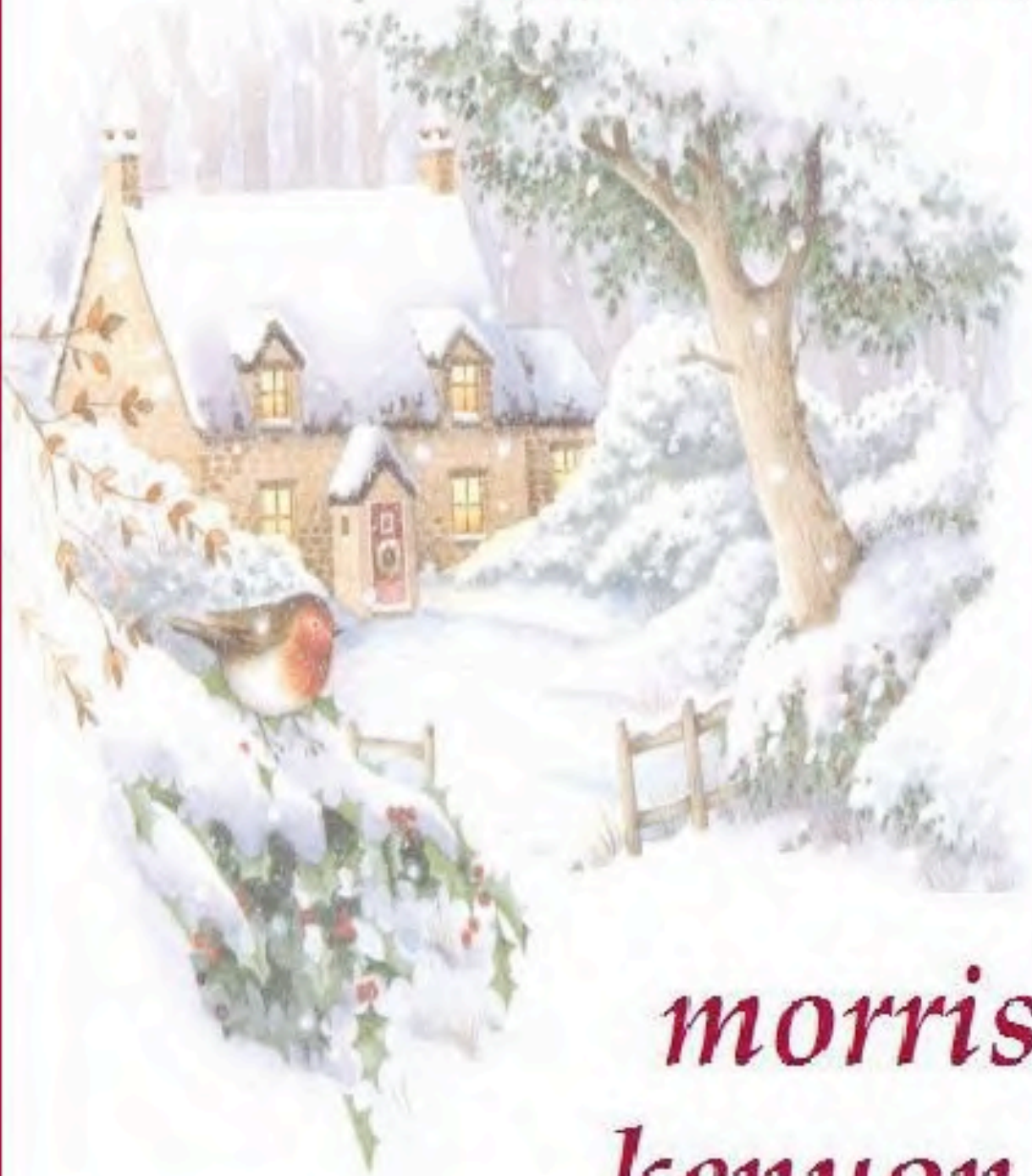


wavertree christmas



*morris
kenyon*

Wavertree Christmas by Morris Kenyon

WAVERTREE CHRISTMAS.

