

CHRISTMAS II

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The Doctor

first publication of a story by

T. F. Powys

*one of the thirty-two items in Selected Early Works of T. F. Powys
(see announcement on the Home Page)*

Those who pass along the road from Wemborne to Maidenbridge might view for a moment, or at least notice, a very ordinary cottage, perched like a swallow's nest upon the side of a down that lay like a great green whale by the roadside.

The nearest town, Wemborne, was a good ten miles off, so that the dwellers in Chalk-pit Cottage had a long journey to go, did they wish for a shop larger than the tiny store at Burnfield.

Suppose a traveller had looked for a moment upon a certain Christmas Eve, when the wind, that had been west all the night, suddenly veered to the north-east, a token, with a low glass and a lowering sky, of ugly weather at hand; the traveller would have seen, were he one to notice such things, an old man in the garden of Chalk-pit Cottage, taking in the clothes from the line, as if they were white flowers, for he touched them so tenderly.

This was Mr Tribb, whose wife as old as himself, exactly as she had placed the kettle on the hob to boil for tea, was taken with pain and sickness and tottered to bed.

The side of that hill, except for the great chalk-pit, which yielded no fossils, was as plainness itself, and the road in the valley, that was at the bottom of the hill was duller still. And the Tribbs might have been as ordinary as their surroundings, with nothing to pray for or to love, unless Mrs Tribb had prayed for the cat, which she once did, that Sandy might be kept from temptation; though the very night of her prayer the cat was caught in a keeper's gin.

Dull they would have been had it not been for Johnnie, and a little dispute they used to have about Almighty God, and His Only Son Jesus, in which Johnnie who was taught by Mr Hayday in the Burnfield Sunday School, was wont to join.

In God Mr Tribb believed, but when Jesus Christ was mentioned, he reasoned that there never was such a person, and that He was only invented by Mr Hayday, who wished for someone of good character to talk about.

The Tribbs had one daughter named Nelly who died away, and from her came Johnnie, whose one wish in life, until he was four years old, had been to fall into the chalk-pit.

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Johnnie was exactly like his mother, whose photograph was in the parlour at Chalk-pit Cottage, while her grave was at Stonebridge where she was in service. He had a round merry face, with an inquisitive look, and a great wish to prove that whatever he was told was true.

Johnnie was ten years old.

The afternoon darkened, Mr Tribb took down the last of the clothes, Johnnie's shirt. A cold rain was beginning to fall, that stung the face sharply, the rain would soon be snow.

Thomas Tribb went indoors, he folded the clothes as he had been told to do and placed them upon a chair. Then he pushed some sticks under the kettle until it boiled. When the tea was made he carried a cup up to his wife. She drank a little but her stomach would not hold it. Her pain and weakness grew worse. The Wemborne Doctor had told her earlier in the year, to be prepared for the worst.

For five years Thomas Tribb's farthest walk had been to the chalk-pit, he was so lame that it would have been quite impossible for him to walk now as far as Burnfield. He gave his wife a look, that a man only gives when he is deeply troubled.

"As soon as Johnnie do come home, 'e had best go for Dr Dawkins," he said.

"'Tis a clergyman I do want," murmured Mrs Tribb.

"Mr Hayday don't never leave John Tubb who be dying at Burnfield," said Mr Tribb, "who do like to hear 'is talk. Dr Dawkins be the one for we to send for."

Mrs Tribb closed her eyes.

Thomas Tribb left her, he went down, opened the door, and looked out into the night. He longed for Johnnie to come. The little boy was at a party given by Mr Hayday at the Burnfield Vicarage, he might not be home till eight or nine o'clock.

"If there were only God to talk about," said Thomas Tribb nodding at the clock, "Johnnie would have been home by tea time."

To watch suffering and to be utterly unable to relieve it, is a sad trouble, though Thomas Tribb did all that was possible before Johnnie came, and even then the time would be long before the Doctor could come.

