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Opening extract from

Christmas Spirit

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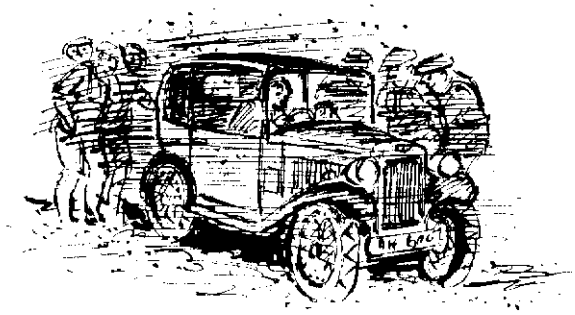


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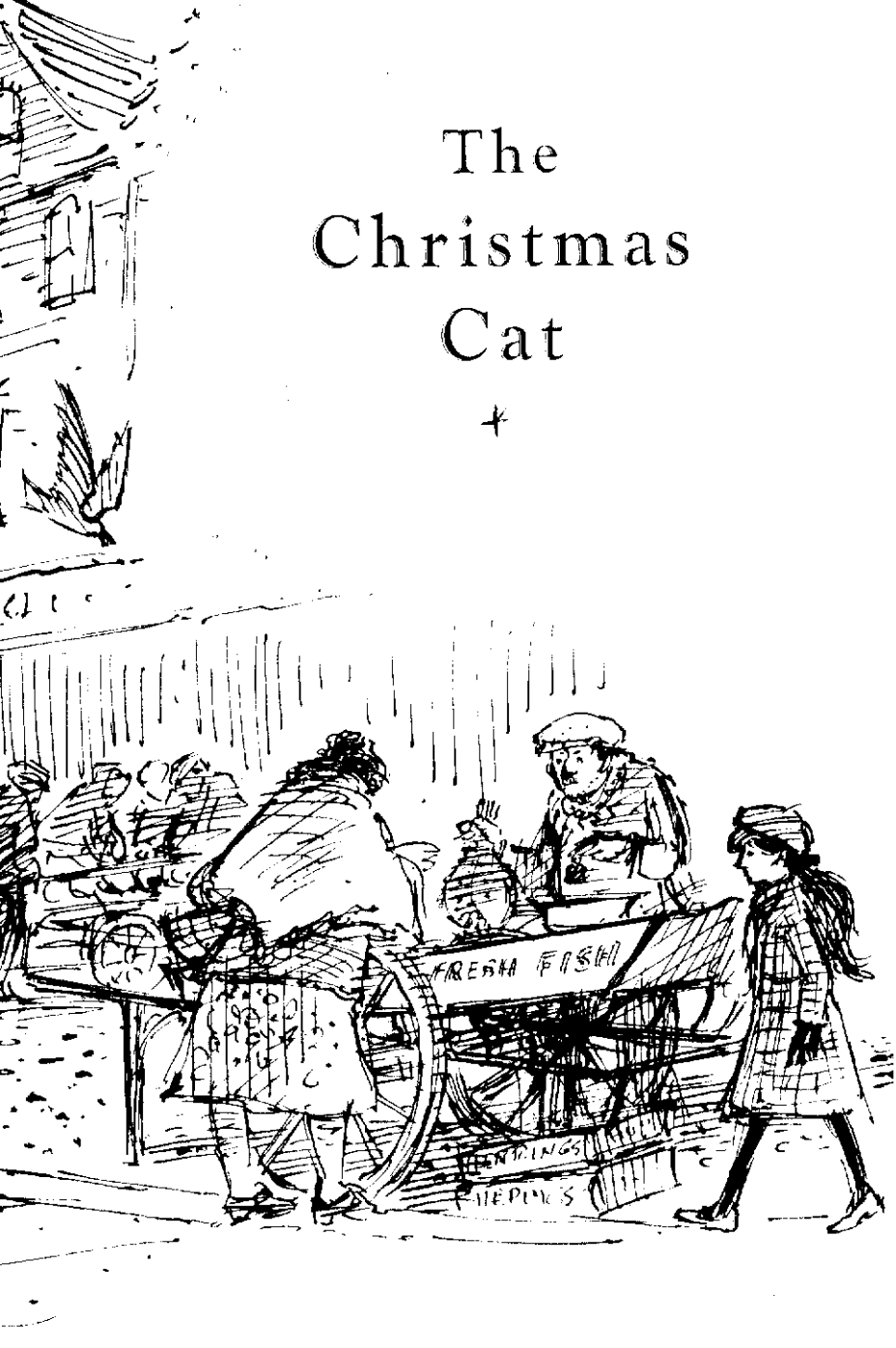


