

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

The Night Before Christmas



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THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS
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Been to Chobham, have you? If you say you have, I'll call you a ruddy liar. Nobody has been to Chobham, except the poor, misbegotten souls who live there. And before you start to pity them too much, you should know that they're mostly bloody stockbrokers and the like; poncing around in their BMWs and drinking their skinny lattes. Bah, how I hate them! But before it was prime commuter belt, Chobham was something else. It was a tiny village in Suffolk, nestled between rolling hills in a rather pleasant part of the country. It's mentioned in the Domesday Book, you know, but let's hold our horses because we've gone back a bit too far there. The date we're looking for, the date when the Really Interesting Thing happened, was December the 24th, 1877.

Now back then Chobham was a few dozen houses, a shop for the purchase of 'sundry items' and of course those two hallowed institutions, the local church and the local pub. The railways never came to Chobham, and so the industrial revolution passed it by entirely and as a result it remained in a kind of time-warp, cut off from the advancements of the modern age. Now, several of the houses in the village – those further out towards what one might charitably call the 'outskirts' – were of a much larger and more opulent style than the majority, which were little more than tiny two-up-two-down cottages designed for the local workforce. For the particular story we're going to hear today we need one of the larger houses. There's a nice red brick one there, just down a little lane about five minutes from the blacksmiths shop and the village green – that'll do; let's set our story there.

By the way, I neglected to mention that it was snowing – though the more eagle-eyed among you will have noticed that it was Christmas Eve and therefore not unreasonably assumed as much without being told. And you were right – in fact, it's especially important that you know that it was snowing because that will become crucial to the story later. And now, finally, we need a cast of characters. And looking in at the widow, I see them now!

There, standing imperiously by the fire, we see the patriarch of the family: old Colonel Wolstencroft. He's in his early 60s and is the local Justice of the Peace. His wife Margaret and his two grown-up children Joseph and Cecily sit looking rather bored as he holds court on some matter of local politics, each holding a small glass of gin. In the corner lurks Trubshawe, a small stain of a man waiting to dispense further drinks; he is the butler, and his wife is the cook. She's down in the kitchen, but don't worry – we'll meet her in due

course. Now were you able to look around yourself you would note one particularly odd thing, to wit that there are no Christmas decorations of any kind. This is because Colonel Wolstencraft is not a man given to ostentatious displays of levity; he is as serious-minded in the course of his home life as he is in his profession.

Oh! I was just about to go on and give you a few little titbits of information about the rest of the Wolstencraft brood, but here comes the fateful knock at the door! No matter, you'll learn all you need to know in time. And now I – the unreliable omniscience – shall withdraw, and leave you in the company of our little cast of characters. And as a sop to tradition, we shall revert to the past tense; for after all, this is a story about a time traveller, is it not? Such things are endlessly fluid.

* * * * *

The knock rang out through the house, drawing the attention of the assembled family who looked at each other, mildly affronted. "Well," said the Colonel, his eyes squinting and his head jerking alarmingly on his neck as if the two were not entirely connected. "Who on Earth could that be at this hour? Go on, Trubshawe, go and see, man. If it's a beggar, invite him in and then summon the constable; I shan't have vagrancy!"

So Trubshawe detached himself from the wall and squelched off to the front door. He threw it open and saw standing – shivering – on the doorstep two people whom he did not recognise. One was a man in his mid-30s, a mop of brown hair framing a face which could not unreasonably be described as 'haughty', all high cheekbones and aloof expressions. He wore a black overcoat over a white shirt, open at the neck, and a waistcoat which was worn as casually as one can wear a waistcoat. The man was accompanied by a girl a few years younger; she was swarthy like a gypsy, such that Trubshawe's mind was immediately filled with concern for the family silver, and her dress was strange and not at all suited to the climate. This last fact had clearly not escaped the girl's attention as she was visibly shivering and the sound of her teeth chattering could conceivably have been heard several streets away.

"Hello there," ventured the man. "My name is the Doctor and this is my friend Hannah. We're sorry to trouble you but we seem to find ourselves rather stranded. Our... carriage... has been caught in a snowdrift, and is currently inaccessible without the application of a dozen shovels and as many navvies, so we wondered if we might impose upon you – as you can see, my friend is not dressed for such weather."

Trubshawe eyed the young woman suspiciously. "Why *are* you dressed like that, if I might ask ma'am?"

Hannah eyed the Doctor angrily. "Because I thought we were going to Brighton. In June."

Ah, so these were imbeciles – that made more sense to Trubshawe. At least the girl was, the man – did he say he was a doctor? – seemed rather more sensible. Trubshawe opened the door a fraction wider and gestured them inside. "If you would care to follow me, sir, I shall escort you to the drawing room where you can meet the Colonel. You can discuss your business with him."

The Doctor waggled an eyebrow at Hannah who merely pushed past him and into the house. Crestfallen, the Doctor followed into a rather sparsely decorated hallway dominated by a large oil painting of a stern-looking man with a pronounced squint and a

very austere haircut. This, surmised the Doctor, was the Colonel – or at least an ancient ancestor of his, bearing down on his issue from beyond the grave like some overbearing phantom.

A moment later, Trubshawe threw open the door to the drawing room and the Doctor and Hannah entered. Inside they found a room that should have been the very soul of warmth and cosiness – a fire burned low in the hearth and a family sat comfortably on furniture that was inviting to two cold travellers. Yet there was a coldness about the room that almost matched the chill in Hannah's bones – there seemed none of the warmth here of the traditional family scene, instead the atmosphere was curiously absent; as if these were mere automata playing at being human.

But if that was Hannah's response, the Doctor was having none of it. He strode forward boldly - hand outstretched - and grasped the hand of the man by the fire – pumping it up and down numerous times for good effect. The man's only response was to raise an eyebrow; a gesture that somehow seemed to combine contempt, seething anger and confusion in one remarkably efficient response. "The colonel, isn't it?" asked the Doctor genially, "I recognise you from your portrait – a very good likeness, I should like to congratulate the artist."

The Colonel withdrew his hand and made a play of wiping it on a handkerchief. "Indeed I am Colonel Wolstencroft. However the portrait is that of my grandfather, sir, and the artist has been dead these thirty years."

"Ah," smiled the Doctor. "Still, perhaps I'll get to meet him. Oh, but how could I let my manners slip? I am the Doctor, and this is my travelling companion Hannah Redfoot. I must apologise for the intrusion but as I was explaining to your most excellent butler we were stranded hereabouts when our carriage was lost in a snowdrift. We were rather hoping that we might stay here tonight and perhaps – if it weren't impinging too much – have a bite to eat?"

Colonel Wolstencroft looked at Hannah askance. He met the Doctor's gaze again and his shoulders slumped barely perceptibly. He badly wanted to toss this strange man and his gypsy out of doors, but the man was clearly a gentleman and a scholar of some sort, and as such it was not an intuitive thing for the Colonel to do. "Of course," he snarled through gritted teeth. "I shall have a bath drawn for your young companion and fresh clothes laid out to replace those... things. Trubshawe, do you think Mrs. Trubshawe might be prevailed upon to set two further places for dinner?"

