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Opening extract from
Mister Creecher

Written by
Chris Priestley

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MISTER CREECHER



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The Dead of Winter

MISTER CREECHER

A NOVEL
IN THREE PARTS

BY
CHRIS PRIESTLEY

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For my father, Tom Priestley

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

Billy pulled his clammy coat collar tightly to his throat. It was damp with the fog and felt like the tongue of a dead animal lolling against his neck. His thin body shivered and trembled. He was fifteen but looked eight. A fever sweat glistened on his forehead. His breaths were short; they puffed from his mouth in feeble wisps.

He walked warily out into Finsbury Square. The fog gathered here, undisturbed, ominous. Billy carried a small cocoon of visibility with him, so that, as he walked, it was as if the world outside this bubble were as yet unformed and he invented his part of it at every step.

It was late and the owners of the pocket watches and handkerchiefs that Billy predated were safely home and happy by their firesides, sipping brandy, counting their blessings and their money.

Amber light seeped like honey from upstairs windows, glowing between the heavy curtains and solid shutters that formed a barrier to the cold and to the fear-filled world beyond.

Voices likewise seeped out into the dank night air: the happy hubbub of laughter and good cheer. Then the giddy tumble of church bells rang out across the city and Billy heard the sound of toasts and singing, and the cold gnawed more deeply into his bones. It was January 1st: New Year's Day, 1818.

Billy was sick. He had been sick before, but this was different. He grabbed the nearby metal railing for support. It burned his hand with its fierce chill. Tiny forests of white crystals were sprouting over metal and wood, over bricks and cobbles. Minute thorns of ice prickled over every surface. The fog seemed to close in around Billy. Soon it would simply erase him and everything he had been. All would dissolve into that desolate nothingness.

The gilding at the edge of the wooden sign overhead flickered with the light from a nearby lamp. The painted letters spelled out *Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones – Publishers*. Billy had worked the customers at this bookshop. They were easy targets as they left, their

faces fixed on the pages of their new books, their minds elsewhere.

The shadow of the sign fell across a body lying against the wall beside the publisher's doorway, face down and motionless. Billy knew a dead body when he saw one. The hands were as colourless as rancid meat. There was no sound, no movement.

He looked at it with the cynical detachment that years on the street had gifted him. He did not know this man and did not care how he had lived or how he came to die. Only the rich could afford to be sentimental. He cared for no one but himself. He was alone. Everyone was.

As ill as he felt, Billy could not bring himself to ignore a possible treasure. This body was a resource to be made the most of. This was a tree that might have fruit to be picked.

Billy had already gathered from the briefest of glances that the clothes would be of no use to him at all. The man was huge. Even though he made his coat look small, Billy could see that it would smother him. Time to see what the pockets of that coat concealed.

He looked about him. He had a feeling there was someone watching, but then he always had that. It was what made him sharp, what gave him his edge. He lived his life on the balls of his

feet, always ready to run. But he didn't have the strength to run tonight. Perhaps it was Death waiting in the fog.

As he bent down to the corpse, his eyelids became heavy, his vision blurred. He was shaking now more than shivering. Billy had seen more bodies than he could remember: who could live on the streets of London and not? The dead were just another waste product of this great machine of a city – like smoke and sewage.

Old age did not seem to be the cause of death: Billy could not see his face clearly, but his hair was long and raven black. Chances were he had been murdered or had died of some disease or other. *Perhaps*, thought Billy, *he simply died of want*. Hunger could kill you stone-cold dead without any hue and cry. Want was a murderer who never swung.

The world seemed momentarily to slither to one side and Billy almost fell, face first, on to the corpse at his feet. He steadied himself, blinking his eyes back into focus.

There were no obvious signs that the man had been attacked: no blood on the ground or on his clothes, no cuts, no gashes. But a cudgel was as deadly as a knife in the right hands. Billy had seen it done. More than once.

He touched the body's blue-white hand. It was as cold as a hangman's heart. He'd probably been dead for hours. A rime of frost was forming on his clothes like a white mould. He had more than likely been robbed already, but Billy owed it to himself to check.

'So,' said a voice behind him. 'What have we here?'

Billy's heart skipped a beat. He knew that voice anywhere. It was Fletcher. Immediately he looked right and left, trying to size up which gave him the best route for escape, but he could already see the shadowy figures in the mist.

'I never had you down as a killer, Billy,' said Fletcher, walking slowly forward out of the fog, so that he seemed to materialise out of the blankness like a thought: a nasty, vicious thought.

'I didn't kill him, Fletcher. He was dead when I got here. Honest.'

Out of the corner of his eye, Billy saw the arrival of Skinner and Tyke, two of Fletcher's toughest cronies.

'Honest?' said Fletcher. 'You? I'm surprised you've got the nerve to even use the word. Why don't we call for a constable and see what he thinks?'

Fletcher's boys chortled at this idea, but Billy knew that Fletcher was never going to call a constable.

'You cheated me, Billy,' said Fletcher. 'And I don't take kindly to being cheated.'

'I'll pay you back,' said Billy. 'You know I will.'

'I don't know nothing of the sort!' shouted Fletcher.