Morris Kenyon

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Christmas 1855 promises no cheer for Walsh and Finnan. Living by their wits has left them hungry, cold, penniless and living in a freezing attic. With no prospects they are not enjoying any of the festive season. However, Walsh has come up with a cunning idea that may solve all their problems. The only trouble is that his plan involves a long walk in the snow and then helping themselves to someone else's Christmas. Will they carry out Walsh's plan or learn the true meaning of Christmas?

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CHAPTER 1. CHRISTMAS EVE.

If there was glass in the window, it would have stopped the snow blowing in. If there had been a fire in the hearth, the flames would have warmed the garret room. If there had been one candle in its holder there would have been some light. If there had been even a box or crate to sit on, the man could have rested at his ease. If there had been a coat on his back, his thin frame might have felt some warmth. If there had been tobacco in his pipe he could have smoked.

The man lifted the bottle to his lips. One last drop trickled out. Now there was not even gin to drown his misery. He flung the black bottle into the corner of the room where it clattered against several of its fellows. The man crossed to the window, moved aside the dirty, billowing rag that covered it and peered out.

Below, people hurried past on the pavement. Most with their heads bowed low against the snow, easy marks for the barefoot urchins scampering about in the snow, their feet frozen blue. The man scowled. Not so many years ago, he was one of them. No place to call home, no food in his belly, living by his wits and nimble fingers. Turning his head, on the street corner the man saw the ale house, the Blue Bells, was doing a roaring trade. Amber light and honky-tonk music from a barrel-organ spilled from its open doors.

Inside the ale house, the man knew there would be warmth, laughter and jolly companionship. However, the man did not even have the price of a latch lifter to gain admittance. As he watched, a man reeled out of the Blue Bells clutching his stove-pipe hat to his head followed by cries of, "merry Christmas".

The watching man coughed, a thin hacking sound. He checked his handkerchief for blood. There were no bloody red spots. The man wondered when the dreaded Consumption would come and claim him for its own. Unless he got food and warmth soon it couldn't be too long before the Devil knocked on his door.

As if summoned by his thoughts, there was a rap on the flimsy door. The man turned from the window as the door creaked open. He half expected the smell of coal and brimstone and a blast of heat as from a furnace's open door. He was so cold he would almost have welcomed the fiery pits of Hell.

Instead, the man from the ale house stood in the doorway. The newcomer swayed and half stepped, half toppled into the room. With difficulty the intruder kept his feet and propped himself up in a corner. His stove-pipe hat fell to the boards.

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"Finnan, me old Fenian mate, you should... should have," the newcomer's thoughts tailed off.

The man so addressed left his place by the window, placed his hands under the other's armpits and helped his friend slide down the wall until he was sprawled out on the floor. Finnan picked up a handful of burlap sacks and greasy rags and draped them over his friend's body.

"I see you brought us back a plump golden goose, roasted parsnips, a huge plum pudding with holly on the top, half a dozen mince pies, nuts and a bottle of brandy to wash it down with," Finnan said, his County Mayo accent still strong despite his having lived in Liverpool these last six years.

The other man looked up from his place on the floor. A lopsided grin on his face. "Sadly, the food slipped through my fingers on the way home but the brandy I can provide." He rummaged through his voluminous, many pocketed coat and produced a black bottle, the live companion of its dead friends in the corner. "Well, gin instead of French brandy but who wants to imbibe a heathen foreign spirit on a night like this?"

"That'll do me fine," said Finnan, snatching the black bottle from his friend's hand, uncorking it and taking a long, long pull. He wiped his lips and handed the bottle back. The harsh liquor hit his stomach, warming him.

"'Tis a miracle worker you are, Walsh. That'll keep the chill out."

The bottle was still lighter when Walsh passed it up.

"All the same, it's food and fuel we'll be needing as well otherwise 'tis the workhouse or the press gang for us. And I for one am partial to neither event."

