



Stephen Paul Song...

Free Gift

Ferretus & The Ghostly Goose

A Christmas Story

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First Edition

To Kichan for indulging me.

To Leigh who made Christmas.



The December wind in London does not howl. It screams as it rips through the coats and bones of folks dashing to and fro and occasionally hither and thither if they can manage it. It feels bitterer than a triple-filtered Jamaican Blue Mountain Coffee with added strychnine, but it also comes with a generous helping of glamour as lights; candles and garlands fill every window, shelf and pantry. If you were in any danger of forgetting it was the festive season, the women of the Matron's League Christian Song wing roamed the streets like some terrifying tribe of warbling moral Amazonian warriors screeching about mangers, kings and ancient stinky oils. In short, it is Yule and you'll get through it, worry not.

Calling the coughing, hobbling urchins seem frivolous at any other time of year, but their slow freezing demise seems to almost be an essential part of the season. Young Shabby Rickets currently slouched in front of Bonemonger's Bonnets was doing his best and humming 'Silent Night' in between hacking his lungs up. Occasionally, a philanthropic gentleman or wealthy lady temporarily buoyed up by her purchase of an extravagant bonnet would drop a penny into his begging bowl, buying him approximately three extra hours of life.

It was into this snowy, blustery lane that a teenage boy, no more than 13 came striding. He inhabited a different dimension to Shabby in that he was well fed, tall and dressed in sensible seasonal clothing of a suit, sturdy boots, a thick woolen dress jacket, top hat, gloves and cane for gouging through the snow and keeping distance from disease-carrying street people. Ferretus de Setterly was not by nature a mean-spirited rich boy who cared nothing for the needy of the world. His family sponsored the St. Glop's Hospice for the Terminally Moribund and were happy to provide respite for the pathetically poor. They just didn't particularly enjoy being near them or their ailments.

He strode past Shabby and accidentally knocked his bowl over scattering the pitiful collection of coins into the snow, but he didn't even notice. His intended destination lay around the corner and it was to here he hurried. Fiddle Groin Street seemed to be on fire; every shop window was blazing with an intensity that lured all shoppers to them like moths. This famous arcade contained everything possibly needed for a truly opulent Christmas. The smell of steaming plum puddings and roasted birds mingled in the lane where tiny well-dressed tots pressed their noses up at the windows, imploring their harried mothers to take them in. Most of the women were more inclined to enter Monsieur BeauCul's House of Chocolate Heaven and dragged them screaming across the alley.

Ferretus walked briskly past them all resisting the urge to spend all his money in Mrs Jockstrap's Candy Shop and arrived at his destination, Baron Flapp's Toys, Games and Doings. His eyes lit up as he saw through the festooned window. The contraptions, gadgets and thingamabobs many of which would soon be his. He opened the door and stepped inside. Almost at once, he was enveloped by the hearty throaty boom that was the Baron's laugh. It embraced Ferretus in its hop-like qualities, and he smiled as the large jolly Austrian bounded across the floor at him. He was almost entirely round and had far more chins than face, a bald head with tufts of bright orange hair and dressed in a tight fitting red suit with enormous flapping tails behind him. He greeted Ferretus, his best customer, enthusiastically.

'Dear dear boy! How haff you being do? Heppy Heppy Kissimass!'

The smell of beer was by now overpowering, but Ferretus had been raised to be as polite as a nun who accidentally walked in on the monk's bath time, and he grasped the Baron by his elbows.

'Very well, sir', he squeaked. 'And a wonderful Weihnachten to you. Have you been busy?'

'Oh, very very', he laughed again. 'And this is hensing all the beer, patrons so generosity. Now, how am I helping you?' he said as he staggered slightly towards the model trains. Ferretus took in the displays and his heart leapt as he looked for his latest treasure. The train sets were always fun, but his sister had threatened to start stomping on the trains if the track he had set up got anywhere near her bedroom door. It already snaked up the stairs and his mother's cat Flobert refused to leave the attic if she heard the toot and whistle. He moved on to look at the toy soldiers. He had most of a light infantry. The newly painted Wellington seemed very slick, but there was no Napoleon to stack him against. *Maybe he could use Flobert for that*, he thought to himself. The birds of paradise flying models were spectacular however, and he pointed one out to the Baron.

'Please may I look at that one?' he indicated to a green and gold painted bird with enormous wings and real plumage.

'Oh Vunderbar! Yes they are being so pretty. Well you must haf one!'

He dragged a small set of stepladders directly underneath the toy and attempted to climb up, but kept missing the first step as the equilibrium of his inner ears combined with the beer to make looking up and remaining upright somewhat impossible. Ferretus took his wrist.

‘Allow me, sir’, he smiled up at him, and the baron gratefully accepted and stood aside, landing heavily on a chair.

Once Ferretus had unhooked the bird, he sat admiring it. The attention to detail was astonishing with gold filigree outlining the eyes, and when you pushed a lever on its back, the wings flapped up and down. It was exquisitely beautiful and would look superb hanging in his bedroom at home. He had made his mind up.

