



*The* CHARITY  
OF EBENEZER  
SCROOGE



12th Street Hill Press

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*The* CHARITY  
OF EBENEZER  
SCROOGE

*or*

A CHRISTMAS CAROL II

A NOVEL BY

GLEN L. BLEDSOE



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For my wife and my mother

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The devil tempts but doesn't force.

*Guyanana proverb*



He [Scrooge] had no further intercourse with Spirits, but lived upon the Total Abstinence Principle, ever afterwards; and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.

*Charles Dickens*—A CHRISTMAS CAROL.

*But Mr. Dickens was wrong!*

## Prologue



IT WAS PRIVATE AS NO OTHER ROOM COULD EVER BE: NO DOORS, NO WINDOWS, no stairways, nor any other architectural means of ingress or egress, yet it could be reached—if the visitor were skilled in the Black Magic Arts. Privacy was needed because the room's Occupant was inclined to engage in practices which were distinctly unchristian while occupying a Christian Time and a Christian Space.

Nor were the oddments strewn upon the tables and benches which ran round the walls of the room likely to be found in a Christian dwelling: assorted stone jars whose ill-fitting lids did little to prevent their mephitic contents from oozing over their sides; discoloured pasteboard-boxes holding the decayed teeth, hair and nail pairings of many of Europe's most infamous villains; the mummified remains of creatures to which the most learned natural philosopher could set no name nor even phylum.

These materials the Occupant put to astonishing uses. He once had used them to raise a dead man, though strictly speaking it could not be said that the man had *precisely* returned to life and the effect was, at all events, not of significant duration. Disordered books, scrolls and papers leapt from dusty shelves to the Occupant's hand at his slightest gesture. He could at will cause the smiling faces of beautiful women to appear, although he hadn't any idea who the women were or where (or even if) they lived.

The Occupant, however, was not satisfied with these elementary miracles. He wanted more. The magic that he had thus far exercised, he felt, was only marginally more accomplished than the level of a common stage magician. The magic he practised was empty of true power.



To obtain what he sought he knew he would need to make a small sacrifice. A mere token: the little finger of his left hand. Removing it had been painful, but he hadn't ever much minded pain. If it got him what he wanted, it was small enough price to pay. The digit lay before him now wrapped in a blood-soaked handkerchief. It was his gift.

He was not so foolish as to believe that he could bend the Prince of Darkness to his will, but he knew that if he served the Beast well, there would be rewards—rewards at an unimaginable scale.

The Occupant chose Christmas Day for the Summoning. Easter, he believed, would have been the more profane, but in his enthusiasm he found he could not wait.

“Your servant,” the Occupant said when at last the Unholy One, Satan, The Devil, The Beast, Old Nick, Scratch, Beelzebub, Lucifer, The Tempter, The Prince of Darkness and the possessor of a thousand other names appeared before him. The Occupant could scarce keep down his gorge from the stench of filth which accompanied the Prince. He swallowed, kept his eyes averted, head bowed. He held his gift in the palm of his left hand to better exhibit the sacrifice.

“I understand that pain is your friend,” the Prince said. The voice was deep with a curious burr. Though the Occupant dared not look the Prince directly in the face, he sensed that it was tall and loose-limbed—a marionette animated by a malefic force. It was not, however, out of temper as he had feared. He felt the Beast almost sway with curiosity.

“I do not flinch from discomfort—even in the extreme,” the Occupant replied, unable to suppress a smile.

“You are relentless.”

Keeping his eyes downcast the Occupant gestured around the room. “None of this was honestly acquired,” he said.

“You are cruel?”

“When it suits my purposes,” the Occupant said, still gazing down at the floor.

“You wish for power?” the Prince said.



The hooves of the Beast scraped upon the stone floor leaving pale scratches. “I wish to serve you,” said the Occupant. “Servitude is my sole desire.”

“If I gave you the power to command storms and batter cities, would you take it?”

“That is not how the Darkness works,” the Occupant replied.

“You do understand me well, then,” said the Evil One.

“I understand that your ways are subtle. You gain power by undermining others.”

The Prince laughed. “There will be little I can teach you,” it said.

“There are not enough days in my life nor any other to learn all that you can teach me, My Master.”

“You wish for immortality?”

“I wish to live for as long as you have use of me.”

“That,” the Prince said, “may not be for long. But...your answers are good.”

“I am careful of my words.”

“Are you now? We shall see.”

“Will you accept this gift?” the Occupant said stretching his hand in the direction of the Prince.

“I will not.”

“I am sorry if I have offended you, Master.”

“You have not. It is that I prefer to take these gifts myself. It was selfish of you to inflict the pain upon yourself.”

The Occupant said nothing, but bowed lower still. His hair hung to either side of his face. He hadn’t anticipated this.

“However, the token is...appreciated,” The Prince said.

The Occupant choked back a short gasp of relief.

The Prince lifted the gift wrapped in its bloodied cloth and tossed it indifferently across the room.

“It is well that you understand the nature of my power,” the Beast said. “You are quite correct when you say that I gain power by undermining others.”



“What service might I first perform, O Master?”

“There is a man here in London by the name of Ebenezer Scrooge. Do you know of him?”

The Occupant nodded. “Scrooge, the Money-Lender. Scrooge, Master of the Union Workhouses. Scrooge, the Counting-House Monster. Yes, I have heard of him. One of yours.”

“No longer!”

The Occupant clutched his ears to mute the blast. Again foul vapours filled the room, and this time the Occupant could not prevent himself from vomiting.

“He has been Redeemed,” the Beast continued, heedless of the Occupant’s emetic reaction. “Worse than that. Far worse. It is clear to me that he will become the Symbol of Redemption, the living representation of Hope and Charity among the dwellers of this City. His story will ring far and wide from the lowest brothels to the most fashionable sitting rooms. Scrooge’s Christmas tale will grow until it reaches mythic proportions. It will spread across all Christendom and every mind will think: ‘If Scrooge can be turned from the path of Evil, then any man can.’ This I can not permit. This I will not permit.”

“You wish me to slay him?” said the Occupant kneeling uneasily in vomitus.

“No—no—no. I thought you understood the nature of my power. You disappoint me.”

“I am imperfect.”

“Death would only make of him a martyr and guarantee him his place in Heaven.”

The Occupant’s eyes glittered. “You wish for me to persuade him to return to the Dark Path—in my own special way.”

The Darkness paused as if considering the suggestion. “Causing him pain will not change his mind. Not solely physical pain, at any rate. It will require more subtle methods. You must understand that Scrooge was never my servant. Not wittingly. Like many men and women, he perpetuated my will without being consciously aware of it. Whether he be *wooed* back to the Dark



Path or whether he drags himself suffering to my door matters little to me. I will leave that for my Servants to determine. However it is done, he will be mine once again. And when that is so, Scrooge becomes Redeemed to me, and his value as a symbol to mankind reverts to Hell. Scrooge will become the universal symbol of Weakness and Desperation, a symbol of the overwhelming power of Temptation. I will savour eating his soul and drinking his sweet blood.”

The Occupant uncovered the back of his head with his hands. “However should I accomplish such a thing, O Master?”

“Why would you presume that I should rely upon you? So much responsibility cannot be given untested. This is far too important for that. However, your talent for creating these discrete spaces,” it waved its claw at the room, “though trivial, might prove of some minor use.” The Beast took several short steps away from the Occupant as if inspecting the room for flaws. The Occupant heard its horns scrape the ceiling. It continued:

“Scrooge’s Redemption came about as a consequence of a visit by three Spirits of Christmas: Past, Present and Yet To Come. It was their persuasion which turned him away from me. It is only fitting that three Demons should turn him back. These Demons however will not appear in a vision nor a dream of a single night’s duration. They will appear to him in human form, and he will not know them from any other man or woman about him.”

“This is a thing I would accomplish alone,” the Occupant said, breathing rapidly. “I am quite sure of it. You must trust this only to me.”

“Absolutely not, there is no more to be said on that point. Consider this your initiation into my services. A first, feeble step. The plot will be realised by divers minions of considerable cunning and power, and they in turn will have the assistance of mortal men and women who are mercenaries in my service such as yourself. They will perpetrate a scheme—long, devious and cunning—which would crush any man. Even one much younger and far more fearless than Scrooge. In the end he will come knowingly to me on his knees begging for my favour. Scrooge will learn that there are fates following death that are far worse than merely wandering the Earth as a remorse-



ful spirit. Far, far worse.”

“And when I have brought about Scrooge’s destruction, what next might I expect? I wish to please you, Master. I am eager to make myself ever the more valuable to you,” the Occupant said.

“When *you* bring about Scrooge’s destruction? Such bumptiousness! Such audacity!” said the Prince. “Have you not heard a word I’ve said?”

The Occupant grovelled on his knees. *I have let my ambition trip me again*, he thought.

But then the Prince laughed. “First you indicate you would bring Scrooge down yourself without the aid of my Servants. Then, you are eager to accept a second commission without you have proved your fiddling worth in the first. But what should I expect? If you were not flawed, if you weren’t a deviant—defective in both mind and spirit, an aberration of your kind—you would not call upon me, would you?”

The Occupant said nothing, but only held himself low and still.

“Perhaps I have chosen the wrong man,” the Prince continued. “I am not perfect and make mistakes, but understand *I never pay for them*, Magician. If I have made an error in choosing you for this and you fail, *you* shall pay the price for *my* mistake. Your dalliance with pain which you have proudly alluded to could never prepare you for what would be your fate—your unending fate, I might add.”

“I cannot imagine how one could fail with the assistance of three demons and the support of Satan himself,” the Occupant stammered.

“Support? I have a small part to play—a cameo one might say—it is true, but I will not *support* you. Ha! Support you? Why not do the thing myself and be certain that it is done right? No, this is a time for you to prove yourself to me. Do your part well and you will rise in my esteem. Fail, and you will suffer. As for the Demons, they will care only for themselves and neglect you completely—you may depend upon it.”

