

Dickens Charles

Charles Dickens' Children Stories



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TROTTY VECK AND HIS DAUGHTER MEG

"TROTTY" seems a strange name for an old man, but it was given to Toby Veck because of his always going at a trot to do his errands; for he was a porter, and carried letters and messages for people who were in too great a hurry to send them by the post. He did not earn very much, and had to be out in all weathers and all day long. But Toby was of a cheerful disposition, and looked on the bright side of everything. His greatest joy was his dear daughter Meg, who loved him dearly.

One cold day Toby had been trotting up and down in his usual place before the church, when the bells chimed twelve o'clock, which made Toby think of dinner.

"There's nothing," he remarked, "more regular in coming round than dinner-time, and nothing less regular in coming round than dinner. That's the great difference between 'em." He went on talking to himself never noticing who was coming near to him.

"Why, father, father," said a pleasant voice, and Toby turned to find his daughter's sweet, bright eyes close to his.

"Why, pet," said he, kissing her, "what's-to-do? I didn't expect you to-day, Meg."

"Neither did I expect to come, father," said Meg, smiling. "But here I am! And not alone, not alone!"

"Why, you don't mean to say," observed Trotty, looking curiously at the covered basket she carried, "that you? –"

"Smell it, father dear," said Meg; "only smell it, and guess what it is."

Toby took the shortest possible sniff at the edge of the basket. "Why, it's hot," he said.

But to Meg's great delight he could not guess what it was that smelt so good. At last he exclaimed in triumph, "Why, what am I a-thinking of? It's tripe!"

And it was.

Just as Toby was about to sit down to his dinner on the doorsteps of a big house close by, the chimes rang out again, and Toby took off his hat and said, "Amen."

"Amen to the bells, father?"

"They broke in like a grace, my dear," said Trotty, "they'd say a good one if they could, I'm sure. Many's the kind thing they say to me. How often have I heard them bells say, 'Toby Veck, Toby Veck, keep a good heart, Toby!' A millions times? More!"

"Well, I never!" cried Meg.

While Toby ate his unexpected dinner with immense relish, Meg told him how her lover Richard, a young blacksmith, had brought his dinner to share with her, and had begged her to marry him on New Year's Day, "the best and happiest day of the whole year."

"So," went on Meg, "I wanted to make this a sort of holiday to you, as well as a dear and happy day to me, father, and I made a little treat and brought it to surprise you."

Just then, Richard himself came up to persuade Toby to agree to their plan; and almost at the same moment, a footman came out of the house and ordered them all off the steps, and some gentleman came out who called up Trotty, and gave him a letter to carry.

Toby trotted off to a very grand house, where he was told to take the letter in to the gentleman. While he was waiting, he heard the letter read. It was from Alderman Cute, to tell Sir Joseph Bowley that one of his tenants named Will Fern who had come to London to try and get work, had been brought before him charged with sleeping in a shed, and asking if Sir Joseph wished him to be dealt leniently with or otherwise. To Toby's great disappointment the answer was given that

Will Fern might be sent to prison as a vagabond, though his only fault was poverty. On his way home, Toby ran against a man dressed like a countryman, carrying a fair-haired little girl. The man asked him the way to Alderman Cute's house.

"It's impossible," cried Toby, "that your name is Will Fern?"

"That's my name," said the man.

Thereupon Toby told him what he had just heard, and said "Don't go there."

Poor Will told him how he could not make a living in the country, and had come to London with his orphan niece to try and find a friend of her mother's and to endeavor to get some work, and wishing Toby a happy New Year, was about to trudge wearily off again, when Trotty caught his hand saying —

"Stay! The New Year never can be happy to me if I see the child and you go wandering away without a shelter for your heads. Come home with me. I'm a poor man, living in a poor place, but I can give you lodging for one night and never miss it," and lifting up the pretty little one, he trotted towards home, and rushing in, he set the child down before his daughter. The little girl ran into her arms at once, while Trotty ran round the room, saying, "Here we are and here we go. Here, Uncle Will, come to the fire. Meg, my precious darling, where's the kettle? Here it is and here it goes, and it'll bile in no time!"

"Why, father!" said Meg, "you're crazy to-night, I think. Poor little feet, how cold they are!"

