound boots like a man on fishmonger's slabs.

"He waggled his bag like a frozen camel's hump, dizzily turned the corner on one foot, and, by God, he was gone."

"Get back to the Presents."

"There were the Useful Presents: engulfing mufflers of the old coach days, and mittens made for giant sloths; zebra scarfs of a substance like silky gum that could be tug-o'-warred down to the galoshes; blinding tam-o'-shanters like patchwork tea cozies and bunny-suited busbies and balaclavas for victims of head-shrinking tribes; from aunts who always wore wool next to the skin there were mustached and rasping vests that made you wonder why the aunts had any skin left at all; and once I had a little crocheted nose bag from an aunt now, alas, no longer whinnying with us. And pictureless books in which small boys, though warned with quotations not to, *would* skate on Farmer Giles's pond and did and drowned; and books that told me everything about the wasp, except why."

"Go on to the Useless Presents."

"Bags of moist and many-colored jelly babies and a folded flag and a false nose and a tram-conductor's cap and a machine that punched tickets and rang a bell; never a catapult; once, by a mistake that no one could explain, a little hatchet; and a celluloid duck that made, when you pressed it, a most unducklike sound, a mewling moo that an ambitious cat might make who wished to be a cow; and a painting book in which I could make the grass, the trees, the sea and the animals any color I please, and still the dazzling sky-blue sheep are grazing in the red field under the rainbow-billed and pea-green birds. Hardboileds, toffee, fudge and allsorts, crunches, cracknel, humbugs, glaciers, marzipan, and butterwelsh

for the Welsh. And troops of bright tin soldiers who, if they could not fight, could always run. And Snakes-and-Families and Happy Ladders. And Easy Hobbi-Games for Little Engineers, complete with instructions. Oh, easy for Leonardo! And a whistle to make the dogs bark to wake up the old man next door to make him beat on the wall with his stick to shake our picture off the wall. And a packet of cigarettes: you put one in your mouth and you stood at the corner of the street and you waited for hours, in vain, for an old lady to scold you for smoking a cigarette, and then with a smirk you ate it. And then it was breakfast under the balloons."

"Were there Uncles like in our house?"

"There are always Uncles at Christmas. The same Uncles. And on Christmas mornings, with dog-disturbing whistle and sugar fags, I would scour the swathed town for the news of the little world, and find always a dead bird by the white Post Office or by the deserted swings; perhaps a robin, all but one of his fires out. Men and women wading, scooping back from chapel, with taproom noses and wind-bussed cheeks, all albinos, huddled their stiff black jarring feathers against the irreligious snow. Mistletoe hung from the gas brackets in all the front parlors; there was sherry and walnuts and bottled beer and crackers by the dessertspoons; and cats in their fur-about watched the fires; and the high-heaped fire spat, all ready for the chestnuts and the mulling pokers. Some few large men sat in the front parlors, without their collars, Uncles almost certainly, trying their new cigars, holding them out judiciously at arms' length, returning them to their mouths, coughing, then holding them out again as though waiting for the explosion; and some few small aunts, not wanted in the kitchen, nor anywhere else for that matter, sat on the very edges of their chairs, poised and brittle, afraid to break, like faded cups and saucers."

Not many those mornings trod the piling streets: an old man always, fawn-bowled, yellow-gloved and, at this time of year, with spats of snow, would take his constitutional to the white bowling green and back, as he would take it wet or fine on Christmas Day or Doomsday; sometimes two hale young men, with big pipes blazing, no overcoats and wind blown scarfs, would trudge, unspeaking, down to the forlorn sea, to work up an appetite, to blow away the fumes, who knows, to walk into the waves until nothing of them was left but the two curling smoke clouds of their inextinguishable briars. Then I would be slap-dashing home, the gravy smell of the dinners of others, the bird smell, the brandy, the pudding and mince, coiling up to my nostrils, when out of a snow-clogged side lane would come a boy the spit of myself, with a pink-tipped cigarette and the violet past of a black eye, cocky as a bullfinch, leering all to himself.

I hated him on sight and sound, and would be about to put my dog whistle to my lips and blow him off the face of Christmas when suddenly he, with a violet wink, put *his* whistle to *his* lips and blew so stridently, so high, so exquisitely loud, that gobbling faces, their cheek bulged with goose, would press against their tinsled windows, the whole length of the white echoing street. For dinner we had turkey and blazing pudding, and after dinner the Uncles sat in front of the fire, loosened all buttons, put their large moist hands over their watch chains, groaned a little and slept. Mothers, aunts and sisters scuttled to and fro, bearing tureens. Aunt Bessie, who had already been frightened, twice, by a clock-work mouse, whimpered at the sideboard and had some elderberry wine. The dog was sick. Auntie Dosie had to have three aspirins, but Auntie Hannah, who liked port, stood in the middle of the snowbound back yard, singing like a big-bosomed thrush. I would blow up balloons to see how big they would blow up to; and, then when they burst, which they all did, the Uncles jumped and rumbled. In the rich and heavy afternoon, the Uncles breathing like dolphins and the snow descending, I would sit among festoons and Chinese lanterns and nibble dates and try to make a model man-o'-war, following the Instructions for Little Engineers, and produce what might be mistaken for a sea-going tramcar.

Or I would go out, my bright new boots squeaking, into the white world, on to the seaward hill, to call on Jim and Dan and Jack and to pad through the still streets, leaving huge deep footprints on the hidden pavements.

"I bet people will think there've been hippos."

"What would you do if you saw a hippo coming down our street?"

"I'd go like this, bang! I'd throw him over the railings and roll him down the hill and then I'd tickle him under the ear and he'd wag his tail."

"What would you do if you saw *two* hippos?"

Iron-flanked and bellowing he-hippos clanked and battered through the scudding snow towards us as we passed Mr. Daniel's house.

"Let's post Mr. Daniel a snowball through his letter box."

"Let's write things in the snow."

"Let's write, 'Mr. Daniel looks like a spaniel' all over his lawn."

Or we walked on the white shore. "Can the fishes see it's snowing?"

The silent one-clouded heavens drifted on to the sea. Now we were snow-blind travelers lost on the north hills, and vast dewlapped dogs, with flasks round their necks, ambled and shambled up to us, baying "Excelsior." We returned home through the poor streets where only a few children fumbled with bare red fingers in the wheel-rutted snow and cat-called after us, their voices fading

away, as we trudged uphill, into the cries of the dock birds and the hooting of ships out in the whirling bay. And then, at tea the recovered Uncles would be jolly; and the ice cake loomed in the center of the table like a marble grave. Auntie Hannah laced her tea with rum, because it was only once a year.