“In that case I should not suffer as a result should the demons fail to undo Scrooge,” the Occupant protested.

“Suffer? My friend, *suffer* is not the word for it. If you fail me, if my demons should fail me, I shall come after you for your head.”

## CHAPTER 1

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### Mr. Topper & Mr. Scrooge

SCROOGE, WHO HAD NOT BEEN EXPECTED, WAS THE VERY FIRST TO ARRIVE. Wearing his coat foolishly unbuttoned, collar open, carrying hat in hand and gloves in pocket, he fairly battered the door to kindling with his sharp knocks. The serving maid flung open the door to see his face flushed with excitement.

“Is your master at home, my dear?” he said.

“Yes, Sir,” the frightened girl replied.

“Where is he, my love?” said Scrooge.

“He’s in the dining room, Sir. Along with mistress. I’ll show you upstairs, if you please.”

“Bless you, sweet girl. He knows me,” said Scrooge, his hand already on the dining-room door. He turned the handle gently, then sidled his face round the edge.

“Fred!” Scrooge bellowed and bounded into the room waving his arms frantically as if sounding an alarm of fire. Instead he shouted his Christmas Blessings to One and All!

The abruptness of his entry all but startled Lily off her footstool. She could not help sniffing his breath as he crossed the room to greet her. Finding him cold sober she was no less nonplussed. *Could this be the man who yesterday scorned our company?*

Scrooge simply could not sit still. One moment he was wringing the hand



of his nephew as if he were intent on shaking it from its wrist. The next he was polishing a nest of apples on the table to the brightness of the silver. The next he was inquiring after the “lateness” of the other guests (who were not yet expected) as if he were their mothers and their fathers and all their unmarried aunts put together. The next he was hurrying behind Lily, offering advice, compliments, and suggestions on her preparations as if he had ever been anything but an old bachelor.

The rest of the guests arrived an hour or so after the setting of the winter sun. So deeply buried beneath woollen scarves, beaver caps, cotton bonnets, great coats, and rabbit-lined gloves that none could be recognised until those garments were removed. Every man and woman exhibited rosy cheeks, much the colour of the Christmas apples Scrooge had so industriously polished. Each eye twinkled with the promise of happiness known best on that day.

Fred’s wife’s seven sisters arrived as one. Being all dressed in a similar fashion and looking very much alike, Fred found them difficult to tell apart. To make matters more perplexing each had been christened with a name beginning with the letter L.

In order from eldest to youngest they were Lydia, Lottie (the only one with raven-black hair and silk-green eyes, unlike the rest with fair heads and eyes of lapis-lazuli), Lillian (that is, Mrs. Fred), Lucille (who would become engaged to a certain gentleman that very evening following a game of Blind-Man’s Buff), Lucinda, Loretta, and lastly, Louisa. The eldest and the youngest were, of course, easy to distinguish—if not name; but, those born in between were, to poor Fred who had not been in the family so very long, of a single, blurred identity. He recognised Lottie (on account of her hair colour), Lucinda (on account of her plumpness), and Lily, of course (on account of her being Mrs. Fred).

After a savoury meal, the guests found themselves irresistibly drawn to the yellow, orange, and green tongues of flame gnawing at the previous year’s blackened yule-log. The flames licked the bark of the log as they had licked their plates.

Fred told the tale of the talking Christmas goose while the sisters mopped



their teary eyes and tittered softly behind their sleeves. The room boomed with Scrooge's loud laughter, an infection, which spread to the other men.

"A glass of wine with you, Sir," said a ruddy-faced gentleman to Scrooge, his ebullience exaggerated by similar pledges shared with several guests. "My name is Topper, Sir—Milton Alexander Topper—a long time friend of your nephew Fred."

"I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Topper," Scrooge said. "You are enjoying yourself this fine day?"

"Indeed, I am," Topper said sipping again at his glass.

They chattered on amiably thus for several minutes.

Topper squinted as if he were carefully weighing his next thought. "Now that we have a moment's private conversation and if I may be frank with you on this Holiday—my humour being so bright from drink and good company, in general, and a beautiful woman, in particular—I'm afraid I entertained a bad impression of you before your arrival at this lovely home this evening. 'Humbug!' I had been forewarned was your Christmas motto, and it was said you kept a tight-fisted attitude toward your fellow man—recommending prisons to shelter the poor.

"But now I see that this impression was just another of Fred's little jests. Ha! Opposites. Such as calling Jervis Thompson *Tiny*—he being the 6-foot coachman down Cox Court with arms the size of barrels. An humorous misstatement. And your nephew is a Master of it, Sir—Bless His Heart! Ha ha ha!"

Milton Topper had many ways of twisting his face into a smile. Like snow flakes, no two were identical. Every wrinkle of skin signalled a new variation—which is not to say it was an old face. One could see the boy in it plain: a time when the sandy head was not quite so spare, a time when the skin of his face needed not to be scraped clean of hair each morning, a time when the mind rattling about in that marvellous skull was filled with frogs and birds' nests.

Ebenezer Scrooge sat considering this very face a long moment. "Not at all, Mr. Topper. Fred was not joking in the least. He was not exercising any form of humorous misstatement for anyone's entertainment. My present



good temper has been as much a surprise to him as it has been to you.

“Sir, I will be honest with you: I have conducted my life in the most miserly fashion. And now I am sorely ashamed of it and intend to amend it. I have sworn to change my ways and have changed them as of this very morning! Of this you may make no doubt. Few of my colleagues would know me as I sit here before you this evening, nor will they be less astonished when business begins on the morrow.” Scrooge rubbed his knees with excitement.

“Truly, Sir?” said Topper. “What has happened, then, that you should be so altered as you say? You must enlighten me. No! I beg pardon, Sir. Clearly it is not my place to question a gentleman such as yourself—even on such a fine day as this.”

“Indeed, Sir, by all that is Holy, I will speak to you the Truth, and you shall hear it.” Scrooge turned to look him hard in the eyes and set his jaw. “On this day any man may speak honestly to any other regardless of his station, to be sure.”

“Tell me then,” Topper said, “what has changed your ways so quickly and so thoroughly.” Then a broad smile creased his face. “Or rather should I ask: what would the gentlewoman’s name be?—like the source of my great happiness this holiday.”

Scrooge slashed the air with a dismissive gesture. “No woman at all, but Spirits!”

“Truly?! You shock me deeply, Mr. Scrooge.” Topper sucked in his lower lip. “I should have smelt it on you.” He sniffed noisily a moment, then scrubbed his nose with his handkerchief. Again he drew in the air. “Give me a moment to reflect, Sir.” He hummed a low note and rolled his eyes. “No, no—too much spirits of a different nature in me now to judge properly, but I do see a bit of ectoplasm here at your knees, more at the elbows, and a wisp or two at the scruff of your neck.”

Scrooge brushed vigorously at those sites as if they had gravy stains.

“They must have been of an extraordinary sort,” Topper said. “Pray, tell me of them—but only if you’ve a mind.”

“You will laugh at an old man’s story,” Scrooge replied.



Topper's face looked scholarly. "Laugh? Never in life! Members of my family has been in the profession of spiritual communication for many and many a generation. I call it a profession, but few of us have made our bread by it. Perhaps I should refer to it as our *calling*."

Topper bent his head forward and lowered his voice: "My Auntie Nellie, God Bless Her, has the Gift. True, she has spent the last eight years of her life bed-ridden, but that only has been a nurturing time for her powers. She can locate missing objects, run-away children, mislaid deeds, and even once identified a murderer—though her testimony was hardly acceptable in a court of law."

Topper raised his eyebrows. "The Gift was not passed to me, however, nor to my younger brother Thorne, now in America, nor the twins Ellen and Helena of my Aunt Betty. Cousin Lag—of whom you may have heard—is a proper fake. Does tricks by taking off his shoes and working black cords with his toes. An embarrassment to the family, but spiritual communication is thick with charlatans as I'm sure you're aware.

"Now," he said, "I have seen my share of ghosts, to be sure—that requires no gift. No English royalty, no Egyptian mummies, no vengeful abbots, no murdered heiresses—but significant spirits in their own way." He touched a glittering ring on his finger.

"An interesting design," Scrooge said, looking closely at the ring. "Did you have it made?"

"I did not, but you shall hear just how it did come to me. One summer night when I was just a lad I noticed Henry the Second, my pug dog, staring at a spot on the wall of my bedchamber. The hair along his back stood stiff as a boar's and his black lips curled to issue a gurgling growl and show his wicked teeth. His eyes were fixed on an oozing, scarlet stain." Topper pointed to a spot on the wall where, of course, there was no stain, though Scrooge stared as if one might appear at any moment.

"A ten year-old boy does not stand up brave and tall and demand: 'Who goes there?' but holds back beneath his bed-clothes, though he well knows they're little enough protection against mortal intruders, never mind supernatural agencies. But when you're seeing things you'd rather not and



your eyelids are froze open, even such fragile things are enough to bury your frightened head.

“Henry switched his position this way and that, undecided which would afford the best advantage. I’d seen him face a half-dozen rats taking nary a scratch, but this was clearly something of a different order.

“The wall puckered and split like the skin of a mouldy orange, Mr Scrooge—Lord strike me dead if I’m lying. The hole spewed out a fog which chilled me to the bone. I expected the Red-Devil himself to dance out, skewer me and drag me back to Hell, but as I watched trembling beneath my bed-clothes, I saw three beautiful women wearing white dresses drift through the tear—angels without wings, they were. Just as the hole was about to seal itself, something else, some grumbling, scarcely visible abomination dashed out as a cat might before its mistress can close and bolt the door for the night.