"Oh, they're warmer now!" exclaimed the child. "They're quite warm now!"

"No, no, no," said Meg. "We haven't rubbed 'em half enough. And when they're done, we'll brush out the damp hair; and we'll bring some color to the poor pale face with fresh water; and then we'll be so gay and brisk and happy!"

The child sobbing, clasped her round the neck, saying, "O Meg, O dear Meg!"

"Good gracious me!" said Meg, presently, "father's crazy! He's put the dear child's bonnet on the kettle, and hung the lid behind the door!"

Trotty hastily repaired this mistake, and went off to find some tea and a rasher of bacon he fancied "he had seen lying somewhere on the stairs." He soon came back and made the tea, and before long they were all enjoying the meal.

After tea Meg took Lilian to bed, and Toby showed Will Fern where he was to sleep. Then he went to sit by the fire and read his paper, and fell asleep, to have a wonderful dream so terrible and sad, that it was a great relief when he woke to find Meg sitting near him, putting some ribbons on her simple gown for her wedding, and looking so happy and young and blooming, that he jumped up to clasp her in his arms.

But somebody came rushing in between them, crying, — "No! Not even you. The first kiss of Meg in the New Year is mine. Meg, my precious prize, a happy year! A life of happy years, my darling wife!"

Then in came Lilian and Will Fern, and a band of music with a flock of neighbors burst into the room, shouting, "A Happy New Year, Meg." "A happy wedding!" "Many of 'em," and the Drum stepped forward and said —

"Trotty Veck, it's got about that your daughter is to be married to-morrow. And there ain't a soul that knows you both that don't wish you both all the happiness the New Year can bring. And here we are, to play it in and dance it in accordingly." Then Mrs. Chickenstalker came in (a good-humored, comely woman, who, to the delight of all, turned out to be the friend of Lilian's mother for whom Will Fern had come to look), to wish Meg joy, and then the music struck up, and Trotty, making Meg and Richard second couple, led off Mrs. Chickenstalker down the dance, and danced it in a step unknown before or since, founded on his own peculiar trot.

TINY TIM

THERE was once a man who did not like Christmas. His name was Scrooge, and he was a hard sour-tempered man of business, intent only on saving and making money, and caring nothing for anyone. He paid the poor, hard-working clerk in his office as little as he could possibly get the work done for, and lived on as little as possible himself, alone, in two dismal rooms. He was never merry or comfortable, or happy, and he hated other people to be so, and that was the reason why he hated Christmas, because people will be happy at Christmas, you know, if they possibly can.

Well, it was Christmas eve, a very cold and foggy one, and Mr. Scrooge, having given his poor clerk unwilling permission to spend Christmas day at home, locked up his office and went home himself in a very bad temper. After having taken some gruel as he sat over a miserable fire in his dismal room, he got into bed, and had some wonderful and disagreeable dreams, to which we will leave him, whilst we see how Tiny Tim, the son of his poor clerk, spent Christmas day.

The name of this clerk was Bob Cratchet. He had a wife and five other children beside Tim, who was a weak and delicate little cripple, gentle and patient and loving, with a sweet face of his own, which no one could help looking at.

It was Mr. Cratchet's delight to carry his little boy out on his shoulder to see the shops and the people; and to-day he had taken him to church for the first time.

"Whatever has got your precious father, and your brother Tiny Tim!" exclaimed Mrs. Cratchet, "here's dinner all ready to be dished up. I've never known him so late on Christmas day before."

"Here he is, mother!" cried Belinda, and "here he is!" cried the other children, as Mr. Cratchet came in, his long comforter hanging three feet from under his threadbare coat; for cold as it was the poor clerk had no top-coat. Tiny Tim was perched on his father's shoulder.

"And how did Tim behave?" asked Mrs. Cratchet.

"As good as gold and better," replied his father. "He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people in church, who saw he was a cripple, would be pleased to remember on Christmas day who it was who made the lame to walk."

"Bless his sweet heart!" said the mother in a trembling voice.

