

All is Bright - A Yorkshire Lad's Christmas

By Dave Preston

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The Stories

1. The Christmas Kiss
2. Paradise Lost
3. The Nativity Play
4. Present Company
5. What the Dickens?
6. Buried treasure
7. Wassail!
8. The Bow
9. Strange holly
10. Crafty
11. Church
12. Pure Magic

Yorkshire Recipes

Father Christmas Suppers

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1. The Christmas Kiss

Me and me Dad were in the kitchen, untangling the Christmas lights for the tree, not that we had one yet. We always waited until just before Christmas cos that's when they got cheap.

"Hey, you'll never guess what the carol singers from the church made the other night," said Mam as she came in.

"No," he said.

"Go on, guess," said Mam.

"Ten quid," said Dad.

"Twenty-seven pounds!" me Mam said. "*Twenty-seven!*"

"Twenty-seven quid! And they were only out for an hour weren't they?"

"Yes," said Mam, "Mind there was a good turnout, the full choir."

It got me thinking did that. Twenty-seven pounds just for singing a few Christmas songs. I could sing.

By the time I went to bed the plan was just about made. I'd go carol singing the next night, and make a fortune. But I didn't like the idea of going by meself. I'd need a mate, someone who could sing, someone who could walk round the village at night, and most of all, someone who could keep quiet about it.

Most of the kids in our school came in on a bus, from the farms roundabout. There were only twelve kids lived in the village itself. When you took away the infants and all the kids younger than me, and the five who were up at the big school, there was only one left. Josie Carter. A girl! Mind, she could sing. But I couldn't go round with a girl. Never. I couldn't get to sleep.

Next day at school I kept looking round at all the kids in our class. When we sang the morning hymn I listened to 'em all. Most of 'em sounded alright, but that was only when we all sang together. If Mrs Heath ever wanted just one person to sing, she either asked me, or... Yeah, Josie Carter.

"It had to be her. Or nobody, and I wasn't going to let all this money go as easy as that. I'd have to ask her at playtime, in secret. I kicked me football across to her, and when I went to get it back, I whispered. I want a word.

"Yeah?" she said.

Shh, I said, no not here, after school, at shop corner, right?

"Alright," she said, and I went back to me mates.

After school she was waiting for me just around the corner from the shop. Now then, I said, do you want to make some easy money?

"I'm not showing you me knickers," she said.

No, not that, I mean carol singing.

She said "Carol singing?"

Yeah, you an me, tonight.

"Where?"

Round t'village.

"Ooh, I don't know about that," she said, "I think I'd rather show you me knickers."

Aw, come on, I said, it'll be a doddle. And think of the money! That church lot made twenty-seven quid!

"Oh, alright then, come for me at seven o'clock."

No, I'll meet you back here.

"Alright then, see ya" and she skipped off up Westgate, singing Away in a Manger.

I could hardly eat me tea I was that excited. At five to seven I went back to the shop corner and Josie was waiting. She was all wrapped up with a scarf and gloves, as well as her duffle coat. Now then, I said, let's start at the other end, and we walked up the village to Cottage Row.

"Righto, shall we knock and then start singing?"

No! I said, we'll sing first, then knock. And you'll have to take that scarf off else they won't hear ya.

"But what if they're watching telly, they won't hear us and when we knock they'll want another song."

No, I said, it's best if we just sing. They'll stop what they're doing and listen, (I'd seen this happen in a film once). Then we knock and they give us money. Easy.

"Alright then," she said. I liked Josie, cos she never argued for long.

See, what Josie didn't realize was that as soon as we knocked on the door, I was going to bugger off round the nearest corner, leaving her to get to the money. I wanted it to snow cos that makes people feel more Christmassy and they'd give us more money. But it was a bit foggy instead, which was alright cos it was easier to hide in.

First place we tried there was nobody in, even though there was a light on. Then we went next door and Mrs Dobson gave us threepence for two verses of Good King Wenceslas. This was going to be easy.