“Unlike the ladies these creatures took immediate notice of me! There were two of them by my reckoning, trapped inside a thin sac. Demons! I couldn’t see them clearly for the membrane was cloudy and distorted what little light passed through it, but I could see sharp talons, teeth, and other boney knob-ends pressed against the sac stretching it to its limits. The closer this bubble drifted near to my bed-side, the more furious they struggled to break free. The membrane thinned and would surely have split at any moment. One pin-prick was all they needed to be loose. Their claws were extended now, the skin acting like fine gloves, in a manner of speaking. They pressed their way toward my bed. The only thing which hampered them was a raging dispute over which was to dine on me first!

“Abruptly my fearless companion, Henry the Second, attacked, although he could lay no tooth to them. They turned their attentions from me to him and tossed the poor brute from one set of claws to another—him snapping at them to no avail—them howling and seething, trying to force him into their mouths, but the membrane prevented it. In their clumsiness the pug was dropped to the floor whereupon he retreated beneath my bed. His tail, usually curled close to his haunches, was now straight as a pin and remained so until his dying day.



“The Three Ladies in White at last took notice, the ruckus of the Demons drawing their attention. They waved their fingers as daintily as climbing-roses and wove a net of smoke and light. They gathered their net, snared the filthy beasts, and drew them back whence they had come with much snarling, hissing and cursing! Then the Ladies turned their attentions on me and sang a song with words which I could not understand, but were pure wonderful to hear.”

Topper pulled his handkerchief and mopped his brow. The recollection had drawn a reaction which he had not experienced in years.

“Wonders! And the ring?” Scrooge asked.

Topper said, “Oh, yes, I’m not about to forget the most important part—that which makes my tale more than a mere Christmas ghost story.

“The Ladies in White then glided toward me, pointing at me, holding their mute mouths open like fishes out of water. Faint eye-brows sat high upon their smooth foreheads in a fixed expression which I could not read. Their eyes, like frosted-blue marbles, gazed at me for what seemed like hours, but surely could have been no more than a few seconds. They were so beautiful that I wept, Mr. Scrooge, as strange as that may seem. They were Spirits, Sir, and as to their purity and goodness there can be no question.

“I did not move—was incapable of movement. One of them glided forward, and something heavy fell from her extended palm—or perhaps through it—into my lap: this.” Topper removed a silver ring from a thick finger and pressed it into Scrooge’s hand.

“It has always fit my finger, Mr. Scrooge. No matter how small my hand as a boy, nor which finger I put it on now—it always fits perfectly.”

Scrooge looked at it again with increased reverence. In spite of its large size, it seemed feminine off Topper’s hand. Many finely-scribed, closely-spaced lines created a pattern of intricate knots and sprouting plants. There were no stones nor jewels to it, but it shone in a peculiar way.

Topper nodded at it. “It’s the work of færies, my Auntie said. I’ve not seen another like it. Mother insisted that there must be some magic about it, but I’ve found none other than I seem to have more than my share of Good



Luck.” He stared a long moment at Miss Lucille across the room. “After that the Spirits withdrew, and beyond that I’ve never discovered any more about it.”

Scrooge returned the ring. As Topper replaced it, it snugged itself around his finger like a cat at the ankles of her master.

“Come join the rest of us, Mr. Topper,” said Miss Lucille from across the room as she noticed his absence from the rest of their festive group. She was, however, glad to see Mr. Scrooge, such a prominent man of business, take keen interest in the man she hoped would soon be her husband. “And be sure to bring Mr. Scrooge with you,” she added.

“Mr. Scrooge and I are engaged in a...er...discussion, Miss Lucille. Be there shortly,” said Topper.

“I hope not politics!” She gave a dismissive cough of laughter. “If that be the case, then talk yourself dry of that topic before joining this happy group. We’re about to play charades,” she said with her yellow curls shaking in amusement. “Won’t you come and join us? It shall be ever so much fun.”

“Presently, Miss. Presently.” Topper waved and smiled.

He continued to Scrooge in a whisper, “That young woman does enjoy her theatricals. She will have us all dressed in costume and parading about like silly children if we’re not careful. Listen, Mr. Scrooge, as gentlemen of mutual understanding and respect, let’s keep my experiences as a bit of confidence between the two of us. Miss Lucille doesn’t like such talk and would rather have me speak of more polite matters.”

“Certainly certainly, friend. Now, if you’ve the patience, I shall tell my tale.”

Scrooge told Topper of his experiences with the Spirits of Christmas Past, Present & Yet To Come in quick whispers. As the story proceeded Topper nodded and grunted to convey that he did indeed believe it.

“The message of the Ghosts was clear, Mr. Topper,” Scrooge said. “I have a short time to make my life over, make it over completely in substance, spirit, deed and act—and not merely for the single day of joy which we celebrate here to-day. Otherwise, Christmas next you will find my name on a cold gravestone, those who knew me will laugh at my memory,



and I will find myself forever more wandering the earth dragging my cash-boxes behind me.”

“Then you need perform some significant good deed,” Topper said, “which only you can accomplish, Sir. Not a single act, but a goodness which perpetuates and grows itself. You might build a hospital or perhaps found a university.”

“I have no knowledge of medicine nor education. My funds though generous are not of that order of magnitude,” Scrooge said.

Topper scrubbed his chin in thought and clapped his hands together sharply as an idea slid into place like the bolt of a door. “I have it then. You shall found a charitable organisation,” said he thoughtfully. “Can you imagine a better way to improve the lives of hundreds of people as well as your own?”

Scrooge’s eyes widened at the idea.

“Charity...” he sighed. “I believe you have it, Sir. How better serve my fellow man than to see to their most fundamental needs by founding a charity? You are absolutely correct, Mr. Topper. The funding of such an organisation I shall gladly undertake. To undo the wickedness of my past I shall devote my every effort to it. I can imagine it now: *Ebenezer Scrooge’s Charitable Aid And Victual Assistance To The Under-advantaged & Desperate.*”

Scrooge peered at Topper as if he were peering into his heart. “I believe it is no accident that on this day I am here and you are here and we have had this discussion. If I am to take on such a task I will need a capable assistant, a man to act as part personal secretary, part clerk, part day-to-day manager—someone whom I can trust, and—more than a little importantly someone—with a deeper understanding of the implications of the Spirits’ message. Someone very much like yourself, Mr. Topper. Are you interested?”

Topper rocked back in his seat. “Well, Mr. Scrooge, I don’t know. It’s kind of you to ask, but, I doubt my skills would be useful to a man such as yourself. I’m but a simple clerk. And as such I know a bit about book-keeping, but I’ve no experience managing such a large affair as a charity.”

“Can you tell an honest man by the look of his eye?” inquired Scrooge.



“I can do that,” Topper said, and twisted the ring on his finger.

“Can you tell a family in dire need?”

“Certainly that, as well.”

“Those will be vital skills beyond all others in our future undertakings. You must stick to these fundamental principles at all costs.”

“Yes, Sir. Still my current employer pays well, and, if I may share a confidence with you, it is my intention to ask for Miss Lucille’s hand in marriage to-night,” Topper said.

“Then I give you joy, Sir,” Scrooge said and wrung his arm in congratulations. “And I offer you dependable and morally uplifting employment to keep your new family.” Scrooge made him an offer of wages in figures so handsome that it made Topper clamp his teeth.

“You do make it difficult for a man to say no, Mr. Scrooge. What precisely would my duties be?”

“Topper, Sir. You have it wrong. I ask you: what will *my* duties be?” said Scrooge.

Topper frowned. “I fear that I may have misrepresented myself to you, Mr. Scrooge. I am a common man with no more idea of God’s Truth than any other man. When in doubt, I follow my heart.”

“That is all that I will ever ask you to do,” Scrooge said. “But even so, I have no doubt you shall more than earn your wages.”

“Something about all this tells me we’re in for a bit of adventure before we part our ways, Mr. Scrooge.” Topper stretched his back.

“Life should be an adventure,” said Scrooge, theatrically waving his arms.

They shook hands. “Here’s to *Ebenezer Scrooge’s Charitable Aid And Victual Assistance To The Under-advantaged & Desperate!*” Topper said. “Now, if you will excuse me.” He rose from his stool. “The evening’s plans call for a game of Blind-Man’s Buff after which I have a proposal of a different sort to offer Miss Lucille.”

## CHAPTER 2



### The Yellow Door

SCROOGE POINTED WITH A GLOVED HAND. “THIS SECTION WAS PARTIALLY burned and sacked as a part of the Luddite riots the year the students at East India College in Hertford rose up against their masters. A decade later, along with a few outbuildings, it was acquired by Marley, my former partner, for a pittance, but even so he could make no return on it.”

“Yes, Sir,” Topper said. With a pencil freshly sharpened with a pen knife from his pocket he scribbled a few words in his notebook.

“Now it is my turn,” Scrooge said, narrowing his eyes, “but it is not my purpose to spin gold from its dusty and mildewed straw.”

“No, Sir,” Topper said. He stomped his feet and pulled his collar tighter around his neck. He wrote: *Not spin gold from straw.*

“This is where I intend to establish my charity,” Scrooge said. “It will take work, of course. For some time there’s been no life within these walls except the kind whose eyes glitter red and whose tails grow no hair. The windows are out and the ceiling does little to keep the weather at bay. But we will put it right. This is where we shall care for, feed, and shelter those who cannot do for themselves.”

“Yes, Sir,” Topper said.

Scrooge said, “But mark me: word of my little charity will spread quickly. The poor will arrive twenty or thirty at a time—perhaps even more. The desperate need no formal invitation.”

“I do believe you are right, Sir,” Topper said. “We must give it our very best.”



Scrooge said, “Napoleon may have been defeated at the Battle of Waterloo, but Britain’s economy continues to reel, bruised by nearly two decades of war with the French.”

“These are hard times, Sir, to be sure,” Topper said.

“The ranks of the hungry and poor,” Scrooge said, “have grown to the size of armies, Milton, in spite of Peel’s measures to import cheap corn. If wealthy public figures as Scott and Lawrence have fallen to their financial knees gored on horns of economic disaster, how many more nameless of the lower and middle classes have been flung into heartless poverty, hunger, disease and crime?”