Bring out the tall tales now that we told by the fire as the gaslight bubbled like a diver. Ghosts whooped like owls in the long nights when I dared not look over my shoulder; animals lurked in the cubbyhole under the stairs where the gas meter ticked. And I remember that we went singing carols once, when there wasn't the shaving of a moon to light the flying streets. At the end of a long road was a drive that led to a large house, and we stumbled up the darkness of the drive that night, each one of us afraid, each one holding a stone in his hand in case, and all of us too brave to say a word. The wind through the trees made noises as of old and unpleasant and maybe webfooted men wheezing in caves. We reached the black bulk of the house.

"What shall we give them? Hark the Herald?"

No," Jack said, "Good King Wencelas. I'll count three."

One, two, three, and we began to sing, our voices high and seemingly distant in the snow-felted darkness round the house that was occupied by nobody we knew. We stood close together, near the dark door.

*Good King Wencelas looked out
On the Feast of Stephen...*

And then a small, dry voice, like the voice of someone who has not spoken for a long time, joined our singing: a small, dry, eggshell voice from the other side of the door: a small, dry voice through the keyhole. And when we stopped running we were outside *our* house; the front room was lovely; balloons floated under the hot-water-bottle-gulping gas; everything was good again and shone over the town.

"Perhaps it was a ghost," Jim said.

"Perhaps it was trolls," Dan said, who was always reading.

"Let's go in and see if there's any jelly left," Jack said. And we did that.

Always on Christmas night there was music. An uncle played the fiddle, a cousin sang "Cherry Ripe," and another uncle sang "Drake's Drum." It was very warm in the little house. Auntie Hannah, who had got on to the parsnip wine, sang a song about Bleeding Hearts and Death, and then another in which she said her heart was like a Bird's Nest; and then everybody laughed again; and then I went to bed. Looking through my bedroom window, out into the moonlight and the unending smoke-colored snow, I could see the lights in the windows of all the other houses on our hill and hear the music rising from them up the long, steadily falling night. I turned the gas down, I got into bed. I said some words to the close and holy darkness, and then I slept.

Where Love Is There Is God Also

Leo Tolstoy



IN the city lived the shoemaker, Martuin Avdyeitch. He lived in a basement, in a little room with one window. The window looked out on the street. Through the window he used to watch the people passing by; although only their feet could be seen, yet by the boots, Martuin Avdyeitch recognized the people. Martuin Avdyeitch had lived long in one place, and had many acquaintances. Few pairs of boots in his district had not been in his hands once and again. Some he would half-sole, some he would patch, some he would stitch around, and occasionally he would also put on new uppers. And through the window he often recognized his work.

Avdyeitch had plenty to do, because he was a faithful workman, used good material, did not make exorbitant charges, and kept his word. If it was possible for him to finish an order by a certain time, he would accept it; otherwise, he would not deceive you,—he would tell you so beforehand. And all knew Avdyeitch, and he was never out of work.

Avdyeitch had always been a good man; but as he grew old, he began to think more about his soul, and get nearer to God. Martuin's wife had died when he was still living with his master. His wife left him a boy three years old. None of their other children had lived. All the eldest had died in childhood. Martuin at first intended to send his little son to his sister in the village, but afterward he felt sorry for him; he thought to himself:—

"It will be hard for my Kapitoshka to live in a strange family. I shall keep him with me."

And Avdyeitch left his master, and went into lodgings with his little son. But God gave Avdyeitch no luck with his children. As Kapitoshka grew older, he began to help his father, and would have been a delight to him, but a sickness fell on him, he went to bed, suffered a week, and died. Martuin buried his son, and fell into despair. So deep was this despair that he began to complain of God. Martuin fell into such a melancholy state, that more than once he prayed to God for death, and reproached God because He had not taken him who was an old man, instead of his beloved only son. Avdyeitch also ceased to go to church.

And once a little old man from the same district came from Troïtsa to see Avdyeitch; for seven years he had been wandering about. Avdyeitch talked with him, and began to complain about his sorrows.

"I have no desire to live any longer," he said, "I only wish I was dead. That is all I pray God for. I am a man without anything to hope for now."

And the little old man said to him:—

"You don't talk right, Martuin, we must not judge God's doings. The world moves, not by our skill, but by God's will. God decreed for your son to die,—for you—to live. So it is for the best. And you are in despair, because you wish to live for your own happiness."

"But what shall one live for?" asked Martuin.

And the little old man said:—

"We must live for God, Martuin. He gives you life, and for His sake you must live. When you begin to live for Him, you will not grieve over anything, and all will seem easy to you."

Martuin kept silent for a moment, and then said, "But how can one live for God?"

And the little old man said:—

"Christ has taught us how to live for God. You know how to read? Buy a Testament, and read it; there you will learn how to live for God. Everything is explained there."

And these words kindled a fire in Avdyeitch's heart. And he went that very same day, bought a New Testament in large print, and began to read.

At first Avdyeitch intended to read only on holidays; but as he began to read, it so cheered his soul that he used to read every day. At times he would become so absorbed in reading, that all the kerosene in the lamp would burn out, and still he could not tear himself away. And so Avdyeitch used to read every evening.

And the more he read, the clearer he understood what God wanted of him, and how one should live for God; and his heart kept growing easier and easier. Formerly, when he lay down to sleep, he used to sigh and groan, and always thought of his Kapitoshka; and now his only exclamation was:—

"Glory to Thee! glory to Thee, Lord! Thy will be done."

And from that time Avdyeitch's whole life was changed. In other days he, too, used to drop into a public-house as a holiday amusement, to drink a cup of tea; and he was not averse to a little brandy, either. He would take a drink with some acquaintance, and leave the saloon, not intoxicated, exactly, yet in a happy frame of mind, and inclined to talk nonsense, and shout, and use abusive language at a person. Now he left off that sort of thing. His life became quiet and joyful. In the morning he would sit down to work, finish his allotted task, then take the little lamp from the hook, put it on the table, get his book from the shelf, open it, and sit down to read. And the more he read, the more he understood, and the brighter and happier it grew in his heart.

Once it happened that Martuin read till late into the night. He was reading the Gospel of Luke. He was reading over the sixth chapter; and he was reading the verses:—

"And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloak forbid not to take thy coat also. Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again. And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise."

He read farther also those verses, where God speaks:

"And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say? Whosoever cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them, I will shew you to whom he is like: he is like a

man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock: and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it; for it was founded upon a rock. But he that heareth, and doeth not, is like a man that without a foundation built an house upon the earth; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great."

Avdyeitch read these words, and joy filled his soul. He took off his spectacles, put them down on the book, leaned his elbows on the table, and became lost in thought. And he began to measure his life by these words. And he thought to himself:—

"Is my house built on the rock, or on the sand? 'Tis well if on the rock. It is so easy when you are alone by yourself; it seems as if you had done everything as God commands; but when you forget yourself, you sin again. Yet I shall still struggle on. It is very good. Help me, Lord!"