Dinner was waiting to be dished up. Mrs. Cratchet proudly placed a goose upon the table. Belinda brought in the apple sauce, and Peter the mashed potatoes; the other children set chairs, Tim's as usual close to his father's; and Tim was so excited that he rapped the table with his knife, and carried "Hurrah." After the goose came the pudding, all ablaze, with its sprig of holly in the middle, and was eaten to the last morsel; then apples and oranges were set upon the table, and a shovelful of chestnuts on the fire, and Mr. Cratchet served round some hot sweet stuff out of a jug as they closed round the fire, and said, "A Merry Christmas to us all, my dears, God bless us." "God bless us, every one," echoed Tiny Tim, and then they drank each other's health, and Mr. Scrooge's health, and told stories and sang songs.

Now in one of Mr. Scrooge's dreams on Christmas eve a Christmas spirit showed him his clerk's home; he saw them all, heard them drink his health, and he took special note of Tiny Tim himself.

How Mr. Scrooge spent Christmas day we do not know; but on Christmas night he had more dreams, and the spirit took him again to his clerk's poor home.

Upstairs, the father, with his face hidden in his hands, sat beside a little bed, on which lay a tiny figure, white and still. "Tiny Tim died because his father was too poor to give him what was necessary to make him well; *you* kept him poor," said the dream-spirit to Mr. Scrooge. The father kissed the cold, little face on the bed, and went down-stairs, where the sprays of holly still remained about the humble room; and taking his hat, went out, with a wistful glance at the little

crutch in the corner as he shut the door. Mr. Scrooge saw all this, but, wonderful to relate, he woke the next morning feeling as he had never felt in his life before.

"Why, I am as light as a feather, and as happy as an angel, and as merry as a schoolboy," he said to himself. "I hope everybody had a merry Christmas, and here's a happy New Year to all the world."

Poor Bob Cratchet crept into the office a few minutes late, expecting to be scolded for it, but his master was there with his back to a good fire, and actually smiling, and he shook hands with his clerk, telling him heartily he was going to raise his salary, and asking quite affectionately after Tiny Tim! "And mind you make up a good fire in your room before you set to work, Bob," he said, as he closed his own door.

Bob could hardly believe his eyes and ears, but it was all true. Such doings as they had on New Year's day had never been seen before in the Cratchet's home, nor such a turkey as Mr. Scrooge sent them for dinner. Tiny Tim had his share too, for Tiny Tim did not die, not a bit of it. Mr. Scrooge was a second father to him from that day, he wanted for nothing, and grew up strong and hearty. Mr. Scrooge loved him, and well he might, for was it not Tiny Tim who had unconsciously, through the Christmas dream-spirit, touched his hard heart, and caused him to become a good and happy man?

LITTLE DOMBEY

LITTLE DOMBEY was the son of a rich city merchant, a cold, stern, and pompous man, whose life and interests were entirely absorbed in his business. He was so desirous of having a son to associate with himself in the business, and make the house once more Dombey & Son in fact, as it was in name, that the little boy who was at last born to him was eagerly welcomed.

There was a pretty little girl six years old, but her father had taken little notice of her. Of what use was a girl to Dombey & Son? She could not go into the business.

Little Dombey's mother died when he was born, but the event did not greatly disturb Mr. Dombey; and since his son lived, what did it matter to him that his little daughter Florence was breaking her heart in loneliness for the mother who had loved and cherished her!

During the first few months of his life, little Dombey grew and flourished; and as soon as he was old enough to take notice, there was no one he loved so well as his sister Florence.

In due time the baby was taken to church, and baptized by the name of Paul (his father's name). A grand and stately christening it was, followed by a grand and stately feast; and little Paul was declared by his godmother to be "an angel, and the perfect picture of his own papa."

But from that time Paul seemed to waste and pine; his healthy and thriving babyhood had received a check, and as for illnesses, "There never was a blessed dear so put upon," his nurse said.

By the time he was five years old, though he had the prettiest, sweetest little face in the world, there was always a patient, wistful look upon it, and he was thin and tiny and delicate. He soon got tired, and had such old-fashioned ways of speaking and doing things, that his nurse often shook her head sadly over him.

When he sat in his little arm-chair with his father, after dinner, they were a strange pair, – so like, and so unlike each other.

"What is money, papa?" asked Paul on one of these occasions, crossing his tiny arms as well as he could – just as his father's were crossed.

"Why, gold, silver and copper; you know what it is well enough, Paul," answered his father.

"Oh yes; I mean, what can money do?"

