

CHRISTMAS EVE AT WATTS'S 1873



One who calls himself "A Paper Stainer" (a correspondent of the press we must presume, whose pen has not been able to keep him from poverty, writes the following very readable description of his experience on Christmas-eve to the 'Daily News' – Ed)

CROYDON, Christmas Day.

Wandering out of the High street, Rochester, yesterday afternoon, up a narrow passage to the left, I came upon the old Cathedral. The doors were open, and as they were the only doors in Rochester that were open to me, except perhaps, those of the tramp house at the Union, I entered, and sat down as near them as befitted my condition. The afternoon service was going on, and even to tired limbs and an empty stomach it was restful and soothing to hear the sweet voices of the surplice choristers, and the grand deep tones of the organ, echoing through the fretted roof, and rolling round the long pillared aisles. There were not ten people there besides myself – the clergy and the choir forming the bulk of assembly; and as soon as the service had been gone through, the clergy and choir filed out, and the lay people one by one departed. I should have liked to have sat where I was all night. It was at least warm and sheltered, and I have slept on worse beds than half a dozen Cathedral chairs. But presently the verger came round, and perceiving at a glance that I was not a person likely to possess a superfluous sixpence, asked me if I was going to sit there all night. I said I was if he didn't mind; but he did, and there was nothing for it but to clear out. "Haven't you got nowhere to go to?" asked the man as I moved slowly off. "Nowhere in particular," I answered. "That's a bad look-out for Christmas-eve. Why don't you go over to Watts's?" "What's Watts's?" It's a house in High-street, where you'll get a good supper, a bed, and a fourpenny-bit in the morning, if you can show you are an honest man, and not a regular tramp. There's old Watt's monument down by the side of the choir. A regular brick he was, who not only wrote beautiful hymns, but gave away his money for the relief of the poor." My heart warmed to the good old Doctor whose hymns I had learnt in my youth, little thinking that the day would come when I should be thankful to him for more substantial nourishment. I had intended to go in the ordinary way to get a night's lodging in the casual ward; but Watts's was evidently a better game, and getting from the verger minute directions how to proceed in order to gain admittance to Watts's, I left the

Cathedral. The verger was not a bad-hearted fellow I am sure, though he did speak roughly to me at first. He seemed struck with the fact that a man, not too well clad, and who had nowhere particular to sleep on the eve of Christmas-day, could not have been exactly merry. All the time he was talking about Watts's he was fumbling in his waistcoat pocket, and I know he was feeling if he had not got threepenny-bit. But if he had, it didn't come immediately handy, and before he got hold of it, the thought of the sufficient provision which awaited me at Watts's afforded vicarious satisfaction to his charitable feelings, and he was content with bidding me a kindly good night, as he pointed my road down the lane to the police-office, where, it seemed, Dr. Watts's guests had to put in a preliminary appearances.

Crossing High-street, and passing through a sort of courtyard and down some steps, I reached a snug-looking house, which I had some difficulty in believing was a police-office. But it was, and the first thing I saw was seven men lounging about the yard. They didn't seem like regular tramps, but they had a look as if they had walked far, and each man carried a little bundle and a stick. The verger had told me that only six men per night were admitted to Watts's, and there were seven already. "Are you for Watts's?" one of them, a little, sharp-looking fellow, with short light hair pasted down over his forehead, asked me, seeing me hesitate. "Yes." "Well it ain't no go tonight. There's seven here, and first come, first served." "Don't believe him, young 'un," said an elderly man. "It's all one what time you come, so as its afore half-past five you'll take your chance with the rest of us." It was not yet five, so I loafed about with the rest of them, being scowled upon by all except the elderly man till the arrival of two other travellers removed to them the weight of the odium I had lightly borne. At a quarter to six a police-sergeant appeared at the door of the office and said, "Now then." This was generally interpreted into a signal to advance, and we stood forward in an irregular line. The sergeant looked round us sternly till his eye lighted upon the elderly man. "So you're trying it on again, are you?" "I've not been here for two months, if I may never sleep in a bed again," whimpered the elderly man. You were here last Monday week that I know of, and may be since. Off you go!" and the elderly gentleman went off with an alacrity that rather reduced the wonderment I had felt at his disinterested intervention to prevent my losing a chance, suggesting, as it did, that he felt the probability of him gaining admission was exceedingly remote. I was the next upon whom the eye