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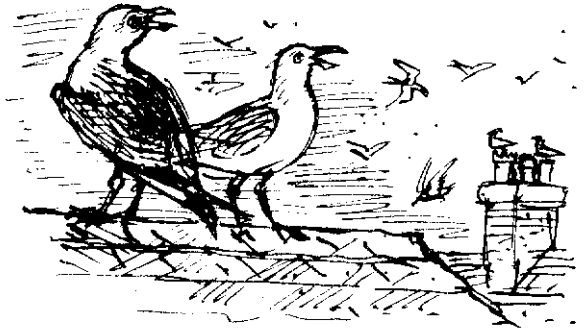

LIPTON

The Christmas Cat



For Caroline Walker
of Stockton Heath

A Cold Welcome



Granddaughter, I was once as young as you. My legs were as long and thin and could run as fast. I could climb a wall better than any boy, even when there was broken glass on top. And my glory was my red hair, so long that I could sit on it.

That was the year 1934, my parents were abroad, and I spent Christmas with my Uncle Simon. My Uncle Simon was a vicar. Vicars then were not like vicars now. If you know any vicar now, he is probably a young man who dresses in ordinary clothes, and tries to make friends with everyone, even if he has a rather desperate smile and a rather uneasy laugh. Vicars are a threatened species now, and they know it. Soon, there

may be hardly any vicars left, and some will be young women.

But vicars then . . . they had the *Power*. They dressed all in black, and people were rather afraid of them. I have seen a vicar empty a railway carriage, just by sitting in it. Just being there, they made people, ordinary people, mums and dads, aware of their *Sins*. They made them feel feeble and wicked and helpless. So people avoided them if they could.

I did not want to go to the vicarage for Christmas. I would rather have stayed on at school, with the headmistress, who was a good sort. But my father had written: 'You must go and stay with Uncle Simon. He has asked for you. Perhaps you will be able to cheer him up.'

I had doubts about cheering myself up. Uncle Simon had no wife and no children. The family said he had given himself to God. God did not seem to have made a good job of cheering Uncle Simon up. Uncle Simon always sent dark small miserable Christmas cards with *Holy People* on them, that wished you a 'Blessed and Peaceful Christmas-tide'. I much preferred Santa, grinning with a sackful of presents.

Still, off I had to go, with my whole school trunk, and a purseful of silver sixpences, to tip the railway porters.

All I knew about North Shields, when I arrived that Sunday, was that the people there made their living from fish, and I would have guessed as much as soon as I put my head out of the railway carriage. There was a mountain of kipper-boxes on the platform, and the smell of kippers would have knocked me flat, if the smell from a mountain of dried cod-boxes had not pushed me the other way. Outside, the cobbles of the taxi-rank were stuck all over with tiny silver scales, and the air was thick with the smell of fresh fish, frying fish, rotting fish, boiling fish and guano. Seagulls sat on every roofrop, nearly as big and arrogant as geese, and splattered the slates with their white droppings and filled the air with their raucous cries.

When I gave the taxi-man the address of the vicarage, he stopped being jolly and friendly, and went all quiet, as if I, too, was dressed all in black and had a huge Bible in my hand. We drove through the town. Every street-end gave us a view of the river with its mass of moored boats. The men and women looked strange to my southern eye; the men in huge caps and mufflers, the women in black shawls. There were shops, but most people seemed to be buying stuff off little flat barrows. There were no cars and lorries, but a lot of horses and carts, and the cobbled streets were

thick with flattened masses of horse-dung, looking a bit like big round doormats.