Mrs Tribb, ill as she was, could not help smiling sometimes at what her husband said, as he sat by her.

"As if a God weren't enough for all honest folk," Mr Tribb observed, "without this t'other that Mr Hayday do talk about."

"But there would be no Christmas without Him," said Mrs Tribb.

"And so much the better for we," exclaimed Mr Tribb. "And if Johnnie don't come I'll start a-walking to Wemborne myself. Dr Dawkins' house be a mile this way out of town."

"Thee'd get so far as chalk-pit, then thee's wold leg would break," murmured Mrs Tribb.

Outside the winter wind beat and battered against the cottage walls, and blew the soot down the chimney.

But though darkness was without, it was not the utter darkness of a winter's night, for the moon though hidden by the snow clouds

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was in the sky.

Happiness to a simple peasant, for such was Mary Tribb, consists of little loving fancies, that are ever with her to ease the toil of her days. The scent of one summer flower and the joy of plucking it from its stem, was an act different to her, than to those who lead a life of greater understanding. Each little event that happens to her is a new wonder, all good, because she is the centre of every happening. She knew herself to be dying—unless something happened very strangely that Christmas night—and to die, that was something to do.

The evening wore on. “Where be kettle put?” asked Mrs Tribb, starting up suddenly.

“’Tis on the fire,” replied Mr Tribb. “Ah, ’twas Christmas time when I did buy this kettle, and ’tis Christmas time now.”

“Which of we be dying?” she asked.

“None of we if doctor do come,” replied Thomas Tribb.

“Be that the doctor?” she cried out when a little after ten o’clock Johnnie came in with a great clatter followed by snowflakes.

Johnnie was in the best of spirits, because Mr Hayday had given him a little hammer, bidding him never forget the kingly boy who had once been a carpenter.

“’Tain’t no Christ but ’tis doctor who be wanted,” said Thomas Tribb.

Johnnie ran upstairs to kiss his grandmother. He called her “Mother”.

No one could be more bold than Johnnie when anything of importance had to be done.

“Don’t ’ee come home without no doctor,” said Thomas Tribb, as Johnnie with his large muffler round his neck and his overcoat on went out into the night.

He had to pass through Burnfield, where he had been only recently the guest of Mr Hayday, whose kindness of heart no one could find a bottom to, and who, as soon as ever the merry games that he played with the children were over, had hurried out into the cold to visit John Tubb who was known to be near to his end.

Johnnie waited a few moments outside the cottage where Mr Hayday was, to tie his boot lace by the light of the window, and he heard Mr Hayday read—

“O Lord, look down from heaven, behold, visit, and relieve this thy servant.”

As Mr Hayday read these words, when he came to “visit”, he paused for a moment, as though he really believed that if he were invited, the heavenly guest would really come.

Johnnie hurried on, all was merriment in the cottages that he passed. From the Inns too there came shouting and singing, for the sharing out of each little club was going on.

At last, and the time neared midnight, Johnnie reached Dr Dawkins’ house near Wemborne, and knocked loudly at the back door.

After some while of waiting the door was opened by the cook, who had been roasting her face by the kitchen fire, as well as

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sampling a good portion of the brandy that Dr Dawkins had given to her for the Christmas pudding.

“Doctor,” she cried. “Who do want Doctor when good brandy be in house? All the Doctors in town be gone to the Mayor’s party. ’Tis all merriment tonight, and our own girls be gone to help in the serving. Don’t ’ee trouble we happy folk tonight.”

Johnnie looked at her with extreme displeasure.

“Where can I find a doctor who isn’t at the Mayor’s party?” he asked.

“Nowhere,” replied the cook and shut the door.

Johnnie stood in the street for a moment and then sought the Mayor’s residence, a great house in the centre of the town.

There all was light and gaiety. Dancing was in progress and much wine was being drunk.

Johnnie rang the bell loudly, and the butler, who, between his wine opening, had found one of Dr Dawkins’ maids very much to his taste, came angrily.