Thus ran his thoughts; he wanted to go to bed, but he felt loath to tear himself away from the book. And he began to read farther in the seventh chapter. He read about the centurion, he read about the widow's son, he read about the answer given to John's disciples, and finally he came to that place where the rich Pharisee desired the Lord to sit at meat with him; and he read how the woman that was a sinner anointed His feet, and washed them with her tears, and how He forgave her. He reached the forty-fourth verse, and began to read:—

"And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment."

He finished reading these verses, and thought to himself:—

"Thou gavest me no water for my feet, thou gavest me no kiss. My head with oil thou didst not anoint."

And again Avdyeitch took off his spectacles, put them down on the book, and again he became lost in thought.

"It seems that Pharisee must have been such a man as I am. I, too, apparently have thought only of myself,—how I might have my tea, be warm and comfortable, but never to think about my guest. He thought about himself, but there was not the least care taken of the guest. And who was his guest? The Lord Himself. If He had come to me, should I have done the same way?"

Avdyeitch rested his head upon both his arms, and did not notice that he fell asleep.

"Martuin!" suddenly seemed to sound in his ears.

Martuin started from his sleep:—

"Who is here?"

He turned around, glanced toward the door—no one.

Again he fell into a doze. Suddenly, he plainly heard:—

"Martuin! Ah, Martuin! look to-morrow on the street. I am coming."

Martuin awoke, rose from the chair, began to rub his eyes. He himself could not tell whether he heard those words in his dream, or in reality. He turned down his lamp, and went to bed.

At daybreak next morning, Avdyeitch rose, made his prayer to God, lighted the stove, put on the shchi and the kasha, put the water in the samovar, put on his apron, and sat down by the window to work.

And while he was working, he kept thinking about all that had happened the day before. It seemed to him at one moment that it was a dream, and now he had really heard a voice.

"Well," he said to himself, "such things have been."

Martuin was sitting by the window, and looking out more than he was working. When anyone passed by in boots which he did not know, he would bend down, look out of the window, in order to see, not only the feet, but also the face.

The dvornik passed by in new felt boots,⁽⁶⁾ the water-carrier passed by; then there came up to the window an old soldier of Nicholas's time, in an old pair of laced felt boots, with a shovel in his hands. Avdyeitch recognized him by his felt boots. The old man's name was Stepanuitch; and a neighboring merchant, out of charity, gave him a home with him. He was required to assist the dvornik. Stepanuitch began to shovel away the snow from in front of Avdyeitch's window. Avdyeitch glanced at him, and took up his work again.

"Pshaw! I must be getting crazy in my old age," said Avdyeitch, and laughed at himself. "Stepanuitch is clearing away the snow, and I imagine that Christ is coming to see me. I was entirely out of my mind, old dotard that I am!"

Avdyeitch sewed about a dozen stitches, and then felt impelled to look through the window again. He looked out again through the window, and saw that Stepanuitch had leaned his shovel against the wall, and was warming himself, and resting. He was an old, broken-down man; evidently he had not strength enough even to shovel the snow. Avdyeitch said to himself:—

"I will give him some tea; by the way, the samovar has only just gone out." Avdyeitch laid down his awl, rose from his seat, put the samovar on the table, poured out the tea, and tapped with his finger at the glass. Stepanuitch turned around, and came to the window. Avdyeitch beckoned to him, and went to open the door.

"Come in, warm yourself a little," he said. "You must be cold."

"May Christ reward you for this! my bones ache," said Stepanuitch.

Stepanuitch came in, and shook off the snow, tried to wipe his feet, so as not to soil the floor, but staggered.

"Don't trouble to wipe your feet. I will clean it up myself; we are used to such things. Come in and sit down," said Avdyeitch. "Here, drink a cup of tea."

And Avdyeitch lifted two glasses, and handed one to his guest; while he himself poured his tea into a saucer, and began to blow it.

Stepanuitch finished drinking his glass of tea, turned the glass upside down, put the half-eaten lump of sugar on it, and began to express his thanks. But it was evident he wanted some more.

"Have some more," said Avdyeitch, filling both his own glass and his guest's. Avdyeitch drank his tea, but from time to time glanced out into the street.

"Are you expecting anyone?" asked his guest.

"Am I expecting anyone? I am ashamed even to tell whom I expect. I am, and I am not, expecting someone; but one word has kindled a fire in my heart. Whether it is a dream, or something else, I do not know. Don't you see, brother, I was reading yesterday the Gospel about Christ the Batyushka; how He suffered, how He walked on the earth. I suppose you have heard about it?"

"Indeed I have," replied Stepanuitch; "but we are people in darkness, we can't read."

"Well, now, I was reading about that very thing,—how He walked on the earth; I read, you know, how He came to the Pharisee, and the Pharisee did not treat Him hospitably. Well, and so, my brother, I was reading yesterday, about this very thing, and was thinking to myself how he did not receive Christ, the Batyushka, with honor. Suppose, for example, He should come to me, or anyone else, I said to myself, I should not even know how to receive Him. And he gave Him no reception at all. Well! while I was thus thinking, I fell asleep, brother, and I heard someone call me by name. I got up; the voice, just as if someone whispered, said, 'Be on the watch; I shall come to-morrow.' And this happened twice. Well! would you believe it, it got into my head? I scolded myself—and yet I am expecting Him, the Batyushka."

Stepanuitch shook his head, and said nothing; he finished drinking his glass of tea, and put it on the side; but Avdyeitch picked up the glass again, and filled it once more.

"Drink some more for your good health. You see, I have an idea that, when the Batyushka went about on this earth, He disdained no one, and had more to do with the simple people. He always went to see the simple people. He picked out His disciples more from among folk like such sinners as we are, from the working class. Said He, whoever exalts himself, shall be humbled, and he who is humbled shall become exalted. Said He, you call

me Lord, and, said He, I wash your feet. Whoever wishes, said He, to be the first, the same shall be a servant to all. Because, said He, blessed are the poor, the humble, the kind, the generous."

And Stepanuitch forgot about his tea; he was an old man, and easily moved to tears. He was listening, and the tears rolled down his face.

"Come, now, have some more tea," said Avdyeitch; but Stepanuitch made the sign of the cross, thanked him, turned down his glass, and arose.

"Thanks to you," he says, "Martuin Avdyeitch, for treating me kindly, and satisfying me, soul and body."

"You are welcome; come in again; always glad to see a friend," said Avdyeitch.

Stepanuitch departed; and Martuin poured out the rest of the tea, drank it up, put away the dishes, and sat down again by the window to work, to stitch on a patch. He kept stitching away, and at the same time looking through the window. He was expecting Christ, and was all the while thinking of Him and His deeds, and his head was filled with the different speeches of Christ.