the police-sergeant louringly fell. "What do you want?" "A night's lodging at Watts's" "Watts's is for decent workmen on the tramp. You ain't a labourer. Show me your hands?" I held out my hands, and the police-sergeant examined the palms critically. "What are you?" "A paper stainer." "Where have you been to?" "I came from Canterbury last." "Where do you work?" "In London when I can find work." "Where are you going now?" "To London." "How much money have you got?" "Three half-pence." "Humph!" I don't know whether a murder has recently been committed in Kent, and whether I in some degree answer to the description of the supposed murderer. If it is so, the unfortunate circumstance will explain why the sergeant should have run me through and through with his eyes whilst propounding these queries, and why he should have made them in such a gruff voice. However, he seemed to have finally arrived at the conclusion that I was not the person wanted for the murder, and after a brief pause he said "Go inside." I went inside into one of the snugest little police offices I have seen in the course of some tramping, and took the liberty of warming myself by the cosy fire, whilst the remaining applicants for admission to Watts's were being put through a minor catechism such as that which I had survived. Presently the sergeant came in with a select five of my courtyard companions, and taking us one by one entered in a book under the date "24th December" our several names, ages, birthplaces and occupations. Also the names of the last place we had come from, and the next whither we were going. Then, taking up a scrap of blue paper with some printed words on it, and filling in figures a date, and a signature, he bid us follow him.

Out of the snug police-office – which put utterly in the shade the comforts of the cathedral regarded as a sleeping place – across the courtyard, which somebody said faced the Sessions House, down High-street to the left till we stopped before an old-fashioned white-house with a projecting lamp lit above the doorway, shining full on an inscription graven in stone. It ran thus:

RICHARD WATTS, Esqr.
by his will dated 22. Aug. 1579
founded this charity,
for six poor travellers,
who not being Rogues, or Proctors,
may receive gratis, for one Night,
Lodging, Entertainment,
and four pence each.
In testimony of his munificence,
in honour of his Memory,
and inducement to his Example,
NATHL. HOOD, Esq., the present Mayor,
has caused this stone,
gratefully to be renewed,
and inscribed,
A.D. 1771.

It was not Dr. Watts then, as the verger had given me to understand. I was sorry, for it had seemed like going to the house of an old friend, and I had meant after supper to recite “How doth the little Busy Bee” for the edification of my fellow guests, and to tell them what I had learnt a long time ago of the good writer’s life and labours.

“Here we are again, Mrs. Kercham,” said our conductor, stepping into the low hall of the white house. “Yes, here you are again,” replied an old lady, dressed in black, and wearing a widow’s cap. “Have you got ‘em all to-night?” “Yes, six – all tidy men. Can you write Mr. Paper Stainer?” I could write and did, setting forth in a book which lay on a table in a room labelled “office,” my name, age, occupation, and the town whence I had last come. Three of the other guests followed my example. Two could not write; and the sergeant, paying me a compliment on my beautiful clerkly handwriting, asked me to fill in the particulars for them. This ceremony over, we were shown into our bedrooms and told to give ourselves “a good wash.” My room was on the ground-floor, out in the yard, and I hope I may never be shown into a worse. It was not large, being about eight feet square, nor was it very high. The walls were whitewashed, and the floor was clean. A single small window, deep set in the thick stone-built walls, looked out on to the yard, and by it stood the solitary piece of furniture, a somewhat rickety Windsor-chair. Of course, I expect the bed, which was supposed to stand in a corner, but which actually covered nearly the whole of the floor. The bedstead was of iron, and, I should imagine, was one of the earliest constructions of the sort ever sold in this country. “I put on three blankets, being Christmas time, though the weather was not according; so you can take one off if you like.” “Thank you ma’am, I’ll leave it till I go to bed, if you please.” Much reason had I subsequently to be thankful for my caution. After having washed, I came out, and was told to go into a room facing my bedroom, on the other side of the yard. Here I found three of my fellow-guests sitting by a fire, and in a few minutes the other two arrived, all looking very clean, and (speaking of myself particularly) feeling ravenously hungry. The chamber which had “Traveller’s Room” painted over the doorway, was twelve or thirteen feet long and eight wide, and, like our bedrooms, was not remarkable for variety of furniture. A plain deal table stood at one end, and then there were two benches, and that’s all. Over the mantelpiece a large card hung with the following inscription: “Persons accepting this charity are each supplied with a supper, consisting of half lb. of meat, 1lb. of bread, and half-a-pint of porter at seven o’clock in the evening, and fourpence on leaving the house in the morning. The additional comfort of a good fire is given during the winter months from 18th October till the 10th of March, for the purpose of drying their clothes and supplying hot water for their use. They go to bed at eight o’clock.” This was satisfactory, except inasmuch as it appeared that supper was not to be forthcoming till seven o’clock, and it was now only twenty minutes past six.