"Stow your whining, Finnan," said Walsh. "I know where such delicacies and far more besides can be had for the taking."

"And would that be the Bridewell? The last time I was entertained there the delicacies consisted of bread and gruel washed down with water so cold it froze my stomach."

"Now, my Fenian friend. Would I be sending us two such jolly boys as us after the admittedly inferior refreshments and entertainment on offer at the Bridewell?"

Finnan looked down at his red-nosed friend. "Get to the point, Walsh. If words were guineas we'd be richer than the Lord Mayor of Liverpool himself and him in a coach and four. We'd drive up to West Derby and be dining with the Lords of Sefton themselves in Croxteth Hall."

"What's tomorrow my short-fused friend?"

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"Why 'tis Christmas Day itself. Not that we'll be invited to partake in the festivities," Finnan said, crossing back to his place by the window. He glanced out at the ale house where the men inside were bellowing out a drunken song. On the corner, a couple of women wrapped in shawls huddled together and waited for their menfolk to come out. The snow had started falling, great white flakes tumbling down and had already started to pile up in the doorways and window sills and the women's shoulders.

Walsh pulled himself together and sat up a little straighter. He peered owlshly at Finnan's darkened form by the window.

"That's right. It's Christmas Day. And what do nice families do on Christmas Day?" Walsh asked.

It was so long since Finnan had been in a family that he had to think. He was one of six surviving children raised in a croft on a bog in County Mayo. His mother buried three and then ignored the rest whilst she concentrated on pickling her liver with *poitin*.

His eldest sister, Brigid, had taken over and raised the younger children as well as she could until she married a farmer's son from near Castlebar. His oldest brother had gone out to California in the gold rush of 1849, another brother, Martin, was accepted by the seminary and became a priest and yet another joined the British Army and was last heard of somewhere near Sevastopol in the Crimea. The only letter he'd sent back had been full of misspellings but told of the heat and flies out in the east.

Finnan himself had sailed to Liverpool hoping to pick up enough money to join his brother in California. Six years later and here he was starving in a garret and no nearer to raising the third class emigrant fare than he had the day he landed at the Pier Head.

"They sing carols around the fire, open their presents, stuff themselves silly eating as much food in one day that would keep men like us going for a month," said Finnan. He leaned out of the window and spat.

"Anything else, my sour black-hearted friend? Here, have another swig from the bottle. It might cheer you up," Walsh said, tossing the bottle to Finnan who snatched it out of the air one-handed.

"Do they also congratulate themselves on their superior English moral worth in bringing God's great good blessings on their table meaning that they are free from hunger and want?"

"You are bitter tonight. Have another drink," Walsh suggested. Finnan obeyed with alacrity.

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"I'll tell you, though I shouldn't have to tell a good catholic boy like your good self. They go to their proddy English churches, put a shilling in the collection and give thanks to their false Lutheran god that they will be going home to a table filled with God's bounty."

"Are you telling me that we should be going to church tomorrow? Don't you remember Father Peter said to us that if he saw us anywhere near the sacred precincts he'd horse-whip us before he wrote to the Pope in Rome asking to excommunicate us?" said Finnan, amazed.

"And you'd have thought the man would have been grateful that we were merely trying to repair the lead on his roof for free out of the goodness of our hearts."

The two men laughed.

"No. But think about it my fine Fenian friend. Think about it long and hard. Who's looking after the roast meats, the Christmas pudding, the presents, the silver knives and forks and any other small easily portable items that could slip into a pocket whilst the family and their servants are out at church?" asked Walsh.

In the now near total darkness, Finnan's face lit up with a smile. He crossed the room, his worn out boot heels clicking over the bare boards.

"You're a genius Walsh. The greatest thinker ever to come out of County Mayo. Come now, have you found a house, a house worthy of our attention tomorrow?" Finnan crouched and hugged his friend in a tight embrace before returning the nearly empty bottle.