‘I’ll take it!’ he announced to a suddenly startled Baron Flapps, who had fallen asleep leaning back in the chair, and made a noise like a drain being unblocked.

‘Vas? Vas? Oh yah, good good, excellent choice!’ and he launched himself in the direction of the counter to attempt to wrap it for Ferretus, but instead only managed to shove handfuls of tissue paper in a bag on which the toy rested. After wishing him another happy Christmas and convincing the drunken shopkeeper to lock up the shop for the night, Ferretus walked back into the chill air thrilled with his purchase and feeling the bite of the air decided to hurry home. There was one stop, however, he needed to make. Having spent most of his money on his own gift, he thought he probably should get something for his family as well – spirit of the season and all that. Looking down at the few coins remaining in his hand, he didn’t have many choices. He passed a feebly coughing Shabby and for a moment thought about donating to him, but then the image of his sister, her arms folded in anger at the absence of a present after presenting him with a homemade piece of art or craft changed his mind and he strolled into Monsieur BeauCul’s instead to pick up some champagne truffle fancies. It would have to do.

Outside in the lane, Shabby leaned against a butcher’s window where even though no warmth came from it, he could imagine the heat from the recently cooked goose that lay cooling just inches from his nose. He would walk in but they would simply throw him out for being poor and pathetic before they closed up and went to church to sing about how man should love and take care of each other. He had felt the door open on the other side of the lane, and the young man from before who had knocked his bowl over emerged throwing greetings over his shoulder. They were the same age but may as well have lived in foreign countries. He turned once more to look at the goose as what remaining strength he had left ebbed away against the glass and he slumped to the floor breathing his last.

The lights in Beagle Place were burning bright as Ferretus walked up the garden path and the smell of sherry and pudding was almost overwhelming. He realised he had neglected to pick up his key when he had gone out and knocked upon the door. He could hear the piano being played badly from the drawing room, which meant his sister was having a stab at 'Once in Royal David's City'. The door was flung open.

'I 'av told you to stop bothering us 'ere with your malignant warblings! Now move on 'fore I..' Mrs Goblite suddenly stopped midswing with the rolling pin she was holding aloft when she saw who it was.

'Oh me apologies, young master Ferretus, but we 'ave been plagued by ruddy wassailers all evening and, what, with my mincemeat pies at a most crucial stage, I am at the end of my plum pudding', she finished with a dramatic gurn.

Keen to get in out of the cold, Ferretus held his hands up in deference 'No problem, Mrs Goblite. Shall we go in?;

His mother had been at the sherry followed by the box of decorations, and some terrible explosion had occurred whereby paper chains and candles were scattered about the house but without any planning. It was such a precious time between his sister and mother that he and his father Stroatly never dared interfere. He hurried to hang his coat and attempted to duck up the stairs and into his bedroom, but a voice called across the hall to stop him.

'Ferret, where and what have you been doing?'

Doducestra stood in the doorway to the drawing room looking imperious. He turned to face his older sister who he knew was desperate for some juicy tidbit to take back to their parents and opted instead for truth.

'Christmas present shopping', he replied.

She eyed his packets. 'For yourself or the family?' she asked suspiciously.

'For the family, of course. Now, let me go and wrap them', and he started to climb the stairs. A figure, in a dense tartan dress with a hoop skirt that seemed to have its own gravity, stumbled out of the drawing room. Doducestra grabbed her mother by the waist to stop her tripping over. She hiccupped.

‘Ferret..come in here at once and admire the tree. It’s taken me hours to do’, she slurred. Doducestra smiled maliciously as Ferret placed his package on the stairs and walked into the dining room with this mother and sister. His father was at the top of a long ladder with Cringemore the butler, holding it as steady as his arthritic joints could manage. They had gone overboard with the tree again; although the drawing room was an impressive height, the girth of the tree nearly filled the room. Every time it shook, as his father cursed another failed attempt to place the star, a rain of needles would cascade down.

‘Nearly, my darling!’ called his mother in encouragement as another glass of sherry miraculously appeared in her hand.

Ferretus rolled his eyes at his sister and mouthed, ‘Tartan?’

The tree was certainly of a Hibernian theme; the baubles were clan MacDonald and ribbons in variations of McCullum and Hootney ran like rivers around the tree. Red and white-striped candles angled as far away from igniting the tree as possible numbered in the hundreds but the real revelation was the tinsel. *How on earth could they make tartan tinsel?* he thought.

Deciding to make a kamikaze run at it, Stoahtly launched himself forward and slammed the star on the top most spur. It listed dangerously to the left but remained in place.

‘Glooooooooooooooooooooooria.....’ screeched his mother so loudly and unexpectedly, Cringemore nearly fell to the floor.

‘Mummy, that’s enough sherry I think’, called Doducestra to her mother over her piercing aria, but she was already moving onto Hark the Herald Angels sing when Stoahtly arrived red-faced and flushed at the bottom of the ladder.

‘Elderflower, darling, save your voice for church in the morning’, he said.