“Far too many, Sir,” Topper said.

“Since the Peterloo Massacre common folk have grown to distrust the government as a whole, and especially the army.”

“A terrible incident, to be sure,” Topper said.

“We may not perform miracles, but neither are we helpless.” Scrooge pulled up his collar. He said, “This is the time of year when winter storms descend upon London killing any man, woman or child caught overnight outside a shelter—freezing them alive and burying their corpses under mounds of snow where they are not discovered for days or perhaps weeks.”

“I understand your sense of urgency,” Topper said. He closed his notebook and slipped it and his pencil into his pocket.

Scrooge was quiet for some moments lost in his thoughts. Then at length he said, “I give you *carte blanche*, Milton, to turn my building into a proper charity.”

“Sir?”

“Do whatever it takes, but if you cannot make this space wholesome for these people by midsummer, I will close it down and determine a better way to go about it.”

“By midsummer? So soon? I am only a clerk, but I would guess that the renovation of such a building would take...”

“The clock is ticking for me, Milton,” Scrooge said, sharply. “Time for me is the one commodity I do not possess in significant quantities. What I lack in time, I must compensate with money which—while I am not rich—I



must confess that I have modest quantities of. No, it is absolutely vital I demonstrate that I am truly a changed man through and through by Christmas next or, I fear, you will find my name chiselled into a cold gravestone.” Scrooge’s memory of the vision sent his heart racing. “My charity will be the centre-piece of that demonstration.”

“Yes, Sir,” Topper said. “We will do our best.”

“Yes, of course,” Scrooge said. He inhaled deeply for a moment, then let it out in a quick burst. “I have hired you to do a job, and now I must stand aside and allow you to do it. As I have said, money is no object.”

“I understand your determination,” Topper said, “but you mustn’t squander your funds, Mr. Scrooge.”

Scrooge nodded and hugged himself against the cold. “I do not wish for you to be wasteful either as it would serve no purpose. But more importantly, I do not wish my charity to fail because of insufficient funds. It will operate under a trust from my counting house—lately and humanely managed by the steady hand of Bob Cratchit, my former clerk. No, Milton, I am confident that you are entirely capable of seeing this through—so much so that I have made the decision to leave you to supervise this undertaking alone while I am away.”

“On my own? Whatever do you mean?” Topper said, in horror. “Where do you go, Sir, if I may make so bold as to ask?”

“There is a young man, a lame boy—the son of Bob Cratchit who, as I have said, now manages my counting house—who requires the aid of a physician. Otherwise the boy will die. I must at all costs see that he lives. To that end I have learned of a German physician, Professor Gebhard Friedrich, of Berlin, who has developed a treatment for the disease which hobbles the boy. Tim—for that is the boy’s name—and I will sail for Germany to-morrow. It is a promise I am bound to keep, and I cannot be dissuaded from it. I can’t help but think that in some way the fates of Master Cratchit and me are intertwined.”

“I see, Sir.” Topper sighed. “I understand completely, and I do wish the boy every success in his treatment. You can, however, see that I am uneasy to take on this task alone. I am not convinced that I have the necessary skills



or experience. If I were to fail you, I should never forgive myself.”

“Pish! I have complete faith in your ability.”

“I appreciate your confidence even if I worry that it is misplaced, Sir.”

“Nonsense,” Scrooge said. “You can see for yourself what needs to be done. You have access to my resources and have my blessing. It’s simply a matter of hiring the right people and seeing that the job is done to finish. If all goes well I shall be back by the first day of Spring.”

“Yes, Sir,” Topper replied.

Scrooge said, “I beg your forgiveness and the forgiveness of God for leaving you at this time, but you do understand about the boy. I am much attached to him.”

“Yes, Sir,” Topper said, and after a pause added: “You will miss the wedding then, Sir.”

“What’s that?” Scrooge said turning on Topper abruptly.

“Our wedding. Mine and Lucille’s. We became engaged at your nephew Fred’s party on Christmas day. Do you remember? The date for our wedding is March 1st. You did receive our invitation, did you not?”

“Of course! Of course! How could I forget such a thing? I am sorry to say that I *shall* miss it, my friend. Naturally I cannot be in two places at once. But I shall make it up to you. You’ll see.”

“Yes, Sir,” Topper said. “I understand that attending to Master Cratchit’s health has priority.”

“Thank you for your understanding, Milton, but I do give you joy, my friend and wish you the best of luck.” Scrooge opened his heavy coat and pulled his watch. “Where does the time go? Two o’clock already! I must bid you good day for I have much to do.” Scrooge nodded and left the building.

Topper followed him out and bowed as the carriage rolled away. He straightened and weighed as to how best to begin his task. He glanced back at the building. Years of London smoke and grit had stained its brick face the colour of peppered gravy. His eyes were drawn to the door of the former employment office whose appearance was particularly disreputable. Green paint bubbled and peeled from its scored surface. Topper blew warm air on his hands, drew out his pocket knife and pointed it at the door.



“Here is where we begin—before the bitterest descends upon us again and takes the flexibility out of my fingers,” he said to no one in particular. Nevertheless a crowd of small children stood round him as he scraped away at the paint and the rot. An hour and more passed before he was satisfied with the results during which time the vigorous activity warmed him.

“Where is there a can of paint hereabouts?” he said more to himself than to any of the spectators, but as if in a dream someone handed him a can of the merriest shade of yellow he had ever seen.

“And a brush, dare I ask?” he said darting a look over his shoulder. “You fellows! Is there a brush nowhere to be found? Surely there must be brushes to go with this lovely paint?”

The boys with their cheeks red and lips blue scattered to search. At last one was produced. Stiff it was having been poorly cleaned after its last use, and its bristles had the appearance and having been gnawed by tiny teeth. Topper did not, however, criticise its condition nor doubt its utility. He used his pocket-knife to prise the lid off the can, squinted into its bright interior, stirred the contents with a stick, dipped his brush, and dabbed at the door as if it were a canvas and he were Thomas Gainsborough.

“There’s a proper yellow door for you,” he said upon completion with a smile of satisfaction (and no little paint) upon his face.

*Ebenezer Scrooge’s Charitable Aid And Victual Assistance To The Under-advantaged & Desperate*—soon known to nearly everyone simply as Yellow Door—shone its new face onto the busy square.



## CHAPTER 3



### Respice, Adspice, Prospice

THE AIR SHOULDN'T SMELL LIKE WINTER. NOT THIS LATE. WINTER SHOULD have blown itself out—yet heavy snow fell in the morning darkness as if the season had just begun in earnest.

The sky changed from inky black to sea-shell pink to wooly blue, as Topper tip-toed through ankle-deep snow. He stretched out his tongue desperate to catch a snow flake. He counted thus far three successes. Topper thrust his hands in his pockets, yawned (accidentally adding one more snowflake to his count) and thought of the beautiful woman whom he had married by license just ten days since. What a morning *that* had been! Could his life be any better now? He doubted it.

Cook and Miss Goosegrass, Yellow Door's new school mistress, would already be inside preparing breakfast, of course, but it was up to him to officially open the bright yellow door to the world each morning. Those who did not live within the shelter but took their meals inside depended upon him.

Topper rounded the corner and saw them huddled together, stamping their feet to drive away the cold, but with smiles on their faces. They were tired, hungry, dirty, and ignorant, but always patient and grateful. And not without hope. No, not without hope.

"Lord Bless you, Captain," said Jemmy McCloud, putting a knuckle to his forehead.

"Good day to you, Mr. McCloud," replied Topper as he reached inside his breast pocket for the keys.



“Fine day for penguins, Sir.” McCloud flipped his grey pigtail over a shoulder. He touched the jagged scar across his forehead as if something in the weather reminded him of that day he’d earned it sailing against the French in the man-of-war *HMS Cloud Dancer*.

“Indeed, it is, Sir,” replied Topper in all sincerity, “I would hazard a guess that the snow and slush will all be run down the gutter by this afternoon. The sun will warm our backs this week. Or if not this week, then next.”

“I expect you’re right, Sir,” McCloud agreed, nodding his head. “The glass is surely rising.” But Topper saw that he doubted his own words.

“It’s good to see you, Mr. Topper,” said Mr. Crackers tugging lightly on Topper’s sleeve. “Do you enjoy married life, Sir?”

“I do immensely, Mr. Crackers. Immensely. I have married the best woman in the world, I have. Make no doubt about it.”

“I am pleased to hear you say that, Sir, I am, and that’s a fact.” Mr. Crackers replied with as broad a smile as would sit on his narrow face. “Makes the world go round.”

“That it does, Mr. Crackers,” said Topper.

“Won’t be long till flowers is out, Mr. Topper,” said Mrs. Blake whose teeth mostly were.

“No, indeed. I look forward to it,” Topper said with a smile. “The first pretty bouquet I buy, I reserve for my wife—as is proper. The second, however, I shall give to you.”

“Oh, Mr. Topper,” Mrs. Blake said, blushing. “Now don’t waste your hard-earned money on the likes o’ me. You just think of your pretty wife is all.”

They asked him how Mr. Scrooge did, and he told them that their benefactor did quite well—as did the Cratchit boy according to the latest letter received.

“I will see this yellow door flung open and directly you shall all have your breakfasts,” he said, jingling the keys in his outstretched hand. He waited patiently as the queue swayed to one side and out of his way.

Topper distinctly heard the growl of a stomach and lifted his brows in comic surprise.



“Them’s bears in there,” said Mr. Porks pointing to his sunken mid-section.

The line laughed.

“Lions, too, by the sound of it,” Topper agreed. “But we shall tame them, Mr. Porks. We shall tame them—they and whatever else you have in your inner menagerie. Cook’s vittles will make peaceable the wildest of beasts while leaving the stomach satisfyingly full and uplifting the soul of men, women and children alike. Victuals of this order are guaranteed to fill you with contentment and joy.” He laughed merrily at the thought.