Trubshawe nodded and grunted in the vaguely affirmative before sloping off, closing the door behind him. "And now," muttered the Colonel, "might I introduce you to my family?"

Mrs Wolstencroft was a mousy, small woman who reminded Hannah of the old lady from the Tweety Pie cartoons she watched as a kid. Her eyes narrowed as she regarded her guests but like her husband she remained polite if aloof. The daughter, Cecily, was taller than her mother and had a rather horsey appearance – a long nose sitting below a pair of wide brown eyes. Unlike her parents she smiled a rather genuine smile and giggled a rather annoying, high-pitched giggle. She was, Hannah noticed, paying particular attention to the Doctor. Finally there was Joseph, who stifled a yawn as he was introduced. Behind the affection of boredom, though, Hannah noticed with a wry smile that he too seemed to be casting glances in the direction of the Doctor.

The introductions done, Trubshaw reappeared unannounced and said that the extra dinner places were set and that a bath was being prepared for Miss Redfoot. With a final nod around the room, Hannah followed the butler.

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It was a large house that Hannah was led through, and cold, with rather sparse and utilitarian furniture lit by the guttering yellow glow from Trubshawe's candle. He led her up the wide, expansive central staircase and along a wood-panelled corridor to a small bathroom containing a tin bath filled with steaming water and a fresh set of clothes which Hannah assumed to belong to Cecily. Leaving the candle, Trubshawe left (closing the door behind him, though Hannah was not entirely confident he was not peering through the keyhole) and young Miss Redfoot slid off her clothes and settled into the steaming water with a relaxed sigh.

When she awoke, the water was cold and the candle had burned down appreciably. With a shiver she leaped from the bath before spending at least forty further minutes working out how to dress herself in her new clothes. Eventually, as satisfied as she was likely to be, she took the stubby remains of the candle in hand and made to head back downstairs to where she hoped to find a warming meal. But as she opened the door she barely suppressed a scream. There, picked out in the candlelight, was a man. But not just any man. He wore an elaborately woven green robe with pure white fur lining his hood, and from his chin sprouted a quite extraordinary beard – poker straight, as white as the snow outside and long enough that it was tucked into his belt. Across his back was slung a rough burlap sack; he could almost have passed for some vision of jolly old Saint Nick, except that there was nothing jolly about him. His face was pinched and gaunt, and his frame was frail. There was an aura of malevolence about him that Hannah – for all her travels with the Doctor – had never felt before and underneath it all there was, unmistakably, the sense that this man was not human. After the two had regarded each other for what seemed a lifetime, the strange man turned and vanished into the darkness. Hannah ran after him, but try as she might she could not find him – it was as if he had simply been swallowed up by the darkness. Suddenly clutched by panic, she turned and hurried back downstairs.

She found the Doctor and the Colonel's family in the drawing room just as she had left them. The Doctor was sitting in an armchair swigging from a cup of tea and holding court, flinging out anecdotes and jokes at a furious pace as the Colonel and his wife smiled politely and Cecily guffawed uproariously. "Hannah!" cried the Doctor as he registered her presence. "You'll never guess what day it is. Christmas Eve!"

Hannah nodded dumbly. She was about to say something about what she had seen upstairs, but thought better of it. This was perhaps something she and the Doctor should discuss alone. Then another thought struck her. "It's not very festive here, is it? Where are the decorations?"

The Colonel opened his mouth to speak, but the Doctor leaped in first. "Colonel Wolstencroft doesn't hold with merrymaking at Christmas, Hannah. This is a solemn and serious house, as befits the station of its owner. Is that not right, Colonel?"

The Colonel nodded in exasperation. "It is indeed."

"And quite right, too," hooted the Doctor. "I can't stand that kind of thing myself. I remember saying to Charles Dickens, why always Christmas? Why not do a story about Scrooge at Easter? Mix it up a bit, you know?"

The Colonel opened his mouth to speak, but at that moment Trubshawe appeared. "Dinner is served," he said glumly before sinking back below stairs.

"Well," smiled the Doctor, rubbing his hands together, "Who's hungry? I know I'm *famished*. Come on, you lot!"

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But there was a shock to come, reader. As the family and their visitors entered the dining room there it was plunged into darkness as first the candles and then the fire guttered and died. There ensued myriad cries and shouts as people barrelled into one another and more than a few toes were stepped upon but in a trice, the light returned; flames roaring back into life as if annoyed by the interruption. But what was this? The room the Doctor and Hannah had glimpsed on their way in was as sparse and un-festive as the rest of the house, but when the light returned it was quite changed. A huge Yule log now crackled merrily in the fireplace, garlands and decorations hung from the walls and in the corner was the largest Christmas tree Hannah had ever seen. Above the fireplace were hung eight stockings. The assembled crowd stared around in wonder for a few minutes before the awed silence was broken by the bellowing roar of the Colonel.

"What is the meaning of this? Who has been in my house? Is this someone's idea of an absurd joke? I'll see the miscreant at the end of a rope for this!" He rounded on the Doctor and pointed a finger accusingly. "You! Is this your doing? You and your gypsy turn up in my house and then this mischief occurs. How do you account for it, sir?"

The Doctor looked as if he might leap over and throttle the Colonel, such was the venom contained in the look he shot the old man. "Come on, don't be so utterly stupid. I was out there with you when this happened, as well you know Colonel. The lights were off for a matter of seconds, do you think I or my... gypsy... had time to do any of this? No, if I didn't know better I'd say these were apports."

"What?" demanded the Colonel. "Speak English, man!"

"Apports. Matter from nothing. Items that just appear from nowhere. Of course, that's scientifically impossible – matter has to come from somewhere. If you're powerful enough, you can use psychic power to convert energy into matter. Perhaps that's what happened here? We all saw the lights go out, and isn't it cold in here all of a sudden? There's your answer, I'd say."

The Colonel looked like he might burst out laughing at any moment but if he was he quashed it with admirable success. "Matter out of nothing, sir? What idiocy is this?"

"Not idiocy, science. Science you're unable to comprehend, perhaps, but then there's so much that you don't comprehend isn't there, Colonel Wolstencraft? Love, passion, the mysteries of the human heart. No, don't start shouting at me – I've been shouted at by experts, sir. Somewhere around here there is a being of extraordinary power – surely you can see that? And this creature seems to want us to be in a festive mood. I would say it might not be a bad idea to oblige."

Whether the Colonel saw the truth of the Doctor's words or simply thought the Doctor mad and imagined it best to humour him we will never know, but he did sit down

and so – at a gesture from him – did the rest of his brood. But the Doctor did not immediately join them. He moved instead to the line of jolly stockings dangling from the fireplace and eyed them suspiciously. “Eight stockings, eight of us. Coincidence? And look – each has one of our names embroidered on it. One for each of you, one each for Mr. and Mrs. Trubshawe and one each for Hannah and myself.” He reached inside his own and looked mildly disappointed. “Empty. But here’s one that’s not – Joseph! A present for you!”