'Here's the vicarage, hinny,' said the taxi-man, pulling up with a squeak and a jerk. I saw a great high, black brick wall, with broken glass set on top in concrete. Tall, shut green gates. And dark trees, massing their dull green heads over the wall, like a curious crowd.

'That's a shilling, hinny,' said the taxi-man, putting my trunk on to the pavement. Then he added, doubtfully, 'I hope you'll be all right,' and drove rapidly away.

I stared at the wall and gate aghast. It looked like the wall and gate of a prison, or at least a home for naughty children. The gate looked as if it was locked; but I managed to wrestle it open, and saw a short weedy drive leading up to a house that might have been pretty, except that the smoke and soot of the town had painted it black, too. I dragged my school trunk inside, and closed the gate and went and knocked on the door of the house. The knocker gave a terrible boom that seemed to echo in every room inside. It seemed to make a noise that was far too important for *me*.

At last, the door opened. The woman who opened it didn't see me at first; she was looking over my head.



Then she looked down and saw me and said, 'The vicar's out.'

'But,' I said.

'But nothing. The vicar's out. He's down at the church if you want him. Saying Evensong. I've nothing for you here.'

'But . . .' I said again.

She'd closed the door in my face.

By this time, I was close to tears but I'd long since learnt that tears don't get you anywhere. So I sniffed them back, and went to look for the church

There were plenty of people around, but I didn't know who to ask. They were such a strange crew; Blacks and Chinese with pigtails, even the men. Groups who looked like Indians, only they wore rags round their necks and suits of thin blue washed-out cotton, and talked at a great rate in their own language. Men who might have been Spaniards, with gold earrings and thin moustaches and flashing smiles; and men who might have been Germans, with cropped hair, and a stolid unsmiling way of stumping along. Even the women talked in a strange accent, though you could pick out the odd English word.

Then I saw this ordinary man ambling towards me. He seemed to be slightly ill, for he swayed as he walked, and wobbled across the pavement, several

times nearly falling into the gutter. But he had a nice face, and was smiling to himself. An unbuttoned sort of man; an unbuttoned overcoat over an unbuttoned coat, over an unbuttoned waistcoat.

'Please could you tell me the way to the church?'

He looked at me like a wise owl, and the smell of his breath was worse than the fish. Whisky. I always hated the smell of whisky. My father sometimes drank it, in the evenings, and I would not kiss him then.

'Aye,' he said, 'but which church? Are you a damned Papist, or a damned Nonconformist, or a True Believer?'

'Sir,' I said, looking him straight in the eye, so that I made him sway a good deal more. 'I am a True Believer!'

'God bless you, hinny,' he said, tears springing into his watery blue eyes. 'Ah'm a Sinner, a Terrible Sinner. It's the drink, you see. Ah drink and then Ah do terrible wicked things . . .'

'The church,' I said, as firmly as possible.