Two soldiers passed by: one wore boots furnished by the crown, and the other one, boots that he had made; then the master of the next house passed by in shining galoshes; then a baker with a basket passed by. All passed by; and now there came also by the window a woman in woolen stockings and rustic bashmaks on her feet. She passed by the window, and stood still near the window-case.

Avdyeitch looked up at her from the window, and saw it was a stranger, a woman poorly clad, and with a child; she was standing by the wall with her back to the wind, trying to wrap up the child, and she had nothing to wrap it up in. The woman was dressed in shabby summer clothes; and from behind the frame, Avdyeitch could hear the child crying, and the woman trying to pacify it; but she was not able to pacify it.

Avdyeitch got up, went to the door, ascended the steps, and cried:—

"My good woman. Hey! my good woman!"

The woman heard him and turned around.

"Why are you standing in the cold with the child? Come into my room, where it is warm; you can manage it better. Here, this way!"

The woman was astonished. She saw an old, old man in an apron, with spectacles on his nose, calling her to him. She followed him. They descended the steps and entered the room; the old man led the woman to his bed.

"There," says he, "sit down, my good woman, nearer to the stove; you can get warm, and nurse the little one."

"I have no milk for him. I myself have not eaten anything since morning," said the woman; but, nevertheless, she took the baby to her breast.

Avdyeitch shook his head, went to the table, brought out the bread and a dish, opened the oven door, poured

into the dish some cabbage soup, took out the pot with the gruel, but it was not cooked as yet; so he filled the dish with shchi only, and put it on the table. He got the bread, took the towel down from the hook, and spread it upon the table.

"Sit down," he says, "and eat, my good woman; and I will mind the little one. You see, I once had children of my own; I know how to handle them."

The woman crossed herself, sat down at the table, and began to eat; while Avdyeitch took a seat on the bed near the infant. Avdyeitch kept smacking and smacking to it with his lips; but it was a poor kind of smacking, for he had no teeth. The little one kept on crying. And it occurred to Avdyeitch to threaten the little one with his finger; he waved, waved his finger right before the child's mouth, and hastily withdrew it. He did not put it to its mouth, because his finger was black, and soiled with wax. And the little one looked at his finger, and became quiet; then it began to smile, and Avdyeitch also was glad. While the woman was eating, she told who she was, and whither she was going.

Said she:—

"I am a soldier's wife. It is now seven months since they sent my husband away off, and no tidings. I lived out as cook; the baby was born; no one cared to keep me with a child. This is the third month that I have been struggling along without a place. I ate up all I had. I wanted to engage as a wet-nurse—no one would take me—I am too thin, they say. I have just been to the merchant's wife, where lives a young woman I know, and so they promised to take us in. I thought that was the end of it. But she told me to come next week. And she lives a long way off. I got tired out; and it tired him, too, my heart's darling. Fortunately, our landlady takes pity on us for the sake of Christ, and gives us a room, else I don't know how I should manage to get along."

Avdyeitch sighed, and said:

"Haven't you any warm clothes?"

"Now is the time, friend, to wear warm clothes; but yesterday I pawned my last shawl for a twenty-kopek piece."

The woman came to the bed, and took the child; and Avdyeitch rose, went to the partition, rummaged round, and succeeded in finding an old coat.

"Na!" says he; "It is a poor thing, yet you may turn it to some use."

The woman looked at the coat and looked at the old man; she took the coat, and burst into tears; and Avdyeitch turned away his head; crawling under the bed, he pushed out a little trunk, rummaged in it, and sat down again opposite the woman.

And the woman said:—

"May Christ bless you, little grandfather! He must have sent me to your window. My little baby would have frozen to death. When I started out it was warm, but now

it has grown cold. And He, the Batyushka, led you to look through the window and take pity on me, an unfortunate."

Avdyeitch smiled, and said:—

"Indeed, He did that! I have been looking through the window, my good woman, for some wise reason."

And Martuin told the soldier's wife his dream, and how he heard the voice,—how the Lord promised to come and see him that day.

"All things are possible," said the woman. She rose, put on the coat, wrapped up her little child in it; and, as she started to take leave, she thanked Avdyeitch again.

"Take this, for Christ's sake," said Avdyeitch, giving her a twenty-kopek piece; "redeem your shawl."

She made the sign of the cross, and Avdyeitch made the sign of the cross and went with her to the door.

The woman went away. Avdyeitch ate some shchi, washed the dishes, and sat down again to work. While he was working he still remembered the window; when the window grew darker he immediately looked out to see who was passing by. Acquaintances passed by and strangers passed by, and there was nothing out of the ordinary.

But here Avdyeitch saw that an old apple woman had stopped in front of his window. She carried a basket with apples. Only a few were left, as she had evidently sold them nearly all out; and over her shoulder she had a bag full of chips. She must have gathered them up in some new building, and was on her way home. One could see that the bag was heavy on her shoulder; she tried to shift it to the other shoulder. So she lowered the bag on the sidewalk, stood the basket with the apples on a little post, and began to shake down the splinters in the bag. And while she was shaking her bag, a little boy in a torn cap came along, picked up an apple from the basket, and was about to make his escape; but the old woman noticed it, turned around, and caught the youngster by his sleeve. The little boy began to struggle, tried to tear himself away; but the old woman grasped him with both hands, knocked off his cap, and caught him by the hair.

The little boy was screaming, the old woman was scolding. Avdyeitch lost no time in putting away his awl; he threw it upon the floor, sprang to the door,—he even stumbled on the stairs, and dropped his spectacles,—and rushed out into the street.

The old woman was pulling the youngster by his hair, and was scolding and threatening to take him to the policeman; the youngster was defending himself, and denying the charge.

"I did not take it," he said; "What are you licking me for? Let me go!"

Avdyeitch tried to separate them. He took the boy by his arm, and said:—

"Let him go, babushka; forgive him, for Christ's sake."

"I will forgive him so that he won't forget it till the new broom grows. I am going to take the little villain to the police."

Avdyeitch began to entreat the old woman:—

"Let him go, babushka," he said, "he will never do it again. Let him go, for Christ's sake."

The old woman let him loose; the boy started to run, but Avdyeitch kept him back.

"Ask the babushka's forgiveness," he said, "and don't you ever do it again; I saw you take the apple."

The boy burst into tears, and began to ask forgiveness.

"There now! that's right; and here's an apple for you."

And Avdyeitch took an apple from the basket, and gave it to the boy.

"I will pay you for it, babushka," he said to the old woman.

"You ruin them that way, the good-for-nothings," said the old woman. "He ought to be treated so that he would remember it for a whole week."

"Eh, babushka, babushka," said Avdyeitch, "that is right according to our judgment, but not according to God's. If he is to be whipped for an apple, then what ought to be done to us for our sins?"