With that the Doctor tossed to Joseph a small black object. Joseph caught it expertly and studied it. “It’s coal!” he exclaimed. “What on Earth does it mean?”

“Now, now,” smiled the Doctor. “Surely we all know what a lump of coal in the stocking means. You’ve been naughty, Joseph!”

Joseph’s face fell, but the Colonel hissed his contempt. “Why this is simply absurd. What *is* the point of all this?”

The Doctor sat down and shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s exciting, isn’t it, not knowing? But perhaps we’ll find out.” He looked down at the plate before him, covered – as were the others – with a silver cloche. “Perhaps when we look at our food? What is the first course?”

“Onion soup,” sighed Mrs. Wolstencroft.

Hannah opened her cloche a fraction and looked beneath. “This isn’t onion soup...” she said nervously.

The Doctor risked a look himself. “No it is not. That, Hannah, is a plum pudding.”

The rest of the diners took a look at their own plates and each found the same thing; a perfectly spherical pudding topped with cream and a sprig of holly. The Colonel stood rapidly, sending his chair toppling to the ground, and flew to the silken rope bell before tugging it so hard that he seemed in danger of tearing it from the wall. “This is those servants, isn’t it? I’ll have their hides for this!”

But one diner did not seem so concerned. Joseph grabbed a fork and stabbed at his pudding. “Well I for one love plum pudding and I’m ruddy starving. I don’t care where it comes from, I’ll eat it!”

The Doctor made to put up a hand and stop the boy, but before anyone could say anything, Joseph had shovelled a forkful of the sticky sphere into his mouth. “Mmm,” he said through teeth stuck together with sugar. “Thish ish really good!”

But in a trice his demeanour changed. It began with a light cough, followed by a heavier one. Then Joseph’s face began to turn an alarming shade of puce, then purple. The coughing continued until he could not speak a word. The Doctor flew to his side as Mrs. Wolstencroft screamed; he wrenched the boy from his chair and began thrashing him on the back before finally giving up that tactic and deploying a textbook Heimlich manoeuvre. Still Joseph became more and more frantic, clawing at his throat as his lips turned an alarming shade of blue. Finally, despite the Doctor’s best efforts, his legs buckled beneath him and finally he lay still and unmoving.

A silence hung over the room for a few seconds before Cecily let out a piercing shriek which might have burst the eardrums of the assembled guests. And it was at that precise moment that Mr. and Mrs. Trubshawe entered.

Mrs. Trubshawe was as fat as her husband was thin, with a jolly red face perched atop a body as spherical as that of a snowman. The pair looked appalled at what they saw, and Mrs. Trubshawe’s hand flew to her mouth.

But the hand of their master would not be stayed. He brought down a crashing blow upon Trubshawe’s right temple and bellowed a feral scream. “What have you done? You

pair of murderers, with your horrid tricks and your plum puddings. I knew I should have listened when people told me about you. You've killed my son!"

But this tirade brought nothing but confusion to the faces of the two cowering servants. "Tricks, sir?" whimpered the confused Mrs. Trubshawe. "Plum puddings? But the plum puddings are downstairs, boiling on the hearth. All that has come up here was the onion soup!"

"They're right," said the Doctor grimly. He was holding a small, silver object which glinted in the watery light. "I don't think they put these puddings here."

"What's that?" asked Hannah. "A coin?"

"A silver sixpence, in a plum pudding. That's what he choked on. Quite an appropriate murder weapon for Christmas, wouldn't you say?"

He tossed the sixpence to Hannah, who caught it expertly. She frowned. "It's cold. If it had come out of a plum pudding, then been stuck in his throat, it should be warm, shouldn't it?"

The Doctor huffed and waved a hand dismissively. Hannah rolled her eyes in annoyance; she thought she'd made a brilliant deduction. "It's another apport," said the Doctor grimly. "Something very powerful is happening here, and I need to think about our next move. Colonel, Mrs. Wolstencroft, Cecily... I'm sorry for your loss, but I think it's only the beginning. We need to get out of this house."

But whatever was stalking the corridors of this house had other ideas. Because as the Doctor ran to the front door and threw it open, he found only the thick limbs and razor spines of a great holly bush which encircled all the house and made escape impossible.

* * * * *

It was half an hour later and the Doctor, Hannah and the remaining Wolstencrofts were sitting quietly in the drawing room. The Trubshaws had retreated to their home below stairs and the body of Joseph had been made as decent as possible and laid in his bed. The Doctor swirled a glass of brandy, having poured one for the parents of the deceased, and stared into the fire. "Okay. First – we are trapped. Second – something is in this house, and we don't know what. But it seems it means us harm. Third... well, I'll think of a third soon enough. First and second should be enough to occupy us for now. Can anyone think of any reason why Joseph should be a target?"

The three members of the family simply stared at the floor. "No," said Mrs. Wolstencroft eventually, her voice on the verge of breaking and her shoulders heaving as she fought to keep back the tears. "He was a good boy, he never harmed a fly. Whoever has done this is a monster."

Hannah yelped as something in her brain fired and triggered a memory. "Of course! Doctor, I meant to tell you but I completely forgot in all the excitement. Upstairs, I saw something. It was... well, it was Santa Claus."

"Who?" enquired Cecily.

"Father Christmas," translated the Doctor. "What do you mean, Hannah?"

"He was in the corridor, outside the bathroom. But he was wrong, somehow. All... creepy and weird. He was a thin and he had horrible eyes. And he was wearing green rather than red."

"Well," mused the Doctor, "That's consistent with the depictions of the time. How about it, Colonel, do you have any friends or relatives stalking about the house dressed as Father Christmas? No? I thought as much. So we can take it as a working hypothesis that this is our killer. But still, why Joseph? And what is the significance of the coal? Of course, it all fits together rather neatly; Father Christmas, coal in the stocking... yes, it is suggestive of something. The coal represents judgement, a sense that the recipient's behaviour has been weighed and found wanting. And yet, Colonel, you and your family maintain that Joseph was a paragon of virtue. Please, I ask you to think again – is there anything you can tell me that might shed light on why he was chosen?"

But the answer never came, because at that moment the candles guttered and went out, followed by the light from the fireplace. A chill entered the room and Cecily cried out in terror "It's him! I see him!"

As quickly as they had gone out, the lights returned and the Doctor rushed to Cecily's side. "What was it?" he demanded. "What did you see?"

Cecily fixed him with eyes full of fear. "I saw Father Christmas, just as your friend did. I saw him through the crack in the door, out in the hallway."

"But it was pitch black. How did you see him?"

Cecily gulped and looked awkwardly at her father. "He... glowed. It was as if he had some internal light. What *is* he?"

The Doctor shook his head. "I don't know. But we'll find out. Come on, everyone!"

* * * * *

Their first stop was the dining room. The Doctor rushed to the stocking hung so carefully by the chimney and began to feel inside each one. With a yelp of triumph he pulled out first one lump of coal and then another. Mrs. Wolstencraft and Cecily looked to the Colonel who attempted (rather poorly) to affect an air of a man in control. "So?" he asked bluffly. "Who do they belong to?"