Her voice trailed off and as one the family stood and admired the tree, which if not classy or beautiful, was certainly impressive.

‘Will the family be having drinks and nibbles in the dining room or remain here?’ asked Cringemore.

‘Oh, I think here’, replied Stoahtly. ‘I don’t think Mrs de Setterly can take her eyes off the tree’.

Ferretus sighed. 'May I be excused? There is something I need to do'.

'What is more important than spending time with your family on Christmas Eve?'

'Yes Ferret. Do tell', his sister chimed in.

Ferretus, however, was an adolescent boy and did what all boys do when they can't get their way ran out of the room, grabbed his package and ran up the stairs.

'You will go to church in the morning, my boy!' roared his father after him.

Ferretus locked the bedroom door and rushed to his desk to admire his purchases again. The feathers were a little crumpled, but they would stretch out nicely when hung. He stood on the chair and attached the long strings to the ceiling then sat back on the bed to admire it. Kinetic momentum was causing the long wooden wings to slowly flap up and down and the head bobbed from left to right. Reaching into the second bag, he popped one of the chocolate truffles into his mouth. *Delicious*. The door knob was tried several times.

'Ferret? Ferret! I know you're not sleeping. Father says you're to come downstairs for mulled wine and mingling immediately. He says you're upsetting mother by not joining in'.

He ignored her and kept on chewing as he stared up at his new favourite purchase. He knew he could never trust his family to buy him anything so exquisite, so spending the money he had been given to buy their presents was the kindest thing he could have done.

'Ferret! You're being really selfish. Come downstairs now!'

He listened to her stomp away and down the stairs. *Poor sister. She would never understand him, nor did the rest of his family*, he thought, connecting him to every single teenager throughout history. They were rich. It was Christmas. It would come again and again. Just be happy with what you've got. The warmth of the room and the flapping of the toy wooden bird created a slightly hypnotic effect and before long, he fell backwards onto the bed into a snooze.

He awoke to a room full of long sinister shadows and dark corners. The embers were dying in the fireplace, and he realised he was still fully dressed. *Might as well just crawl under the covers like this*, he thought. *Saves getting changed for breakfast*. He started to pull the blanket over him and wriggle up the bed when he caught site of the outline of the wooden toy

bird still flapping away quite vigorously as though caught in a breeze. *How odd. Baron Flapp must have created a new momentum device. hHow clever.* He made a note to ask him the next time he went in. It was only as he gazed longer at the toy did he grasp how much bigger it looked. He had carried it home in a paper bag, but now it looked larger than a duck. Actually, the body seemed somewhat round and fat. He immediately suspected his sister. She had probably found the key, let herself in and damaged it. *Oh she would pay for that.* Angry and awake he fumbled for a match on the bed side table and lit a candle. He stood up and held the light up to the ceiling.

'HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKK!'

Ferretus fell backwards over the bed and felt hot wax burn his hand and snuff out the flame. He sat shivering and paralysed. *What on earth had made that din? It couldn't have been the toy even the most intelligent of contemporary designs could only produce a squeak.* He was tired. It must have been the champagne in the truffles. Perhaps, the milk in them had gone sour and he was imagining things. *Yes, that was it. Pull yourself together, boy.* Finding another match, he relit the candle and kneeled by the bed where he came face-to-face with an ethereal, translucent green goose.

'HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONNNNNKKKKKKKKKK!' it cried again.

Ferretus thought he would pass out. A ghost of a goose was sitting on his bed. *It's the madhouse for me then,* he thought.

'HOOONL.....ghur....ghur....yak....yak...blublubbluh'. The vision seemed to be choking and was violently stretching and contracting where its neck once was. Finally, it threw up an ephemeral blob of something, which vanished into thin air. It turned to look at Ferretus.

'Why on earth would they shove the stuffing down your neck? Barbary, I calls it'.

The goose was now speaking. Ferretus, however, was a de Setterly. They had travelled the world and been exposed to every kind of culture and calamity. Diplomacy was in his veins.

'Are you feeling better now?' he asked in the smallest of voices. *'Could I bring you a glass of water?'*

The goose fixed him an odd stare. *'I would say it's a little late for that, what, with being dead an' all'*.

There were a few moments where they just stared at one another and nothing was said. Occasionally, the goose would preen an imaginary feather and then simply stare again.

‘Erm’, began Ferretus. ‘How exactly may I help you, Mr...erm...Goose?’

The goose threw back its head and laughed like treacle through a brick.

‘Help me, Master de Setterly? No it’s me who’s here to help you. You see...’

Without warning, the goose flew into the air and grew to ten times its original size. Its great wings flapping and beating. Ferretus yelped and ran for the door, but one casual flick of the wing, and he was launched back onto the bed. Its long neck and sharp beak came down to face Ferretus. Its voice now was old, deep and louder than a thunderclap.