It was then that Johnnie noticed a man who looked like a beggar standing nearby.

Johnnie asked for Dr Dawkins.

The Butler told him to go to the devil and banged the door.

Then the beggar drew near to Johnnie, who by the light from the Mayor’s window took him to be a jobbing carpenter.

“You need a doctor,” the man said kindly. “And you have walked far to find one.”

“Yes,” exclaimed Johnnie eagerly. “My grandmother is ill.”

“And your grandfather is Mr Thomas Tribb, who believes in God, but thinks that Jesus, whatever Mr Hayday has to say about it, never existed.”

Johnnie smiled.

“And what do you think?” the man asked.

“That Jesus was born on Christmas day,” said Johnnie boldly.

“I used to heal people myself,” said the carpenter. “Perhaps I would do.”

“Can you do it now?” inquired Johnnie eagerly.

“If I am believed in, I can,” replied the man.

Johnnie wondered what to do.

The Mayor’s great door opened and the Rector of the town stepped out very much disguised in liquor. He staggered about fifty yards, then rolled into the gutter.

When Johnnie reached the clergyman, he said to his new friend, “Make him rise up and walk.”

The carpenter touched him, and Mr Bonner the Rector of Wemborne looked up. He at once rose extremely abashed. “Now go home,” said the Carpenter, “and remember that the Mayor always begins a party by giving his guests the worst wine.” Mr Bonner gave one scared look at the doctor and hurried to his home.

“You will do,” said Johnnie quietly.

The snow that up to that moment had been falling thick and fast, now became only a flake or two. Soon the clouds broke and the moon shone haughty and serene, while small dark clouds passed by

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her glory but dimmed it not.

They had walked about three miles, when the doctor suddenly stopped.

“I am hungry,” he said.

“I am hungry too,” remarked Johnnie.

“Suppose we sup,” said the doctor.

There was only snow to be seen, which covered the road. A few yards further a large bough, with many smaller branches, reached out. Upon one of these branches, caught in a fork, a box hung by its string. In a moment Johnnie was along the bough and the box was released.

“Mr Balliboy’s car must have been heavily loaded with parcels tonight,” observed the doctor, “for this box of figs to be caught by the tree. We will walk the quicker for a little supper.”

Johnnie sat beside his companion in the shelter of the tree and they both munched contentedly.

When the box was empty, the doctor rose up. “A timely fruit,” he said—and blessed the tree.

In order to hasten the journey, now that the moon shone, they left the road and took a path which led through the meadows to Burnfield. There were rough cattle in the path, and as the travellers went by, the cattle knelt before them.

“I thought that’s who He was,” said Johnnie gladly.

At Burnfield, the doctor stopped at Mr Tubb’s cottage.

“Mr Hayday asked me to visit here,” he said to Johnnie.

The doctor went in.

When he was come out again, Johnnie heard Mr Hayday’s voice say—

“Yet seeing it hath pleased thee of thy tender mercy ... and to restore the voice of joy and health.”

In a little while they were come to Chalk-pit Cottage.

All was nearly over, and Thomas Tribb could hardly receive them for the anguish that was in his heart.

“’Tis the doctor,” said Johnnie.

Mr Tribb led the way upstairs.

The doctor went to the bed.

“Bring me water,” he said, “she still breathes—”

He dipped his hand three times in the basin and touched her lips.

A wonderful change came over the dying woman, her breathing became regular, her heart beat naturally again, and as they looked, her eyes closed and she sank into a peaceful slumber.

“She will sleep until the afternoon,” said the doctor, “and then she will ask for a cup of tea made from her favourite kettle.”

Thomas Tribb hid his face. The tears of an old man are best hidden.

He would have knelt as the beasts had done, only the doctor took him in his arms and kissed him.

Then Thomas Tribb stood back as if troubled.

“One God be enough for an old man,” he said.

“My father and I are one,” answered the Christ.