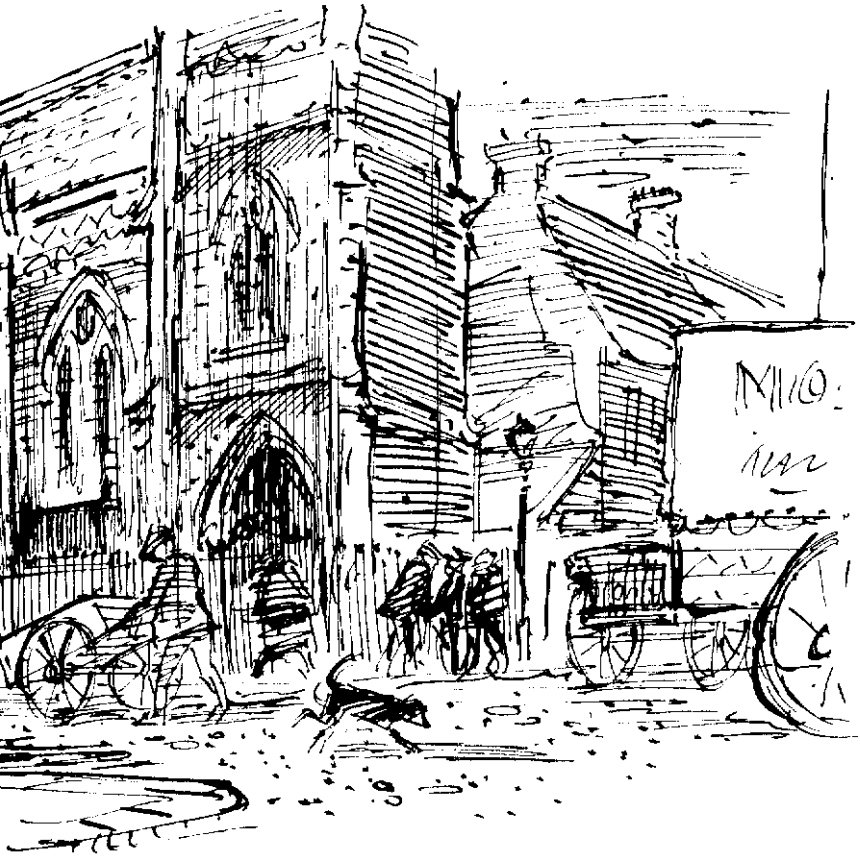
'Ah'll show ye.' And the next second, he had enclosed my hand in his huge warm dry one, and was leading me a staggering dance along the pavement, still telling me of his wicked sins, though not in any detail, which might have been interesting . . .

'There's the True Church,' he said at last, pointing.



And I had no doubt it was. For it was as black as coal, and the door was barred by huge rusty iron railings, and a black notice board announced Uncle Simon's name in small gold Gothic letters.

I thanked him; but he would not let go of me; he kept on going on about his sins. At last, I had a brainwave.



'Come and see the vicar. He's inside. He's my uncle. He'll help you with your sins.'

'God forbid,' said the man fervently. 'My sins are too black for any vicar to help.' And the next second, he was gone.

The rusty gate was not so fortress-like as it looked. It opened under my hand. So did the great studded

door. I was in dimness, with the saints staring down at me, all purple and red and blue, from out of their stained-glass windows. There was a smell of polish and Brasso and incense and dust and mice.

And the sound of my uncle singing. He had a very beautiful voice; his voice was the only beautiful part of him. He was singing half the service, and a cracked old voice was singing the other half.

'O Lord, open Thou our lips.'

'And our mouths shall shew forth Thy praise.'

'O God, make speed to save us.'

'O Lord, make haste to help us.'

I sat, and listened to the end. I listened to that lovely voice preach about the feeding of the Five Thousand. He preached very well.

The only thing was, that apart from me and the old lady at the organ, the huge church was completely empty.

'You walked down here by *yourself*?' said my uncle. 'You must never do that again. I cannot imagine what Mrs Brindley was thinking of, letting you come down here by *yourself*.'

He did not look at me. He looked at his pulpit, at the board that gave the numbers of the hymns, at the saints in the stained glass windows. Never at me. Not all the time I stayed with him. I got the feeling, in the

end, that I was accompanied by an invisible person, two feet to my left, that my uncle talked to all the time.

'Why not?' I asked, greatly daring.



'Child! This town is filled with such wickedness that your poor young mind could not contain it. You cannot breathe the air of these streets without being defiled. Such *sins* . . .'

But he didn't go into any detail, which might have been interesting. Just like the poor whisky-man . . . My mind went over the wickedest things I knew. Which were not very wicked in those days, granddaughter. I have learnt a lot since.

'We must rescue your trunk. Before they steal it.' That at least made sense. We'd had thieves at school.

Together we hurried up the road. A way cleared before us, through the milling crowd, as if by magic. A lot of people actually crossed the road to avoid us.

My uncle seemed surprised to find my trunk still lying where I had left it. He picked it up with a grunt that made me worry for him. He was older, much older, than my father. He had silver hair; and an old cracked broad leather belt, round his long black cassock, that strained at the last hole. Tall and portly, my uncle was.

Mrs Brindley opened the door to his knock, undoing both the top and bottom bolts with a rusty squawk.

'Oh, it's you, Vicar! Is this young woman pestering you?'