The old woman was silent.

And Avdyeitch told her the parable of the master who forgave a debtor all that he owed him, and how the debtor went and began to choke one who owed him.

The old woman listened, and the boy stood listening.

"God has commanded us to forgive," said Avdyeitch, "else we, too, may not be forgiven. All should be forgiven, and the thoughtless especially."

The old woman shook her head, and sighed.

"That's so," said she; "but the trouble is that they are very much spoiled."

"Then we who are older must teach them," said Avdyeitch.

"That's just what I say," remarked the old woman. "I myself have had seven of them,—only one daughter is left."

And the old woman began to relate where and how she lived with her daughter, and how many grandchildren she had. "Here," she says, "my strength is only so-so, and yet I have to work. I pity the youngsters—my grandchildren—but what nice children they are! No one gives me such a welcome as they do. Aksintka won't go to anyone but me. 'Babushka, dear babushka, lovliest.'"

And the old woman grew quite sentimental.

"Of course, it is a childish trick. God be with him," said she, pointing to the boy.

The woman was just about to lift the bag up on her shoulder, when the boy ran up, and said:—

"Let me carry it, babushka; it is on my way."

The old woman nodded her head, and put the bag on the boy's back.

And side by side they passed along the street.

And the old woman even forgot to ask Avdyeitch to pay for the apple. Avdyeitch stood motionless, and kept gazing after them; and he heard them talking all the time as they walked away. After Avdyeitch saw them disappear, he returned to his room; he found his eye-glasses on the stairs,—they were not broken; he picked up his awl, and sat down to work again.

After working a little while, it grew darker, so that he could not see to sew; he saw the lamplighter passing by to light the street-lamps.

"It must be time to make a light," he said to himself; so he got his little lamp ready, hung it up, and he took himself again to his work. He had one boot already finished; he turned it around, looked at it: "Well done." He put away his tools, swept off the cuttings, cleared off the bristles and ends, took the lamp, set it on the table, and took down the Gospels from the shelf. He intended to open the book at the very place where he had yesterday put a piece of leather as a mark, but it happened to open at another place; and the moment Avdyeitch opened the Testament, he recollected his last night's dream. And as soon as he remembered it, it seemed as if he heard someone stepping about behind him. Avdyeitch looked around, and saw—there, in the dark corner, it seemed as if people were standing; he was at a loss to know who they were. And a voice whispered in his ear:—

"Martuin—ah, Martuin! did you not recognize me?"

"Who?" exclaimed Avdyeitch.

"Me," repeated the voice. "It was I;" and Stepanuitch stepped forth from the dark corner; he smiled, and like a little cloud faded away, and soon vanished.

"And it was I," said the voice.

From the dark corner stepped forth the woman with her child; the woman smiled, the child laughed, and they also vanished,

"And it was I," continued the voice; both the old woman and the boy with the apple stepped forward; both smiled and vanished.

Avdyeitch's soul rejoiced; he crossed himself, put on his spectacles, and began to read the Evangelists where it happened to open. On the upper part of the page he read:—

"For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in."

And on the lower part of the page he read this:—

"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."—St. Matthew, Chap. xxv.

And Avdyeitch understood that his dream had not deceived him; that the Saviour really called on him that day, and that he really received Him.

12 Days of Christmas

With foreward by Nathan CJ Hood



Jan Steen 'Twelfth Night' (1662)

Christmas Carols, broadly speaking, fall into two categories. There are those that celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, such as *In the Bleak Midwinter* or *Hark the Herald*. These are the songs you will hear at a church carol service. Then there are those that belong to regional and national English traditions, some going as far back as the medieval period. For example, *Wassail* is a drinking song about a kind of mulled cider usually drunk around Yuletide during various wassailing activities. It is amongst such festive cheer and goodwill that *The Twelve Days of Christmas* belongs.

No one knows how far back *The Twelve Days* goes. It was first printed around 1780 in a book called *Mirth without Mischief*. It was aimed at children, and perhaps indicates something about its earliest origins. Orchard Halliwell wrote in 1842 that it was common practice for children to repeat the song as part of a game. In one version, a singer would sing the first line, then another the second, a third the third and so on. The player who failed to remember their line would be subject to some measure of light-hearted punishment, such as giving up one of their possessions. *The Twelve Days* was particularly popular during the Victorian period among schoolboys and at family parties in the Newcastle area, suggesting that it may have first originated in the north-east of England.

The song joyfully encapsulates the sentiment that lay at the heart of Merry England. In Medieval Christendom, the yearly cycle was divided into segments. There were feast times and fast times, the strict followed by the carnival. After the fast of advent, English men, women and children would celebrate the Twelve Days of Christmas from 25th December to 5th January, otherwise known as 'Twelfth Night'. Within this season there would be much eating, drinking, gift-giving, singing and playing. Such merriment was a release from the moral norms, the indulgence of desire allowed for a brief period before a return to Christian living. This notion was pushed to its extreme in the 'lord of misrule'. A servant was chosen to preside over the Christmas festivities. Inverting the hierarchy and moral order, they could command their superiors and organise mischievous activities, such as comedic farces and silly games. Gluttony, drunkenness and lechery abounded in the midst of time honoured and fun traditions!

It is this festive spirit that remains in the words and melody of *The Twelve Days*. Wishing you, dear reader, a Merry Christmastide!

On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me
A partridge in a pear tree

On the second day of Christmas my true love gave to me
Two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree

On the third day of Christmas my true love gave to me
Three French hens, two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree

On the fourth day of Christmas my true love gave to me
Four calling birds, three French hens
Two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree

On the fifth day of Christmas my true love gave to me
Five gold rings, four calling birds, three French hens
Two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree

On the sixth day of Christmas my true love gave to me
Six geese a laying, five gold rings
Four calling birds, three French hens
Two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree

On the seventh day of Christmas my true love gave to me
Seven swans a swimming, six geese a laying, five gold rings
Four calling birds, three French hens
Two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree

On the eighth day of Christmas my true love gave to me
Eight maids a milking, seven swans a swimming
Six geese a laying, five gold rings
Four calling birds, three French hens
Two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree

On the ninth day of Christmas
Nine ladies dancing, eight maids a milking
Seven swans a swimming, six geese a laying, five gold rings
Four calling birds, three French hens
Two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree

On the tenth day of Christmas my true love gave to me
Ten lords a leaping, nine ladies dancing, eight maids a milking
Seven swans a swimming, six geese a laying, five gold rings
Four calling birds, three French hens
Two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree

On the eleventh day of Christmas my true love gave to me
Eleven pipers piping, ten lords a leaping
Nine ladies dancing, eight maids a milking
Seven swans a swimming, six geese a laying, five gold rings
Four calling birds, three French hens
Two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree

