

A Midwinter Night's Carol

A Cautionary Tale in Six Staves

STAVE THE FIRST

Somewhere in the Wolds

Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail. It is perhaps unfortunate that Marley has absolutely nothing to do with today's tale, as he sounds quite interesting. Still, these things happen. Come with us instead, dear listener, to the sleepy village of St Botolph-in-the-Wolds, in East Yorkshire. After all, if you hang around in Dickensian London, you might catch something, and we don't mean fresh fish.

It is, as usual, Christmas Eve. The village itself is not really our concern, although we could point out that at the moment it lies under a thick coating of snow. Mounded beneath winter whiteness, it is the nearest to picturesque it's ever going to get. Some of the snowmen shouldn't be examined too closely, but you might want to ask Mummy and Daddy about that later. With luck they'll go red in the face and offer to take you for an icecream.

But look now beyond the warped spire of St Botolph's church, further even than the barbed wire surrounding the Girl Guides' hut. Can you spot that lone, decrepit building on the hillside above the village, the house half-hidden by undergrowth? The one next to the sign saying "And Don't Come Back". That is our destination today.

As you can see, it is large and gambrel-roofed. If an Elizabethan builder had lost a fight with a group of Amish alcoholics, this would have been the result. Crouched behind dense banks of rhododendrons, the house emits faint spirals of smoke from its dilapidated chimneys, and occasionally through holes in the roof. It stretches the word 'disrepair' so far that even the rats write to their local Member of Parliament and ask for better accommodation. You get the idea.

On the doorstep of this architectural accident stands a grey-haired figure, wrapped in a number of worn-out dog coats. The immediate impression is of a man who badly needs ironing, and we're not talking about his clothes. He is listening to a group of carol singers who have braved the snow and rough path up the hillside this evening to regale the old gentleman with merry songs. As the last strains of 'Once in Royal David's City' fade away, a tear rolls down his cheek...

J Linseed Grant's eyes watered with pain as he regarded the plucky band of singers. They had been truly, unbelievably awful. Their 'First Noel' had rattled his remaining teeth, and their version of 'Angels We have Heard on High' would have made the Baby Jesus convert to Buddhism.

Reflecting on that mangled carol, he reached under the dog-coats and produced a German machine-pistol, which he had liberated during the war. Or 'stolen from a pawn shop outside York on the 5th August 1943', as the magistrate had put it at the time. He found it a great comfort during the festive season.

"I warned you about coming up here again," he said, and fired a few rounds into the air, rather than aiming directly at the carol singers. It was an uncharacteristic gesture which showed how he too had been touched by the meaning of Christmas. The carol singers scattered, and were soon lost to sight.

"Bah. Sausages," he said (an almost tragic choking incident the week before had left him with an aversion to boiled sweets).

He went inside, slamming the front door shut and dislodging several tiles (most cold-callers to his house ended up with head injuries one way or the other). Despite all this, he was in a relatively good mood, as his housekeeper Mrs Gumworthy had gone to her sister's for the holidays. Mshindi, the under-gardener, was planning to roast one of the penguins Swahili-style, and the maid had volunteered to tackle some of the less aggressive vegetables in the kitchen-garden. There would be jokes and japes, and the dogs could have the beak.

As he kicked the snow off his boots, fond fancies of a meal he could actually keep down were interrupted by the plaintive cry of the telephone. After it had rung for four or five minutes, he picked up the receiver.

"We regret that Mr Linseed Grant is currently unable to come to the--" he began.

"I know you're there, JLG" came a distressed female voice.

The old man shuddered as his agent commenced to list the many deadlines he had missed, and to point out that he was due in court again for libel.

"I can't live on a percentage of what you make," she said. "The children are down to eating the pizza boxes, and we haven't paid the gas bill for six months. For pity's sake, send me something saleable," she ended, descending into the usual wracking sobs.

"It's in the post," he said, and put the receiver down.

Damned money-grubbing agents, he thought. And the rest. Everyone wanted something from him at this time of year. Next it would be some non-existent nephew calling round to invite him for Christmas dinner, and calling him 'Uncle Linseed' every other sentence to make sure the readers got it. He would cut the phone wire and go to bed, an approach which usually solved most of his problems.

Mshindi was out with two of the dogs, and would probably spend the night trying to round up a suitably fat penguin. And Henrietta the maid was down in the village drinking a yard of absinthe for charity, which left only him and Bottles the lurcher in the house.

