



WELCOME

As promised, this Christmas issue is in light hearted vein, but make no mistake, humour can be a powerful tool when used wisely. I will allow you to judge whether that has been achieved.

Although, over the years, I have written dozens of pieces, I rarely write stories, mainly writing more factual items, so I hope my attempt at writing a parody of A Christmas Carol will be acceptable.

Along with the story, my wife and I send our very best wishes for Christmas.

As long as I don't overdose on Christmas pud, a personal favourite, the next Redlines will be around New Year.

Consultation of the diary pages show that there are a number of important meetings in January, so although we may be taking a few days respite, it is merely a "ceasefire", and we will soon be back in action.

Material for next newsletter to: editor@sohs.co.uk by Thursday
 SOHS-Save Our Hospital Services
 (A non-party group whose aim is to campaign to protect our health services in North Devon)

**Wishing You
 A Happy Christmas**

To all our supporters and readers: those we have campaigned with, and those starting their campaign, we wish a happy and healthy Christmas.



**Not the Ghost
 of a Chance**

From the pen of that celebrated observer of Victorian society, Mr Charles Dickens, came a wondrous tale of Christmas. This isn't it. Well it is, sort of. I'll leave you to judge.

There was nothing unusual about the knocker: or at least that was what Stooze would have said: would have said until now, that is. Peering at the knocker in the gloom of a swirling London fog, Stooze had thought for a moment that the knocker had turned into a likeness of his dead business partner, Jacob Meerly. He blinked and checked again, shaking his head as he did so. No, it had returned to it's usual appearance of the cheap and

gaudy door bauble that he had purchased from the local DIY. He entered the house, contemplating that maybe the illusion had been caused by eating too much cheese, but discarded that as he had eaten none. His second thought was that it was caused by the chicken vindaloo he had consumed in



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that cheap place at the back of Boatpool Street. That must be it. The illusion was nothing more than a dodgy dish! He made a mental note to complain next time he went there. He might get a refund, which would be some compensation for the shock of the vision of his dead partner.

Stooge prepared for bed quickly. He didn't want to stay up even though it was Christmas Eve. Within a short time he was asleep. He had no problem sleeping, he had long ago learned how to stifle his conscience and his thoughts, and even his earlier shock was pushed to the back of his mind.

Stooge awoke suddenly, to a clock striking midnight. That in itself was strange, as he didn't have a clock, but the sound was loud. The room was dark, pitch dark, and even as he sat up, rubbing his eyes, the curtains were thrust aside, and he saw what he was convinced was a strange apparition. It had the form of a man, but then didn't look like a man. It wore a tunic of purest white, of *glowing* white. For a moment Stooge thought he might be dead. The apparition, if such it was, held a

branch of fresh green holly in its hand: yet it's tunic was trimmed with summer flowers. But the strangest thing about it was, that from the crown of its head there sprung a bright clear ray of light, by which all was illuminated.

Although Stooge was terrified, he managed to stutter out: "Who or what are you?"

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Past." For some reason it did not seem strange to Stooge to be visited by a Spirit, if such it was, or that it should speak to him: yet in his rational mind he would have dismissed the possibility. He boldly inquired what business had brought the Ghost there.

"Your welfare!" said the Ghost.

Stooge thanked the Ghost, but could not help thinking that a night of unbroken rest would have been more conducive to that end.

"Rise! and walk with me!"

It would have been in vain for Stooge to plead that the weather and the hour were not adapted to pedestrian purposes; that his bed was warm, and the thermometer a long way below freezing; that he was but lightly clad. The grasp, though gentle as a woman's hand, was not to be

resisted. He rose: but, finding that the Spirit made towards the window, clasped its robe in supplication.

"I am just a human," Stooge remonstrated, "and liable to fall."

"Just a touch of my hand there," said the Spirit, laying it upon his heart, "and you shall be safe with me!"

As the words were spoken, they passed through the wall, and stood upon an open country road, with fields on either hand. The city had entirely vanished. Not a trace of it was to be seen. The darkness and the mist had vanished with it, for it was a clear, cold, winter day, with snow upon the ground.

"Good Heaven!" said Stooge, clasping his hands together as he looked about him. "I was bred in this place. I was a boy here!"

The Spirit gazed upon him gently. "Come, let us go on our way."

With Stooge trailing behind the Spirit led him down the road a short distance to a village, and they made their way to a cottage, a poor dwelling. Along the way, Stooge recognised every tree, every gate and post. He cried out as he saw some village boys, not any village boys, but his friends from long ago: yet they had not aged. The boys did not see Stooge or the Ghost.

"These are but shadows of the things that have been," said the Ghost. "They have no consciousness of us."

As the boys wished each other a happy and merry Christmas, Stooge reflected that Christmas was not happy for him. Yet he remembered the simple home to which they had come with happiness.