The Doctor tossed the first piece to the Colonel. "Mr. Trubshawe," he said grimly. "And Mrs. Trubshawe," he concluded, throwing the second piece to Hannah. "Come on, we'd better go and check on them."

But it was too late. Below stairs, in a homely little kitchen, filled with towering piles of crockery and pans, were the two servants – but their spirits had already quit their bodies and gone to join the choir invisible. Mrs. Trubshawe's head was submerged in a pan of boiling water containing several bobbing puddings in their muslin casings. Her face was pale and swollen as the Doctor pulled her lifeless corpse from the bubbling water. Sitting nearby was Mr. Trubshawe – a sprig of holly emerged from his chest, and his formerly white shirt was soaked in a vast quantity of blood that left none present in any doubt that some vital organ had been pierced. I need hardly mention, reader, that he was quite dead.

"Boiled with her own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart," murmured the Doctor. "So our killer is well read, we know that much. But still not how he does it, or why."

Hannah looked into the face of Colonel Wolstencraft. "Is this making any more sense to you? You said you couldn't understand why someone would kill your son, but what about these two? Did they have any enemies? Anyone who might wish to harm them?"

But the Colonel merely shrugged. "I couldn't say. Let's get out of this charnel house." He turned and marched up the stairs, but his shoulders had fallen and the pride had gone out of him. He was a man on the edge, that much was clear. And in the fight to keep as many people alive as they could, that was an unpredictable factor that the Doctor and Hannah could do without.

* * * * *

After the bodies had been tidied up as well as possible and put respectfully to bed, the group reassembled once more in the drawing room. The atmosphere was now grimmer even than it had been before as the Doctor fretted and strutted about, the weights of the two fresh deaths settled about his shoulders like a black cloak.

"None of it makes sense," he complained. "How do we connect the deaths? Joseph and the Trubshawe's may have lived in the same house but they were different people with different lives. They would have moved in different social circles, known different people... it just doesn't stand up. There must be some connection, but what could it be?"

"Did they spend any time together?" asked Hannah. "Did they have any mutual friends or acquaintances?"

The Colonel and Mrs. Wolstencroft looked aghast at the suggestion. "Nothing so improper," said the Colonel bluffly. "Joseph was my son and they were the staff. They were polite with each other and I don't know that they ever quarrelled but beyond that there is nothing to say."

The Doctor mused on this. "The connection may not be a direct one. It may be something they all did, but not necessarily together or at the same time."

The room sunk again into silence as everyone reflected on this. For a long time the crackle of the fire and the gentle ticking of the clock were the only sounds, as Hannah thought long and hard. Something at the back of her mind would not stop niggling; it was as if a thread had come loose in her brain and was dangling there, daring her to pull it but her mental fingers lacked the dexterity necessary. She stared at the Wolstencrofts, sure they knew more than they were saying, for they could meet neither her gaze nor each other's. It was so *stupid* – if they knew something that might help the Doctor unravel the whole riddle, why should they not say? After all, their lives were at stake as much as anyone else's.

And it was then, as she relaxed for a moment and stopped consciously trying to remember that the neural pathways slotted into place, and Hannah sat up with a start as if she had been given a rather illuminating electric shock. "Wait a second," she yelped. "You said something – when the Trubshawes came in after Joseph died, you said something... something about how you should have listened to what people said about them."

The Doctor, who had been bowing his head in silent contemplation all this time, suddenly sat bolt upright. "Yes, that's right, you did! What did you mean by that?"

"Nothing," said the Colonel – too quickly. "I didn't mean anything. I mean... some people might have said something to me about the general quality of their work. I... I don't know why I said it – my son had just died, I was in shock."

"No," said the Doctor, leaning in closer. "No, it was something very specific. You thought they'd killed your son and you suggested that you'd been warned they would do that. Now why would anyone tell you that?"

The Colonel shifted uncomfortably in his chair and looked to his wife for help. She could not meet his gaze. After a few further moments of silence, finally, Cecily spoke up. "Come, father, I think it is time to confess."

"Be quiet, Cecily," chided her mother.

"No! Why should I? We both know what this is about, and so does father. We could all be in danger, and the Doctor and Hannah might be our best chance of getting out of it. We have to tell them what we know."

The Colonel opened his mouth to speak, but the Doctor held up a hand. "Go on, Cecily," he smiled. "You tell me what it is that you know."

Cecily drew herself up to her full height and put her hands delicately into her lap as she began the story. "Father isn't as well off as you'd think. He's made some bad investments over the last few years and we can barely keep this household together any more. When I was a girl this house was full of life – there was the family, of course, and many, many servants and we all lived together and laughed together and my goodness, we had some wonderful Christmases! But over the years everything seemed to simply dwindle away and mother and father became so bitter and angry. And when at last it came to the day when we could no longer afford to keep on the butler and the cook, and they packed their bags and left, the house at last seemed so empty that it was as if the world had quite ended. And then, that night, there was a knock at the door and it was Mr. and Mrs. Trubshawe, and they were offering their services to father for a fraction of what he had paid the previous servants. Father couldn't believe his luck, but there was a catch. Their previous employer had been an old lady by the name of Mrs. Ratchett. She had died quite mysteriously one night, and the Trubshawes had inherited all her money. There were rumours in the village that when they discovered the terms of her will they had done away with her by means of poison in the soup. There was a very thorough police investigation but no hard evidence was ever found, and so they had inherited the money. But Mrs. Trubshawe was a drinker, and her husband was a devil for the cards. Within a year they had lost the money and so they appeared here with their offer of work that was so advantageous for father. The rumours would not die, though, and many of father's friends thought he was mad to give them work here."

The Colonel leaped into the story here. "But I saw all the police reports. There was no evidence at all that they had poisoned Mrs. Ratchett, and even if there were why should they do it to us? I was in rather reduced circumstances so there was no great inheritance to be had, and even if there were they should not inherit it. Unlike Mrs. Ratchett I had a family, who would claim anything that was left in the event that I died."

The Doctor considered this. "But even if they didn't intend to do away with you, that doesn't mean that they were innocent of the previous murder. Far be it from me to think ill of the dead, but I think this may give us some insight into why this spectral Father Christmas judged them and found their behaviour wanting."

Hannah interrupted. "But wait a moment. That might tell us why the Trubshawes were targeted, but what about Joseph? What had he done?"

"A very good question," said the Doctor grimly. "And one for which I imagine the Colonel and Mrs. Wolstencroft are about to furnish us with an answer. Well, Colonel?"

The Wolstencrofts looked at each other, neither wanting to speak, but eventually Mrs. Trubshawe tore her eyes away from her husband and looked down at the floor glumly. "There was an incident when he was at school..." she began.

"Margaret!" hissed the colonel, but the story was begun and would not be ended.