‘YOU ARE A SELFISH CHILD, FERRETUS DE SETTERLY. YOU WILL GROW TO BE AN INSULAR CORRUPT MAN IF YOU DO NOT CHANGE YOUR WAYS. YOUR FAMILY HOLDS THE KEY TO GREATNESS AND JUSTICE AND SO IT WILL REACH ITS ZENITH UNDER YOU. CHANGE! SHOW KINDNESS, POLITENESS, MERCY AND CHARITY OR NOUGHT BUT THE GATES OF HELL AWAIT YOU!!!!!!!!!!!!!’

It dragged out this last note, causing Ferretus to bury his head under the pillow whimpering like a kicked puppy.

‘Bleuh. Damn, there’s always more’.

Ferretus slowly lifted the pillow and saw the goose had returned to its regular size and was blinking up at him.

‘Ready to go?’ it asked him.

Ferretus sat up clutching the pillow like a shield. ‘Ready to go where?’ he asked trepidatiously.

‘For a bit of education. The powers that be have sent me here to guide you to a better understanding, so let’s be having you. Shouldn’t take all night’.

Ferretus pointed to the space above the bed.

‘So what the bloody hell was that all about?’ he demanded.

The goose chuckled again. ‘Theatrics. Give the punter a bit of a scare. It’s all in the manual now. Chop-chop. Let’s get to it. The goose hopped off the bed and waddled over to the door which began to glow with green flames.

Ferretus discerned the vision wasn’t going to go away any time soon and reluctantly walked slowly over to the door. It was cold to the touch and his hand went straight through. He looked down at the encouraging goose.

‘Do you have a name? I don’t want to keep calling you Mr Goose’.

The goose seemed to have a think and then replied, ‘Well, in life I was known as Shabby, so why don’t we use that?’ And he walked through the closed door.

Ferretus took a deep breath, gulped and followed him through.

It was bright and sunny, and judging by how warm it felt, it must have been summer. The clack of balls against wickets suggested cricket, and the tinkling of crockery meant a picnic was taking place. He was in the garden of his house. He must have closed his eyes going through the strange door and reluctantly opened them. It was a lovely almost Constable painting, level of English quaintness, as Ferretus tried to understand the purpose of what he was seeing. There was his mother doling out tasteless cucumber sandwiches that required dunking in mustard for flavor to extended members of the family, who would descend on London each summer to get their fill of town life. Aunt Belstrude was arguing with Uncle Hamsteran about which wine went best with cow tongue. His sister and father were engaged in a heated game of cricket with various male relatives furious at her obvious superiority in the game as she bowled over and under with the same finality.

Ferretus looked around to find Shabby the goose who no less unearthly was hovering just above the small stream that ran past the end of the garden.

‘Sorry’, he croaked. ‘Seems to be some sort of forced of habit’. He floated over to join Ferretus who made a noise like a horse and put his hands on his hips.

‘Why are we here? This is just a normal family summer day’, he scoffed.

‘Is it?’ replied Shabby. ‘So pray, tell me where you are?’

Ferretus glanced around the garden. Everywhere family members, some happy, some angry, some just happy to be there, were interacting, but of the younger Ferretus, there was no sign.

‘I...I don’t know’.

Shabby suddenly raised a wing and with a cry of surprise, they lifted off the ground and were yanked up and through the walls and into a familiar looking bedroom. Ferretus had the shock of looking at himself no more than two years previously, sitting at the foot of his bed feasting on apples he had scumped from Lord Lointotty’s orchard down the road. He had a pang of memory where his sister had shown him how to grab a few apples from the road using the lattice as a climbing frame. He went back and took every available apple and sat scoffing them until he became quite ill, finally passing out on his bedroom floor as the fruit slowly digested in his stomach. Doducestra had come home crying when she realised there were no more, and her parents couldn’t understand why she was so upset.

Ferretus scoffed. ‘They were just apples. Heavens, we always have so many in the house. Why should these ones matter?’

Shabby clucked up at him. ‘She didn’t eat them herself!’ She took them in a basket to St. Whithergusset’s Home for poor orphaned children. It was the only vitamins they got sometimes. Instead, that week she stole all the apples from the house to take and got into terrible trouble with your mother. You didn’t even notice’.

Ferretus folded his arms in defiance and adopted a haughty stance.

‘Well then, they still got apples. What is the big deal?’

Shabby knew he had his work cut out with this one and needed more shock value. He leapt causing Ferretus to yell but as soon as they contacted, they were transported. Ferretus found himself being ripped through space and time, the turrets of London wheeling past in a blur until they landed with a heavy thump in front of an imposing looking institution. Dark turrets rose to the sky and a heavy iron gate stretched out left and right and seemed to go on forever. This was not a happy place to be. Shabby pointed a wing up at the sign nailed to the gate.

St. Painful’s Workhouse For The Hopelessly Poor

It rang no bells at all but the damn goose was already floating through the gates and into the building beyond as the snow began falling. Inside, it was as inviting as an asylum and with all the charm of an abattoir. The brown walls and concrete floors were littered with doors beyond which moans and groans emanated from some poor cursed souls. Occasionally, harassed looking nurses with sweaty brows and ripped dresses would rush in to administer medication. Ferretus found himself wrinkling his nose at the whole thing.