They entered in and Stooge cried out in astonishment.

"My dear old mum and my dad. Why they have been dead many years. How I miss them.



Diary Dates

Visit our new diary page on the website. More dates, maps and pretty pictures!

Wednesday 4 January 19.00 Northam, the Town Council public meeting with SOHS, also

Thursday 5 January, in the afternoon (time tbc) at Westward Ho!

Wednesday 11 January 19.00 SOHS general meeting, The Castle Centre. Castle Street, Barnstaple EX31 1DR

Friday 13 January Braunton, SOHS Public meeting (details to be confirmed later)

Monday 16 January South Molton SOHS Public meeting (details to be confirmed later)

Tuesday 17 January 19.00 Paignton Methodist Church, Palace Avenue, Paignton TQ3 3EQ

Wednesday 18 January Northam (provisional) SOHS Public meeting (details to be confirmed)

Thursday 19 January 10.00 – 13.00 Devon CC Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee to question the STP team. Followed by normal Committee meeting from 14.00

Wednesday 25 January Holsworthy SOHS Public meeting (details to be confirmed later)

Saturday 28 January 20.00 - 22.00 Ricky Knight and Friends, benefit event for SOHS. The Plough Arts Centre, Torrington EX38 8HQ £7 from Box Office: 01805 624624 www.theploughartscentre.org

Saturday 28 January Hands Off Our NHS! D-Day March 11.00 · Gower St to Trafalgar Square

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They worked so hard for me, my father went to an early grave."

"Shh," said the Spirit placing his finger to his lips, "let us just listen."

Stooge's father was speaking. "I have been reading of a 13-year-old girl, Sylvia Diggory. She was the first patient in the new NHS service. She was very poorly and was treated at a hospital in Manchester. Apparently she was visited by Mr Bevan himself. Of course, since then, thousands of people have received free medical care. It is a wonder, a modern miracle."

Stooge's mother nodded. "You are right as usual Bill. I don't know what we would have done if we had had to pay for all the medical help that young Ebenezer has had."

"I was a sick child," said Ebenezer Stooge, vouchsafing an explanation. "I had to go in and out of hospital. It was hard for my parents. They worked so hard to provide for me."



"You recollect the way?" inquired the Spirit. "Remember it!" cried Scrooge with fervour; "I could walk it blindfold."

"It would have been harder if the care had not been provided free, or had not been local."

Stooge knew that the Ghost was alluding to his business activities. "But the NHS was not sustainable like that. There are many more people to treat, and we had to make changes. People were living too long and some would unfortunately die."

"People like your poor dad. He died comparatively young."

"He had rheumatic fever when he was a child. There was no treatment then, even if they could have afforded it. He was left weak."

"But the NHS were later able to help him and make his last days more comfortable. And, as you say, people were living too long. He had his life, he was no longer needed."

"That's not how I wanted it to be, how it should have been..."

Even as he spoke Stooge realised that he had wanted his father to have the best care and live as long as he could.

"Come," said the Spirit, "our time is done" And, as he spoke, Stooge felt himself to be in a kind of whirlwind and then a moment later, or so it seemed, he awoke, as if from a heavy sleep.

It was dark. And the clock, the clock he hadn't got, was striking 12. How could it be? Stooge did not know. Could he have slept a whole day? Had he dreamt of the Ghost of Christmas Past? Stooge rose and went in search of a drink of coffee, yet as he went along the corridor he became aware of a light, a positive glow, from the door to his lounge; from *under* the door to his lounge, if that was possible. Had he left a light on? Certainly not one that bright. He went to the door and opened it.

The room had undergone an astonishing transformation. The walls and ceiling were so hung with living green, that it looked a

SOHS
(Save Our Hospital Services Devon)

RICKY KNIGHT AND FRIENDS
With special guest Jim Jones
A Benefit for SOHS
Keep the red line going - wear red on the night!
Saturday 28 January 8pm
All Tickets £7

the plough ARTS CENTRE
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perfect grove. Crisp leaves of holly, mistletoe, and ivy reflected back the light, as if many little mirrors had been scattered there. Heaped upon the floor, to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, game, poultry, great joints of meat, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, and seething bowls of punch, that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam. In easy state upon this couch there sat a jolly Giant, glorious to see; who bore a glowing torch held up high, which shed its light on Stooge as he came peeping round the door.

"Come in!" exclaimed the Ghost. "Come in! and get to know me better, man!"

Stooge entered timidly, and hung his head before this Spirit.

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Present," said the Spirit. "Look upon me!"