The keys jangled. A twist. The yellow door swung open. Topper shook his head as he pocketed the key. The locking mechanism had failed long ago. It wouldn’t prevent a cat from entering so long as the cat could turn a door knob, but the residents of Yellow Door respected it as if it were the secure tumblers of the vaults at the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street.

The hungry flowed coursed round him like water round a rock.

Topper took a step toward the door and stumbled.

“Have a care, Sir,” said a small voice.

Topper swivelled in a complete circle unable to determine its source. From the corner of his eye, however, he saw a huddled form at his feet—a legless boy as white as the snow surrounding him on a low cart. Topper, however, pretended not to see the boy.

“Who’s there?” Topper said putting a hand to his brow and absurdly scanning the horizon. “Who calls to me? Oh, an invisible spirit! What do you wish to tell me? Is there a will which would grant your dear sister her due fortune, and you want me to discover where it has been hidden? Or perhaps you have been murdered, and you wish me to find your body so that you may rest in peace?”

The boy giggled and said, “You’re having me on, Sir.”

Topper looked down, leapt back and dug his fists theatrically into his hips. “What’s this?” he sang as if he were in an opera.

The boy’s small hands fluttered in applause. “You should be in the theatre, Sir,” said he. Topper looked into the boy’s face and was reminded of Revelation 1:14. *His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow. His*



*eyes like a flame of fire.* The boy was an albino. His long white hair gave him the appearance of great age—yet his skin was free of creases and wrinkles and his pink eyes glittered like stars. So white was he that he seemed to shine with a light of his own.

Topper said, “I do not believe audiences would long sit for any meagre entertainment I might provide, young master..?”

“My name is John Forest, though some call me Jack Frost,” said the boy.

Topper reached down to shake the boy’s icy hand. “I am Milton Topper,” he said. “I am most pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“And I am pleased to make yours,” said Jack.

“Tell me, son, if I may ask,” said Topper, “what has happened to your legs that you must propel yourself about on that cart of yours.”

“These sad peepers of mine,” said Jack pointing to his crossed eyes, “have never steered me right. I had an accident. Foolish of me, but I walked in front of a carriage and was run down near on a year and a half ago. Lucky, I was.”

“Lucky?” said Topper who could see no luck in it.

Jack smiled up in his face. “Lucky I wasn’t killed, Sir.”

“Well, yes. There is that to be said,” Topper agreed. “And now, as the weather grows increasingly hostile, let me ask you: Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Well, yes,” Jack said, “I am in search of suitable employment, and I was wondering if you knew anything of this charity.”

“I do,” Topper replied with a swift smile.

“I was hoping that I could get a job cleaning up. I can wash dishes, sweep, haul rubbish.”

Topper looked at him doubtfully.

“Don’t let appearances fool you, Mr. Topper,” Jack said. “I am quite strong of arm. You might be surprised at what I am capable of.”

Topper said, “You have already impressed me as being a rather remarkable young man. I am, in fact, in need of someone—a young man of about your age—to act as my page. He might also run a few errands—generally help out in the day-to-day functions of the charity. He must have a noble



bearing...” Topper suppressed a chuckle as he watched the boy puff up his chest, “...be responsible and tidy in appearance. To your knowledge is there such a young gentleman as that who might be interested in earning...?” and Topper named a liberal sum. “Someone whom you would personally recommend?”

“There is only one person fitting the requirements which you have set forth among all my acquaintances,” Jack said.

“And who might that be?” Topper asked.

“Me,” the boy said tapping a thumb at his own chest.

“You would do such a thing?” Topper said. “I thought you preferred scrubbing and washing up.”

“I would be honoured to serve as your page—would even prefer it to washing up,” Jack said giving Topper a kind of bow.

“I can think of no one whom I should prefer,” Topper said, reached down and shook the boy’s hand again. “Won’t you go in and have yourself some tea? After which keep yourself inside and make yourself available should I ring. Can you do that, Jack?”

“Oh yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir,” Jack said and cleared his throat:

“Being your slave, what should I do but tend  
Upon the hours and times of your desire?  
I have no precious time at all to spend,  
Nor services to do, till you require.  
Nor dare I chide the world-without-end hour,  
Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you,  
Nor think the bitterness of absence sour  
when you have bid your servant once adieu:  
Nor dare I question with my jealous thought  
Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,  
But, like a sad slavey, stay and think of nought,  
Save, were you are how happy you make those.  
So true a fool is love that in your will,  
Though you do anything, he think no ill.”

“Why, that’s beautiful, Jack. It’s Shakespeare, isn’t it?” Topper said.

“Yes, Sir—*Sonnet Fifty-Seven*,” Jack replied.



“However did you find the time to memorise it?”

“It was no trouble whatsoever. I never forget a thing once I hear it, Sir. So help me,” Jack said.

“What an amazing boy,” Topper said.

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Where did you get such a memory?”

“I couldn’t say, Sir. All I know is that it’s all locked up right here. Etched in stone, you might say,” he said tapping his forehead. “Every sound I’ve ever heard has become a permanent record to be recalled whenever I wish.”

“How is it then that you know this poem?” Topper said.

“My father is carpenter at the Palladium where I’ve spent many, many hours backstage. The recitation I just gave is based on a performance by Richard Collins, Wednesday evening, August 23rd, two years, five months and five days ago.

“I was examining a bucket of nails at the time. I can’t honestly say that I normally spend much time studying nails, but my father had just brought me my lens, you see.” He pulled the instrument proudly from a velvet-lined drawer in his cart and held it up for Topper to examine.

“It is very fine, indeed,” Topper said looking it over quickly. He handed it back. “Your father sees to your every need, doesn’t he? He loves you very much.”

Jack nodded. “My lens was brand new to me. I, as you may well guess, do not see very well. Light, natural light—out of doors especially—hurts my eyes. Stage lights can absolutely blind me, so I spend my time in the shadows, among the folds of the curtains in the corners of the backstage. When Father procured this lens for me, I could see small things well for the first time. It was a wonder. To pick out the tiny flecks of rust on a bucket of nails utterly absorbed me for hours. Even now I can turn each nail from that bucket over and over in my mind. Count the ones which are bent, which are straight.”

“That’s quite all right, Jack. There’s no need to tally crooked nails just now. I’ve heard enough to be impressed by your memory for detail.”

“‘The Devil,’ as they say, Sir, ‘is in the details,’” the boy said.



“So many talents. Who would ever guess? What should happen, Jack, when your head tries to hold more memories than you’ve room for?”

“I shall just grow me another head,” Jack said without hesitation.

Topper burst out in laughter. “Two heads are better than one, I’ve heard tell,” he said. “Well now, young Sir, run along and warm yourself indoors.”

Topper turned and looked up at the sky which rather than clearing had turned a deep purple and now mixed rain with snow. He would have stepped into the shelter of the door, but Cook stood blocking his way with her fat arms folded across her bosom.

“Mr. Topper,” she said.

Topper knew her only as Florence. Whether this was her given name or her surname, he couldn’t say. She was a round woman, rather low to the ground with fierce black eyebrows and white hair pulled back tight against her head.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“There is, Mr. Topper-Sir,” she said. “Do you have any idea how many mouths we’ve to feed in there?”

“I could tell you in round numbers if I had my papers with me. Why?” he said.

“It is more than a woman can handle alone,” she said.

“Then we shall need to get you help,” Topper said.

She blinked her eyes at him as if she could not believe her ears. “But, Sir?” she said.

“What is it, Florence?”

“It’s just that I didn’t think...”

“Think what?”

“I didn’t think that Mr. Scrooge could...I mean I didn’t think Yellow Door had the money to hire...”

“Nonsense, Florence,” said Topper. “While we don’t splurge, we won’t do things by half measures either.”

“No, Sir. Of course not.”

Topper closed one eye pointedly and said, “You wouldn’t happen to know of someone who might act as your assistant—a kitchen-maid or



whatever it is you need inasmuch as this appears to be a day when I am hiring new staff?" Topper gripped himself against the elements which spattered his clothing with increasing intensity.

"Funny you should ask, Sir," she said and put two fingers to her mouth and produced a whistle that painfully vibrated the back of his head. A moment later a young woman, taller than Cook (which wasn't saying much), broad-hipped, short-wasted, narrow-shouldered with a head covered with a mat of unruly hair and a jovial face which presented the merriest expression Topper could ever remember seeing. Her smiling cheeks nearly closed her eyes.

"This is Mary-Martha White," Cook said, placing a hand on the girl's shoulder and shoving her forward. "My sister's girl. Curtsey, Mary-Martha," she hissed, and the girl awkwardly obeyed.

"I am pleased to meet you, Mary-Martha," Topper said, clutched his coat collar against the wind and bowed slightly.

"I am pleased to know you, Sir," she said.

"I shall watch her close, Sir," Cook said. "Her mind does wander, but she's a strong back and a good temper—I can vouch for that. I'll keep her at her work. I knows I will—otherwise it's mine to do."

"Yes, well. I won't have her mistreated—but I know you'll handle her kindly. If I might make my way inside...?" Topper nodded toward the door.

"We've no time to stand about gossiping," Cook said, and gave Mary-Martha a gentle shove in. "We've got work to do." She spun on her heel and stomped inside.

But before Topper could pass through the doorway, he felt a light tap on his shoulder. He turned and found himself looking up at the tallest woman he had ever seen. She was fully two heads taller than he and wore a grey cloak with the hood pulled up over her head and down upon her brow. Her face was long with a straight nose, dark eyebrows and pale eyes which she held wide like a Grecian statue. Her expression though not unattractive was one of utter seriousness.

She pointed a long finger at him for a dozen heartbeats as if to accuse him of a crime, but instead she said in a rich contralto voice:



*“Respice, adspice, prospice.”*

“I beg your pardon, Miss,” said Topper, “but I don’t understand your tongue.”

*“Sie heissen nicht Herr Scrooge.”*

“Something about Mr. Scrooge, yes? German, I should think, but I am afraid I only speak English, Miss,” Topper said.