He glanced in the parlour, where Bottles was dozing upside down on a pile of abandoned sonnets. The dog was having an extended break from his adventures with a local girl. The vet said that he was in danger of complete bladder collapse, and needed to be kept away from any excitement for a while.

Confident that he might have the bed to himself, the author climbed the stairs and stumbled into his bedroom. They had eaten most of the candles for lunch, so he navigated by the light of the small fire in the cast-iron hearth. At least he had enough rejection letters to keep that going for a few hours more.

“Ah, peace at last,” he said, quite unnecessarily.

He wrapped himself up in the quilts, though not without remembering to take out his teeth and reload the pistol. After a moment's thought, he removed his teeth from the weapon and put bullets in the magazine instead.

“Damn the expense. It's Christmas.”

STAVE THE SECOND

A Providential Spirit

He was on the edge of slumber when he heard a noise. A Phut. Then a clank. And another clank. He remembered tucking most of Father's legs into the cot and locking the cellar door, so it couldn't be him. He peered over the quilts.

There, already halfway through the far wall, was a terrifying apparition. If you were easily terrified. Or you thought that walls were there to stop that sort of thing. It was man-sized, and man-shaped. It was a man, in short. A somewhat pale, worried looking man in an outdated suit, with chains dragging behind him, great iron chains hung with antique typewriters. As the spirit materialised fully, it was clear that he had brought some of the wallpaper with him.

“Can I help you?” The old man sighed, lighting the last stub of candle from a damp book of matches stamped 'Property of RMS Titanic'.

“I show myself on this mortal plane as a warning, J Linseed Grant. And to tell you that other spirits, more dreadful than I, will visit you this night.”

“Wouldn't it be easier for everyone if you just gave me the gist of it now, and let me get some sleep?”

The apparition frowned, hauling his chains closer and clearly trying not to fall over. “You don't seem very bothered by all this.”

“Happens all the time round here. We had the ghost of Prince Albert last month.”

“Wasn't he the one who had a thing in his... no, I am here with fell purpose. Ask me, J Linseed Grant, ask me who I was in life”

The old man sat up in bed and wished he had some cigarettes upstairs.

“From the suit and the jawline, I'd say you were H P Lovecraft. That colonial chap who used to send me drafts of horror stories about squamous things getting up to no good. Damned nuisance, it was.”

One of the typewriters clattered, producing the first few lines of an awkwardly-written tribute to Edgar Allen Poe.

“Lucky guess.” said Lovecraft's Ghost. “I was indeed he, but now I am condemned--

“So is this house. Has been for years. Mother has half the tiles off the roof when she gets in one of her moods. I'm not sure how long that attic is going to hold her.”

“Now I am condemned,” repeated Lovecraft's Ghost with determination, “To wander the Earth, and consider in woe as to why I didn't become a plumber and make proper money. And why I held so many peculiar prejudices. I mean, I pointed out that I was only echoing the social mores of my age, but no-one seemed to buy that one, and...”

“Is there a point to this?” Linseed Grant yawned. “I've had a long day.”

The ghost took a deep breath, or its spiritual equivalent. “I didn't ask for the assignment, you know. I was on call, and one of the Powers Above remembered that I knew you... it's all a bit of nightmare.”

“Much what I was thinking. Never mix gin and laudanum with cheese. Still, you're here now. I don't suppose that you've brought some inspirational material – plots, characters and so on?”

“I don't imagine you'll find anything inspirational in this tale,” said Lovecraft's Ghost, relieved that he wasn't in it for very long. “By the way, I saw a suspicious looking man outside the house while I was materialising. Not a... how can I put this? Not a white fellow.

“That would be Mshindi, the under-gardener.”

“I see. Some debased native you tolerate, I suppose, for philanthropic purposes.”

“My only philanthropic purpose is the hope that Mshindi and I can make enough money to have the roof fixed and buy a case of decent port. He's smarter than most people I've met round here, even if he is a rubbish gardener.”

“Smarter? And yet not Caucasian?” Lovecraft's Ghost looked puzzled. “Ah, then the locals themselves are perhaps the product of some foul and degraded miscegenation...”

“Not especially. You might want to meet Father, though.”