Stooge reverently did so. The Ghost was clothed in one simple deep green robe, bordered with white fur. Its feet, observable beneath the ample folds of the garment, were bare; and on its head it wore no other covering than a holly wreath, set here and there with shining icicles. Its dark brown curls were long and free; free as its genial face, its sparkling eye, its open hand, its

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cheery voice, its unconstrained demeanour, and its joyful air.

"You have never seen the like of me before!" exclaimed the Spirit.

"Never," Stooze made answer to it.

"But Spirit," Stooze went on, submissively, "conduct me where you will. If you have anything to teach me, let me profit by it."

"Touch my robe!"

Stooze did as he was bid, and held it fast.

The room vanished and suddenly they were in a street. But not just any street, but one which Stooze recognised, or thought he recognised, for was it the centre of Barnstaple, or Bideford, perhaps Ilfracombe? It was not clear, but it was a High Street, thronged with many shops, and down this road of commerce, came many people, a stream of people, a veritable deluge of people. And all of them were dressed in red!

"Do you recognise these people?" asked the Ghost.

"No," Stooze admitted. "They mean nothing to me."

"Yet these are your neighbours. They could be your friends. Yet you care nothing for them."

"Not at all. They are just people dressed in red. Why should I care?"

"They are dressed in red because they are protesting. They want to prevent cuts in hospital services which you proposed through your business activities. Cuts which will hurt their loved ones, their families: cuts which you designed and have been implementing."

"But we had to. We had instructions. I had no choice but to do as I was told. We had to save money."

"And you inflicted your cuts upon the poor and the weak, so that your masters made more

money. But as you say, you care nothing."

Stooze remained silent, for there was nothing he could reply. The Ghost tapped him on the shoulder. "Come, we will go this way."

The scene changed and Stooze stood in front of a small house in a terrace. Although he had not been there he recognised the house as that of his chief clerk, Bob Catchitt.

Saying nothing, and Stooze following the Spirit, they entered the house. They were in a room that was a lounge/diner. It was meagrely furnished, with cheap shabby furniture: around it sat a number of people, whom Stooze took to be members of Catchitt's family. There were a few children and several adults, but Stooze's attention was focussed on a little boy, set in a wheelchair.

"Who is that boy?" asked Stooze.

"It is Tiny Tim, Catchitt's younger son. He has a medical condition which means he must be treated in Plymouth, 60 miles away. Although he is in pain, and the journey is harsh, he rarely complains."



A young lady came into the room. Although once pretty, she now looked worn and haggard. Catchitt turned to her and said, with a loving look, "Thank you for working so hard to make Christmas special. We are all so grateful, aren't we?"

There were nods and smiles all around.

The woman spoke. "It is important we celebrate. While we can..."

"What does she mean?" Stooze asked. "What is she saying?"

"Tiny Tim is very ill. This might be his last Christmas."

"Can nothing be done to help him?"

"There are drugs and medicines, but they are not available on the NHS because of cutbacks, and although there is treatment that would help, it is too far away to go."

"But surely that is nonsense? Why is the treatment not available nearby?"

"You should know that, as it was part of your proposals. There was a plan, that treatment should be moved to specialist centres. It was a good plan except that it didn't take into account the fact that families couldn't get to them, that there is no transport available, or even that a very sick child couldn't make those journeys."

"But surely the plan was tested? I'm sure it was."

"Oh yes, someone made the journey, but they chose a time when the roads were not busy and they had a fast car, and of course they did not have a sick child or an old relative. Even then they couldn't meet the target time and so they ignored it."

"Will Tiny Tim die?" Stooze asked sadly.

"He will die sometime. But how long before he dies, and

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how comfortable he and his family are in his final days will be governed by the plan, and how much the people in red can stop or prevent that plan."

Stooge was aware that the voice of the Ghost was growing fainter, and the view before him was getting dimmer. Then it all went, and Stooge was again awaking in his own bed, again as if from a deep sleep. And the non-existent clock was striking twelve.

As the last stroke ceased to vibrate, Stooge, lifting up his eyes, beheld a solemn Phantom, draped and hooded, coming like a mist along the ground towards him.

The Phantom slowly, gravely, silently approached. When it came near him, Stooge bent down upon his knee; for in the very air through which this Spirit moved it seemed to scatter gloom and mystery.

It was shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible, save one outstretched hand. But for this, it would have been difficult to detach its figure from the night, and separate it from the darkness by which it was surrounded.

"I am in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come?" said Stooge.

The Spirit answered not, but pointed onward with its hand.

"You are about to show me shadows of the things that have not happened, but will happen in the time before us," Stooge pursued. "Is that so, Spirit?"

The upper portion of the garment was contracted for an instant in its folds, as if the Spirit had inclined its head. That was the only answer he received.

"I fear you more than any spectre I have seen. But, as I know your purpose is to do me good, I am prepared to bear you



company, and do it with a thankful heart. Will you not speak to me?"