‘So quick to dismiss it all are you?’ scolded Shabby.

Ferret replied with disdain. ‘Why am I here? This is nothing to do with me’.

Shabby attempted to peck maliciously at him, which was hard with a non-existent beak and clucked at him to go towards a large set of double doors directly ahead of them. Holding his nose, he put his hand out which naturally went straight through, and he found himself in a large hall with high ceilings. Long wooden tables stretched from wall to wall, where at the far end, doors to a kitchen stood and running horizontally were several large trellis tables covered in metal pans. There was a great deal of banging and clattering coming from the kitchens.

‘What am I supposed to be seeing?’ asked Ferretus.

‘Just wait and see’, chided Shabby. ‘Oh, here they come now’.

The door they had come through burst open, and men and women in pajamas made of some awful hessian material and wild looks in their eyes wandered in holding metal bowls, and for those without the sense to walk by themselves were helped by tired looking nurses who placed them at one of the long tables and joined the others in the long queue now forming in front of the top counter. It was quite a pathetic scene.

‘Look. How much longer do we...?’ he began but Shabby waved him into silence and pointed his wing at the kitchen doors.

Coming through them, struggling under the weight of the trays of food he was carrying came his father Stoa followed by his mother and sister carrying tureens of soup between them. They placed all this on the table while shouting greetings to the patients in front of them. Suddenly, through the door came his Uncle Marmoset, his mother’s sister Blistora and his cousins Fenwick and Prattley— all carrying baskets of bread or flagons of beer. They set up a

human chain of servers as the line full of hungry, eager people tussled to get to the feast. It was an enormous task but amazingly, they seemed to be enjoying themselves, laughing and greeting and occasionally bursting into song, which he suspected was fueled by sherry on his mother's part. He was confused he didn't remember them ever mentioning this.

'When did they do this?' he asked the goose.

'We are watching this in real time, Ferretus de Setterly. It's where they are now. It's where they come every year. Your sister has been helping out since she was eight. I believe your father has given up on asking you, but every year your sister comes to your room and you simply ignore her'.

Ferretus attempted to feel wounded pride but felt nothing but pity that he knew nothing of what his family did on Christmas eve as he hadn't actually spent it with them for some years now. His ears were beginning to burn a little bit.

'Well, who pays for it all?' he asked.

Shabby fluttered up onto a table and gave him the haughtiest stare a member of the poultry family could. 'They do. They donate their money, their time and their service. Never wondered why they always look so exhausted on Christmas morning as you're tearing into your presents. They've sometimes only had a few hours rest. It's incredible to me that somebody as ruthlessly selfish as yourself could have family like this!'

Ferretus rose to it. 'How dare you! Who do you think you're talking to you malodorous mallard?'

He hit the floor and cowered in fear as Shabby grew to an even more terrible size, filling the entire hall his wings flapping like giant sails as the head threw itself back in anger and the beak descended upon him swallowing him whole.

The scream died in his throat as he realised he hadn't been munched or bitten. He dared to open his eyes and was shocked to find himself outside in the street. It was very dark, save for a few dim lights coming from corner gaslights, but most of the shops along the lane appeared to have closed. He stood slowly up and pulled his coat to him against the cold of the snowy streets. He also felt very alone.

‘Erm, Mr Goose, Shabby?’ he called softly to the shadows. There was no reply. He walked a few meters, expecting to see the apparition at any moment but none came. Only as he walked through a passageway did he realise where he was. Fiddle Groin Street. There along the way was the familiar sign of Baron Flapp’s Emporium. He exhaled gratefully. Oh yes, it was all so clear now. On his way home, he had stopped for some sweets at Monsieur BeauCul’s. One of the liquors must have been off, and he had passed out in the street and had wild dreams thanks to a bad piece of milk chocolate and somebody had stolen his purchases. All was well indeed and he laughed. As he recovered, he noticed a familiar glowing blue just a little farther down the lane. He walked slowly towards it, where it disappeared and in its place laid the body of a frozen boy no older than Ferretus. His glassy eyes fixed on the window wherein lay a cooling goose.

‘A pathetic life, spent poorly and without compassion’, said the ghost of Shabby behind him.

Ferretus was shocked to discover he was crying.

‘How can he just have died here? How did no one see him?’

‘You have walked past him countless times and never even noticed him there’.

‘But every one of these shopkeepers could have helped him, given him food, a warm place to stay. How could they just ignore him like this? It’s unbearable! Somebody should be punished!’ The hot tears were pouring down his face at the terrible injustice of it all.

‘Somebody was punished— *him*. For being born poor, for having both parents die when he was just a boy, for being thrown out of the hovel he called home by a greedy landlord, by the well-to-do ladies and gentleman on their way to church who pretended not to see him, to the teenage boy rushing for this latest toy. He was punished by you all’

Ferretus sat crying as the molten lava of shame spread through his veins.