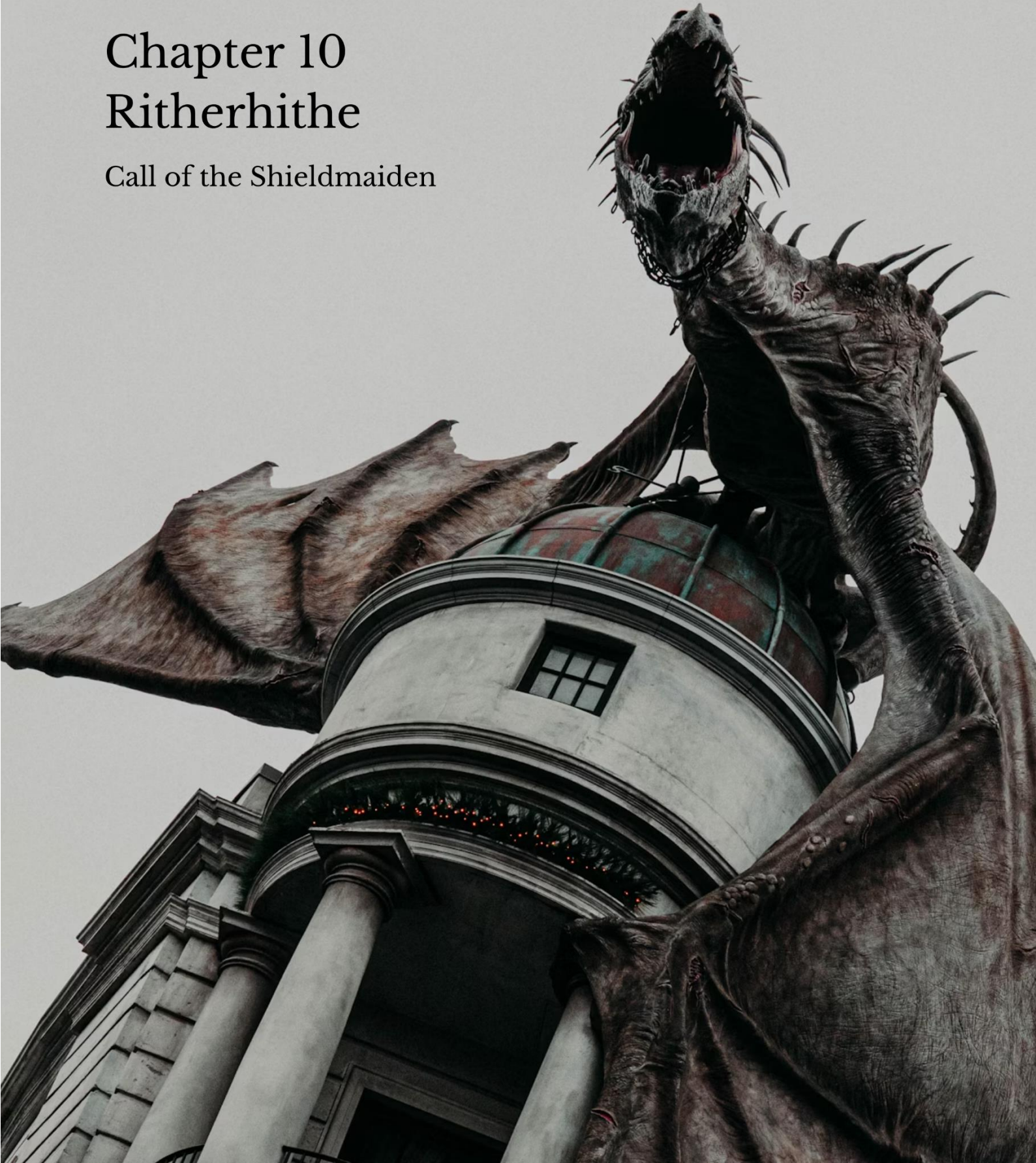
On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love gave to me
Twelve drummers drumming, eleven pipers piping
Ten lords a leaping, nine ladies dancing, eight maids a milking
Seven swans a swimming, six geese a laying, five gold rings
Four calling birds, three French hens
Two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree

Druid

Without a Home

Chapter 10
Ritherhithe

Call of the Shieldmaiden



The journey across the river the next day was stressful. The tidal water had receded and the sandbar was visible above the water all the way across. The saltwater crocodiles slipped silently into the water as they approached. The caravan travelled across in groups of three camels, each surrounded by guards with their swords drawn.

Callum informed the boys that the crocodiles would often come close to the men under the water, preparing to jump out and grab one. Fortunately that did not happen on this occasion, and everyone made it over successfully.

As they travelled forwards through the salty marshes they were haunted by the sounds of the spirits. Fergal came over to check on the boys and the animals from time to time, his stress visible in the lines across his forehead and audible in his voice. But he told Degore that the loud booming sounds were caused when the spirits slapped the water with their jaws and lifted their tails to send the vibrations across the swamp.

The swampy marshes petered out as the sun began to set, and they made camp cautiously at the top of a large hill. It took a full hour to scale the rise, but once at the top a lush, fertile plain stretched out before them. There were many signs of human activity, from huge ancient standing stones jutting from the ground, to patches of trees that looked like orchards. Here and there was a well-used road and in the distance, humble farm cottages, but no humans appeared; only a large herd of buffalo were stretched out before them almost as far as the eye could see.

The next day they travelled down onto the plain and Clancy slew a buffalo. Aofie was very impressed and began to suggest Clancy stay with them and that she would find him a wife. The young woman she picked out had dark eyes and blonde hair and was most attractive. However, Clancy was not swayed merely by looks.

Later on Clancy was helping Degore and Callum scrape the meat off the bones. Callum displayed belligerence towards Clancy when he enquired as to the purpose of their activity, but was quite happy to inform Degore that high quality tea cups were made from bone in Ritherhithe so they would carry the cleaned bones there to sell.

Clancy was silent for most of the job from then on, and later on after dinner, when the stress of the last few days had abated and the dancing and singing was in full swing, Clancy presented his longbow to Callum.

Callum shook, holding the longbow in silence, looking in bewilderment from it to Clancy.

“I think you like the lady,” Clancy winked, “and I will help you impress your grandmother so she will arrange for the two of you to marry.”

Callum was speechless, and then when he could talk he did so haltingly, stuttering and repeating himself. He confessed that he was just a sheep herder and that he sometimes wondered if marriage would ever be something he would be able to experience. He also was

stunned that a random stranger would not only give away his weapon but also reject such a desirable woman.

Clancy took Callum practising for the rest of the journey until the tall spires of Ritherhithe cathedral could be seen far in the distance. The plains began to turn into farms and the trading began in earnest.