“This is hardly a social occasion. J Linseed Grant, I am here to warn you that if you do not mend your ways, you too will be doomed to trudge the ethereal plane, burdened by your sins, much as I.”

Lovecraft's Ghost shook his chains, and the typewriters rattled out some moderately good verse, followed by a short story about rats who got drunk on cheap cider and couldn't find their way out of the walls.

“A terrible fate indeed,” said the author, noticing the many typos in the story. “And how might I avert such a fate, then? It's not the old sudden conversion to Catholicism game, is it?”

“You'd be amazed by how many writers fall for that one,” said Lovecraft's Ghost. “But no. I am here to tell you that this night, you will be visited by three spirits from the Great Beyond, in order to show you your errors.”

“I do use too many semi-colons, I suppose.”

The apparition raised itself high above the bed, which set the typewriters off again. Fragments of juvenile stories fell to the bedroom floor, mostly to do with forbidden practices and damp bedsheets.

“No, Linseed Grant. The errors of your life, the poor choices you have made – and your attitude, which stinks, by the way. Three spirits, remember...”

With that, Lovecraft's Ghost turned majestically and made his ectoplasmic way through the far wall, only pausing to curse as one of the typewriters got caught in the skirting board.

No wonder you didn't go to Heaven with that sort of language, thought Linseed Grant. He lay back on his pillow, wondering if he should take some bicarbonate of soda to settle his dinner, but then there came a scratching at the door. It was a suitably ominous sound for the way the evening seemed to be going.

He got out of bed and grabbed the poker from the fireplace. Maybe cold iron would settle this first spirit's hash and let him get a decent night's sleep. He pulled the door open, his improvised weapon raised high, to be greeted by Bottles. The lurcher promptly wet himself at the sight of a man waving a poker in the air.

"Oh, it's you. I notice you weren't around when astral annoyances were in the room."

Bottles gave an aggrieved yelp, and threw himself onto the bed. Grumbling, Linseed Grant rescued a portion of the quilts and managed to make himself vaguely comfortable. As usual, the dog seemed to have an excess of limbs, one of which was always poking him in the back of the neck.

"Move over, you daft mutt. I have to get back to sleep. Or wake up and get out of this dream. Not sure which." He let Morpheus draw him into slumber, assisted by the occasional soft fart from the dog...

STAVE THE THIRD

A Brief, if Spectral, Misunderstanding

"J Linseed Grant!"

The old man opened his eyes, a trick he had learned in the desert. There, at the foot of his bed, stood a tall figure in white, its hair a flickering mass of silver flame. It had a tin bucket in its hand – or in whatever that was at the end of one arm. Whether male or female, the supernatural visitor had a variable number of appendages, and seemed to be continuing the Lovecraftian theme somewhat longer than necessary.

As Linseed Grant blinked at this new apparition, the clock in the hallway chimed out eighteen minutes past eleven. An ill-omened time, he reflected, especially for itinerant clock-repairers who didn't know what they were doing.

"Your head's on fire," he said. "Isn't that uncomfortable?"

"I am no mortal being, but the Ghost of Christmas Past. Didn't Lovecraft tell you I was coming?"

"Not specifically, but he always was one for vague intimations. Don't let me spoil things. Why the tin bucket, by the way?"

"Health and safety. J Linseed Grant, you must come with me and behold your history. I shall help you to see what made you the sorry person you are."

"I'm not that sorry," said the author.

Ignoring him, the spirit reached out a tentacle and took his hand, raising him from the bed. Ever watchful for danger, Bottles drifted with some determination into a deeper sleep, where he dreamed about chasing asthmatic rabbits which had lost their inhalers.

It seemed to Linseed Grant that the spirit drew him into a past which he had long forgotten. The usual mists involved in this sort of thing parted, and before him lay a typical school scene. Outside the school, fresh-faced boys played rough and tumble on the rugby field, occasionally checking out the contents of each other's shorts. In an otherwise empty classroom, however, a lone child studied feverishly, ignoring the calls of his classmates to come out and play.

“See how the others wait for their parents to pick them up, but you have already lost the joys of family and companionship.”

The author scratched his chin. “Very nice point, I'm sure, but that's not me. It's not even my school.”

“What?”

“I went to Mrs McCreedy's School for Wayward Girls. Some sort of typing mistake in the application, apparently. And it was cheap. I don't know where this is, but it's definitely not Mrs McCreedy's.”