His voice cut its way through the fog and skittered across the icy cobbles like a dropped knife. Billy noticed that he had moved a little closer.

'That's what I was doing, just now,' said Billy. 'I thought the stiff might have some goods on him. I was going to bring them straight to you, I swear.'

'Billy, Billy, Billy,' said Fletcher with a sigh. 'The time for paying back has gone. Tyke – check the pockets.'

Fletcher smiled briefly and clicked his neck.

'Truth is,' he continued in a soft, conspiratorial tone, putting his arm round Billy's shivering shoulders. 'Truth is, I'm going to have to hurt you.'

Billy whimpered and tried to pull away. Fletcher's grip tightened. Billy could smell the gin on his breath.

'I don't want to hurt you,' Fletcher murmured. 'I like you, Billy. I've always liked you. Weren't

it me who looked after you when you run away? But what would it look like if I was to let you show that kind of disrespect?’

Billy knew Fletcher was blind in one eye, but he could not for the life of him recall which. He was sure it might be some kind of advantage to him if he could just remember, but both eyes looked equally dead and Fletcher seemed to read his mind.

‘You looking at my eye?’

Billy knew that no reply was necessary, so made none. He just wanted Fletcher to get on with whatever beating he was going to hand out. He had been beaten before. As long as nothing broke you were all right. Billy sometimes felt he was one big scar. He was suddenly so very tired.

‘I was born with only the one eye working,’ Fletcher went on. ‘Probably on account of my mother being blind drunk when she had me.’ He chuckled throatily at this joke, but no one else was foolish enough to join him.

‘You’d think that would have held me back, but no – it’s made me what I am. You see the world clearer with one eye. I’m going to give you that gift, Billy.’

With one deft movement, Fletcher brought out a huge clasp knife and flicked the blade out

in front of Billy, his ashen face reflecting in the pitted steel. But before he could make another move there was a screech of such animal wildness from Tyke that Fletcher, Billy, the whole of London and Time itself seemed to freeze in wonder at it.

All eyes – including Fletcher’s blank left eye – turned to the sound. The corpse that Tyke had been in the course of searching was now standing up and had him gripped by the arm.

‘It’s alive!’ shouted Skinner. ‘It’s alive!’

If that had not been enough, the reanimated corpse was easily the tallest man Billy had ever seen and certainly the ugliest. This giant must have been nigh on seven feet tall – maybe even eight. His lank black hair fell across his face like trickles of ink, partly, but not wholly, obscuring a face that looked as though it had been hanging at Execution Dock for many days and had had the Thames washing over it, tide after tide.

His eyes were limpid and, though shadowed by his furrowed brow, still managed to catch what little light there was. They seemed so alive compared to the rest of him.

‘Libberrrrrrrrr legarrrrrrsssonnnn!’ growled the giant, pointing at Billy.

This gravelly, guttural outburst was greeted by a few moments of astonished, uncomprehending silence.

‘What the hell ...?’ said Fletcher, his voice sounding thin.

The giant tightened his hold on Tyke’s forearm, turning it as he did so. Tyke’s scream died in a gurgling croak and the relative silence allowed for a sound like a chicken leg being twisted apart. He dropped to the cobbles and screamed again.

‘Layliberrrrrrrrrr!’ growled the giant, without once looking at the writhing Tyke at his feet. Billy felt another wave of weakness wash the life from his limbs and his eyes drifted out of focus. Had Fletcher not still had hold of him, he would have dropped to the ground like Tyke.

Fletcher seemed uncertain as to what to do next. The first to react was Skinner, who had already pulled a knife from his coat pocket and now lunged at the giant.

The giant barely seemed to move, but Billy saw the knife fall to the ground as the stranger grabbed Skinner by the throat and, holding him at arm’s length, began to lift him slowly into the air.

Skinner enjoyed his pies. He was not your normal skin-and-bones street urchin. He was big.

He was heavy. Billy stared in disbelief. What kind of man was this?

The stranger flung Skinner away as though he were nothing but the stinking clothes he was wearing. The boy landed with a sickening clang against the nearby railings and lay in a motionless heap.

Billy could sense the conflicting emotions in Fletcher: should he leap to attack this giant while he had the chance, should he run – or should he carve a piece out of Billy before he went?

Billy felt sure he had decided on the latter and shut his eyes, waiting for the cold kiss of the knife blade, but opened them immediately as he heard the giant, with a speed and agility that belied his size, come rushing forward.

Before Fletcher had time to move or cry out, the giant grabbed his right arm. Billy heard the wrist bone snap and Fletcher's knife fell to the pavement.

Fletcher was tough if nothing else and, broken wrist or not, he fought back. He kicked and lashed out with his good arm, but it was to no avail. The giant struck him with a fearsome blow to the side of the head and he dropped like a sack of flour. He did not stir.

When Billy turned away from Fletcher, he found himself staring straight at the giant's chest. He looked up. The giant looked down. His skin had the almost translucent look of a drowned man Billy had once seen by London Bridge. *Perhaps this is what Death looks like*, thought Billy. Or *his* death, at any rate.

The giant leaned forward, staring at Billy with the bemused look of a snake about to strike. The fog seemed to rush forward suddenly, and then there was nothing.