"A boy drowned," sobbed Mrs. Wolstencroft. "At Joseph's boarding school there was a lake. Joseph and another boy stole a boat and went out onto the water one night. Joseph always maintained that the boy fell into the water, but afterwards some of his school chums came forward and said that he and the boy had been quarrelling a lot. They suggested he might have pushed the boy. The police were involved but there was no evidence either way. He swore to us that it had been an accident, and we accepted it. But now... now I don't know what to think."

Finally Mrs. Wolstencroft erupted into sobs. Hannah moved to comfort her but was shoved away roughly. "Is that it?" said Colonel Wolstencroft in a voice dripping with quiet menace. "Is this what this is all about? Some childish mistake - that is why my son is dead?"

"No," said the Doctor. "I think he is dead because he committed a crime and was never punished. Or at least someone - or something - believes he did. That's the connection, that's why he and the Trubshawes are dead. But what about the rest of us? Are there any other secrets here?"

At that very moment, the lights dimmed in the now-customary fashion. "Well," went on the Doctor. "We'll soon find out, won't we?"

* * * * *

The group crept into the dining room and the Doctor hastily crossed to the fireplace. "Who is it?" enquired the Colonel, a quiver of fear in his voice. "Who is it now?"

The Doctor felt at the stockings until he found a slight bulge in the bottom of one. "It's Cecily," he said grimly. Mrs. Wolstencroft shrieked loudly and buried her head into the bosom of her child, but as the Doctor reached into the stocking he laughed. When he extracted his hand it was not a lump of coal that he was holding but a small toy monkey holding a pair of cymbals. The Doctor placed the toy delicately on the table amongst the remains of dinner and smiled as it began maniacally crashing the tiny tin discs together. Its face was drawn into a demented rictus grin and on its head was perched a red bell-boy hat with gold trim, worn at a jaunty angle.

"What is it?" wailed Cecily. "What does it *mean*?"

The Doctor smiled and thrust his hands into his pockets. "I think it means that you are safe. That whatever this is has judged you and found you innocent. It's left you a Christmas present!"

Cecily cried out. "But I don't *want* the beastly thing! I just want this over with, finished!"

"Well, then," said the Doctor. "Let's see what we can do about that."

* * * * *

Back once more in the drawing room the Doctor poured a stiff drink for all concerned. "You'll need these," he said. "Once I've told you what I'm about to tell you, you'll probably be glad of them. Now, I need you all to have a good long think about what we've all seen tonight and I need to make sure you're keeping an open mind because lives may depend on it. We're trapped here, and nobody is going to come and let us out. If we're going to escape we have to act."

The Colonel cast a downward glance at the floor. "We know all that. If you have some idea about how we can get out if this, just tell us, would you?"

"But it isn't as simple as that. What I'm going to tell you requires you to accept some things that may be hard for you. The first thing you need to understand is about Hannah and myself. We're... well, we've come a long way to be here tonight."

Mrs. Wolstencroft looked up in confusion. "You're... not from Chobham?"

"No," confirmed the Doctor with an apologetic smile. "I may tell you candidly that we are not from Chobham."

"Then where? Woking?"

"No," said the Doctor impatiently. He ran a hand through his hair. "Rather further away than that. Hannah here is from the United States."

The Colonel looked confused. "Then she *isn't* a gypsy?"

"No, though I can see why you would make that mistake. She is from America, but not the America you know. She is from the future."

This was greeted with blank stares. The Doctor, pleased that if nothing else he hadn't been called a lunatic, decided to push his luck. "I mentioned we have a carriage. But it isn't the kind of carriage you might be used to. Our carriage travels in time."

"Okay," said Cecily at last. "So if Hannah is from the future, where are *you* from?"

The Doctor pointed quietly upward. This drew nothing but looks of confusion from the assembled family. "You come from... upstairs?" said the Colonel hesitantly.

"No, from another world. There are many, many other worlds out there and many of them have life just as Earth has. And I think the thing that is in this house with us comes from another world just as I do."

"So," said Cecily, "This carriage of yours carries you among the stars, as well as through time?"

"Yes."

"I see. So do you know what this thing is?"

"Cecily!" yelled the Colonel. "Don't tell me you've been taken in by this absurd nonsense?"

"Oh, be quiet father. You haven't come up with any better suggestions, and you've seen what's happened here tonight. Clearly this is not of this world, is it?"

The Doctor glared at the Colonel contemptuously. "No, no it isn't. I think this is a thing called a Puck. I don't know how it got here – it may have made its own way or it may have stowed away with us. I suspect the latter, because it seems too large a coincidence otherwise that it would turn up at the exact moment that we did."

Hannah had been listening intently. "So this Puck is what's dressed up as Santa?"

"Not actually, no. A Puck is only about three or four inches high. But it can project incredibly vivid psychic images. I suspect our Puck is presenting the image of this Father Christmas. It has clearly picked up on the psychic resonance of the local population and since they are all concerned with Christmas, this is the form it has chosen to project."

Hannah looked confused. "So it can't hurt us? If it's just an image?"

"It clearly can hurt us," the Doctor snapped back angrily. 'It's killed three people already, using its psychic power. It's physically weak, but incredibly powerful in other ways. The Puck race see themselves as intergalactic vigilantes. They are able to see the guilt or innocence of a person, to weigh their character, and if they believe they are unworthy... they will kill them. They hate criminals and they *especially* hate murderers. But they are

also born with a rather absurd sense of theatre about the matter. They like to carry out their duties in an ostentatious and, if I may say so, a rather silly manner. That's the real purpose of this charade, and that's what has given it away to me."

"So what can we do?" said Hannah nervously. "If it's so powerful..."

"But it isn't *that* powerful; it can't project these images or create these apports remotely. It has to be somewhere in the area, most probably in the house. So what we have to do is find it."

Mrs. Wolstencroft sighed. "But you said this thing was only a few inches tall. This house is vast. How are we to find it?"

"Well," said the Doctor with a shrug. "I agree it's not an ideal plan but it's the only one we have. So we'd better get started, hadn't we?"

* * * * *

So they split into teams. Since Cecily – if the Doctor's theory held – was safe, she volunteered to go alone. Colonel and Mrs. Wolstencroft insisted on staying together, which left the Doctor and Hannah to make up the final team. The Wolstencrofts remained downstairs while the Doctor and Hannah made their way up the great staircase in the main hall. They had turned over several of the bedrooms – finding nothing – when Hannah turned to the Doctor. "Will we find it in time?" she asked.

"I don't know," grimaced the Doctor as he threw books from a bookshelf. "Hey, this reminds me of that kids' game show that they used to make. Did you watch that?"

"Maybe it was before my time," said Hannah, rolling her eyes. "Doctor, I'm worried."

The Doctor turned around and glared at his companion. "Hannah, for once will you just trust me? Listen, because I've explained this before and I'm not going to keep going through it all night. You'll be fine. Remember it isn't out to kill us all – just those of us who it thinks are guilty. It specifically seems to have a grudge against murderers, which as I said is consistent with the way these Pucks behave. So look... there's nothing to worry about. You're going to be just fine."