“Oh.” The spirit flickered uncertainly. “No matter.”

It coughed awkwardly and whisked him through a veil of ectoplasmic mist to another scene. After Linseed Grant had wiped the gunk from his face, he found that they were peering down upon a fine country house. Inside the main entrance hall, a sweet-looking girl held a young man by the hand. Laughing at his shyness, she led him into a room full of jovial, well-dressed people.

The Ghost of Christmas Past sounded more confident. “Watch, pitiful mortal, as your sister introduces you to the pleasures of polite society, yet you do not see the joy in others...”

“Only child, I'm afraid. And even then Mother was convinced that I was a large otter who had been hiding under her petticoats.”

The spirit reached inside its robes and pulled out a small notebook, flicking through the pages and muttering to itself. It used a number of its features to make an expression of mild annoyance.

“The world of the supernatural is a mysterious one,” it said quickly. “I shall show you instead how you spurned your first love for the urge to write, despite having affection from both her and your kindly employer Mr Fuzzypeg...”

“My first love? I had a quick fumble with Hetty Olthwaite behind the church organ. After that I worked as sump-drainer and sports correspondent at the Wolds Tractor Review, and never went out with another girl. They cost too much.”

“Oh bollocks. I think that they've given me the wrong booking. Look, it's all about you understanding that the past makes the present, and so on.”

“An invaluable lesson,” said Linseed Grant. “If every visit is as short as this one, I should still get a good night's sleep after all.”

Taking the tin bucket, he shoved it over the spirit's head, whereupon the already bedraggled flames

went out, and both spirit and bucket vanished.

STAVE THE FOURTH

The Third of the Spirits if You Count H P Lovecraft, Which You Probably Shouldn't

As soon as the spectre was gone, Bottles opened one eye and gave a warning yip.

“Nice timing.” The old man started back to his warm, if over-occupied bed. Before he could get under the quilts, he heard the clock chime eighteen minutes past eleven for the second time that night, and there came the distinctive Phut of another spirit appearing. He turned around, to be confronted by the gigantic apparition of a bearded man in a green towelling bathrobe.

“Is this how you usually appear? It's rather informal.”

“I was in the shower when I got called. Not many of us like working the Christmas shift.”

The spirit waved one robed arm, and around it appeared mounds of festive food – knock-off hampers marked 'Fortmun & Mason', frozen turkeys with one leg missing, and a large heap of chocolate flavoured wine-gums. As a dozen boxes of Turkish delight materialised at the foot of the bed, Linseed Grant couldn't help noticing that they were past their sell-by date.

“I am the Ghost of Christmas Present.” the figure boomed. “Hence these magnificent gifts I bring. Ho ho ho!”

Awakened by the spirit's unconvincing jolly laughter, Bottles lifted his slender head and slid slowly off the quilts. He eyed up the multi-packs of pork chops which lay at the spirit's feet.

“Oh.” Linseed Grant sighed. “I suppose you mean to take me somewhere, and show me various morally relevant scenes?”

The Ghost of Christmas Present looked annoyed. Suddenly the corners of the bedroom were full of toothpaste and slimming products, each carton covered in Turkish writing and marked 50% off.

“Have I done you before?” it asked.

“Don't think so. There's usually a pattern to this sort of thing, though.”

“Hmpph. Well, take my hand...”

Without waiting, the spirit grabbed hold of the old man, and the bedroom shimmered out of existence. Linseed Grant found that instead he was hovering near the ceiling of a tawdry room in a run-down London suburb.

“That carpet's pretty ghastly. Is that what I'll end up with?”

“Shut up and watch.”

A harassed man in his forties was trying to disentangle a cat from a length of tinsel, watched by five children of irrelevant ages. Behind them loomed a Christmas tree of such proportions that it might generously have been called a pot plant. It was festooned with ornaments and tinsel for a tree ten times its size, thus usefully obscuring the almost needle-free branches.

“Don't worry, children,” said the man, booting the disentangled cat into one corner of the room. “Mama will be home soon with Little Jim.”

The children shrugged and went back to picking each other's scabs. True to their father's forecast, not a moment later they heard the sound of the front door trying not to come off its hinges, and in walked J Linseed Grant's agent, who was too poor even to afford her own name. On her shoulders sat a pale boy of five or six years with mucus running from his nose.