She opened her mouth again and a different string of sounds with a more familiar rhythm and cadence issued forth.

“You speak French, do you?” he said. Although he recognised the language from its sound, he couldn’t understand a word of it.

The tall woman spoke a fourth time and raised one long arm slowly over her head as if she were a colossal statue. A fifth time, a sixth. Every new phrase she produced in a different tongue: Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian—and other languages which Topper could not identify.

At last she finished. Both her arms hung calmly at her sides, lost in the loose folds of her cloak.

Topper applauded softly. “Bravo!” he said. “Very good. Very good, indeed. You are quite the talented linguist. And I should be very much surprised if the English language weren’t listed among your accomplishments. I ask you then confident that I will be understood: how may I help you?”

“It is not I who am in need of help,” she said in perfectly unaccented English.

“Indeed,” said Topper, “and who then is?”

“You.”

Topper struggled for a reply. “I beg your pardon,” he said. “I don’t believe that I heard you properly.” The wind whipped around his head and deposited a spoonful of snow down his neck. He clasped his hand to his collar and waved the other to the door. “Will you not step inside out of the weather where we might hold a more comfortable discussion?”

“Of course,” the woman said. “How rude of me. I do apologise.” She nodded gravely, ducked her head and stepped through the door.



Topper closed the door softly behind. "You have quite a gift for languages, Miss....?"

"You may call me Miss Trellis, Miss Elizabeth Trellis," she said and widened her pale eyes. Topper found that he could not look directly into them long.

"I am delighted to meet you, Miss Trellis," Topper said bowing slightly. "My name is Milton Topper."

"So I understand," she said. "You are not Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge."

"No, I am not that beneficent gentleman, but merely his humble servant."

"Yes," the young woman said as if that were a detail that she understood but gave little importance to. Then she added: "Of course, he would have need of assistants to carry out his good works."

"That is my mission, Miss Trellis," Topper said, unbuttoning his coat. The air just inside the door was not perceptibly warmer than the air outside. Topper tested this by carefully exhaling and watched his steamy breath curl to the ceiling. The interior air did have one delicious quality which the air outside did not share: the smell of kippers, bacon, sausage, eggs, mushrooms and (a rare treat!) devilled kidneys. No gruel for this lot. Not from the larder of Ebenezer Scrooge!

Miss Trellis gripped his arm with a terrible strength and drew him to a corner. Topper blushed furiously, but did not twist away. She leaned down until her lips nearly touched his ear. Topper fidgeted as she sucked in her breath, then said in a hushed voice, "There are people lurking about here to-day, Mr. Topper. Watching you. Watching the movements of everyone here. Please have a care."

Topper gave her a nervous laugh. "Bonapartists I make no doubt. Those who would resurrect their emperor and export his revolution to the good lands of Britain."

"You mock me, Sir," she said, her voice startlingly low. She released his arm, stood upright and frowned.

"I mean you no insult, Miss Trellis. You will understand that it is only that I find it difficult to take your suggestion seriously. There is no evidence.



There is no reason why we should draw the attention of anyone but the needy.”

“The League of the One-Eyed Demon,” she said wagging a finger the size of a Bow Street truncheon in his face, “would know your secrets.”

Topper withdrew from her carefully and stood tall—though he could only have matched her height had he stood on a chair. He spoke to her in a clear voice. “We have no secrets here, Miss Trellis. Anyone may come in or watch us, stare at us—if they have a mind to—secretly or in full view. We have nothing to hide,” Topper said then quickly added: “Which is not to say we do not appreciate your diligence or concern for our well-being.” And he handed her a coin.

“I’m no dog,” she said. “I do not do tricks for sugar lumps.”

“My dear lady, I did not wish to imply...”

She drew her grey cloak more tightly about her and let the coin drop to the floor with a clunk.

“I have misunderstood you then, Miss Trellis. And I do apologise.” Topper bent to pick up the coin.

She blinked her eyes as if about to cast a curse upon him, but instead turned on heel and strode toward the door.

“Wait!” he cried. “One moment. Please.”

She stopped and turned toward him, her face betraying no emotion.

“I mean to ask you, Miss, are you currently employed?” he asked.

She paused a moment as if she were considering the consequence of saying too much. “I am not currently employed, no.”

“Capital! How lucky for us. Then I will tell you that Mr. Scrooge has granted me the right to hire help as I see fit and have need. We here at the charity often receive guests who speak languages we have no means of understanding. We have need of a talented linguist such as yourself. If you are not otherwise engaged, I would like to employ you should you find the terms of employment acceptable.” And he described them to her.

From the look on her face he was convinced that in spite of the generous nature of his offer she would refuse. She did not.

“Mr. Topper, I accept your proposal, and I shall report here for work to-



morrow, Sir. Till then..." she curtsied with surprising grace and walked out the door in a very business-like manner.

No sooner did the yellow door close than it flew open again and a young man dashed into the building as if shot from a cannon. Topper stepped aside to remove himself as an obstacle, but the boy had the identical notion. The collision left the boy sprawled upon the floor as injury-free as only the young can after such an impact. Topper sat down next to him with a grunt, the wind knocked out of him.

"What manner of demons give you chase, Patrick Coal?" Topper said, pressing his abdomen. "I believe they've passed you by and instead have taken their wickedness out upon me."

Patrick smiled elfishly. "Beg pardon, Guv," he said. "Is it too late for breakfast?"

"I opened the door not ten minutes since. If you're not too selective about what you eat, there are likely left-over slops."

Patrick's face turned the colour of ash.

"Do not take me seriously, boy." Topper said. "There are always victuals at Yellow Door for young men who enter the building like gentlemen."

"I suppose I deserved that," the boy said. He stood to his feet and brushed the seat of his britches.

"I suppose you do," Topper replied. "Give us a hand," he said. "I am ill-used to being run down and the wind knocked out of me. And it must be said that I am not so young as I once was." The boy helped Topper pick himself up from the floor.

Patrick lifted a penny-whistle to his lips. "I shall earn my redemption and forgiveness with this selection from Mozart's Cantata in E minor—no need to pay for this one, Sir. It's on me."

This was a misdirection inasmuch as he instead played "Rinse M'Mouth in Gin."

However, Patrick did not merely play the penny-whistle. Patrick sang, sighed, hooted, groaned through the instrument creating a variety of effects counter-point to the melody. He drummed his chest, slapped his thigh, waved his hat, shook and swayed his body in rhythm to the music as though



the Devil himself tickled his Soul from the inside.

He finished to Topper's polite applause.

"Here, Mr. Topper. If I may have a moment more of your time, listen to this." He played a slow, thoughtful piece. Sad and beautiful it was all at once. It reminded Topper of the sky at dawn just as he had experienced it that very morning.

"It's lovely. What is it called?"

"Hain't got a name yet."

"Do not tell me it is of your own creation?" Topper said in astonishment.

"I do tell you, Sir. It is only one of many."

"You have a marvellous talent, young man. I do hope you realise that."

Patrick grinned.

"It is such a lovely melody. Perhaps if you were to write it down, you could have it published."

"Write it down?"

"Yes. That's what I said. Some people make a good living writing songs, you know. Popular tunes. Like 'Rinse M'Mouth in Gin.' Somebody wrote that and got paid for the effort."

"But you can't write down music," Patrick insisted. "Not this music."

"Oh, indeed, you can. You can write music just as you might write down words." Topper paused. He wasn't certain of the extent of Patrick's literacy skills. "Music notes on paper look like black goose eggs with flag-poles and waving banners. There are whole notes, half, quarter, eighth,—and faster notes like sixteenths and thirty-seconds." Topper traced a few in the air by way of example. "Sharps—flats! Keys major and minor. Modes! There are treble and bass clefs and staff lines: Every Good Boy Deserves Favour, and it is indeed a fine boy who deserves favour when he studies his music. You may not believe it to look at me now, but I took violin lessons myself when I was a young man." He tucked an imaginary instrument under his chin, bowed viciously, laughed, then looked down at his hands and shook his head. "That such thick fingers could have ever teased music from a fiddle—hard to believe. Yes, Mr. Coal, music can be written. Music is written down by masters, their students and common folk every day of the year."



“Not this music, Mr. Topper. No, Sir,” Patrick said. “This music comes from my feelings, from my heart. The notes might be different to-morrow, but the feeling would be the same—or perhaps finer still. Or the notes will be the same, but the feeling will have changed. You can’t write that down on paper. Not with all the ink in London.”

Topper rubbed his index finger under his nose with thought. “Perhaps you are right. Still, it cannot hurt to improve one’s understanding of the elements of music, can it?”

“Could this be written with a quill?” Patrick said and pressed a dented mouth organ to his lips. He tapped his foot, shook his body, hummed and blew all at once. To finish he threw the instrument into the air and caught it in the oversized patch-pocket of his coat. “Tell me what notation would record all that.”

“None, I should think,” Topper admitted. “That was, indeed, quite a performance.” He tossed the lad the coin Miss Trellis refused.

“Many thanks to you, Sir,” Patrick shouted and bolted out of Yellow Door.

“But what about your breakfast?” Topper shouted after him. How could the boy forget his stomach so easily? Topper moved toward the door to watch him run. As he did so he felt a hand grab him roughly by the upper sleeve of his coat. *Oh, now what!* Topper spun round surprised to see a handsome black man dressed in bright blue flowing robes.

“What can I do for you, my good man?” Topper demanded in the way that a normally patient man does when he is stretched to his limits.

The Black Man mutely handed Topper a sheet of paper which had been rolled like a scroll. A scrap of string held it closed. The outside was smudged, the corners dog-eared. The man gestured for Topper to open it.

Topper did so wondering if this were one of the men whom Miss Trellis had warned him of. He was stunned to see a finely drawn picture of Christ on the Cross. “Where did you get this?” he said.

The man shook his head and lifted an up-turned palm to indicate that he didn’t understand.