‘I want to help....I want to help....I WANT TO HELP!!!!!’

Someone banged on the door and Ferretus woke up with a yell of surprise. He was in his bedroom and in his pajamas. His mother was calling in to him. ‘Ferret, breakfast time!’

He scrambled from the bed and collapsed on the floor as the bed sheets tangled around his feet.

‘Ferret? Are you well?’ called his mother with some alarm.

He stared wildly around and looked up to the ceiling no wooden toy bird was hanging there. He had learned the hard way that visions are rarely to be ignored and assumed that some malcontent would soon be coming his way if he didn’t interpret this correctly. He garnered what courage he could and called out.

‘I’ll be down in a moment. Do you need help with breakfast?’

There was a confused silence while Elderflower de Setterly processed this uncharacteristic request through the fog of a sherry hangover.

‘Well, I don’t but I’m sure Mrs Goblite wouldn’t mind a bit of a hand. Come on down!’

He heard her tottering away and down the stairs and ran over to the window, throwing it open to the cold air. He strained his eyes. *Yes, St. Witherflop’s Market was open across the river, which meant it was a trading day and not Christmas Day.* He threw on his clothes, giving his face the most cursory of washes in the cold water left by the staff and steamed out onto the landing. He collided with his sister who was carrying a huge amount of fabric, and she almost dropped it over the side onto the head of Mistress Goblite. Ferretus managed to yank it up in time and set about refolding it with her.

‘Dodu, what date is it today?’ he asked his incredulous sister, who was looking very suspiciously at him.

‘It’s Christmas Eve, of course’, she replied waiting for the punch line. He handed her the refolded fabric.

‘Wonderful, lots to do today then. What time do we go to the workhouse?’

He was drenched in positivity and helpfulness, which made it so out of character Doducestra actually backed away a little.

‘How do you know about that? You always ignore Father when he talks about charity work’.

Ferretus took her hand. She flinched then relaxed as she realized something was very different about her brother today. His face was missing the sneer and had been replaced by a warm smile and dare she think it, compassion? He pulled her to her feet and led her down the

stairs to the breakfast room where Mistress Goblite and Cringemore were laying the table and his mother and father were already seated and reading the papers.

‘Good morning, Father. Morning, Mother!’ he called and kissed each on the cheek who looked more alarmed than if a herd of wildebeest had swept through the dining room.

‘Thank you, Cringemore. Mistress Goblite, this all looks lovely’, he complimented as he tucked into some mushroom soup and toast as tea was poured for him.

They both bobbed a thank you and hurried away in case what he had was catching. Docucestra remained in the doorway exchanging looks with her parents. Their son had not sat down to breakfast for quite a few years and never this pleasantly.

‘Feeling okay, my dear?’ asked his mother.

Halfway between munches, he looked up enthusiasm radiating out like a fever.

‘Never better, Mother. I’m so excited it’s Christmas Eve. I have so much to do today, and I’m sure I won’t have time to do it all before tonight. What time do we decorate the tree?’

Docucestra had wandered over to stand by her mother.

‘After tea. We always have it ready before we head to St.Painful’s to man the kitchens’, she replied, still with a look of alarm on her face.

‘You’ll be joining us this year?’ asked his father.

‘Oh absolutely!’ cried Ferretus, leaping to this feet causing his collective family to lean back.

‘But right now, there are some very important things I need to do first’, and with a flourish and a bow he ran out into the hall, put on his nice coat and hat, took extra money from the bureau and headed out into the bracing December air.

His stunned family was quite lost.

His mother broke the silence. ‘Is it too early for a sherry?’

The doors to the House of Cladmistra Department Store were just opening as he got there. A hundred employees all rushed to aid him as best they could. He chose perfume for his sister, a beautiful shawl for his mother and a new chess board for his father. He requested them

wrapped and sent to his address and stopping in front of a delegation of the Matron's League, who were doing warm-up trills ready for an all-out assault on the shoppers' ears. He dropped some coins into their festive bucket and with a hearty 'Happy Christmas' sped out into the winter's morning again.

This next part was going to be tricky. He was searching the lanes and streets for a sign of Shabby but he realized, with shame, that he didn't remember at all what he looked like in human form. He also lamented how many young people there were out on the streets trying to shelter in doorways, begging for food or money huddling in little groups to try to coax some warmth into their emaciated frames. The burning guilt was spreading up his back and onto his neck. They all would have been here yesterday but in his hurry and greed to buy a new toy for himself, he hadn't even noticed them. There were too many. What would saving one child do?

He stopped to think for a minute as his head began to spin with the enormity of it all. He looked up and was surprised to see he was standing in front of St.Glop's Hospice. His family was the principal benefactor. A brilliant idea shot through his brain and he went inside at once to speak to the head nurse, Mrs Flaggardour, about a spot of festive charity work. She had been surprised but extremely practical and willing and within an hour, a ward had been set up in the east wing with comfy beds, toys and most importantly of all, roaring fires. Porters and caretakers led by Ferretus had poured out into the streets directed to bring the small, the cold, the elderly and the sick to the hospice and to be given a Christmas like no other.