"That I have. A nice big villa with a nice religious family who will most certainly be attending mass, or whatever these proddy dogs call it, tomorrow morning. I was talking to their footman down at the Blue Bells yonder who had been given the afternoon off to visit his family but was more tempted by the delights to be found in yon hostelry rather than the cheer to be found at home..."

"Out with it," interrupted Finnan.

"...as I was saying, this footman, Tom by name, was telling me in between liquid refreshments that the family he works for, the Vickerys, are keen church goers. A very holy, God-fearing family for proddies and it's a shame they will burn as heretics when the last trump sounds. He then went on to tell me, purely in the strictest confidence, that the kitchen door key can always be found under the third plant pot on the left. He tipped me the wink and said he could be found in the Blue Bells next week if I wanted to pass him a little gratuity."

"Fortune smiles on us at last. So where can we find this bounteous house?"

Walsh coughed into his hand. "Cow Lane, Wavertree."

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Finnan exploded. His good humour vanished in an instant. "But that's miles away. Miles and miles out in the country. And me without a coat on my back."

"Nothing to a pair of fine strong men like us. The walk itself away from this pestilential smoky air will do us good and put the roses on your cheeks. It will put an edge on our appetites."

"My appetite already has enough of an edge. It's as sharp as a razor blade already. My stomach thinks my throat's been cut."

"And tomorrow you'll eat your fill and more beside. I guarantee it. This time tomorrow you'll be full to bursting and with money to pave your way through this harsh world."

Walsh yawned widely, stretched his length on the bare boards and with an arm for a pillow rolled over and went to sleep. Finnan himself wrapped himself up in his torn threadbare jacket and hugged his knees to his chest for some pretence of warmth. Eventually, he too dozed and dreamed of a low smoky farmhouse, a small cow in the field outside, a bucket of potatoes cooking on the peat fire and the room filled with laughter and people talking Gaelic.

CHAPTER 2 CHRISTMAS DAY.

The snow had fallen heavily during the night blanketing the dirt and poverty of Liverpool's crowded slums under a layer of pristine whiteness. The footsteps of those few people out that early were dulled and muffled. Finnan struggled awake, instantly aware of the gnawing hunger in his belly. He rubbed the stubble on his jaw and smiled. He was really hungry now, only a notch or two on his belt away from starvation, but later he hoped he'd be full to bursting.

Finnan knelt and shook his friend awake.

"Merry Christmas, Walsh. 'Tis a fine crisp morning for our stroll to the charmingly named Cow Lane. I suppose if it all goes wrong, 'tis one of the cows we'll be eating instead."

Walsh shook himself like a dog emerging from his mound of sacks and rags. He found his battered stove-pipe hat and clamped it onto his head. "Just think of all those fine foods awaiting us at the unwittingly hospitable Mr. Vickery's house."

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The two men clattered down the rickety staircase, past the cramped families living on the second and first storeys and out into the courtyard surrounded by the other tenements. However, they almost never made it on their journey. A group of idlers were playing crown and anchor on a few planks. Rummaging through his pockets, Walsh found a couple of left over farthings and took part.

Luck smiled on Walsh and his farthings became pennies, then a sixpence, then a shilling and finally the almost unheard of fortune of half a crown. Pocketing his winnings and ignoring the glares from the other gamers Walsh and Finnan walked out of the court, turned away from the riverside slums and then along Hanover Street and up Mount Pleasant.

"Now we have some refreshments for our journey," Walsh said as they walked up the slope, carrying on until they reached the little village of Edge Hill on the brow of the hill. By now, their exertions were taking their toll on their weakened frames. Their breath steamed in the cold air.

Finnan stopped, turned around facing the way they had come and took in the magnificent view. Behind them was the brick built parish church of St. Mary's. But downhill was the smoky warren of Liverpool itself, the streets pierced with steeples and chimneys. Beyond that a forest of masts on the river Mersey and still further, under the pale blue sky were the Welsh hills, white and snow covered.