"Anything, everything – almost," replied Mr. Dombey, taking one of his son's wee hands.

Paul drew his hand gently away. "It didn't save me my mamma, and it can't make me strong and big," said he.

"Why, you *are* strong and big, as big as such little people usually are," returned Mr. Dombey.

"No," replied Paul, sighing; "when Florence was as little as me, she was strong and tall, and did not get tired of playing as I do. I am so tired sometimes, papa."

Mr. Dombey's anxiety was aroused, and the doctor was sent for to examine Paul.

"The child is hardly so stout as we could wish," said the doctor; "his mind is too big for his body, he thinks too much – let him try sea air – sea air does wonders for children."

So it was arranged that Florence, Paul, and nurse should go to Brighton, and stay in the house of a lady named Mrs. Pipchin, who kept a very select boarding-house for children.

There is no doubt that, apart from his importance to the house of Dombey & Son, little Paul had crept into his father's heart, cold though it still was towards his daughter, colder than ever now, for there was in it a sort of unacknowledged jealousy of the warm love lavished on her by Paul, which he himself was unable to win.

Mrs. Pipchin was a marvellously ugly old lady, with a hook nose and stern cold eyes.

"Well, Master Paul, how do you think you will like me?" said Mrs. Pipchin, seeing the child intently regarding her.

"I don't think I shall like you at all," replied Paul, shaking his head. "I want to go away. I do not like your house."

Paul did not like Mrs. Pipchin, but he would sit in his arm-chair and look at her. Her ugliness seemed to fascinate him.

As the weeks went by little Paul grew more healthy-looking, but he did not seem any stronger, and could not run about out of doors. A little carriage was therefore got for him, in which he could be wheeled down to the beach, where he would pass the greater part of the day. He took a great fancy to a queer crab-faced old man, smelling of sea-weed, who wheeled his carriage, and held long conversations with him; but Florence was the only child companion whom he ever cared to have with him, though he liked to watch other children playing in the distance.

"I love you, Floy," he said one day to her.

Florence laid her head against his pillow, and whispered how much stronger he was growing.

"Oh, yes, I know, I am a great deal better," said Paul, "a very great deal better. Listen, Floy; what is it the sea keeps saying?"

"Nothing, dear, it is only the rolling of the waves you hear."

"Yes, but they are always saying something, and always the same thing. What place is over there, Floy?"

She told him there was another country opposite, but Paul said he did not mean that, he meant somewhere much farther away, oh, much farther away – and often he would break off in the midst of their talk to listen to the sea and gaze out towards that country "farther away."

After having lived at Brighton for a year, Paul was certainly much stronger, though still thin and delicate. And on one of his weekly visits, Mr. Dombey explained to Mrs. Pipchin, with pompous condescension, that Paul's weak health having kept him back in his studies, he had made arrangements to place him at the educational establishment of Dr. Blimber, which was close by. Florence was, for the present, to remain under Mrs. Pipchin's care, and see her brother every week.

Dr. Blimber's school was a great hot-house for the forcing of boy's brains; and Dr. Blimber promised speedily to make a man of Paul.

"Shall you like to be made a man of, my son?" asked Mr. Dombey.

"I'd rather be a child and stay with Floy," answered Paul.

Miss Blimber, the doctor's daughter, a learned lady in spectacles, was his special tutor, and from morning till night his poor little brains were forced and crammed till his head was heavy and always had a dull ache in it, and his small legs grew weak again – every day he looked a little thinner and a little paler, and became more old-fashioned than ever in his looks and ways – "old-fashioned" was a distinguishing title which clung to him. He was gentle and polite to every one – always looking out for small kindnesses which he might do to any inmate of the house. "The oddest and most old-fashioned child in the world," Dr. Blimber would say to his daughter; "but bring him on, Cornelia – bring him on."

And Cornelia did bring him on; and Florence, seeing how pale and weary the little fellow looked when he came to her on Saturdays, and how he could not rest from anxiety about his lessons, would lighten his labors a little, and ease his mind by helping him to prepare his week's work. But one day, when his lessons were over, little Paul laid his weary and aching head against the knee of a schoolfellow of whom he was very fond; and the first thing he noticed when he opened his eyes was that the window was open, his face and hair were wet with water, and that Dr. Blimber and the usher were both standing looking at him.