The Doctor, perhaps realising he had been too hard in his response, winked at Hannah as reassuringly as he was able and turned back to what he had been doing. Hannah stared sadly at him for a moment and wiped away a tear.

* * * * *

After an hour, nothing had been found by the Doctor and Hannah. The group having previously agreed that they would reconvene at this time in the dining room to compare their findings, the pair – with a look of defeat settled about their shoulders – tramped down the stairs. But on entering the dining room they found a sight they did not expect.

Sitting calmly at the long dining room table was Cecily. Before her on the table sat two lumps of deep black coal, a kind of horrid malevolence radiating from them.

"Cecily?" said the Doctor. "What happened?"

"The lights went off again. Didn't you see?"

The Doctor looked to Hannah. "We didn't. We were upstairs, but... oh, of course! The effect must be more localised... we were too far away. Oh, Cecily. Why didn't you call us?"

"What would have been the point? You can't stop it, can you?"

The Doctor conceded the point. "Cecily, who's stockings did they come from?"

Cecily laughed. "Mother and father, of course. I never believed it, but I suppose it must have been true."

"I'm sure you have something to tell us, Cecily, but that must wait. There might still be something we can do for them. "Where did they go?"

Cecily sighed. "They were in the drawing room."

* * * * *

Cecily waited in the dining room as the Doctor and Hannah crept down the corridor to the drawing room and gingerly opened the door. Hannah almost let out a whoop of delight as she saw the couple sitting on the sofa sharing a tender kiss. But then she realised they were not moving, even their chests were still, the gentle rise and fall of life quite missing. The Doctor gestured for Hannah to stay where she was, and crept gingerly over to the pair. As he touched the Colonel on the shoulder he slumped lifeless to the floor and the Doctor bent over his prone form. He reached into the man's open mouth and pulled out a handful of mashed leaves and white berries. "Mistletoe," he said. "Very poisonous stuff. Though looking at him I'm not sure whether the poison got to him first or he simply choked – the stuff is rammed right down his throat. Mrs. Wolstencroft is the same."

"A kiss under the mistletoe..." added Hannah, rather redundantly.

Cecily entered the room and sat down. She glared at the lifeless corpses of her parents and sighed forlornly. "Well, I suppose I should tell you the story as I heard it from Joseph, who heard it from a boy at school who claims *he* heard it from his father who had too much port at dinner and became loose-lipped. Apparently everyone around here knew all about it. When father was in the army he was away a lot. At that time there was a gardener who worked on the house, a young thing, tall and strong as my father was pot-bellied and weak-limbed, and word got back to father that mother was quite taken with the young man and that they had been seen stepping out together. I suppose you wouldn't think so to look at her now, but she was a pretty thing in her youth, I'm told.

"So the next time father got back he went to have it out with the gardener, and the next thing mother found father standing over the body of the boy with a pitchfork in his hand and that was the end of that. Except that mother, full of grief and anger, became fixated on the idea that one of the maids had gotten word to father. She thought that the maid liked the gardener herself and so had set out to break up the affair. The next thing anyone knew, the maid was herself found in a broken heap at the bottom of the stairs."

The Doctor turned to Hannah and arched an eyebrow. Hannah stared back wide eyed – who *were* these people, this unassuming family who seemed to kill as if it were nothing?

"The story ends with mother and father deciding to stay together for the sake of appearances and laying out a lot of money to keep the whole thing hushed up. And that's how father found himself in reduced circumstances, not through bad investments. It wasn't long after the incident with Joseph and I've often thought the two things might be connected. You see, the rumours weren't just that Joseph and the boy stole a boat, but that they were doing... unnatural things together on their nocturnal adventures. Mother and father were both beside themselves, father buried himself in his work and became more distant."

The Doctor held up a hand. "How do the Trubshawes come into this? What is their connection?"

Cecily let out a grim little laugh. "The Trubshawes didn't come to work for us because they were they had gambled and drunk away their money, at least not *just* for that reason – they came because they were in on it too. Mr. Trubshawe was one of the men who helped father hide the bodies, in return for which father used his influence to make some very important evidence in the Mrs. Ratchett case disappear. Since each knew things about the other that could be inconvenient, they decided that the Trubshawes should work here where they and father and mother would be close at hand and everyone could keep an eye on everyone else. So that's the story, as best I know it, and I can't say I'm much sorry that any of them are dead if a word of it is true, which I suppose it seems it is."

Hannah sat down and let out a long sigh. "So they were all murderers? All of this was connected?"

"So it seems," said the Doctor quietly. "But the night's not over yet. You and I still have to be judged, Hannah."

"Maybe we don't," cried Hannah. "Look, all these killings that we've heard about tonight... the boy at the school, Mrs. Ratchett, the maid, the gardener... they're all resolved now, right? Maybe this was the situation the Puck was wanting to sort out and now he has and the rest of us can go!"

The Doctor shook his head sadly. "No, Hannah, I don't think that's it. If that were true, why would we have stockings of our own? No, we have to wait and be judged too."

But Hannah threw her arms up frantically. "No, no, you're wrong. I know it. Come on, let's go! We'll be allowed to leave now, I'm certain!"

So Hannah ran to the front door and threw it open, but outside the thick, choking holly remained as impenetrable as ever. It covered the doorway, and the windows, and the thick snow meant that the chance of anyone happening by to effect a rescue was remote. No – the Doctor had been quite right, of course. Escape remained impossible until this long Christmas Eve had finished and the work of the ghostly Santa was quite done. Hannah collapsed onto the tiled floor and closed her eyes.

* * * * *

A few minutes later she re-entered the drawing room having composed herself. "So what's the plan?" she hooted gamely, hoping desperately that the red around her eyes would not give away that she had been crying. She saw that the Doctor and Cecily, in her absence, had covered the bodies of the Colonel and Mrs. Wolstencroft.

"Well," said the Doctor, steepling his fingers and staring into the fire. "We could revert back to our original plan and carry on searching for the Puck. Although exactly what we're going to do with it if we catch it... well, I'm not sure. Our other option is to wait it out. It's already examined Cecily and decided she's okay. You'll be fine too. My only concern is what happens when it's my turn."

"What do you mean?" cried Hannah. "You're *brilliant*, how could it possibly object to you?"

The Doctor sighed. His face darkened and he stared once more into the fire. The crackling radiance lent his face a sinister aspect that Hannah had never noticed before. He suddenly seemed infinitely old, and infinitely wise, and infinitely terrible.

"You ask the Daleks if I'm brilliant. Or the Cybermen. Go and speak to the Zygons, or to Morbius, if you can scoop up all the bits. I've seen and done things you people wouldn't believe; and people have died. People and monsters and aliens, and I believe – I genuinely believe, because I have to – that all that had to happen, that I was always just and true and I never overstepped the mark. In the balance, I saved lives. But even so, people *did* die. Not directly by my hand, not usually, but *because* of me. So I live with myself because what is the alternative? Becoming a hermit, staying out of the way? I've tried that, and it was rubbish, and I'm never doing it again. But now I'm faced with an enemy that doesn't see it that way. Doesn't understand all my justification and moral relativism, and wouldn't care a whit about them if they did. I can't say what is going to happen when it comes for me, Hannah, and I worry that if I end up meeting some festive demise you're going to be stuck here, forever."

