

A Yuletide Tail

Being a Most Heart-warming and Improving Account of the Utmost Edification, and Not to Mention Profound Moral Rectitude, by Mr D.R. Stone

The snowflakes fell upon G-d's good Earth like as to feathers plucked from the wings of an Angel ... although, if Angel it had been, such an Angel must have been some cold, and cruel, and bitter wretch, forever cast out from the Host of Stars and D-mned to spend all of Eternity in the very depths of H-des with his Infernal Master the D-vil himself! The snow was cold and sharp as a grandmother's tongue – if that grandmother had been known about the town to be particularly sharp-tongued, and was dead.

The crystal flakes fell upon the denizens of London as they bustled through the streets on this merry Yuletide Eve. They fell upon the jarvies perched atop their hansom cabs; they fell upon the gypsy flower-women with their sprigs of lucky heather; they fell upon the honest clerks and cut-purses alike. They fell upon the hulking forms of mechanical alien conveyances as they lay waste to entire districts around them ... but most of all, it seemed, they fell upon Poor Tom.

"Garn, you filthy littel beast!" bellowed a corpuscular pieman, as Poor Tom nuzzled at his trousers in an attempt to gain some small degree of succour. "I have nothing on my tray for the mangy likes of you!"

The bedraggled black-patched kitten (for that, alas, was the station of Poor Tom in life) dodged smartly from the pieman's hefty kick – and it was fortunate, for Poor Tom in any event, that he did. For at that very instant, a galvanistic Death Ray struck from above and incinerated him, pies and all, where he stood.

All that remained was a pair of smoking boots. There was nothing good to eat about a pair of smoking boots, in the considered opinion of Poor Tom ... nothing good to eat even for one who has never been so hungry in his life.

How he longed to be back in the warm and happy home from which he had been so cruelly ousted, with kind Mr and Mrs Cumbundersnatch and their forty-seven children. It had hardly been *his* fault, after all, that their youngest, crippled daughter, Small Doris, had succumbed to the suffocation. Poor Tom had, after all, been merely been looking for some comfortable place to curl up and sleep.

Now, the crowd around him milled and screamed as further Death Rays rained down from the winter sky, cutting through the feathered snowflakes with hisses that, altogether, combined amongst themselves to take upon the aspect of a bestial roar. Poor Tom clawed and scrambled through the forest of legs until, at last, he reached the dark mouth of an alley, and darted within.

In the alley, a frail and frostbitten little girl attempted to sell matches to those who might pass. In this she was somewhat inconvenienced, for the little girl was blind, and had thus positioned herself directly facing the wall.

“Oh, sir ...” she whispered, sensing the movement of Poor Tom as he passed by, “... can it be that you are some cruel Illusion of the last extremities of hypothermia ... or might you be some Seraph, come to bear me from the Miseries and Durance of this Mortal Realm ..?”

And with that, she pitched back violently, hit the ground with a thump and expired upon the instant from the cold, her single leg sticking up in the air, and the fractured twig that had served her most inadequately as a crutch lying at a pitiably sad angle. For in addition to being, blind, penniless and an orphan, the little match girl had been every bit as crippled as, once, had been Small Doris. Even more so, probably.

Poor Tom paid the dead match girl no heed, it being obvious that she was in no fit state to feed him, and continued on his way toward the far end of the alley ... where, as he knew, it would open on a dark back street containing piles of totter-refuse awaiting collection, and in which he might find something fit to eat, and somewhat less of a preponderance of screaming and exploding people.

Just before he got there, though, he came upon a second scene – this latter comprising of a thin and somewhat wash-wasted Lady of the Night (one of those Fallen Women who are no better than they ought to be and, alas, infest the more disreputable districts of our Fair Municipality) confronting a bullish ruffian of a man with a puckered scar down the side of his unshaven face and a stout knoberry stick clutched in his hand.

“You take these here shillin’s, Big Bill Scrote,” the young jade cried, flinging the coins in question in the man’s evil and phrenologically subnormal face. “Them’s all I have on me, and much good may they do yer! As for the child, you’ll never find him. I’ve ‘id ‘im away, I ‘ave, where you can never trouble him again!”

“What’s this, Sticky Sal?” the brute roared. “You’d seek to deprive me from my livelihood, d-amn yer eyes, of sending young Jeremy Bender into the townhouses of rich old misers, by way of the littel window thing you get over some front doors, the name of which I have temporarily forgot? Well, then, Sticky Sal ... we’s a-goin’ to have *words* about that, Sticky Sal, you just sees if we don’t!”

The thug raised his knoberry stick, and there is no question that things would have gone hard for poor Sticky Sal – had not a ghastly collection of alien tentacles chosen that very moment to burst into the alley, from the dark back street beyond, wrapped themselves around the body of Bill Scrote and dragged him bodily back into the darkness from whence they had come.