"Ah, that's well," said Dr. Blimber, as Paul opened his eyes, "and how is my little friend now?"

"Oh, quite well, thank you, sir," answered Paul, but when he got up there seemed something the matter with the floor, and the walls were dancing about, and Dr. Blimber's head was twice its natural size. He was put to bed, and presently the doctor came and said he was not to do any more lessons for the present.

In a few days Paul was able to get up and creep about the house. He wondered sometimes why every one looked at and spoke so very kindly to him, and was more than ever careful to do

any little kindnesses he could think of for them: even the rough, ugly dog Diogenes, who lived in the yard, came in for a share of his attentions.

There was a party at Dr. Blimber's on the evening before the boys went home. Paul sat in a corner of the sofa all the evening, and every one was very kind to him indeed, it was quite extraordinary, Paul thought, and he was very happy; he liked to see how pretty Florence was, and how every one admired and wished to dance with her. After resting for a night at Mrs. Pipchin's house, little Paul went home, and was carried straight upstairs to his bed.

He lay in his bed day after day quite happily and patiently, content to watch and talk to Florence. He would tell her his dreams, and how he always saw the sunlit ripples of a river rolling, rolling fast in front of him; sometimes he seemed to be rocking in a little boat on the water, and its motion lulled him to rest, and then he would be floating away, away to that shore farther off, which he could not see. One day he told Florence that the water was rippling brighter and faster than ever, and that he could not see anything else.

"My own boy, cannot you see your poor father?" said Mr. Dombey, bending over him.

"Oh yes, but don't be so sorry, dear papa. I am so happy, – good-bye, dear papa." Presently he opened his eyes again, and said, "Floy, mamma is like you, I can see her. Come close to me, Floy, and tell them," whispered the dying boy, "that the face of the picture of Christ on the staircase at school is not divine enough; the light from it is shining on me now, and the water is shining too, and rippling so fast, so fast."

The evening light shone into the room, but little Paul's spirit had gone out on the rippling water, and the Divine Face was shining on him from the farther shore.

THE RUNAWAY COUPLE

"SUPPOSING a young gentleman not eight years old was to run away with a fine young woman of seven, would you consider that a queer start? That there is a start as I – the boots at the Holly-Tree Inn – have seen with my own eyes; and I cleaned the shoes they ran away in, and they was so little that I couldn't get my hand into 'em.

"Master Harry Walmers's father, he lived at the Elms, away by Shooter's Hill, six or seven miles from London. He was uncommon proud of Master Harry, as was his only child; but he didn't spoil him neither. He was a gentleman that had a will of his own, and an eye of his own, and that would be minded. Consequently, though he made quite a companion of the fine bright boy, still he kept the command over him, and the child *was* a child. I was under gardener there at that time I and one morning Master Harry, he comes to me and says —

"Cobbs, how should you spell Norah, if you were asked?' and he took out his little knife and began cutting that name in print all over the fence. The next day as it might be, he stops, along with Miss Norah, where I was hoeing weeds in the gravel, and says, speaking up —

"Cobbs, I like you! Why do I like you do you think, Cobbs? Because Norah likes you.'

"Indeed, sir,' says I. 'That's very gratifying.'

"Gratifying, Cobbs?' says Master Harry. 'It's better than a million of the brightest diamonds, to be liked by Norah. You're going away ain't you, Cobbs? Then you shall be our head gardener when we're married.' And he tucks her, in her little sky-blue mantle, under his arm, and walks away.

"I was the boots at this identical Holly-Tree Inn when one summer afternoon the coach drives up, and out of the coach gets these two children. The young gentleman gets out; hands his lady out; gives the guard something for himself; says to my governor, the landlord: 'We're to stop here to-night, please. Sitting room and two bed-rooms will be required. Mutton chops and cherry pudding for two!' and tucks her under his arm, and walks into the house, much bolder than brass.

"I had seen 'em without their seeing me, and I gave the governor my views of the expedition they was upon. 'Cobbs,' says the governor, 'if this is so, I must set off myself and quiet their friends' minds. In which case you must keep your eye upon 'em, and humor 'em, until I come back. But before I take these measures, Cobbs, I should wish you to find out from themselves whether your opinion is correct.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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