Guessing that the man was offering the sheet for sale Topper reached into



his pocket and withdrew several coins and held them out for the fellow.

The Black Man folded Topper's hand closed and pushed it away, shaking his head violently. With the white palms of his hands he sketched a large rectangle in the air with sweeping gestures, softly speaking words of a language which was entirely foreign to Topper's ear. There was passion in those phrases, Topper could tell, but he could not glean any meaning.

Topper reached a second time into his pocket and added several more coins to those in his hand thinking that the man wanted a higher price.

Again the Black closed Topper's hand and pushed it away. A second time he drew a fierce rectangle in the air large enough to be a door. He repeated the same phrase over and over.

Patrick Coal bolted back through the door with a hot bun in his hand. He drew up sharply when he saw the black man.

"Oh, there you are, Patrick," Topper said to the young boy. "I have need of you just now. If you hurry you'll see a rather tall woman not far from here. She can't be more than a block away. She wears a long, grey hooded-cloak. Bless you, she will not be hard to spot. Run along like a good fellow, and see if you can catch her up. If you can, send her my compliments and please tell her that Mr. Topper of the charity sends for her and has immediate need of her talents. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Sir. What shall I do if I cannot find her?"

"If after half an hour's search you do not find her," Topper said tossing him a coin, "return here, and I shall have another coin for you. You can fill your other cheek with a bun to the match the one you've already tucked away—you squirrel."

"Right, Guv," Patrick said. "Any idea which way she might have gone?"

"None whatsoever. That's why I've hired you to find her," Topper pointed his finger at the boy and smiled.

"Me mates may know where she's gone," he said and slipped out the door.

Topper twisted the ring on his finger impatiently, and said to himself, "I do wish Miss Trellis would return. This is just the kind of thing we need her for."



Hardly had the words left his mouth when Miss Trellis opened the door and walked through, head held high. “You wish to see me?” she said casting an incurious eye at the black man.

“Patrick found you quickly enough, I must say. There’s a bright young man for you. Yes, Miss Trellis—this fellow wants something, and for the life of me I cannot make out what it is. It is my hope that you will understand him and tell me what he wants and what if anything I can do for him.”

“I shall be happy to try my best, Mr Topper,” she answered.

There was a lengthy exchange between the two in a smattering of languages of which Topper recognised the tone and cadence of but a very few. Finally courtesies were exchanged in a language in which they had found common ground.

“He speaks Arabic, as you may have already guessed—actually Berber. He also speaks Portuguese passably well—learned from sailors, I should judge by his choice of words.” She paused and briskly began asking him questions.

“His name is Al-Mustafa Ali,” she said. “He says that he has the blood of many people in his veins: Berber, Arab, Ethiopian, French. He says that he once was one of the Blue People, but he says now he is a Christian. He asks, ‘Do you know Christ died for your sins?’”

“Tell him that Britain is a Christian nation, that all men and women here well know of the Saviour.”

She translated this message. The Black bobbed his head soberly. He slowly replied while Miss Trellis translated, “He says that he is from Morocco where there are too few Christians—except those in chains—that he is glad to be in a Christian land and is very pleased to meet you.”

Topper said, “Ask him to explain what it was he was trying to tell me earlier of the drawing. Do you see it there in his hand?”

There ensued a long exchange in which Miss Trellis asked for many points of clarification. When she believed she had the story correct she explained:

“This will take some telling,” Miss Trellis said, slowly. “He says that he grew up in Tangiers practising his trade as a carpenter—like nearly all



Moroccans he was a devotee of Islam. He worked for a wealthy merchant who traded between Europe and Africa. Generally the trade was limited to textiles, brass pitchers, platters and occasionally foodstuffs, but one day a shipment of Italian Art treasures—statues and paintings—bound for Spain found their way to the storehouse where Al-Mustafa worked. A rough sea voyage had damaged some of the packing crates, and Al-Mustafa was asked to replace or repair them.

“Al-Mustafa had never seen a painting nor a statue before in his entire life. He says that the human image is forbidden to the followers of the Islamic faith. There is much clever decorating with coloured bits of tile, but nothing like what was stored in the crates. When he first saw them he was awe-struck—he could not conceive that such things could be the product of human hands. They seemed flat and round, real and not real all at the same time. The paintings were mostly of landscapes. He also recalls seeing a few portraits. None of these were much larger than the window of a house.

“Lastly, he set to repair a very large crate which held a painting of the Crucifixion. He removed the painting from its damaged crate and carefully set it aside to see if the painting had been in any way injured. He says that upon viewing it he immediately fell to his knees—for Christ had touched him. When he saw this painting his life was changed forever. He knew Christ’s Agony, understood His pain, His suffering for those who were meek. He knew that he must find out more about this Jesus Christ, and more about the Art of making such paintings out of the oil paint. From that moment on he was a Christian though he admits that his understanding of his new religion is very shallow.

“There were not many in Morocco who could teach him about Christ, so he considered the prospects of leaving his home and travelling to a Christian nation. To this end he hired on a Portuguese merchant ship as a carpenter. He sailed to many ports—saw many new lands, but still searches for someone who can teach him to paint the Agony of Jesus. He wants very much to be able to make paintings such as the ones he examined in Tangiers. That is why he is here in London. To seek out our greatest painters and learn from them.”



Topper said, “Although I do not run in those circles, I am given to understand that our great painters are some of the finest landskip painters in the world, but I’m not terribly knowledgeable about such things.”

Miss Trellis interpreted Topper’s comment and the Black’s reply. “Al-Mustafa says that he has little interest in landskips. He says he wishes only to paint Christ in his agony.”

“Tell him that although we are a Christian nation we prefer not to dwell on Christ’s suffering. That is the difference between us and the Papists. He had probably been better off travelling to Italy to study among her masters.”

Miss Trellis spent some minutes clarifying this message and responding to Al-Mustafa’s many questions.

At last she said, “Al-Mustafa begs your pardon and apologises for wasting your time. He hopes that his ignorance does not offend you so very much. He says he will take his leave now.”

“No, never. It was not my intention to make him feel unwelcome. That is what the charity is all about: making everyone feel welcome. Tell him, that although we do not paint crucifixions here, we have many fine painters from whom he might learn the craft. I am not sure if I can help him or no. The charity can supply food, clothing, shelter, but instruction in Art? That may stretch us beyond our abilities. Yet I will not say no without giving it a try. The Charity is not just Mr. Scrooge and myself. It is also the people we serve. Perhaps someone among us can help us make a connection. In the meanwhile, he will need a place to stay and something to eat.”

It took several minutes for Miss Trellis to convey Topper’s message. She clasped her hands before her and said, “He understands.”

“Excellent. That will be all, Miss Trellis. I am grateful that you were able to come on such short notice.”

Miss Trellis pulled the grey hood of her cloak over her dark hair without saying a word. She turned deliberately and glided slowly out the yellow door. Scarcely had her skirts crossed the door-sill than Patrick Coal burst in.

He pulled off his hat and held it apologetically in his hand. “I gave it my best, Sir, but I couldn’t find her. I asked round, but no one’s seen anything like her. No one like you described, tall and all.”



“But Patrick,” said Topper, “you just missed her. She walked out the door not a half-dozen heartbeats before you just came in. You would have had to pass her directly by on your way. Tell me you didn’t see a tall woman so high.” He held his hand over his head.

Patrick shook his head.

“Long, grey cloak?”

“Not that I saw.”

“Well, I have it then,” Topper said smacking his fist against his palm. “She’s actually two midgets—one standing on the shoulders of the other and draped in a long garb.”

Patrick said, “Mr. Topper, have you had your breakfast yet? A bit of indigestion might cause you to see things which ain’t there.”

“I shouldn’t think so. Miss Trellis was real enough and will return tomorrow so that you may see her yourself with your very own eyes. Bless me. If I don’t hurry, I’ll miss my morning visit to the breakfasting, and that simply will not do. Care to join me?”

“Na-o, I’ve got me own ‘pointments, Sir. A man’s got ‘is business to attend to. We can’t all of us spend the day larking about.”

“I am delighted to see you take such an industrious attitude,” said Topper. “You must have eaten quite a number of buns to put you off your breakfast, though. I’ll bet within the hour you’ll have changed your mind. ‘Hollow leg’ as my mother used to call it. Howsomever, I must be on my way, and I shall see you later.”

He strode down a corridor and up a short climb of three steps. As he grew closer the murmur of the happy assembly grew in his ears. His nose twitched at the tantalising breakfast aromas. He would not breakfast a second time, but he was sore tempted.

Topper stepped quietly into the dining area. He did not wish to disrupt their meals, nor draw attention to himself. He closed his eyes. He listened. The squeak of a chair backed away from the table. The clatter of a fork or a spoon or a knife on a plate. The clink of a water glass. The thump of a mug replaced on a table top. The aggregation of satisfied conversation and companionable tones—as soothing as the babble of a brook. Topper could



not make out a single word, yet he knew there was peace here. This was civilisation at its highest. This was the mission that Scrooge had already fulfilled. There were greater goods, but this was a success which gave Topper intense satisfaction.

He turned and nearly broke his neck.

“Sir, have a care,” said a small high voice from the floor.

Topper looked down.

“Twice in one day?” he said. “I do beg your pardon, Mr. Jack. I must make it a habit to watch where I’m going, mustn’t I?” Topper said. “It doesn’t do to walk about with one’s eyes shut. I am such a fool. Have I injured you with my clumsy feet?”

“Not at all, Sir. I’m as right as rain.”

At some point since they had last spoken, the boy found an old wig which he awkwardly draped over his head. Topper thought that in spite of any future attention, care and powder that Jack might give it, it would never match the whiteness of his natural hair.

“I’ve knocked your wig askew as well,” Topper said, clucking in disgust at himself.

“I shall have to have Father add me a flag pole to my cart six feet high and fly the Union Jack from it,” the boy said, rather seriously. He placed a hand on the top of his head and gave his wig a twist with as much dignity as he could muster.