"We will stop in the Bear's Paw and have one or two for the road," announced Walsh. Finnan eagerly pushed open the door and a minute later were drinking a pint of porter out of pewter flagons. Walsh called for food and shortly after the pot boy brought them a plate of sausages.

"This is better than that garret, eh Finnan, but we'd better not eat our fill here. Not when there's free food for the taking further down the road."

Finnan, who didn't have a coat, was loath to leave the open fire and venture out again in the cold. He was tempted to call for a further porter but Walsh was holding open the door and an eddy of snow drifted in.

"Merry Christmas, gentlemen," called out the landlord as they left. The landlord was a fat, jolly man who looked like he'd never missed a meal in his life.

"Did you hear that, Finnan? He called us gentlemen. Wait until we've eaten our fill and dressed in clothes that are better than these rags we are reduced to. Then we'll be gentlemen for sure."

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Finnan nodded. He was getting cold again now, the fireside and porter already no more than a memory. As they turned away down Wavertree Road a family hurrying to St. Mary's waved to the two men and also wished them a happy Christmas.

"Why hasn't that man got a coat?" asked the youngest girl.

"Ssh," said the girl's mother hurrying the family along.

Finnan didn't say anything but was determined he would be better dressed on their way home.

Beyond the village of Edge Hill the road led away through open countryside. Fields were surrounded by snow covered trees and hedges, their branches heavy laden with snow. As they watched, a robin perched on a branch and sang to them. Its red feathers stood out bright against the snow. Their breath steamed in the cold air as they trudged along. Soon even Walsh stopped talking in order to save his breath.

Then eventually the two men reached the country village of Wavertree. Along the High Street was a row of shops and a few well built stone houses. Looking in, Finnan saw Christmas decorations sparkling in the light.

"Where's Cow Lane?" asked Finnan.

"A little further on the right. Ah, my fine Fenian friend, here we are." The two men turned down Cow Lane, both eyeing the Thatched House tavern on the corner. Leaning against the ale house, a thick set man in a bulky coat smoking a pipe bid them a "merry Christmas." They looked at each other.

"Why pay for our ale when we can have some for free?" said Walsh. There was no answer to that. A few minutes later, they arrived at a large Georgian brick built house sheltering behind a high wall. A holly wreath decorated the door and more holly and ivy garlanded the windows.

"This the place?" said Finnan.

"And would I be after directing us to the wrong house. And us after having walked all this way out to the back of beyond?" replied Walsh.

Finnan looked around. There was no-one in sight. Further down Cow Lane was a church built in a classical Greek style. In the distance he saw a windmill, its sails still in honour of the day. A peal of bells rang out from the church, startling a flock of rooks who rose, cawing, from the trees. Looking down, Finnan saw footprints tracking out of the house, through the gate and then turning in the direction of the church.

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“Fine eyes and a fine mind you have there, my currently lath thin but soon to be plump friend,” said Walsh. “Now, let us, with no more ado and no more delay make haste and help ourselves to all the food we can eat and all the silverware we can carry away with us.”

“Hurry up and find the key,” Finnan said, shivering now he was standing still.

The two men pushed open the gate and then walked around the side of the house. Both were glad to be out of sight behind the wall. At the side of the house, a short flight of steps led up to the kitchen door. Flower pots lined the edge of the treads. Using his finger to point, Walsh counted the tubs. He lifted one up and there, sheltered from the snow, was an iron key. Walsh lifted it up and danced a little jig, all elbows and knees.

“Open the door and let us at the food,” cried Finnan.

Walsh jammed the key in the lock and turned it. He looked puzzled and stretched out his hand and turned the handle. The latch lifted and the door opened.

“It wasn't locked?” asked Finnan.

Walsh shook his head. “They must have forgot. After all, who would take it into their heads to rob a house on a day of celebration such as this?” He grinned and shook his head at such foolishness, his thin face weasel-like now.

The two men stepped into the house and Finnan closed the door behind him.