Ferretus was then free to search for someone in particular. He racked his brains, which had been in a state of high fever since his twilight revelations, and tried to remember where he had seen Shabby last and then it came to him. Fiddle Groin Lane! He ran past the harried and harassed last minute shoppers of London, ignoring all the delicious and intoxicating smells coming from every doorway that screamed to his innate sense of total selfishness until he turned a familiar corner. There in front of Bonemonger's Bonnets huddled in the corner of the wall was the pathetic and shivering form of Shabby. How many times had Ferretus simply never looked down at the people on the streets? How often had he ran past in pursuit of some selfish acquisition? The pity that burned his neck was not for the plight of the poor but his guilt in not having done more to help. Well, that would change today.

Shabby's head was hanging low as he looked at the sad small change in his bowl, but then he suddenly felt warm. A thick snug woolen coat had been placed around his shoulders. He

looked up into the smiling face of a teenage boy who was holding his hand out and shivering somewhat without his coat.

‘May I help you?’ Ferretus asked.

Shabby was taken aback but also felt his lot was not to refuse and took his hand. Ferretus nearly jumped in fright at the glacial cold of Shabby’s skin but he kept smiling. It was imperative he remain jolly, positive and a source of warmth. He was aware that around him men and women in expensive bonnets and cravats were eyeing him with surprise and no small amount of disdain at his touching of a filthy street urchin, but Ferretus was past worrying about that. Slowly, he began leading the young man down the lane, pausing only very quickly to collect something, and took him onto the welcoming haven of St.Glots.

Christmas Eve turned out to be busier than any of them were expecting, but good work done well has many rewards. His family had stopped questioning the sudden transformation and were content to let their enthusiastic brother and son lead the way with the rest of the family continuing onto the workhouse. The beds of St.Glops were full with content children and elderly people enjoying the warmth of hospitality and even the strangled warbling of the Matron’s League Christmas Carol Marathon could not dent spirits. The de Setterlys had taken over the kitchens to prepare a worthy feast and ladled, mashed and stirred vats of potatoes and gravy. Ferretus appeared in the ward, carrying a large sack of toys he had bought from Baron Flapp’s along with boxes full of chocolate truffles. He distributed them with enormous jollity and took great pleasure in the happy tears filling the patients’ eyes. He arrived at Shabby’s bed, who though very ill was in a much better condition than he could have been. Ferretus sat on the edge of the bed and handed him an object wrapped in tissue paper.

‘Thank you’, said Shabby in a small voice. He pulled the tissue away to reveal a large wooden moving model of a bird of paradise with real green feathers. It was the most exquisite thing he had ever seen and he was left almost speechless. ‘...ng u...’ was all he could manage.

‘Happy Christmas’, and Ferretus patted him on the shoulder.

The doors banged open and Stroatly, Elderflower and Doducesta billowing clouds behind them came through pushing a large trolley loaded with dishes, bowls and steaming plates. They were harassed but happy as the children exploded with joy at what could possibly have been

their first hot meal in weeks. Doducestra produced a tower of metal bowls and utilising her natural matronly skills, blew on a whistle for the able children to line up to receive their food with almost military precision. His father Stroatly took delivery duty and doled out bowls of hot nourishing soup and bread rolls to the bed-bound, while his mother sang and filled plates. Ferretus stood for a moment and truly felt how he had been. What he had missed and what he had to look forward to. A life spent selfishly is rewarding only for a fleeting moment before the high disappears and the bitterness and greed guides your hand. Be thankful for all you have but be humble enough to show gratitude through your deeds. He understood that now.

Lady Cracklegusset of the Matron's League came through the doors to the dorm, trailing her daughter Doderly behind her and enthusing with tears in her eyes.

'Wonderful! Wonderful!' she exclaimed again and again. For years, she had been quietly pestering the de Setterlys to open a wing for the poor children of London and her mithering had finally paid off. She clutched at Stroatly's hands.

'Oh, my dear man. Thank you for bringing a little light into our murky darkness'.

He smiled graciously among the slurping and ghastly lack of manners occurring all around them. 'Well, actually, this little venture is all down to young Ferretus. He was quite insistent'.

The lamp-like eyes turned towards the now slightly embarrassed boy helping a small girl into a long red scarf.

'Charming, charming', and she practically threw her daughter across the room at Ferretus.

He smiled sheepishly at the sweet girl coyly demurring in front of him.

'Hello', she said.

'Hello', he answered.

'Hello!?' shouted Doducestra to remind them work needed to be done here.

Ferretus bobbed his head sheepishly at Doderly who merely raised her eyebrows and wandered back to her mother who was doing what English women the world over called '*helping*' and everybody else called '*interfering*'. She was trying to wrestle a tray of roast carrots out of Elderflower's grasp, but this was a woman who could keep every drop of brandy in the glass during a squall on the high seas and she wasn't going to give in lightly.