We soon had the routine down - we'd sing two verses, Josie would knock and I'd bugger off. Then she'd come and find me and tell me what we'd been given. Mrs Bradshaw said she hadn't got any change and gave Josie an orange instead. By eight o'clock we'd done all the houses we wanted to. A lot of people seemed to be out.

Had enough? I said, as we got to the corner of Westgate.

"Yeah, and I'm a bit cold," she said, "Can I put me scarf back on?" She'd had to take her gloves off anorl, so people could hear her knocking. Alright, let's go to your lane end and sort out what we've got. We pulled out all the coins and put 'em on the wall and started counting. We had one and six between us.

"Don't forget the orange," said Josie, holding it up like it was the FA cup. Oh aye, I said, but I don't like oranges, you can have it.

"Ta," she said. Then I suddenly realized this was part of our earnings. Hey, how much is it worth?

"Oh, I don't know," she said, "Me Mam always buys at least six. I think she pays about two bob." I started doing the sums in me head...

"Fourpence," she said. Is it? Are you sure? Fourpence apiece? Right then, so if that orange is worth fourpence, and we add that to the one and six, we get, er...

"One and ten," she said. Right, one and ten, between the two of us that makes, er...

"Eleven pence each," she said.

Alright then, eleven pence each. Hang on, it doesn't work, I said. It won't go, we haven't got enough pennies. I suddenly had an idea. Hey that's a bloomin' big orange, I said. I bet you wouldn't get six o' them for two bob. I'd bet you'd only get, ooh, maybe four.

"You mean sixpence each?" Aye, I said, if you keep that I'll have the tanner we've got here and we're all even, right, and I shoved the two threepenny bits in her coat pocket and put the rest of the cash in mine. Right, I said, I'll be off then.

"Yeah," she said, "It was a laugh eh?" See ya, and I turned to go.

"Hey Derek?" she says, Yeah? I said, and when I turned back she was right in front of me, taking her scarf off.

"What about a Christmas kiss then?" You what? I said.

"Go on Derek, it's nearly Christmas, and I know you won't give me one at school." Damn right I won't I thought to meself. Then I had a sudden brainwave, Aw, sorry I said, I've got no mistletoe. Kuh!

"We don't need mistletoe, that's just for old folks, come here." And she grabbed the front of me duffle coat and pulled. She was the same height as me, and her nose was really close. I could feel her breath. Then she closed her eyes, really slow, and her lips kind of squished up together and reached out, all on their own, towards me.

"I couldn't move. Everything went quiet. I stopped breathing. She stopped breathing. Everything stopped, I think the street light might have gone out cos it suddenly seemed to go all dark and then before I knew what was happening... I was doing it. Giving her a kiss. Me!

"I was kissing Josie Carter! right there at the bottom of Suggett's Lane! Kissing... on the mouth, and... and... and by gum it felt good. Lovely.

"Not like a kiss from me Mam, or me aunt Judy, or like any other kiss I've ever had. It was bloomin' great. Nice. Warm. Better than toffee, better than chocolate, even better than Turkish Delight. I closed me eyes anorl. Me and Josie were kissing. Oh... Then she stopped and took her lips away. I could feel the cold air on me face again...

"Goodnight!" And she turned and ran up the lane towards her house. I felt a bit dizzy, and suddenly remembered I had to breathe and sucked in a great big lungful, then blew it all back into the night, like smoke from a gun.

"I turned and ran anorl, all the way back home, with streetlights twinkling and the money jangling in me pocket.

I was still a bit dizzy when I walked into the house. They were all in the front room, and me Dad was still on the floor wrestling with the Christmas lights and quietly saying bad words. He didn't look happy.

"There you are, Derek," Mam shouted, "come and see yer Aunt Hilda. Be sharp, she has to leave in a minute."