Immediately, the smells of cooking filled their noses. They sniffed the savoury scents of the roasting goose, the sweet spices of the pudding and mince pies, carrots and parsnips. Finnan licked his lips.

“What did I tell you, my fine friend? A feast that would not disgrace even the Queen on her golden throne, a banquet that would tempt the angels down from heaven. All we can carry away and eat, enough sustenance to fill even our pinched bellies many times over, enough to take back and feed our friends and their poor hungry children in the courtyard...,” said Walsh.

“Stop wasting our time with your blather and lead the way to the kitchen,” Finnan growled.

The two men walked down the tiled passage past a rack of coats above a row of boots and Walsh opened the door at the end. Immediately he closed it again.

“What's the matter,” hissed Finnan.

“The cook's still in the kitchen.”

Finnan swore.

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“We should have expected that. Of course the cook wouldn't have gone to church but stayed behind to finish their dinner.”

“We could rush in and overpower her,” suggested Finnan.

Walsh turned to his friend. “For shame on you. Overpowering and frightening a respectable woman going about her lawful business in cooking for her master's table?” Walsh thought for a moment. “On the other hand, my fine friend, if I were to go around to the front door and ring the bell and engage her in conversation...”

“Which is something you do exceedingly well having laid your lips on the Blarney Stone more than once in your time,” interrupted Finnan.

“...then you could sneak some of the food and silverware and meet me at the top of Cow Lane later. And no harm done to the cook nor to anyone else,” Walsh finished.

The two men shook hands and Walsh trotted back down the corridor and back outside. Through the open door Finnan saw the snow had started falling again. A minute later, Finnan heard the door bell jangle. Laying his ear to the kitchen door, Finnan heard the cook mutter to herself and then leave her kitchen.

Instantly, like a fox let loose in a hen house, Finnan was in the kitchen. A black-leaded range throwing off welcome heat took up much of one wall. On the well scrubbed table in the middle of the room was a goose and a chicken resting before being carved. Opening a sack, Finnan threw them inside. Grabbing a cloth, he opened the range oven and took out the pudding. A tray of tarts cooled on the window sill. They joined the pudding.

Finnan crossed over to the opposite door which stood ajar. From the hall he heard Walsh playing the part of a lost Irish wanderer begging for just a few morsels to carry him on his way to visit his ailing widowed mother... For once, Finnan blessed his friend's gift of the gab.

Sneaking into the hall Finnan saw the cook's broad back as she tried in vain to close the door on Walsh. He crossed to the first room on the right. His luck was in. It was the Vickery family's dining room. Silverware gleamed on the white lawn tablecloth. Presents were piled up underneath the beautifully decorated Christmas tree. The sharp, clean tang of pine filled the room. Too much choice and too little time.

Ignoring the presents, Finnan walked round the table, snatching up the silverware and dropping it into the sack. There was a decanter on the table. Lifting it to his lips he drank deep of the rich, ruby port. Emboldened, Finnan was about to try and lift a few of the smaller

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presents when he heard the cook's voice rise as she was about to finish talking to Walsh and close the door.

Finnan gasped. Had he left it too late to get away? Leaving the presents untouched, Finnan hurried out of the dining room and was back in the hallway. Then disaster. Turning the corner the sack holding the silverware swung and clattered against the door frame. Finnan swore under his breath and started to run for the kitchen. The cook wheeled around on the spot, saw Finnan's back and screamed before starting down the hall after him. Walsh leaped up the front steps, into the hallway and ran after the cook.

The cook was still screaming. Finnan found himself in the kitchen. Without stopping, Finnan dashed past the table and down the passage to the back door. He flung the door open. Just in time to meet a thick-set man in a bulky coachman's overcoat carrying a large blunderbuss. The bell shaped mouth of the shotgun gaped as wide as the opening of Williamson's Tunnels. The coachman raised the blunderbuss to chest height. Finnan stopped running.

"And where do you think you're going?" the man said.