Topper said, “That just might be enough to keep you safe from the stomping boots of Milton Topper.”

“Yes, Sir. Before I forget: there’s someone to see you, Sir,” Jack said. “He sits in the waiting room.”

“What sort of fellow is he?” Topper asked.

“I expect that he is a man of the cloth, Sir—an American from the sound of him,” Jack said, his eyes shaking in the low light. “He murmurs verse beneath his breath.”

“Very well. I shall see him directly—in my office (you do know where it is, yes? Good!) after I’ve been able to make my way there.”

## CHAPTER 4



# Gyrations

TOPPER EASED HIMSELF INTO HIS CHAIR AS IF HIS BACK HURT HIM — WHICH it did after his collision with Patrick Coal. His eyes scanned the papers on his desk top. Receipts stacked neatly in one pile. Letters of correspondence in another. Bills which required his attention filled this slot. Appeals for grants and donations in the next. He set each stack square to the edge of the desk as was his habit, drew his appointment book forward and ran his finger down it until he found the list of this day's duties. There was nothing on it which couldn't be delayed a short while for an American visitor.

Topper listened to the sound of Jack's cart rolling down the corridor followed by soft footsteps. A rap at the door.

"Come in," Topper said.

The door opened, and Jack scooted in holding his head high. "Reverend Salvation Mitchell here to see you, Sir," he said gesturing toward the empty doorway.

"Very good, Mr. Forest," Topper replied, craning his neck as if somehow the visitor who was not present might be seen.

"Thank you, Sir," Jack said and after backing out of the room, gestured toward the unseen visitor.

Reverend Salvation Mitchell, a bulbous man with flapping jowls and pipe-stem arms and legs, charged into the room as if he were making a comic stage entrance. In height he was a mere imp of a man, hardly taller than a stripling. His cheeks flushed a delicate rose, his black hair glistened



against his scalp, bags puckered beneath wide-set eyes. He danced like a man in his cups.

“I am the Volcano of HIM-HIM!” said the man in a frog-like voice which grated against back of Topper’s head. The man vaulted himself to the tips of his toes like a ballerina and laughed as if he were about to tell an anecdote which he found too funny to deliver. His body shook. He quivered in the Ecstasy of Spirit.

Topper stood, walked round his desk and extended a hand in the gentleman’s direction. He said, “I am Milton Topper. Mr. Scrooge’s personal assistant. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Sir?”

The Reverend stopped his agitation and looked suspiciously at Topper’s hand. Rather than shake it, he bowed low from the waist.

“That is an unusual ring you have there, Friend,” said he as he stood erect. “I don’t believe I’ve seen anything like it. But then I’ve not seen much of the world outside my home. I am from the United States, you know.”

“You have an interest in jewellery?” said Topper.

“None, Friend. None at all, but I recognise fine craftsmanship when I see it. Did you buy it hereabouts?”

“It was a gift,” Topper said, and twisted the ring several times.

Then, as if this bit of conversation had never happened, the Reverend set about his gyrations once more.

“This day is perfect! Perfect!” said he. “How happy I am. I am!” The Reverend pranced about and pumped his arms as if he meant to fly.

Topper clasped his hands, cleared his throat and repeated. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

The Reverend Mitchell inhibited his gyrations sufficiently to look Topper full in the eye. “Mr. Scrooge-Mr. Scrooge, have you seen it? Glory awaits us and the greater Glory of HIM!” The Reverend Mitchell pulled his lips into a tight smile all the while marching in place to an unheard beat. The veins in his neck bulged. His eyebrows were raised as if he were waiting for some signal from Topper.

“I am afraid, Sir, that there is some misunderstanding,” Topper said. “I am not, as I have said, Ebenezer Scrooge.”



“Would you be Marley, then?” he said.

“I would not. My name is Milton Topper. I am Mr. Scrooge’s personal assistant. Mr. Scrooge is away at the moment. How may I help you?”

“Is there anything finer than Christian Charity, I ask, Friend?” said Mitchell.

“Charity is the finest of men’s deeds,” Topper said.

“When our people lack jobs, when our people suffer disease and ignorance, it is HIS test of their faith, would you not agree, Friend?”

*It is a test of our society’s failure to care for its own,* Topper thought, but he said nothing of this. He returned only a blank look.

“Do you not see HIS mark everywhere?” Mitchell said.

“The world is not perfect, Sir, but the potential for goodness is at the heart of every man,” Topper said. “We may rise to the level of angels or sink to the depths of Hell. We each of us are given choices.”

“This is HIS challenge to us. We live in an imperfect world, Friend, and we must look carefully to determine HIS desires.”

“We must work to make this a better world,” Topper said. “That is the work of men.”

“We are all instruments of HIM,” Mitchell insisted.

Topper sighed. “What can I do for you, Reverend? Neither of us has the time to exchange aphorisms.”

“No one is more aware of that than me, Friend.” Mitchell slapped his hand on the top of Topper’s desk. “I am here to help you,” Mitchell said simply.

“You wish to make a donation?” Topper said, knowing full well that he did not.

“No-no-no-no-no,” Mitchell said waving his hands. “I am here to offer my services.”

“And what services might those be?” Topper said, his stomach sinking.

“Only this, Friend,” Mitchell said with a cry and resumed his gyrations. “I wish to minister to the spiritually bereft of this fine charity. To prepare their souls for Him and their Reward of the Hereafter.”

Topper paused, then said. “Can I offer you a seat, so that you might



explain yourself at your ease?”

“Glory be to HIM. I cannot sit!” Mitchell said now bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“You test my patience, Sir. I believe it is time that you were shown the door,” Topper said and made to leave the room. Mitchell stopped as if someone had dowsed his boiler.

“Let us talk, Friend,” the Reverend said solemnly, and for the first time since he entered the room stood perfectly still. Topper nodded and pulled two chairs together.

Mitchell began, “Word has reached me that you are providing food, clothing and other necessities for the worthy poor.”

“We do what we can for any unfortunate person who finds his or her way to us,” Topper said. “Food, clothing and shelter may only be the beginning.”

“Any person, do you say, Friend?” Mitchell said, pulling his chin thoughtfully.

Topper nodded. “The charity makes distinctions of neither class nor race among those it serves, although I will admit that we have had neither a Duke, a Count nor a Lord apply to us for help.”

“You have a sense of humour about you, Friend. You do, indeed. You remind me of my daddy. A man of a fine sense of humour. A FINE sense of humour—rest his soul. No, I would imagine you don’t have too many royal bloods to wait upon,” Mitchell said. “Your resources are plentiful?”

“Our resources are modest compared to the need, I will not deny,” Topper said. “We make do.”

“Exactly, Friend, exactly,” Mitchell nodded as if that was the answer he had been expecting. “You cannot feed every man, woman and child in London.”

“Nor even every man, woman and child for three square miles. Not for any length of time, at any rate,” Topper said.

“Then how do you decide who to feed and who to turn away?” Mitchell blinked his frog-like eyes. “Though far be it from me to tell you your business, of course. I’m just asking since I am interested in such things myself.”



“We make no such decision,” Topper said. “We feed all who apply.”

“This is a Christian nation, Friend,” Mitchell said.

“I said so myself not half an hour since.”

The Reverend rubbed his forehead as if so rubbing cleared his mind. “Then charity must be reserved for those who have accepted Him as their saviour. Otherwise you are feeding souls who will one day be damned.”

Topper felt his face hardening.

“I saw a Negro as I entered the building,” Mitchell said. “Now I know a lot about Negroes as we have more than our share back at home. The United States are full of them. What was he doing here? Do you keep slaves?”

“He is from Morocco—and no he is not a slave. In Britain men are not made slaves because of the colour of their skin, nor for any other reasons, as they are in *some* countries.”

“In the Miskatonic Valley in Massachusetts where I am from, we don’t keep slaves either, though it must be admitted they are little more than innocent beasts. It is, however, a custom of our Southron brothers. They will not give up their peculiar institution in spite of all the blather they are given by the abolitionists. I too am opposed to slavery, but I cannot help but feel that the Negro benefits under the care of the white man. Why, they can scarcely clothe or feed themselves in their natural state. They can neither read nor write and think of anything but copulation—if you will excuse my saying so.”

Topper closed his eyes angrily. “We in this country find the black men we meet as intelligent as men of any other race. White men raised as animals and treated no better might resemble your description of the slaves in the United States.”

“P’raps so, p’raps so,” Reverend Mitchell said. “But this one was from Africa do you say? Is he a heathen?”

“In fact, he is a Christian though he was born a Mussulman. He has converted.”

“Then he deserves your kindness,” the Reverend Mitchell said. “What does he do here?”



“He would receive our kindnesses,” Topper said, sharply, “whether he were Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Hindu or Mussulman. The most Christian act I can imagine is to offer kindness to those in need who are not Christians.”

“In a perfect world perhaps,” Mitchell said, “with infinite resources—but our world is not perfect nor are your resources limitless.”

“We make do.”

“Mr. Topper, I have been sent here by HIM to convert unbelievers into the Faithful and to give sinners a chance at Redemption. Redemption, Sir—do you realise how important our Redemption is to Him? These are the services I offer. These are the services which you do not provide.”

“We have no need here for your services, Reverend,” Topper said.

“Is that your decision to make?” Mitchell asked.

Topper looked down. “No, I admit, it is not.”

“Then I suggest that you perform your duty as *personal assistant* to Mr. Scrooge and take my offer to him. If he refuses...” Mitchell shrugged. “But I do not believe he will. He understands the value of spirituality. I promised my dear mother, Elizabeth Whately Mitchell, that I would spare no effort to bring every soul I can into His Flock, and I aim to keep that promise, Friend, I do.”

“As you wish, but as I have said, Mr. Scrooge is absent at the moment. I am in charge in his stead.” Topper said, stiffly. “Now if you will excuse me, I have other responsibilities to care for.”