"You know," said Cecily, "You really are the strangest man I've ever met."

"I should hope so," snapped the Doctor. "And if you live to be a hundred I doubt you'll meet stranger. But now, perhaps it's time for me to go." With that he stood up, picked up the cup of tea that had been sitting on the arm of his chair and drained it in a single mighty gulp, then tossed the cup into the fireplace and whirled round dramatically. "Freezing bloody cold," he said rather sadly. "Which somewhat spoiled the effect. Now, come on you two!"

He threw open the doors of the drawing room and banged loudly on the walls. "Come on!" he yelled. "Come on out! I'm ready! Come and judge me, I can take it!"

As if on cue, the candles dipped and a chill settled over the house. "That's it!" chided the Doctor. "Come on, then, let's see what you've got for me!"

The Doctor tore at speed into the dining room, almost barrelling into the huge Christmas tree as he went. He thrust his hand into the stocking bearing his name but as Cecily and Hannah caught up with him he wore a look of confusion. "It's not here," he whispered. "There's nothing here, it's empty."

Hannah smiled weakly and shrugged an apology. "No, that's because it's here." She reached into her stocking and pulled from it the now-familiar black mass. "I'm sorry."

The Doctor looked at her aghast. "But... why? You've done nothing. *Nothing.*"

"Oh, Doctor," sighed Hannah, cupping her friend's face in her hand. "I could tell you. I want to tell you. But I don't want to die with you hating me."

"Hannah, you're not going to die."

"I am. I am. It's okay, I think I've known ever since you first told me what this thing was. I probably guessed even before that."

"I need to understand," whispered the Doctor. "I need to help you."

"You can't. He's here now. Come for me. I can see him. He's there, in the doorway – no, don't look – and in a moment the lights are going to go out and when they come on again I'll be dead in some comic fashion and I just want to ask you, will you take me home? Afterwards. I just want to know that I'll be home."

"Of course," said the Doctor, squeezing her hand as a teardrop formed at the corner of his eye.

The candles began to splutter and fail, and at that moment Cecily Wolstencroft chanced a look at the door and saw standing there Father Christmas, staring back at her with a coal-black hatred burning behind eyes full of malevolence. She remembered her brother, and her mother and father, and the servants, and that little monkey and its

horrible grin and it all became too much for her. Clutching her head, she keeled over in an act of impeccable physical comedy, landing on a nearby tallboy on which was perched precariously an antique vase. Furniture and vase and girl all went down together, landing with a crash on the floor – whereupon with an almost audible ‘pop’ the evil Father Christmas – along with the tree, the garlands, the stockings, the log, the puddings, the coal and the monkey – all vanished.

Hannah looked at the Doctor who looked at her. Then both looked at the prone form of Cecily. Among the ruins of the smashed vase, crushed by the fallen tallboy, there was the corpse of a tiny man with pointed ears, wearing a bright red shirt and an amusing conical hat with a bell on the end. Hannah and the Doctor looked down at the strange, broken little thing.

“Is that...?” began Hannah.

The Doctor nodded. “Yes, Hannah, it is. He was hiding in the vase the whole time. Wasn’t that lucky?”

* * * * *

A dose of smelling salts found in the cabinet was enough to bring revive Cecily from her swoon, at least enough for the Doctor and Hannah to escort her upstairs and pop her into one of the few beds in the property not now occupied by a corpse. Then they gingerly took up the broken Puck and Hannah found an empty humidor in which to store it until they could send it off with a degree of dignity. Then the Doctor poured them both a double brandy and sat down beside Hannah.

“And now,” he said, “You’re going to tell me exactly what all this is about.”

Hannah took the glass gratefully and smiled weakly. “I suppose it’s too late to say ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about?’”

“Yes,” came the reply. “I think we’ve gone a bit beyond that now.”

Hannah wiped tears from her eyes and stared intensely at her friend. She made a faltering attempt to speak but the words caught in her throat and choked her. The Doctor raised an eyebrow. “Come on,” he said. You can tell me, you know. Whatever it is, it can’t be as bad as all that.”

Hannah gave a wry little laugh. “You think? You think it isn’t as bad as all that? You don’t know... you just don’t. You need to understand, telling you this is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. When I’ve told you I’m not sure you’ll want me around anymore.”

“I promise, I will listen to what you tell me and I will try my very hardest not to judge you too harshly. Whatever it is. I know you are a good person, and I can’t imagine anything you have to tell me might change that.”

Hannah screwed up her courage and took a deep breath. “The first thing you need to understand is that it was... it was Christmas, that’s the funny thing. It was Christmas time when my mom’s cancer got really bad. She was in the hospital all the time. They were doing everything they could for the pain, giving her morphine she could drink and covering her in patches but it still hurt her every day. It was a real deep pain, right in her bones, and the meds just didn’t touch it, y’know? I remember we were sitting out on the porch, about a week before Christmas, and my mom asked me... she said, if it got too bad, so that she couldn’t stand it anymore... would I help her? You know, you know what I mean. Help her to die. And... I said yes, because... because you just *do* don’t you? It’s just *talk*. I still... I mean,

the doctors had said she wouldn't get better but I think I just assumed they were wrong. Does any of this make sense? It was stupid, and I think I knew deep down how stupid it was, but I just never imagined that she wouldn't get better, so I could make this ridiculous promise and not worry about it. Because it was never going to happen. Not to my mom. And that was so stupid, so ridiculous, because then it did happen to her and I wasn't ready, I hadn't used the time to prepare myself."

Hanna paused in her tale and the Doctor took her hand, only to realise it was shaking violently. He squeezed it hard and gestured for Hannah to go on.

"So it's Christmas Eve and she calls me into her room and she says she's ready, she wants to go. And I don't believe it because... because she loves Christmas and I can't believe that she wants to go now. And she says, it's okay, and if she goes now it'll always be Christmas Eve for her and that I should see that that's a beautiful thing and I shouldn't be sad, and this shouldn't spoil Christmas for me because I'm doing what she wants. I'm helping her to fly, to get out of that bed, out of that wheelchair, out of that body that's crippled with pain and fly away. And all I can think is that I promised. I promised. I can't say no now.

"So I... I get her pills, and I help her crush them and I put them into a glass of water and I help her drink it and... and then I lie with her and we talk about old times and we laugh like we haven't laughed for a long time. And then she's gone. She's gone, and I'm left. And I swear, I wanted to drink the rest of that glass myself. I killed my mom, Doctor. And I've been keeping it secret ever since like a coward. I told people I left the bottle by her bed by accident and she must have done it herself. I should have gone to prison, Doctor; I lied. Like the Colonel and Mrs. Wolstencroft and the Trubshawes."

"No," said the Doctor. "Not like them. Hannah, you're not like them. They did what they did out of self-interest and greed. I'm not going to say they deserved to die, because that isn't for me to decide any more than it was for the Puck. But you, certainly, did not deserve to die."

