

The Noel Stories

The Cratchit's Christmas Dinner



Charles Dickens' classic novel, *A Christmas Carol*, tells the story of Scrooge, a dreadful old miser. He is visited by the ghost of his deceased business partner and warned that if he doesn't change his ways, he'll die a miserable, lonely death.



In this extract the Spirit of Christmas Present shows Scrooge the Christmas dinner being enjoyed by his employee, Bob Cratchit, and his family.



This is the original English Christmas feast with all the trimmings – the goose, the gush of stuffing, the Christmas pudding (a steamed spongy dessert made of fruits and spices). And how the Cratchit family enjoys it, even though their poverty and Tiny Tim’s bad health give them very little to celebrate.



Once Upon a Time

Up rose Mrs Cratchit, Cratchit's wife, dressed out but poorly in a twice-turned gown, but brave in ribbons which are cheap and make a goodly show for sixpence; and she laid the cloth, assisted by Belinda Cratchit, second of her daughters, also brave in ribbons;



... while Master Peter Cratchit plunged a fork into the saucepan of potatoes, and getting the corners of his monstrous shirt-collar (Bob's private property, conferred upon his son and heir in honour of the day) into his mouth, rejoiced to find himself so gallantly attired, and yearned to show his linen in the fashionable Parks.



And now two smaller Cratchits, boy and girl, came tearing in, screaming that outside the baker's they had smelt the goose, and known it for their own; and basking in luxurious thoughts of sage and onion, these young Cratchits danced about the table, and exalted Master Peter Cratchit to the skies, while he (not proud, although his collars nearly choked him) blew the fire, until the slow potatoes, bubbling up, knocked loudly at the saucepan-lid to be let out and peeled.



“What has ever got your precious father, then?” said Mrs Cratchit. “And your brother, Tiny Tim? And Martha warn’t as late last Christmas Day by half an hour!”



“Here’s Martha, mother!” said a girl, appearing as she spoke.

“Here’s Martha, mother!” cried the two young Cratchits.

“Hurrah! There’s such a goose, Martha!”

“Why, bless your heart alive, my dear, how late you are!” said Mrs Cratchit, kissing her a dozen times, and taking off her shawl and bonnet for her with officious zeal.



“We’d a deal of work to finish up last night,” replied the girl,
“and had to clear away this morning, mother!”

“Well! Never mind so long as you are come,” said Mrs Cratchit.
“Sit ye down before the fire, my dear, and have a warm, Lord
bless ye!”

“No, no! there’s father coming,” cried the two young Cratchits,
who were everywhere at once. “Hide, Martha, hide!”



So Martha hid herself, and in came little Bob, the father, with at least three feet of comforter, exclusive of the fringe, hanging down before him; and his threadbare clothes darned up and brushed to look seasonable, and Tiny Tim upon his shoulder.

Alas for Tiny Tim, he bore a little crutch, and had his limbs supported by an iron frame!



“Why, where’s our Martha?” cried Bob Cratchit, looking round.

“Not coming,” said Mrs Cratchit.

“Not coming!” said Bob, with a sudden declension in his high spirits; for he had been Tim’s blood-horse all the way from church, and had come home rampant. “Not coming upon Christmas Day!”



Martha didn't like to see him disappointed, if it were only in joke; so she came out prematurely from behind the closet door, and ran into his arms, while the two young Cratchits hustled Tiny Tim, and bore him off to the wash-house, that he might hear the pudding singing in the copper.



“And how did little Tim behave?” asked Mrs Cratchit, when she had rallied Bob on his credulity, and Bob had hugged his daughter to his heart’s content. “As good as gold,” said Bob, “and better.



Somehow, he gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard. He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day who made lame beggars walk and blind men see.”

Bob’s voice was tremulous when he told them this, and trembled more when he said that Tiny Tim was growing strong and hearty.