She must have come to bring the Christmas presents I thought, so I took me coat off. Me aunt Hilda was a big woman, real big, and she lived on her own at the edge of the moors. Some kids said she was a witch, but she wasn't really. She had the wrong hair for a start, it was all white. She would have made a good Mrs for Father Christmas cos she had white whiskers anorl. On her top lip and all over her chin, but you weren't supposed to notice 'tem. As soon as I got near she grabbed hold o' me.

"Now then young Derek," she said, grabbing hold of me and crushing me up against her stomach," say hello to your old aunt Hilda! Would you like a Christmas kiss?"

No thank-you, I said, I've just had one.

* * *

2. Paradise Lost

It was Friday, the week before Christmas, the day before Christmas shopping day. Pay day for me Dad, and funny thing was, he was late home from work.

Me and our Jimmy were watching for him from the front room window. It was real cold outside but we had a big fire on. The steam from the clothes horse kept fogging up the glass, so I kept having to wipe it with Jimmy's sleeve.

Me Dad was never late on Fridays, and me Mam didn't know where he was, but she knew he had a big pay packet this week, cos he's in the firm's Christmas club. This means that they save a bit out of his wages every week, all year, then he gets it all back on the week before Christmas, so's he can give it to Mam for the Christmas shopping. That would be tomorrow.

It was going to be great cos we'd get to have our dinners in the cafe and then go to the CO-OP and sit on Father Christmas' knee and tell him what we want. Then we'd even get a taxi back home cos we had too much stuff to carry. But that wasn't til tomorrow. That's the worst thing about Christmas, all this waiting.

Anyway, it was past five o' clock when we finally heard him open the front gate, and he was singing, which was daft cos me Dad can't sing. Then we heard him shout ARGH! And by the time we got to the window all we could see was his legs sticking out from under the big bush inside the gate. And his bike was on top of 'im. Me and Jimmy had spent all afternoon making a real good slide down the front path and I think he must have slipped on it.

So, he finally comes in through the back door and he's red in the face but still fairly happy, and him and Mam have a few quiet words while me and Jimmy are sent to wash our hands. Seems he'd been to the pub with his work mates, since it was Christmas, and had a drink. Seems he'd had a few drinks, seen as it was Christmas, and I thought there was going to be a war on cos Mam wiped her hands real hard on her pinny like she does just before we get a slap, but then Dad pulls out a piece of mistletoe and holds it over her head, then winks at us and gives her a big kiss. She calmed down a bit after that and served up the tea, bangers and mash, my favourite.

We're all dying to talk about Christmas shopping, well, I am, but nobody says anything, until I ask what time we're going. Early," says Mam, then she says to me Dad: So, how much is there?" nodding to his jacket on the back of the chair.

Oh, about forty quid," he says, real casual, as though he gets forty quid every week, instead of ten. Ooh, hang on," he says, but I had a drink or two so maybe there's just thirty-odd."

"Good," says Mam, cos it's already spent." I thought for a minute that we weren't going to get to go down Malton shopping next day, but then I remembered that she always says that when he gets paid.

"Right, let's have it then," she says and holds out her hand, which he kisses, what with him being still daft from the pub. Then he reaches into his jacket pocket, then the other pocket, then he takes the jacket off the chair and all the time his face is getting less and less happy. He finally stands up and goes through his trouser pockets and turns the jacket inside out, then he gets his lunch bag from off the kitchen door knob and goes through that, turning it upside down and dropping the flask out which lands on the floor and breaks inside, like they do. He sat down again. He couldn't find it. He'd lost his big wage packet with all the Christmas money.

"How can you lose the Christmas wage packet?" says Mam, not very happy now and certainly not wanting another kiss under the mistletoe. Not that he was offering. Dad was looking real sad, and trying to think. He said he'd taken his jacket off in the pub cos it was warm and cos he was playing darts, and left it hanging over a stool.

"Oh, I bet some greedy sod's pinched it," says Mam, also sounding quite sad now. Dad just looked down into his plate of mash and said nothing. Me and Jimmy knew to keep quiet so we did.