“Aaargh!” came the frantic voice of Big Bill Scrote. “It’s had me bl--dy arm off! This is a right old rorty business, this is, an’ no mistake!”

For the barest instant, Sticky Sal stood, stunned somewhat at the fortune and agency of her deliverance. Then a further set of tentacles whipped themselves around her, and hauled her off in an instant. He screams were, subsequently, most heart-rending and pathetic. And then there was nothing but the busy sound of alien mastication.

Poor Tom sighed, insofar as a small black-patched cat can sigh. It seemed that *everybody* was getting a fine meal, this Yuletide Night, but him.

Judging that the alien-infested back street would be no place for a small black-patched cat, Poor Tom left the shelter of a discarded sign board, behind which he had been hiding from the notice of Sticky Sal and Big Bill Scrote. There was a storm grate in the alley, moved aside by some previous hand; Poor Tom dropped down to find himself in the sewers. He cast around himself for a moment, cautiously sniffing the air, and then set off in the hope of finding some nice fat rat.

What Poor Tom found, in fact, were rats of quite some other stripe entirely.

In the noisome and unremarked-upon oubliette of a catchment vault, through which the fetid and quite repellent oudre of the city swirled, a farraginous assortment of urchins – a somewhat less than entire set of warm winter clothes between them – gathered themselves around a gentleman in a moth-eaten scrapwork coat and a strangely pristine stovepipe tile fully half again as tall as he was himself.

“Now don’t you be a-worryin’, my fine lads,” this gentleman was saying. “We’m all of us be safe from them there hideous alien death machines down here, and make no bones about it. You just listen to your kind old Uncle Bagel.”

“Please, dear Uncle Bagel,” piped up a minuscule urchin, between wracking and consumptive coughs and waving one of his three crutches to attract the stovepipe-hatted gentleman’s attention, “but my internal organs appear to have prolapsed due to certain complications arising from acute malnutrition.”

“Acute malnutrition, is it?” declared the gentleman. “Lessons will take your minds away from the suchlike of grumblin’ bellies and the lupus! Now tell me, my fine lads, what d’ye do when you see some toff a-walkin’ down the street like this?”

The gentleman began, theatrically, to mince through the filth of the sewer, a much used handkerchief pressed languidly to his hugely Semitic nose. “What d’ye do, me fine lads, eh?”

“Stab him in the kidneys, and when he goes down kick him in the head and nick his change purse?” opined an urchin slightly larger than the rest and in a flat cap. And with an ear trumpet, for he was tragically deaf.

“Right you are, young Crafty Shitehawk,” the gentleman affirmed. “That’s the stuff to give ‘em – an’ you can tell ‘em Uncle Bagel said so if’n they don’t believe yer.”

“Pardon?” said The Crafty Shitehawk.

“I have, this very Yuletide Eve, made up a song about it,” said Uncle Bagel. He opened his mouth, no doubt to give voice to the air in question ... and then, perhaps mercifully, closed it again, and regarded a dark corner of the catchment area curiously.

“Do my eyes deceive me,” he said at length, “or do I not espy a smallish, black patched cat in that dark corner?”

As one, the faces of the urchins turned to regard Poor Tom, their eyes – those of them who had eyes, and had not lost them in a terrible and awful detonating apothecary accident – lit up with gleeful hunger.

“Let’s eat it,” one of the wee tots suggested.

The comestible suggestion, it seemed, agreed to some large extent with all those present. The horde of urchins advanced with various cries of “Yum!”, and “Save the parson’s nose for me!” save for those, of course, for those who were struck congenitally dumb.

Poor Tom decided, in the light of recent events, that here was not entirely the safest place to be. He pelted from Uncle Bagel and the advancing urchins, disappearing into the sewer tunnels at such speed that not even the strongest and relatively intact had a chance of keeping up.

Behind him, as he made his escape, he became aware of the sound of several, somewhat muffled, explosions. Then the hissing of some infernal gas.

“’Tis the Mutagen!” came the frantic voice of Uncle Bagel, wafting up the sewer tunnel. “Try to ‘hold yer breaths, me fine lads and ... Arrgh! Whuurgh! Brek! Tik! *Whoork!*”

Uncle Bagel and the urchins, Poor Tom realised vaguely, having caught sight of such things before, were at this moment being busily converted into a certain quantity of reddish slime, at the agency of a particular gas which, it seemed, the aliens utilised in the extermination of vermin. In any event, it was something of a blessing that Poor Tom had been frightened to run when he did.

Not entirely fortunate, however. Any rat he found here, now – even a rat not reduced to reddish slime – would smell too wrong to eat.

Somewhere, in even the smallest capacity, there must be *something* for Poor Tom to eat ...

The totter’s yard was piled with all kinds of refuse, of the sort that totters commonly collected from the back streets – though so far as Poor Tom was concerned, he could not imagine why it should be collected and piled so, such inedible portions of it in any event, or of what use to anybody it could possibly be.