It gave him no reply. The hand was pointed straight before them.

"Lead on!" said Stooge. "Lead on! The night is waning fast, and it is precious time to me, I know. Lead on, Spirit!"

The phantom moved away as it had come towards him. Stooge followed in the shadow of its dress, which bore him up, he thought, and carried him along.

They came upon a solemn scene. Along a road, a long and endless road, there came a line, a procession of people clad in black. They were wailing and crying out, as ones in mourning. Dotted amongst this throng of people were coffins, carried by black-suited pall bearers. Like the road, the procession seemed endless.

"Who are these, pray?" cried Stooge.

The Ghost made no answer, but as Stooge watched he heard snippets of conversation that floated across to him.

"He would have been alive today if he could have got to the hospital on time."

"They had no facilities locally, and by the time we got to the hospital her baby had died."

"The person who came to look after her didn't have the training, didn't spot what was wrong with her..."

"When they made it compulsory that you had to pay, we could no longer afford it..."

It seemed to Stooge that there were myriad voices, each with a tale of woe. Each was a tale of accusation of failure of the system, of inadequate support. Yet the stories were told with an infinite sadness to a symphony of sorrow from the mourners, loved ones and family. There were the children

who had lost their parents because they could not be got to treatment fast enough when their car had crashed. There were parents who had lost their children. There was a sadness that was so profound, so deep, and Stooge was overwhelmed by it. But then the Spirit touched him, and instantly the scene changed.

Now they were in a boardroom. Stooge recognised it. He had been there. He recognised the people around the table. They were his colleagues.

He listened. They were discussing hospital closure plans.

"If we make these changes, lives will be in danger. People will surely die..."

"That is inevitable, but we must make profits for our shareholders, and protect our investments..."

There was chuckling about this, and somehow Stooge, in his new self found



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the very thought obscene. In his old self he would have had no compunction about putting profits before people. But that was before he had been visited by the Spirits. Before he had been introduced to the greater plan.

The scene swiftly changed, Stoooge was back at the road he had seen earlier. Gone were the throng of people. This time there was but one solitary coffin. A small coffin, surrounded by a group of mourners. He recognised Bob Catchitt and his wife.

"No," gasped Stoooge, "not Tiny Tim! Something should have been done." A tear coursed down his cheeks. It was a new experience.

Turning to the Spirit, Stoooge said, "Answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of the things that May be only?"

The Spirit made no answer, so Stoooge went on. "Why show me this, if I am past all hope?"

For the first time the hand appeared to shake.

"Good Spirit," he pursued, as down upon the ground he fell before it: "your nature intercedes

for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me by an altered life?"

The kind hand trembled.

"I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach."

In his agony, he caught the spectral hand, and as he did so he saw an alteration in the Phantom's hood and dress. It shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost.

Yes! and the bedpost was his own. The bed was his own, the room was his own. Best and happiest of all, the Time before him was his own, to make amends in!

Running to the window, he opened it, and thrust out his head. No fog, no mist; clear, bright, jovial, stirring, cold; cold, piping for the blood to dance to; Golden sun-light; Heavenly sky; sweet fresh air; merry bells. Oh, glorious! Glorious!

"What's to-day?" cried Stoooge, calling downward to a boy in Sunday clothes, who perhaps had loitered in to look about him.

"Eh?" returned the boy with all his might of wonder.

"What's to-day, my fine fellow?" said Stoooge.

"To-day!" replied the boy. "Why, Christmas Day."

"It's Christmas Day!" said Stoooge to himself. "I haven't missed it. The Spirits have done it all in one night. They can do anything they like. Of course they can. Of course they can."

Shutting the window, he sat down, lost for a moment in thought. He had been given a second chance. On Christmas Day! The wonder of it all. How could it be? How could it be!

And there, dear reader, we must leave Stoooge and the Ghosts, for this is but a fairy story, and as we all know, fairy stories must have a happy ending. We must hope too that our own story will have a happy ending, and in the word of Tiny Tim, "God Bless Everyone!"

Stephen Clark



Here's a couple of cracker jokes, the sort that make you groan.

I heard that the Success Regime had to hold their Christmas party in the Barmaid's Arms. Apparently they don't like the Red Line¹ anymore. (¹ Red Lion - this joke works better spoken aloud.)

Do you know how to spoil the Success Regime's Day?

Easy, just send them four letters...

(Wait for it)

S - O - H - S



"It's part of the new Care in the Community"

I gather the Success Regime writing team just missed out on winning the Dizzy Fiction Prize. Their stories were praised for being inventive and containing an interesting fictitious plot. But they lost out because fairy stories are

supposed to have a happy ending, and none of their stories did.

Apparently next year they are going to try in the category of horror story awards, as they feel they are likely to have more success.