His active little crutch was heard upon the floor, and back came Tiny Tim before another word was spoken, escorted by his brother and sister to his stool beside the fire ...



... and while Bob, turning up his cuffs – as if, poor fellow, they were capable of being made more shabby – compounded some hot mixture in a jug with gin and lemons, and stirred it round and round and put it on the hob to simmer, Master Peter and the two ubiquitous young Cratchits went to fetch the goose, with which they soon returned in high procession.



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Such a bustle ensued that you might have thought a goose the rarest of all birds; a feathered phenomenon, to which a black swan was a matter of course – and, in truth, it was something very like it in that house. Mrs Cratchit made the gravy (ready beforehand in a little saucepan) hissing hot; Master Peter mashed the potatoes with incredible vigour ...



Miss Belinda sweetened up the apple sauce; Martha dusted the hot plates; Bob took Tiny Tim besides him in a tiny corner at the table; the two young Cratchits set chairs for everybody, not forgetting themselves, and, mounting guard upon their posts, crammed spoons into their mouths, lest they should shriek for goose before their turn came to be helped.



At last the dishes were set on, and grace was said.



It was succeeded by a breathless pause, as Mrs Cratchit, looking slowly all along the carving-knife, prepared to plunge it in the breast; but when she did, and when the long-expected gush of stuffing issued forth, one murmur of delight arose all around the board, and even Tiny Tim, excited by the two young Cratchits, beat on the table with the handle of his knife, and feebly cried Hurrah!



There never was such a goose. Bob said he didn't believe there ever was such a goose cooked. Its tenderness and flavour, size and cheapness, were the themes of universal admiration.



Eked out by apple sauce and mashed potatoes, it was sufficient dinner for the whole family; indeed, as Mrs Cratchit said with great delights (surveying one small atom of a bone upon the dish), the hadn't ate it all at last!



Yet every one had had enough, and the youngest Cratchits, in particular, were steeped in sage and onion to the eyebrows!

But now, the plates being changed by Miss Belinda, Mrs Cratchit left the room alone – too nervous to bear witnesses – to take the pudding up, and bring it in.



Suppose it should not be done enough! Suppose it should break in turning out! Suppose somebody should have got over the wall of the back yard, and stolen it, while they were merry with the goose – a supposition at which the two young Cratchits became livid! All sorts of horrors were supposed.



Hallo! A great deal of steam! The pudding was out of the copper.
A smell like a washing-day! That was the cloth. A smell like an
eating-house and a pastry-cook's next door to each other, with a
laundress' next door to that! That was the pudding!



In half a minute Mrs Cratchit entered – flushed, but smiling proudly – with the pudding, like a speckled cannonball, so hard and firm, blazing in half of half-a-quarter of ignited brandy, and bedight with Christmas holly stuck into the top.



Oh, a wonderful pudding! Bob Cratchit said, and calmly too, that he regarded it as the greatest success achieved by Mrs Cratchit since their marriage. Mrs Cratchit said that, now the weight was off her mind, she would confess she had her doubts about the quantity of flour.



Everybody had something to say about it, but nobody said or thought it was at all a small pudding for a large family. It would have been flat heresy to do so. Any Cratchit would have blushed to hint at such a thing.



At last the dinner was all done, the cloth was cleared, the hearth swept, and the fire made up. The compound in the jug being tasted and considered perfect, apples and oranges were put upon the table, and a shovel full of chestnuts on the fire.



Then all the Cratchit family drew round the hearth in what Bob Cratchit called a circle, meaning half a one; and at Bob Cratchit's elbow stood the family display of glass – two tumblers, and a custard cup without a handle.



These held the hot stuff from the jug, however, as well as golden goblets would have done; and Bob served it out with beaming looks, while the chestnuts on the fire sputtered and crackled noisily. Then Bob proposed:

‘A merry Christmas to us all, my dears. God bless us!’

Which all the family re-echoed.



“God bless us every one!” said Tiny Tim, the last of all.

The End