As he climbed out from the sewers through a ditch-breach, he noticed that amongst the jumble stood something a little like a workman’s hut – or like the wardrobe in which nineteen of the Cumbundersnatch children had slept of nights. It was painted a dark, but vivid, blue.

The door of the thing was open, and from beyond it Poor Tom could hear voices:

“By G-d!” a voice exclaimed. “I but would never thought to see the like! ‘Tis bigger on the inside than the out!”

“Oh bl--dy H-ll,” said another, female voice. “Not another one.”

Mindful of his previous encounters of this Yuletide Eve, Poor Tom considered that it might be best to conceal himself and await developments before making his presence known.

Presently, three figures emerged from what was something like a worker’s hut and something like a wardrobe.

One, Poor Tom recognised as Soldier. (A soldier lad lodged, once, with the Cumbundersnatches, until seven of the eldest daughters, and Mrs Cumbundersnatch herself, had fallen into the Family Way, whereupon the Soldier had been summarily defenestrated with a shovel and buried in the

cellar by Mr Cumbundersnatch.) The Soldier was clutching a packet of papers, sealed with wax and tied up with string.

The second was a girl, but barely into her majority, dressed most inappropriately and carrying what appeared to be a malformed cricket-bat of some metallic substance.

The third was a quite profoundly inconsequential man in a hat.

"It's a werry worrying thing you're telling me, Doctor," the Soldier was saying. "A werry worrying thing indeed."

"Be that as it may, sergeant Thackary." This from the man in the hat. "it is imperative that you get this information to Brigadier-General Cholmoldley-Crichton. Can I trust you to do that, sergeant?"

"For Queen and Country," said the Soldier, standing for a moment to attention, "you can trust me with ... a-a-a-chooo!"

"Oh dear, sergeant," said the man in the hat. "It does appear that I might have given you a cold."

For a while after Sergeant Thackary had left, Ace amused herself by poking through the debris in the totter's yard. There was something about the various dumb and mismatched items that was akin to going on a completely historically-inaccurate pirate rollercoaster-ride.

There were several more concussions in the middle-distance, out beyond the wrought-iron gates. There was an odd taste to the air – and she *really* hoped that the Doctor had been telling the truth when he had said that the Slaarg mutagen-spores wouldn't affect her.

After a while, she wandered back to the TARDIS, and found the Doctor outside it. He was just standing there. For some reason, Ace was reminded of old *Droopy* cartoons – simply standing there, while chaos raged around him, as if he'd had nothing to do with it at all.

'I still don't get the point, Professor' She said. 'I mean, so what? Why should anybody care if the Slaarg are dismantling what's basically a glorified theme park? They built it in the first place, didn't they?'

The Doctor shook himself slightly, then turned his head to regard her, as though he had completely forgotten her existence. 'Mm?'

'Dickensworld.' Ace shuddered at the thought of it, even though the actuality of it was all around her. 'Who in the entire galaxy is going to miss it, apart from a bunch of aliens who didn't know what the hell they were doing in the first place and got it all wrong?'

The Doctor frowned. 'That's exactly the point, Ace. The Slaarg got it wrong – completely and utterly wrong – when they built their pleasure world and stocked it with what they thought of as simulacra. They didn't understand what humanity was, exactly, but they copied it. Down to the synthetic DNA.'

He waved a hand toward a skyline that even now appeared to be on fire with the nimbus of Death Rays. 'The people out there are simplified and twisted, but they're *real*. As are the other biological entities the Slaarg copied. The suffering is actual. And the Slaarg are wiping them out *en masse*.

'That's not going to happen, now. The pathogen with which I infected Thackary will present itself as a common cold in the human analogues – but it's sudden death to the Slaarg on an accelerated vector. Most of them will survive, I'm sure, if they get off the planet and declare it a Plague Zone. They

probably won't bother to obliterate it from orbit. I got the idea from a chap I used to know. An old Companion, apparently, used to go around for coffee with him regularly. I'm sure I'll remember his name presently ...'

'Now, hang on,' said Ace. 'If these people are ... if they're *real* people, in a sense, then you've just sent out a *real* guy to be gobbled up by the first Slaarg who comes across him and ...'

'Hello, what's this?' said the Doctor. 'It looks like a small cat. Black-patched, if I'm not entirely mistaken. It looks a bit hungry – now, I'm sure I had a bit of fish, somewhere, in my pocket ...'

As the big, blue wardrobe vanished into thin air, Poor Tom paid it not the slightest heed. He spat out a fishbone, and rolled over on the junk pile, onto his now full stomach, and dropped contentedly to sleep.

Thanks to the Kindly Gentleman in the hat, it seemed that it would be a Merry Yuletide after all.

And the same to you, too.