This forty minutes promised to be harder to bear than the hunger of the long day; but the pain was averted by the appearance at half-past six of a pleasant-looking young woman, carrying a plate of roast beef in each hand. These she put down on the table, supplementing them in course of time with four similar plates, six small loaves, and as many mugs of porter. It does not become guests to dictate arrangements, but if the worshipful trustees of Watts's knew how tantalising it is to a hungry man to see cold roast beef brought in a slow and deliberate manner, they would buy a large tray for the use of the pleasant young person, and let the feast burst at once upon the vision of the guests. We drew the benches up to the table, and Mrs. Kercham, standing at one end and leaning over, said grace. Impatiently hungry as I was, I could not help noticing the precise terms in which the good matron implored a blessing. I suppose she had had her tea in the parlour. At any rate, she was not going to favour us with her company, and so, bending over our plates of cold beef, she lifted up her voice and said with emphasis, "For what you are about to receive out of His bountiful goodness may the Lord make you truly thankful." Six emphatic "Amens" followed and before the sound had died away, six able bodied men had fallen to upon the beef and the bread in a manner that would have done kind Master Watts's heart good had he beheld them. I think I had done first, for I remember when I looked round the table my fellow-guests were still eating and washing their suppers down with economical draughts from the half pint mugs of porter. They – I think I may say we – did credit to the selection of the police-sergeant and so far as appearances went fulfilled one of the requirements of Master Watts, there being nothing of the rogue in our faces, if I except a slight hint in the physiognomy of the little man with the fair hair plastered down over his forehead, and perhaps I am prejudiced against him. It was a little after seven when the plates were all polished, the mugs drained, and nothing but a few crumbs left to tell where a loaf had stood. The pleasant young person coming in to clear the table, we drew up round the fire, and for the first time in our more than two hours companionship began to exchange remarks. They were, however, of the briefest and most commonplace character, and attempts made to get up a general conversation signally failed. "What do you do?" "Where do you come from?" "Things hard down there?" were staple questions with an occasional "Did you hear tell of Joe Mackin on the road?" or "Was Bill O'Brien there at the time?" From the replies to these inquiries I learnt that my companions were respectively a fitter, a painter, a waiter and two indefinitely self-described as "labourers".