“What did the doctor say, dear?” asked Mr Agent.

“She was quite positive, really. Little Jim has only rickets, scurvy and beri-beri this time. And he was supposed to have the calamine lotion on his skin, not to drink it, so that explains some of the down-below problems.”

Linseed Grant stared at this sad vision, and felt a certain swell of emotion. Even on the ethereal plane, the room really stank of used cat litter.

His agent placed Little Jim on an upturned plastic bucket by the 'tree', whereupon the pale child settled down for inspired fit of coughing and wheezing.

Linseed Grant turned to the Ghost of Christmas Present.

“That cough. Tell me spirit – is Little Jim to die, perhaps of consumption?”

“No, he stole one of his mother's hand-rolled cigarettes, and smoked it behind the goose-sheds. He will get acne quite badly, though. And possibly trench-foot.”

The two adults in the scene held hands, trying not to make eye contact.

“Is there no hope that old Linseed Grant might sell something soon, and raise us from this penury?” Mr Agent glanced sadly at Little Jim, whose mucus flow was becoming prodigious.

His wife shook her head. “No. His biography of Ebediah Crake, the Wolds' least successful mass murderer, is barely started. The manuscript for 'At the Mountains of Mild Confusion' is still with the solicitor, pending a High Court case for plagiarism. And most of his poetry is being used for toilet paper at various publishers.”

“Home-made tofu for Christmas dinner again, then.” The man sighed.

Linseed Grant turned away. “Enough, spirit, enough. Take me from this tragic scene.”

“You are touched by their plight?”

“No, they're just very annoying. And I suspect they're socialists.”

“Then I shall show you where even now your nephew sits with family and friends, in joyous celebration of companionship and paying your staff a living wage--”

“We've done that one. I don't have a nephew.”

“I could find you one.”

“No thanks.”

The spirit laughed heartily to disguise a venomous look. “Back to your wretched home it is, then, where I have one last thing to show you, troublesome mortal.”

In a moment they were at the house above St Botolphs again. Bottles was in the middle of the bedroom floor, surrounded by the discarded wrapping of four packs of pork chops. Looking surprised at their sudden reappearance, the dog coughed up half a tube of toothpaste.

Linseed Grant sat on the edge of the bed, and the spirit loomed above him, reaching to grasp the towelling at its loins...

“You're not going to take that robe off, are you?” The author winced. “I tried that sort of thing during the war, and it made my knees hurt. We don't have any margarine, either.”

“Foolish mortal, I must show you what comes when Charity and Love are lost. See now what clings to me...” The green towelling parted, revealing two thin forms, children with narrow faces and hungry eyes. “These tragic figures before you, they are Ignorance and Want, and they--

“No they're not.”

“What do you mean?” The spirit's face went dark with anger.

“That's Emily Pethwick and Mary-Sue Perkins from the Girl Guides. I'd recognise those little horrors anywhere, even if you hadn't wrapped them in old bedsheets.

The smaller girl, Emily, shoved most of one finger up her left nostril. “An' this feller telled us we'd get ten shillins, an' Ad'laiide our boss says oh yeah, heard that one, an' then--”

“We made a gosh-darned deal, faster than you could say Jiminy Cricket.” said Mary-Sue, who had been brought up to believe she was American. “And here we are, a-clinging to this fine feller's breeches like hominy grits to a plate.”

The spirit winced at the girl's appalling accent, but tried to rally. “You'll have to imagine them as the personifications of Ignorance and Want. I told you I was rushed.”

The author nodded. “I would ask if they were yours, but no-one in their right mind would have these two.”

“An' we is to say,” Emily beamed, “That we has your doom writted on our foreskins--”

“Foreheads,” snapped the spirit, shedding a consignment of gluten-free frozen chickens, most of which were in the process of defrosting.

Linseed Grant sighed. “Am I suppose to ask if they have no other refuge, except for bothering me?”

The Ghost of Christmas Present seemed to have had enough. “I doubt there are any prisons or workhouses which would take these two. I'm pretty sure that one of them has already been through my robe pockets.”

“An' I founded a hedge-piggy!” said Emily brightly, holding up what was obviously a bath brush

with the handle broken off.

The Ghost of Christmas Present kicked over a pile of 'Buy One Get One Free' chocolate oranges, each with a slice missing.