Finnan dropped the sacks he was carrying. He racked his mind trying to think of some excuse, however unlikely. But even his fertile mind froze. There was nothing he could say. He was as guilty as a fox leaving a chicken coop with a hen in its mouth. Finnan raised his hands.

"Point that thing somewhere else," he said. But the man kept the blunderbuss aimed directly at Finnan's chest. Finnan saw the man's finger tighten on the trigger. He closed his eyes and wondered if he would hear the bang that would send him to Hell.

More people entered the passage behind him.

He heard cook's voice protesting loudly and then Walsh trying his blather.

"Honestly, my good sir, this gentleman here is a complete stranger to me. Purely an infernal coincidence that I was merely asking your no doubt most excellent cook for directions to my poor infirm father's cottage, him with a terrible case of frostbite, whilst this coat-less blackguard was ransacking your house....," Walsh said.

"You liar, you told me it was your mother!" interrupted the cook.

A strong, commanding voice cut through the hubbub. Both Walsh and the cook fell silent. Finnan opened his eyes. He saw a tall man of about thirty-five years or so enter the passage. The man was well built and wore a black coat. Blue eyes above cavalry whiskers pierced the gloom of the passage.

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"They are both in it together, Mr. Vickery. I saw them walking together down the High Street earlier, sir," said the man holding the shotgun.

"I have no doubt about that, Pugh," Mr. Vickery said. He rubbed his cheek, deep in thought.

"Shall I summon the constable and have these two rogues taken to the lock-up on the green, sir?" asked Pugh.

A little girl of eight or nine with her hair in ringlets and wearing a velvet dress pushed past Mr. Mr. Vickery.

"Oh, no papa. You cannot do that. Not on Christmas Day, papa," she said. Finnan instantly warmed to the little girl.

"Certainly, sir, those are noble sentiments most in keeping with the highest traditions of this festive Holy Day, sir. You are to be congratulated on your daughter's compassion, sir; a credit to yourself and your wife, sir..."

Mr. Vickery raised his hand, cutting off Walsh's flow of words.

"Papa, look how thin they both are and that one has not even a coat on his back," the little girl said, pointing at Finnan. Finnan shivered.

"Don't point, Eliza, it's rude. I know what it is to be cold and hungry. I was out in the Crimea last winter when I liberated some Russian chickens," said Mr. Vickery, thoughtfully. He turned to Walsh. "As it's Christmas-time, I am going to take a chance. If you can sell as well as you can talk, then I have a position for you. I own a chandlers on the High Street and one of my store clerks resigned at short notice. Would you be interested in taking his place?"

Even Walsh looked stunned by this change in his fortunes. One moment looking at being escorted to Wavertree lock-up by Pugh and a constable followed by the Bridewell and now the offer of paid employment. But Walsh was only stunned for an instant.

"Mr. Vickery, sir, you will regard this Christmas Day as being the most fortunate for your business. Of course, I can sell. Did I not used to work at a cattle auction in Castlebar and was able to raise the price and squeeze extra shillings out of even the most tight-fisted farmers? There was this priest..."

"Tell me another time," said Mr. Vickery.

Mr. Vickery then turned to Finnan. "And you. Maybe you can garden?"

Finnan smiled. "Sir, I was born and raised on a small holding in County Mayo. I kept our family alive on what I could grow."

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"Then, as soon as the snow clears, you can start work in our garden. In the meantime, Cook, please make sure these two half-starved gentlemen have plenty to eat. Merry Christmas gentlemen."

Finnan and Walsh looked around them in disbelief. Only Pugh looked less than pleased but he had lowered his blunderbuss.

Cook rescued the stolen food from the sacks. It hadn't been too knocked about. She pointed to Finnan and Walsh. "You rogues can wash your hands and peel some more potatoes and vegetables whilst I repair the damage and sort dinner out."

Mr. Vickery took his daughter's hand and left the passage for the kitchen. As he did so, both Walsh and Finnan called out, "Merry Christmas, sir."

Now they had food, warmth and work. It was the best Christmas either of them had had for a long time.

Merry Christmas.

THE END.