Ferretus found himself laughing out loud. *Christmas is such an absurd affair*, he thought. This obsession with forced jollity, and yet it was important to take time to stop, to think, to look around and, yes, even pretend you enjoyed the taste of boiled sprouts. The children were enraptured with their gifts, beds, food and warmth— things he had always just seen as part and parcel of life and yet were so precious to those who didn't possess them.

'Starting to understand it all are you?' asked the familiar cynical voice of his only sister.

He turned to look at her and she was surprised that the snarl was no longer there, replaced by gentle understanding and the promise of a new, better relationship. Without further comment, she kissed his cheek to his surprise. But before any words could be exchanged, Lady Cracklegusset had begun to sing.

'Silent night. Hoooooollllly night'.

Amazing how many vowels could be inserted into such a short phrase, but she was a professional warbler and was used to singing to the rafters in lofty churches and cathedrals. Very soon the whole room was joining in as best they could, although it was impossible to harmonise with the ferocious vocals of the lead soprano. The de Setterly family came together to hold hands and around the room small groups huddled together as the story of the nativity played itself out, the candles flickering warmly in their holders. At the conclusion of the song, Stroatly picked up the knife and sharpening rod and announced.

'Well, I should think we're all ready for the main event, don't you?'

He grasped the domed lid of the meat platter as every child felt their mouths water at the thought of succulent meat and leaned forward with snatching little hands. His mother started to do an impromptu little drum roll with two spoons as the hungry tension grew and with a flourish and a cry of 'Ta-Da!!!!' He lifted the lid to reveal a giant crispy goose surrounded by roast potatoes. There was a cry of appreciation and much clapping of hands, but Ferretus stared at it in horror. The ghostly goose was sitting underneath the trolley scowling at him. His corpse now being hacked into by his over-enthusiastic father. Ferretus mouthed 'Sorry' at the goose who merely harrumphed and glared back maliciously. It dawned on Ferretus that perhaps he was meant to save the goose as well as Shabby and the street children, but it was a bit late now. He declined a plate of fatty roasted deliciousness in respect.

His mother had, of course, produced a bottle of sherry from the recesses of her skirt and poured out a few glasses for the grown-ups. Doducestra procured one for her and Ferretus as she felt he had earned this reward.

‘Well done, Ferret, really’, she smiled at him, and he was astonished to find he was smiling back.

‘I couldn’t have done it without you, you big old nag!’ he joked as she knuckled his head.

Laughing they walked over to the window and looked out on the snow which was beginning to fall anew and leaned on the window sill as the party atmosphere and shrill tones of Lady Cracklegusset filled the space again.

‘Glad we’re all not out there tonight. It’s perishing’, said Doducestra.

‘It is indeed’, agreed Ferretus and something caught his eye. The ghostly goose was now sitting on the roof of the building opposite peering across at them. Ferretus waved up at it and it honked loudly back at him.

‘What are you looking at?’ questioned Doducestra.

The goose sailed into the air and flew upwards disappearing among the falling snowflakes.

‘Nothing. I just hope everyone is with people they love tonight’.

His sister gave him a quizzical look but decided not to pursue it. They walked back to their parents and Stoahtly put his hand on his son’s shoulder in a gesture of pride and called to the room.

‘Attention everyone, please. Attention. Please refill your glasses...’ His wife had preempted his command and glasses were duly filled. ‘I would like to welcome each and every one of you. Please eat all you can and enjoy the warmth and safety of this fine establishment. I particularly want to thank my son Ferretus whose brilliant idea this was and we are all very proud of him.’

Ferretus could feel the beaming smiles of everyone in the room and in particular, Doderly was making doe eyes at him which stirred a different pot of emotions that had until that moment lay dormant.

‘So I wish to say to you all, a very Happy Christmas and more prosperous New Year!’ He raised his glass to a chorus of greetings and a hiccough from his wife.

Somebody tapped Ferretus and he turned to see a happy Shabby, blanket wrapped around him standing there.

‘Is everything okay?’ Ferretus asked him a little concerned.

Shabby nodded his head and brought out from under his blanket the wooden bird of paradise still in pristine condition and offered it to Ferretus.

‘Oh no. Please, Shabby, that is for you....’

But it was being pressed firmly at Ferretus. Behind him Doducestra whispered into his ear, ‘Ferret, it is all he has to give. He is showing his gratitude’.

Ferretus took the toy gently from Shabby. ‘Thank you very much’.

Shabby smiled again and turning walked back to his bed to finish his meal. He had been given life what use were possessions to him.

Ferretus was surprised to find he was crying and accepted the hug from his sister without resistance. His father and mother soon came to join them, and the now happy and united family held each other tightly as the sounds of the midnight bells rang across the city heralding the arrival of Christmas Day.

In the swirling misty air outside, people dressed in furs hurried to church and home, happy voices mingling with snatched choruses of carols across a suddenly magical city. Small children pretended to sleep as they awaited Father Christmas and their parents said a prayer for another healthy year passed.

Above the city lights blazed and a drifting hum filled the air. There was peace.

HONK!

The End