We went to bed early that night and heard Mam and Dad talking downstairs, quietly, with the telly turned off. Jimmy whispered across to me, "It's a good thing Father Christmas brings the presents and we don't have to buy 'em, else it would be a lean do this year."

Next day we were up early to get ready for shopping, but Mam said we needn't bother. She'd go on her own cos she hadn't got much money and she didn't want us nattering for stuff she couldn't afford. So me and Jimmy stayed with me

Dad. He said sorry to her as she left the house, and I think he must have said it lots of times last night cos she didn't seem to notice, and her eyes were all red.

When she'd gone Dad says "Right, lads, we'll put the decorations up," which we did, finally, but the house still didn't look right.

"There's no tree," said Jimmy.

"Aye, son, ah know," said Dad, as if he did know but couldn't do anything about it, like when you say to him it's raining.

"Maybe we can go and find one cos Mam won't be bringing one back, she hasn't got enough money for that." No money for a tree? I thought that usually came top of the list but Dad said we needed food first and there wouldn't be much of that this year either. I could see he was still sad, but he was being what Granny would call a brave little soldier. Though he didn't look very brave right now. Mind, I've never seen him cry so I didn't think he'd start now.

Dad went out to the coalhouse and got his saw and me and Jimmy put our coats and wellies on. We went into the backyard and Dad said "Ey up, it looks like snow," and we said great but he didn't think so, and he went back in to get his cap. That's when he remembered that he'd lost his cap last night anorl. It must be in the pub with the wage packet. I said why not go back to the pub and ask but he said there was as much chance of his wage packet still being there as there was of our Jimmy sleeping in past ten o'clock on Christmas morning.

Dad needed a hat, though, so I said he could borrow my other one, the one Granny made me for last year. I went and got it and gave it to him. Our Jimmy looked as if to say Dad's not that daft, but he was, and he put it on. I hated that hat on me, but it looked great on Dad. It was that real scratchy wool, a funny grey colour and it had a big pom-pom on top, which was lopsided and hung down the back of his head. He looked like a fat squirrel.

Anyway, we got set off up the backyard and over the fence into Cuppo's field. I know where we'll go," said Dad, I know where there's a load o' nice Christmas trees to choose from," and he was looking towards the moors, towards the colonel's estate. Me and Jimmy knew we hadn't to go near there. Mam said we'd end up in prison if we ever went in there. But this was Dad's idea so we'd be alright.

Goin' over the fields Dad was still real quiet so I thought I'd cheer things up a bit with a Christmas song, but I didn't want to start on me own, and Jimmy wouldn't sing cos he was too busy whining about losing his socks off inside his wellies. "Come on," said Dad, "Keep up, we've a long way go to go. And keep yer eyes open." He never said what for.

I was freezing. It wasn't as much fun as shopping. Mam would be in Woolworths by now, where it was warm and smelled of goodies. I was just looking at the fat squirrel bouncing around on Dad's head as he trudged us through hedges and over ditches, without ever stopping to have a rest or give us some chocolate, if he had any.

We finally got to a barbed wire fence with a lot of fir trees behind it, which we knew was the edge of the colonel's estate. There was a sign saying *Keep Out* cos he kept pheasants and stuff in there so him and his mates could shoot 'em.

"Alright," said Dad, in a quiet voice, looking up and down the fence, You hold the wire down and me and Jimmy'll get through then we'll hold it down for you." so I did. It was like that film I saw a few weeks back, about some soldiers getting out of a prison camp in the war, but they were getting out of trouble and it seemed to me like we were struggling to get into it. But then I thought if we did get caught it wouldn't be our fault cos Dad was there and they wouldn't report him to the police, I don't think. And besides, we needed a Christmas tree and we'd lost our money. And there were lots of trees, the colonel wouldn't miss one.

Anyway, we were soon standing among the trees and Dad pointed to a good one, about six feet tall and real thick and bushy.