The goods the caravan carried were things like tea and spices. The villagers had the usual gold or daily provisions to trade in return, but Callum was always on the lookout for anyone selling cigars. The weather over this area produced the finest leaves.

These people were dragon worshippers and Grudaire had to sit the boys down to tell them how to act if they came across a dragon.

“Dragons roam free here. They are raised from eggs to adults to be worshipped.” Grudaire scanned the sky. “They are tame and friendly, but you must remember that they are massive animals and can kill you if they want to.”

Degore was thrilled, he looked around in the hope that a dragon would appear in front of him immediately and kill him.

“And conceal anything you do not want them to take,” Grudaire added, “they are well trained but will take a bite of your steak or a particularly shiny coin.”

The large market by the wharves on Loch Shiel, in the huge city of Ritherhithe, was where they parted from the caravan. Callum was well on his way to learning how to handle the longbow, and Degore noticed the young woman was getting chatty with him. Fergal thanked them for their help and especially Clancy for bringing down roamers and buffalo.

Grudaire guided the boys from the market and up the hill towards the cathedral. “I was here once, years ago,” he told them. “Going here is a sure way to see a dragon.”

The cathedral was huge. It needed to fit a dragon in through the doorway. It was made of dressed blue quartz and had spires and domes enough to confuse a man. Degore could not even guess at the cost of the building.

They joined the line of people and slowly made their way inside. As soon as his eyes adjusted to the contrast from the blaring light outside to the soft light of the interior, filtered through the huge stained glass windows, he looked about the interior with keen interest. Most of the windows were different textures of white glass in pleasing shapes of lines and circles, but the stained glass one in the front windows of the cathedral was huge and colourful and depicted a dragon.

Degore’s eyes then fell upon the living object of the worship and affection of the whole of Mor-Roinn Dragantir: the dragon. Time seemed to stand still. The dragon was young, no older than he, as it seemed. The soft green scales bore only the slightest tinge of silver around the edges, and the eager brown eyes constantly scanned the crowd. The worshipers bowed or kneeled before the dragon and offered gifts of food or gold.

Suddenly they were themselves before the dragon and Grudaire was bowing politely and wishing the dragon well. The dragon's face was suddenly inches from Degore's. He shrank back involuntarily.

"I knew you," the dragon said "many years ago."

Degore nodded. "Yes. You are familiar to me."

The dragon moved back to a more comfortable position. "My mother and I rescued you," the dragon nodded. "It is just as well you did not come to live with me. On our way home we were attacked and our mother was killed." The dragon shook his head. "I am like you now. An orphan."

"That's horrible!" Degore balled up a fist. "Why would your mother be killed?"

"Some like to trade in dragons, or parts of dragons," the creature shrugged, "but I freed myself when the young soon-to-be Emperor Dragos attacked the pirate vessels and made me a god." The dragon threw back his head and laughed. The laugh echoed around the cathedral and pleased the adoring crowds.

The dragon wanted to hear what had brought Degore to Ritherhithe, and after a short account of his adventures the dragon rifled through his gifts and replenished Clancy a longbow. He gave Grudaire a firesteel. And to Degore he gave a map, he accompanied these with a simple blessing, tho in the place of references to the saints, he referred to himself. Then he ushered them off, as he had others to bless.

It was like a dream as Clancy led Degore from the cathedral. The others around them kept bowing to Grudaire, which was strange.

They stayed the night at an inn by the docks, ready to catch an early morning barge across the river. Degore took the opportunity to inspect the map. It was more detailed and expansive than any other map he had seen.

Grudaire glanced over. "It's a dragon map. They fly everywhere so their maps are more detailed. It's very valuable so hang onto it."

"Don't you want to look at it first?" Clancy asked.

Grudaire smiled and pulled a roll of vellums from under his robe. "Does your map have Claytonious on it?"

"To the east of Ritherhithe," Degore murmured as he studied the map. "Yes, it's on here and some land to the north as well, was that where we fixed the mast?"

Grudaire nodded. "Here are my maps, they are all ones I got in individual cities. The only large area detailed maps are from dragons."

"Why did the dragon give me this map?"

Degore asked "why not Clancy?"

"Because you look the most lost," Clancy sniped, ducking a moment later to avoid Degore's hurtling sandal.

Grudaire looked at the dishevelled shoulder length hair and rough robes of Degore and the primly smooth shirt collar and perfectly combed locks of Clancy. "Dragons can sometimes look into the hearts of

us humans and see something that we want or need or desire—" Grudaire paused as if he were sharing a deep secret "—perhaps one day you will understand why."

Degore nodded. "I should come back here and visit him again. I wonder what his name is."

"What goes on in Wraithall?" asked Clancy.

"Some of the old documents at the Abbey mention it in passing, but here it is on Degore's map"

The nostalgic look in Grudaire's eyes was not lost on Degore. "Have you been there?"

Grudaire laughed and in an instant was back to his normal self. "It is the city of dragons."

Degore was thrilled. "CITY OF DRAGONS!" he almost yelled, "We must go immediately!"

"The documents did not say anything about the city," Clancy said. "So have you ever been?" he looked at Grudaire.

"You can only go there through dragon invitation unless you want to become scorched," Grudaire chuckled. "Plus it's hard to get to, the only feasible way being via the water and you will be seen for miles on the ocean."

Degore sighed. "I will go there one day."

The journey across the loch was pleasant, they could see where the loch joined the bay, and beyond that the huge waves dancing in the ocean beyond. Degore managed to catch a fish in the smoothly flowing waters.. The city of Llyme was bustling with activity and they came across some Abbey people journeying back from market.. They were merry on the journey home, though Degore did notice that he did get some concerned looks every now and again. Perhaps it was his shabby appearance, or the wild glow in his eyes. Or maybe both.

The familiar spire of the cathedral was soon in sight and Degore realised how much he missed home. The spire was smaller than the dragon's cathedral in Ritherhithe, and was made of local stone, and not nearly as dramatic as the multiple blue ones, but it was sturdy and secure and reassuring.

Things looked mostly the same, a mound of bare earth in the graveyard from some poor unfortunate, and a new barn beside the old one. And soon they were officially at home. Uhtred came hurrying out of the house. He seemed to have suddenly aged.

Degore caught him up in a bear hug. "So where is Freyja? I thought she would be rushing out to meet me."

Uhtred sighed, and Degore was suddenly aware of the sober moods of the people around him. Clancy looked with concern into the face of his adoptive father.

"Degore," Uhtred said gently, as concern began to cross the boy's face, "she is no longer with us."

Degore could not hear anymore. He felt himself being led towards the graveyard and he hung back a bit as he approached the mound of bare soil. Clancy was on one side and Uhtred on the other. The tears

caught in his throat and after some time he asked to be left alone.