They had walked since morning from Faversham, from Sittingbourne, from Gravesend, and from Greenwich, and, sitting close around the fire, soon began to testify to their weariness by nodding, and even snoring. "Well, lads, I'm off; good night," said the painter, yawning, and stretching himself out of the room. One by one the remaining four quickly followed, and before what I had on entering regarded as the absurdly early hour of eight o'clock had struck, five of Watts's guests had gone to bed, and the sixth was looking drowsily over the fire and thinking what a jolly Christmas he was having. I was awakened by a familiar voice inquiring whether I was "going to sit up all night," and opening my eyes beheld the matron standing by me with a full shovel of coals in one hand and a small jug in the other. Her voice was sharp, but her look was kind, and I was not a bit surprised when she threw the coals on the fire, and putting down the jug, which evidently contained porter, said she would bring a glass in a minute. "I'm not going to bed myself for a bit, and if you like to sit by the fire and smoke a pipe and drink a glass whilst I mend a stocking or two, you'll be company." So we sat together by Master Watts's fire, and whilst I drank his porter and smoked my own tobacco, the matron mended her stockings, and told me a good deal about the trials she had gone through in a life which would never again see its sixtieth year. Forty years she had spent under the roof of Watts's, and knew all about the old man's will, and how he ordered that after the re-marriage or the death of his wife, his principal dwelling-house, called Satis, on Boley Hill, with the house adjoining, the closes, orchards and appurtenances, his plate and his furniture, should be sold, and the proceeds be placed out at usury by the Mayor and citizens of Rochester for the perpetual support of an alms house then erected and standing near the Market-cross; and how he further ordained that there should be added thereto six rooms, "with a chimney in each", and with convenient places for six good mattresses or flock beds, and other good and sufficient furniture for the lodgment of poor wayfarers for a single night. Had she many people come to see the quaint old place beside those whom the police-sergeant brought every night? Not many. The visitors' book had been twenty years in the house, and it was not nearly full of names. I took up the book, and carelessly turning back

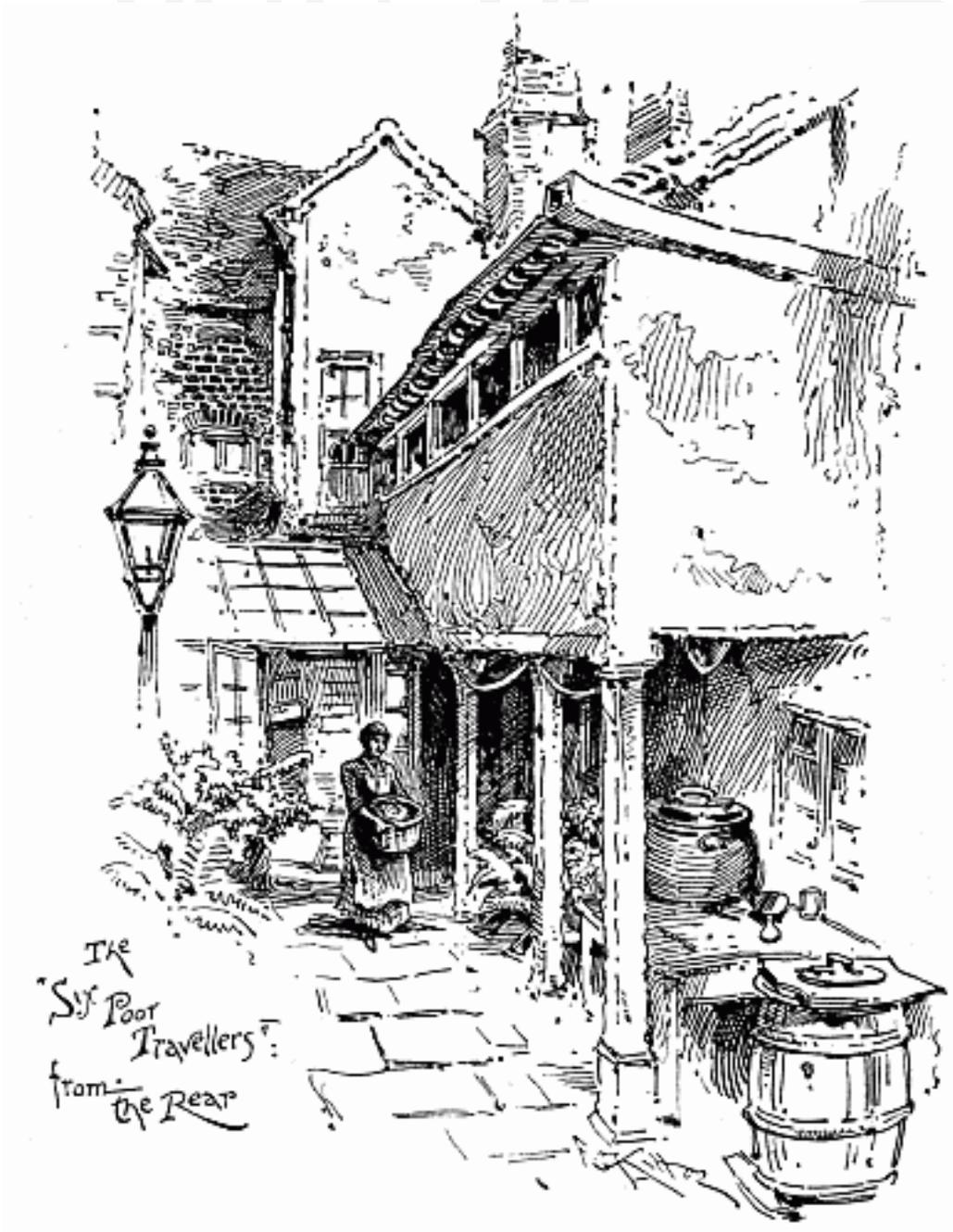
came upon the signature Charles Dickens, with Mark Lemon written underneath. I KNOW Dickens pretty well – his books I mean of course – said with a gratified start, “Ha! has Dickens been here?” “Yes, he was,” said the matron, in her sharpest tones, “and a pretty pack of lies he told about it. Stop a bit.” I stopped accordingly whilst the old lady flew out of the room, and flying back again with a well-worn pamphlet in her hand, shoved it at me saying, “Read that.” I opened it, and found it to be the Christmas number of ‘Household Words’ for 1854. It was entitled “The Seven Poor Travellers,” and the opening chapter, in Mr. Dickens’s well-known style, described by name, and in detail, the very house in which I had taken my supper. It was a charming narrative, and I felt a strong personal regard for the great novelist as I read the cheery story in which he sets forth how, calling at the house on the afternoon before Christmas day, he obtained permission to give a Christmas feast to the six poor travellers: how he ordered the materials for the feast to be sent in from his own inn; how, when the feast was set upon the table, “fine beef, a finer turkey, a great prodigality of sauce and gravy,” he never saw; and how “it made my heart rejoice to see the wonderful justice my travellers did to everything set before them.” All this and much more, including “a jug of wassail” and the “hot plum-pudding and mince pies” which a walleyed young man connected with the fly department at the hotel was, at a given signal, to dash into the kitchen for, seize, and speed with to Dr. Watts’s Charity was painted with a warmth and colour that made my mouth water, even by the plate of cold beef, the small loaf, and the unaccustomed allowance of porter. “How like Dickens,” I exclaimed, with wet eyes, as I finished the recital, “and he even waited in Rochester all night to give his poor travellers ‘hot coffee and piles of bread and butter in the morning!’ ” “Get along with you, he didn’t do anything of the sort.” “What! did he not come here, as he says, and give the poor travellers a Christmas