“That's it! I give in. You have learned nothing from me, and so I will leave you to the most dreadful spirit of all – the one you will not be able to ignore. Beware, J Linseed Grant, for soon you will be visited by the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come!”

And the spirit vanished, leaving behind only the smell of damp bathrobes, and a sense that there was always a hidden cost to buying counterfeit goods. Sensing that he wasn't going to get any sleep until all this was over, Linseed Grant patted Bottles on the head.

“One of those nights, boy.”

His words were wasted, as the dog had passed out. Twelve large chops, and a substantial amount of toothpaste, had sent him into that Dreamland which the old man seemed destined to miss.

STAVE THE FIFTH

Four Hooves and an Attitude Problem

As the clock choked out yet another version of the dreaded eighteen minutes past eleven, the author was alarmed to see the room darken, as if a mighty thunderstorm had come within the house. Door and windows rattled in their frames, and from the darkness stepped a black horse the size of a main battle tank. Its mane was wild, and its eyes burning with a sulphurous crimson flame.

Linseed Grant drew back, wishing he'd kept the German pistol nearer. He found that his usual sarcasm had deserted him.

“What now approaches to haunt and punish me? Are you the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come?”

The great beast snorted, and slammed one hoof down in a move which shattered a floorboard.

“Where will you take me, O spirit?” asked Linseed Grant, opting for a respectful tone this time. Christmas was not a good time to get your head kicked in. “What scenes of my no doubt appalling future are you to show me?”

The horse stretched its muscular neck and spat.

“Bugged if I know.” said Mr Bubbles. “Was in my barn, then here.”

The old man took a deep breath. “I think you're supposed to show me what will become of me if I keep to my dubious ways. That's what H P Lovecraft's Ghost said, anyway.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“To... I don't know, make me a better person?”

“Sod that.”

“Look, there's no point in me having a chill visitation without reflecting on my own shortcomings and mortality. Or something along those lines.”

Mr Bubbles considered the matter.

“Suppose so. If it gets this over with. Grab my tail, then.”

Linseed Grant took hold of the thick black hair with a certain caution. He knew about the back end of horses, and he didn't have a shovel to hand. As if in some badly written song, the two of them rose above the decrepit house, ignoring the structural impediments of walls or roofs.

“I'm walking in the--” he began to sing.

“One more word of that, you get your nadgers bitten off.”

The old man went quiet. High above the rooftops they flew, avoiding the edge of Whateley Wood. Even at this distance they could hear the sound of birds croaking in the gnarled trees.

“As I said, I had that H P Lovecraft here earlier.” Linseed Grant felt he ought to make conversation. “I think he's the reason why the woods are full of whip-poor-wills with bronchitis.”

But the horse was silent, pounding the night air as they approached the village hall. Descending, Linseed Grant noticed that rich yellow light shone from the windows and the open door. There seemed to be a crowd inside. Sounds of merriment floated out into the crisp air.

“Am I to look in on this gathering, spirit?”

Mr Bubbles did not reply, so Linseed Grant crept forward to peer through the doorway. The hall was decked out in the style of a typical village festivity in the Wolds - cold iron, trays of silver bullets, rowan branches and the demon-averting symbols of half a dozen religions. Hex marks were scrawled on the walls with creosote, and although he recognised many of the people there, they seemed older. Still, he didn't get out much.

There by the pork pie stand was the round, bearded figure of Imam Syal, debating with Father O'Hanrahan, but both had less hair than he remembered. They were deep into their regular theological debate about who would win in a fight, a djinni or a leprechaun. Beyond them he saw Mr Quilling, the village pervert, in conversation with the chair of the Womens' Institute.

“...But he wasn't all bad,” Mr Quilling said. “He used to let me have Mrs Gumworthy's used bras every so often--”

They were interrupted by a large, shaven-headed man in pink chiffon and kitten heels.

“He wasn't the worst of masters, either.” said the man, a slight sob in his voice. “Bought me a new apron every Martinmas - and he once complimented me when I added a little lace to my outfit.”

Linseed Grant nodded his insubstantial head. Henrietta, his maid, had always understood that keeping such a complicated household was not an easy task. Besides, Henrietta was the only maid in the area capable of felling trees and splitting them for the log shed. You didn't take an ex-coal-miner with an axe for granted, even if they did wear their maid's outfit above the knee.