"Right," he said, "you lads keep a look out and I'll cut the bugger down." he doesn't usually say words like that in front of us so he must have been as excited as we were. He went round the other side, knelt down and was soon sawing away at the tree, while me and Jimmy kept a lookout, though Jimmy was still whining and asking me to take his wellies off and see to his socks.

"Good, just about there," said Dad, then it started to come down, right on top of me and Jimmy, and I shouted Ey up! But then there was a huge *BANG!* and twigs and fir needles were going in me eyes and Jimmy screamed.

"*Bloody hell fire!*" said Dad coming round to our side, "What the 'ell was that?" We all grabbed hold of each other, me and Dad hugging with Jimmy stuck in between us. Then we heard a voice shouting from a fair way off.

“Oi!” It said. “What the hell are you doing?” Oh, no, it was Slatey Brown, the colonel’s gamekeeper, we were in for it now. He was marching along a row of trees towards us, in big green wellies and with smoke still coming from the end of his gun.

“Bloody hell,” said Dad, “you coulda killed us!”

“Aye,” said Slatey, when he got to us, “Aye, I could anorl. Ha! Thought you were a fat squirrel. It’s yer hat. Or these glasses Never seen one like that.” It didn’t surprise me cos Slatey had the thickest glasses I’ve ever seen anybody wear so I bet he hasn’t seen a lot o’ things. He’s a bit fat anorl, is Slatey, and he was puffing and red-faced when he got to us, with a big dew drop hanging on the end of his nose. Dad was still in shock and was cuddling our Jimmy to death.

“So what you up to, then?” says Slatey.

“Well, Tom,” says Dad, cos that’s Slatey’s real name, but no one ever calls him by it, unless they’ve been caught red-handed nicking one of his trees. “Well, we were looking for a Christmas tree, cos, well, money’s been a bit hard come-by lately.” Slatey took his hat off and scratched his head, and the dew-drop on the end of his nose shook and I thought it would drop... but it didn’t.

“Yer still working aren’t ya, Ron?”

“Aye, oh aye,” said Dad, “I’m still at t’factory, but I lost me wage packet last night. Christmas wages anorl.”

“Well, that’s a bugger,” said Slatey. I always wonder why grown ups usually believe each other and never have to say things like honest, I did, ah bet ya, honest, you ask me Dad... Not that Slatey would have asked me Grandad I don’t suppose.

He looked down at me and Jimmy. “Wanted a tree did yer lads?” We didn’t say ought. “Wanted one enough to steal it and risk going to prison?”

“Ey up, Tom,” said me Dad, but then I caught Slatey give him a wink and then I noticed it was snowing. Great big flakes, landing on all of our heads and making us look like, oh, I dunno, funny folks with big white heads. Or a big fat white squirrel if you were Dad’s head.

“Come on you lot,” said Slatey, “I’m foggin’ up ‘ere, let’s get back,” and the dew drop fell off his nose. “And you might as well bring that tree. Evidence.”

He took us back alongside the fence, but on his side, back to where he’d parked his Land Rover. He opened the door for Dad to get in the front then took me and Jimmy round the back. You lads get in there with Dana,” he said, “you’ll be alright.” so we climbed in and sat on a bale of hay, next to his dog, who I suppose was called Dana. She was black, a Lab I think, and as soon as Slatey had shut the back door she came across and started licking our Jimmy’s face. At least it made him laugh and stopped him moaning about his bloomin’ wellies for a bit.

We rode back to the colonel’s farm with the tree tied on the roof and I was wondering if Dad was going to be in real trouble, and get sent to prison, but I heard him and Slatey laughing in the front so I thought it would be alright. They were passing a little leather bottle back and forth to each other and drinking from it. By the time we pulled into the farmyard I was freezing, but Dad and Slatey were laughing like a pair of twits.

“Over here,” said Slatey, getting out of the cab, “Just have a look at this,” and we all trooped into a building next to the dairy. “Don’t worry about Colonel,” he said, “the old sod’s away up in Scotland for Christmas, won’t be back ‘til t’New Year.” Dad laughed again, and he still had Slatey’s leather bottle stuck to his mouth.