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There had been no supper, no wassail, no hot coffee in the morning, and, in truth, no meeting at all between Charles Dickens and the travellers, at Christmas or at any other time. Indeed, the visitors' book testified that the visit had been paid on the 11th May, 1854, and not at Christmas-tide at all.

It was time to go to bed after that, and I left the matron to cool down from boiling point to which she had been suddenly lifted at sight of the ghost of 1854. My little room looked cheerless enough in the candle light, but I had brought sleep with me as a companion, and knew that I should soon be as happy as if my bed were of down, and the roof tree that of Buckingham Palace. And so in sooth I would have been but for the chimney. Why did the otherwise unexceptional Master Watts insist upon the chimney? Such a chimney it was, too, yawning across the full length of one side of the room, and open straight up to the cold sky. There was, what I forgot to mention in the inventory, a sort of tall clothes horse standing before the enormous aperture, and after trying various devices to keep the wind out, I at last bethought me of the supernumerary blanket, and throwing it over the clothes horse, I leaned it against the chimney board. This served admirably as long as it kept its feet, and when it blew down as it did occasionally during the night, it only meant putting up and re-fixing it, and the exercise prevented heavy sleeping. At seven in the morning we were called up, and after another "good wash," we went our ways, each with fourpence sterling in his hand, the parting gift of hospitable Master Watts.

"Good bye, paper stainer," said the matron, as, after looking up and down High-street, I strode off towards the bridge Londonwards. "Come and see us again if you are passing this way." "Thank you, I will," I said.



The
Six Poor
Travellers
from
the Rear