“But... Henrietta talks as if I'm no longer around.”

Mr Bubbles snorted. “Quick, aren't you?”

“Have I gone on holiday, then? Or...” Linseed Grant paused, shocked by a sudden thought. “O spirit, do not say that I've moved to Wetwang!”

The horse snickered, but would not explain. Despite the passing words of sorrow from Henrietta, most of the people at the gathering were less complimentary. The author listened as the words skinflint, miser and pain in the arse were trotted out by various villagers, along with a number of personal recollections which were hardly flattering.

“All of those ducks were volunteers,” he protested, but no-one could hear him, and after he had passed through several of them, he remembered that this wasn't your normal Christmas Eve.

“Right, next stop.”

“But wait, spirit – is there not more to learn here?”

Mr Bubbles turned his head. In each of the horse's large, crimson eyes was a tiny reflection of an old man with a surprisingly fragile skull.

“Do you have a warm barn and a pile of turnips to get back to?” said the creature.

“No,” Linseed Grant admitted.

“Then button it.”

The horse drew him once more into the ether, rising above the village and heading for the old churchyard. That's never good, though Linseed Grant. There were many things buried in the overgrown cemetery, and not all of them stayed where they should.

His own great-grandmother had been interred there last century. Four times, in fact. Even a year after her demise, she insisted on scrubbing the front door step and black-leading the stove once a week, a habit instilled in her as a good Yorkshire woman. Her last words as they weighted her down for the last time were 'And them net curtains need washing...’

Alighting amidst leafless brambles and discarded bottles of the local Old Suzy gin, Linseed Grant found that he was before a newly-carved gravestone. It seemed time to have a bad feeling about this.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” he said. “Whose grave is this, O spirit?”

Mr Bubbles raised an ominous hoof, indicating that he should go nearer. The author trembled. A night-shirt made out of old tablecloths was not the best attire for a cold winter night. Avoiding the discarded bottles, he crept forward until he could trace the letters caved in the gravestone.

“Agnes Cleggins. Not resting, but dead.” he read out aloud. In smaller letters below it said 'Good riddance, from all the family'. He straightened up. “Er, who is Agnes Cleggins?”

“No idea. Couldn't be arsed to find yours. Same thing though, I expect.”

Linseed Grant shuddered. “Then I am dead in this time you show me. But – did I at least succeed in

my quest for literary recognition? Did I ever complete my biography of Ebediah Crake?"

The great beast gave a sigh of annoyance. "Remaindered after three days. A woman in Malton bought one."

The author allowed a moment of hope to enter his crabbed heart...

"Cheaper than cat litter," added Mr Bubbles.

"Nooooooo!" Linseed Grant fell to his ethereal knees in the graveyard. "Is there still time for me to make amends, to avoid these terrible sales figures? Tell me it is so, kind spirit, tell me."

He inserted the 'kind spirit' part with little confidence. In truth it was hard to work out if the horse was malevolent or merely bored.

"Don't know. Don't care."

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come flicked his tail, and suddenly they were back in the bedroom of the old house. Before Linseed Grant could frame one last question, the monstrous black horse whinnied, kicked the door down for amusement, and was gone.

STAVE THE SIXTH

The Inevitable Consequences of Paranormal Meddling

Along with the return of corporeal presence came a feeling that he needed the bathroom and a stiff gin. And a carpenter. He looked around at the mess. Everything the Ghost of Christmas Present had manifested was still there, and he was surprised to see that Lovecraft's Ghost was back, trying to open a dented can of peaches with a typewriter key.

"You had a further message for me?" asked Linseed Grant.

"Not really. I was just hungry." The embarrassed spirit dropped the peaches and went Phut, leaving the author alone. Or almost alone. Bottles peeked out from under the bed, and after checking that everything of a supernatural or otherwise threatening nature had left, started barking loudly.

"Good dog," said the old man. "What would I have done without you?"

He sat down on a box of Korean whisky-type liquor and put his head into his hands. Was it too late to learn the lessons that the spirits had taught? Or, indeed, to work out what those lessons were? It was all a bit confusing, really. He watched Bottles cock his leg on the night-stand, and came to a decision.

Going to the window, he threw it open, a process which caused most of the glass to fall out its frame. Down below, the butcher's boy sat eating a meat pie.

"You there, fine young lad!" shouted Linseed Grant.