Inside the building there was a great long line of turkeys. All dead and plucked and white, and hanging upside down. At the far end was a lot of boxes with taties and other stuff in. “For the estate staff and some friends of the family,” said Slatey. “Right then, pick yerselves a good ‘un, but look sharp, I’ve got be in Malton by one o’ clock.”

Me and Jimmy went down one side and Dad went down the other and we all pointed to the same turkey, right at the end, a big fat one with a few white feathers still left on its bum.

“Right you are,” said Slatey, and cut it down with his pocketknife. He gave it to me and Jimmy to carry, and I got the fat end, nearly dropped it, but when I looked round for Dad to give me hand I saw him holding a sack open while Slatey put all kinds of stuff in it from the boxes... a swede, some taties, a big cabbage, some parsnips, a bunch of carrots each about as long as my arm, and a bucketful of brussels sprouts.

“There now, that’ll do yer,” he said, “and we know nowt, right?”

“Right you are,” said Dad. Then we all went back into stackyard to the Land Rover. Me and Jimmy got in the back again, and Jimmy got a another good licking, then with Slatey and me Dad sat in the front we set off back to our village, making fresh tracks in the snow down all the lanes.

“Ey, and don't say ought to Mam,” said Dad, as we finished loading all the stuff into the pantry. “It’ll be a nice surprise,” and it was anorl. When she got back from Malton, looking fed up and wet through with snow, and saw our tree in the front room window, twinkling and decorated... she went all quiet. Then she took her two little bags of stuff into the pantry and had to come out again cos there was no room for ought else. And she sat down on a kitchen chair and started to cry.

“Lads,” said me Dad, and he gave us a look and a twitch of his head, which means go outside to lark and stay there ‘til I tell you to come back in. So we did.

It wasn’t quite dark yet, and our slide was covered with snow, but it made it even better, more slippery. I made Jimmy go down first, just to make sure there was no gravelly bits, and he got right to the end and hit the gate, bouncing back down the path a bit. Out the way! I shouted, and made me run up, sliding real smooth all the way down, but Jimmy hadn’t got up. Ey up! I said, *Out the way!*, but it was too late, and I crashed right into him and went flying, right into the bloomin’ bush.

Ow! I said. “Huh! Bloomin’ ow!” he said. Right then, Big fat bloody ow! I said, to show him who was hurt most. Then I noticed something against me face. It was cloth. Like a cap. So much like a cap that it was one. It was Dad’s. And inside it was some paper. An envelope. I got up and wiped off all the snow and looked at it. A brown envelope, just like a wage packet.

Hey! I said, look at this, but Jimmy was still stringin’ a lot of swear words together in front of his next Ow. No, shurrrup, look I think I’ve found Dad’s money! And we opened the packet and took out all the notes, a lot of pounds and a few fivers.

“It must be a *fortune!*” said Jimmy, There must be millions!” Actually, I think you’ll find there’s nearly forty pounds I said, and there was. We thought for a minute about saying nowt. Maybe giving Dad the cap but keeping the money and going to Woody’s shop at the corner, which was still open. We wondered how many Fruit Gums we could get for nearly forty pounds. Jimmy said he’d spend his half a forty on comics, but then we thought we should maybe share it with Mam and Dad, half for us and half for them. Then I remembered it was Christmas and I said we should give ‘em the whole thing. Every pound.

Jimmy said “You what? No, hang on, Der, how about the cap and twenty pounds, and a fiver for Mam.” No, you daft sod, I said, it’s all theirs. And you never know, there might be a reward. So we looked at each other a minute, then set off back up the path to the house. He had the cap, I had the wage packet. It was still snowing.

“Fifty seven thousand nine hundred and twelve,” said Jimmy as we reached the kitchen door. What you on about? I said. “Fruit gums you could get, for forty quid.” Oh, yeah, I said. Maybe you could have. Maybe.

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