Having been on the verge, Hannah finally broke into a sob. "But I *killed* her!"

"No, I think... you did what you did for love. I think she would have found a way, whether you had helped her or not, but because you were there she got to die surrounded by love. I'm not going to tell you that you did the right thing because it isn't for me to make that judgement. Only you can decide that. But for what it's worth, I think your reasons were admirable, and you have nothing to be ashamed of. And I would be *honoured* if you would continue travelling with me."

Hannah wiped her nose noisily on the sleeve of her dress. "You mean it?"

"Of course. You're my best friend, Hannah Redfoot. And life without you would be... less. The Puck did what it did, it judged you the way it judged you, because it was an idiot. It didn't understand nuance. It didn't grasp the reasons why you did what you did. I do, and I am proud to count you my friend."

"Are you okay?" asked Hannah, looking askance. "You don't normally say things like that."

The Doctor winked at her. "Don't get used to it. Now come here and take advantage of my good mood while it lasts." And so the two friends embraced, a long warm hug that said more than any of the words that had been bandied that Christmas morning (as it must now be, for through the window the sun could be seen cresting the tops of the trees). As

they parted from each other with a smile, and more than a few tears in their eyes, they saw the figure of Cecily framed in the doorway.

"Ah," smiled the Doctor. "Miss Wolstencroft. We were just thinking that now might be a good time to take our leave. You know, despite everything we really are very sorry about your family. I'm sure this must all have been very hard for you."

Cecily shrugged. "Well... I can see why you'd think that. But actually, I'm perfectly okay with it. I mean, there's the obvious problem of how I'm going to explain things to the authorities. But besides that... well, even though father lost most of his money, there's still a reasonable inheritance to be had, and the house of course. And... well, to tell you the truth there's a farmer's lad I've had my eye on for some time but my parents didn't approve so they stopped us seeing each other. But now I'm free to do as I please! So, while it's certainly tragic and I shall certainly mourn *very* hard, it isn't *all* bad. Now, if you'll both excuse me, I have a lot to do. Do you need me to show you out?"

* * * * *

And so it was that the Doctor and Hannah found themselves, that Christmas morn, standing on the doorstep as the door was closed politely but roughly in their face.

"Hey," said Hannah. "My clothes are still in there!"

"Come on," shrugged the Doctor. "This has been a very silly night and I'm in no mood to hang around."

Then Hannah produced the humidor containing the dead miniature alien from the folds of her dress. "What are we doing with this?" she asked.

"Well, I thought we could go into the village and see if there's a pub open. If there is we'll have a Christmas drink, then hire some local navvies to come and dig the TARDIS out. And *then*, I'll make sure we get this to someone who can take it back to its home. We won't go there ourselves for... reasons that should seem self-explanatory."

"Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"Merry Christmas, Doctor."

"And a Merry Christmas to you, too, Miss Redfoot. And a Merry Christmas to all of you at home."

"What?"

"What do you mean what?"

"Why did you say that?"

"Say what?"

"You know, about a Merry Christmas to everyone at home. Who do you mean?"

"Well isn't that a thing people say?"

"Not in my experience."

"Oh. I... I see."

"I need a drink."

* * * * *

And that, dear reader, was that. The Doctor and Hannah were soon away to the stars, having adventures and righting wrongs as was their wont. And as for Cecily and her farmer's lad? Reader, she married him. Alas, the marriage barely saw out the year before

poor Cecily found her young man in bed with a milk-maid; thereafter Cecily took to rattling around her family home becoming increasingly erratic in her behaviour. She lived to a fine old age, right up until the early 1960s, having carved out dual careers as a moderately successful science fiction novelist and a local eccentric. But she always said – to any who would listen – that she adored Christmas, and that she meant to keep the season as well as she could for it was her favourite time of the year and held wonderful memories for her. What that says about her, reader, is beyond the wit of your humble narrator to tell.

But hark! I hear the clock strike twelve; it is now Christmas! I must repair to my bed, to await the pleasures of the morning, but I will pray for you that you receive a visit from Father Christmas – and that he leaves more in your stocking than a lump of coal; and if as you celebrate you might make time to raise a small glass of sherry to your humble narrator it shall be very much appreciated. And so it remains only for me to say the immortal words: “Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!”

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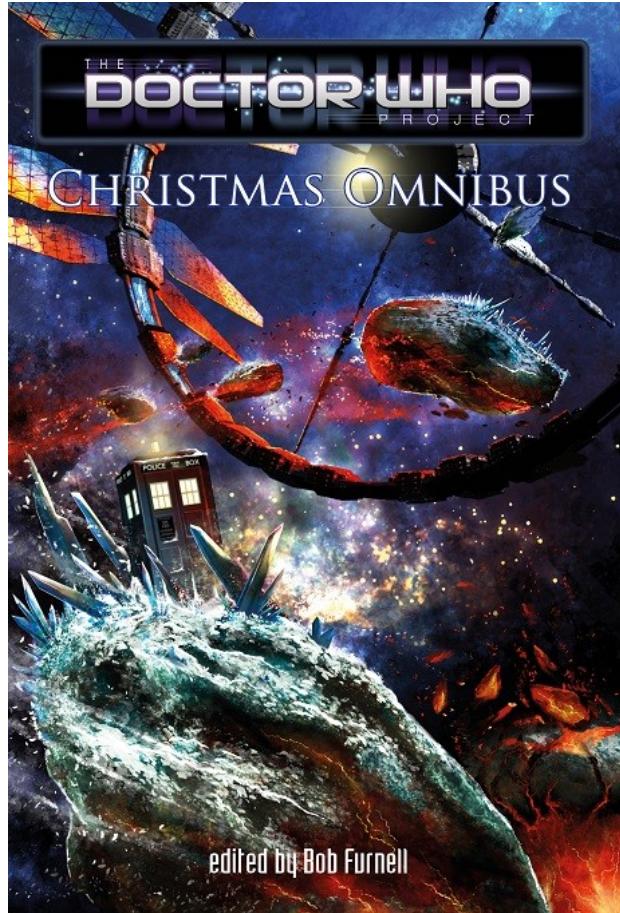
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Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house not a creature was stirring...

Except the Doctor. And Hannah. Oh, and the evil alien Santa stalking them through the corridors. When the time travellers find themselves stranded and cut off by the snow they take refuge at a local house where they find a welcome as cool as the weather outside. And as the bodies pile up in a house riddled with secrets, the Doctor must find the killer before it's his turn. Meanwhile Hannah harbours a secret of her own that could destroy her relationship with her best friend.

Why have Christmas decorations mysteriously appeared where there were none before? What horrors do the mysterious blackouts portend? And what IS going on with that Santa? As night falls and the house is cut off from rescue, the Doctor is the only one who can save those who live there. But do any of them deserve to be saved?

Careful with that mistletoe. Stay well away from the plum pudding. And whatever you do, pray you don't find coal in your stocking. Because this is one Christmas when you really, really had better watch out...

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This is another story in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the Tenth Doctor as played by Laurent Meyer