The child looked up, trying to hide the meat pie behind his back. "I think it was off, sir."

"Tell me boy, what day is this?"

“Er... it's the fifteenth of January, sir. Almost Chinese New Year, and only three days until the Feast of St Scrofula the Blessed Martyr. In the Hindoo calendar, it's coming up to...”

“Ah. Not quite what I'd expected. Never mind. Is that fine goose still hanging in your master's shop, the one as big as your bicycle?”

The boy looked surprised. “It is, sir. Bit ripe now, but...”

“Here is a shiny silver sixpence if you will pedal back to the shop and send it to the address I provide.” He scribbled the details of his agent on a flannel, and threw it down to the boy.

“Make it a shilling, and you're on.”

Linseed Grant bit back his usual ill-tempered comment, and tossed the lad a shilling. He could only imagine the expression on his agent's face when presented with a large, only slightly-decomposed goose. It was enough to feed her entire family for a week, with only a moderate chance of dysentery afterwards. And she must have some of those sonnets, as well. The paper was quite thick, and ideal for wrapping children in when the heating was off. Perhaps he should add some nicotine gum and acne cream for Little Jim.

“Come, Bottles.” He rushed downstairs, followed by the confused lurcher. Mshindi was in the kitchen, boiling a sausage in the tin kettle.

“Merry Christmas, my good and faithful fellow!”

Mshindi muttered something in Swahili and turned to cut the sausage in half.

“No, have it all. And here is a guinea. You must buy that chainsaw you so wanted, and let the rhododendrons beware.”

The young under-gardener's face was reward enough for Linseed Grant's crabbed old heart. Truly, the spirits had touched him (but not in that way), and he felt a new, charitable life lay ahead of him. Henrietta would have a new dress, not just a few lace trimmings, and he would send a bottle of Brasso to the Girl Guides as a peace offering. After that, perhaps he would work on the next chapter of his biography, the one where Ebediah Crake completely failed to slaughter seven people in a railway carriage outside Bugthorpe...

“Come, Bottles, get your lead. We shall go down into the village and distribute some of that dubious out-of-date food to the needy.”

He might even pretend that one of them was his nephew, and pump his hand warmly, as if he were a miserly old uncle who had suddenly come to his senses. He wasn't sure what good that would do, but what the heck. It was only three weeks after Christmas.

The kitchen seemed full of post-seasonal levity.

“Mshindi, we shall have another penguin for dinner, and damn the expense. Where are the other dogs?”

The under-gardener smiled and nodded to a heap of lurchers dozing in the corner, tangled in the remains of Linwood Grant's best overcoat. Bottles hesitated, sensing a good nap coming on, but bravely went for his lead instead. He had already urinated on almost everything inside the house,

and even he seemed to be emboldened by the experiences of the calendrically-challenged night behind them...

Therefore, dear listener, it is with a sense of unusual merriment that we watch J Linseed Grant and his faithful Bottles venture out on a crisp morning, heading down to the village to spread good cheer.

“I shall show the people of St Botolph-in-the-Wolds that I can be as joyous as any man,” he proclaims.

The curmudgeonly old author is better than his word. For some days he visits people all around, knocking on their doors and distributing the knock-off toothpaste and bent salamis left by the Ghost of Christmas Present. To Little Jim, his agent's son, he is like a second distant relative who rarely writes and forgets most birthdays. Even Mrs Gumworthy, who has returned from her sister's, finds him a changed man. He attempts to eat at least half of her meals, and rarely spits out the larger bits of rat.

On the seventh day, having declared him to be the most jolly of men for the umpteenth time, the locals decide that they have had enough of enforced charity and frivolity. It strikes them that they prefer the miserable old recluse who keeps his nose out of their business. So they throw stones through his windows and shout rude words until he stops bothering them.

Sitting in his freezing parlour the next day, J Linseed Grant has to accept that he is a wiser man for the visit of the three ghosts and the slightly psychopathic horse. He is now absolutely sure that it is preferable to be bad-tempered and penny-pinching.

He strokes Bottles behind the ear, and the two of them watch peaceably as Mshindi sellotapes greaseproof paper over the broken window panes. From outside comes only the sound of a badger being violently sick in the rhododendrons. All is well again.

And so, as Mr Bubbles often observes, Sod them, Every One.

THE END