Clancy and Uhtred patted his back as they left and in the late evening light Degore sat by the grave. He looked around at the budding leaves and the yellow grass that had recently been uncovered by the melting snow. It grew darker and the sun began to set.

He sat for a long time until the last rays of the sun threw shades of orange and golden across the dark forest and the paddock in front of him. He got up stiffly and went home.

Uhtred told him briefly how Freyja had fallen ill and there had been nothing that they could do to save her.

The next day Degore joined Clancy in the cathedral. Grudaire was loitering before the fire and a few elderly white-haired priests were settled down on a pew that had been moved over.

Uhtred motioned the boys over. "We will have our meeting here as it's too cold in the back rooms."

"So you boys went out under the guidance of Grudaire?" began one of the old priests. "We are glad you have returned safe and sound. We are sorry for the losses you have experienced upon your return." He bowed his head to Degore. "Do you have a report on the boys to make?" This was directed to Grudaire.

"Yes, I am proud to report the boys are fine young men who will go far in life." Grudaire was obviously happy. "I will be supportive of whatever choices they make."

"It is tradition," the man continued, "for our youth to experience life outside our walls before deciding on what they will do with life. You two will have a few days to decide and confirm your decisions."

Uhtred cleared his throat "I will say on behalf of the Abbey, and I am not saying this only because my darling Freyja and I had the joy of raising you Degore, but you two are very welcome to join our order and we would love to have you. But we do understand our order is not for everyone and as you know we are on good terms with those of us who have left and live normal lives."

"And of course we will take into consideration your wishes to stay here at the abbey itself or settle down in a town abroad or perhaps continue to wander the nations as a druid," the old man added.

The boys were then invited to give an account of their journey and then were dismissed to go about their days.

Degore found himself under an ancient tree, sitting on a large rock that he and Clancy had moved there to cover the grave of the little dog Pawdraig.

Uhtred came over and sat with him for a short time. He went into more detail about Freyja's last moments and how she was happy to have been able to be his mother and raise him. She also would have liked to see him one last time but she knew he was out there doing something good and would see him again one day. Degore realised that her death would have coincided

with that terrible night of the fight between the roamer and the spirit.

After Uhtred left he sat quietly for a time until Clancy appeared.

"I have decided on what I want to do," Clancy said, looking carefully at his friend.

Degore smiled weakly. "Yes, tell me. I am grieving, but I know Freyja would want me to go on with life."

"She was the best of people." Clancy straightened the symbol of the saints around his neck.

"When did you start wearing that?" Degore asked.

"I have decided to stay at the Abbey and join the order in the running of the cathedral." Clancy glanced at his shoes lest a speck of dirt made him look less fervent.

"You know your mind fast," Degore commented. "You did well on our adventure, does it not make you want to travel more?"

"It was fun," Clancy agreed, "but I want to start a family."

"Ooooh, I will soon be an uncle!" Degore teased, "and who is your bride to be?"

"I have yet to propose," Clancy said, leaning in closer. "I am heading that way now, but she is the youngest daughter of Uhtred's oldest son: Gwendoline."

"I met the family a few times," said Degore. "How were you around her enough to know you liked her?"

"I felt we had an understanding when we met up with them at markets and at Christmas and so on when they came up from Llyme to the cathedral—" Clancy looked dreamily at the building "—and now she is here for a while to be with Uhtred."

Degore nodded. "I met her last night, I remember her as a freckled child."

Clancy began to move away anxiously. "She is by the henhouse, now is my time."

"Good luck," Degore saluted, and Clancy rushed away.

As the quiet settled down around him, the velum in his robe pocket scratched at him. He took it out and looked it over. The strange names and distant lands excited him and his eyes ran to the word 'Wraithall'. He felt a strong need to go there.

The boys met before the committee a few days later. Uhtred was pleased with the engagement of his granddaughter to Clancy and Degore announced to an unsurprised audience his desire to head out as a druid.

Clancy's wedding was in spring. The flowers were out in full bloom and an addition had been made to Uhtred's house to fit the new couple in. He was accepted as a novice priest to serve directly under Uhtred and assist him. For many years Uhtred had gone without an assistant despite being the head of the order, but now he was open and welcoming to Clancy.

Degore waited impatiently for his instructions on where to go next. He came in one day after herding

sheep in the crisp spring air and found the family happy to see him.

“We have your directive,” Uhtred said, while Clancy shuffled his papers.

Gwendoline was busy arranging some flowers in a vase. She beamed over at him. “I am making you some bannock bread tomorrow for your journey.”

“We cannot send you to Wraithall as dragons do not need to be baptised,” Uhtred began, “but we know there is trouble brewing in the Black Hallows, so we would like you to go to the Kingdom of Torachas; that should be on your dragon map.”

Degore checked his map. There it was, to the south of the continent, a high area of land bordering the sea with cliffs and separated from the forest by the rivers and lakes that fed Loch Shiel.

“What kind of trouble?” Degore inquired.

Clancy pulled out a letter. “They used to be quite a devout kingdom but it seems things are slipping and we recently got a letter that a priest was attacked. It appeared to be a one off incident, but we need you to go around and visit all the towns and cities that we have priests in and gather information.”

Degore looked over the page Uhtred handed to him. A long list of towns and names. “Who am I to go with? Is Grudaire still around?”

Uhtred and Clancy exchanged glances. “I do not think Grudaire is one of us,” Clancy said slowly.

“What do you mean?” Degore was puzzled “surely you know him, Uhtred?”

Uhtred looked sheepish. “He is about 20 years younger than me, and I become head of the order in my late 30s, so it’s possible he was raised away from the abbey and went through his training and for some reason I either did not remember him or was perhaps off on my own travels at the time, so when he showed up for the first time back when you were young, I did not research his background. He arrived with some men from Torachas, and they seemed to know him, so I was all fine with it,” he admitted. “So, when he volunteered to go travelling with you boys we thought it would be a great idea as he was so well travelled. And he did take good care of you. If he shows up again I will ask a few questions.”

“Then who is he?” asked Degore, his first feeling was to be put off by being sent off in the care of a stranger, but remembering that nothing too bad happened, he shrugged off the feeling.

“Probably a dragon in human form,” Gwendoline offered.

They all laughed. It was not possible for a dragon to become a person.



Mistletoe

By Walter de La Mare

Sitting under the mistletoe
(Pale-green, fairy mistletoe),
One last candle burning low,
All the sleepy dancers gone,
Just one candle burning on,
Shadows lurking everywhere:
Some one came, and kissed me there.

Tired I was; my head would go
Nodding under the mistletoe
(Pale-green, fairy mistletoe),
No footsteps came, no voice, but only,
Just as I sat there, sleepy, lonely,
Stooped in the still and shadowy air
Lips unseen—and kissed me there.





corncrakemag.com