

Spotlight Publications

The Chimes

Adapted by Ron Nicol



Dickens

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THE CHIMES

By Ron Nicol
Adapted from the Charles Dickens story

CAST (in order of appearance)

Toby "Trotty" Veck, a ticket-porter or casual messenger

Margaret "Meg" Veck, Toby's daughter

Richard, a young smith

Alderman Cute, a Justice of the Peace

Mr Filer, a political economist

Sir Joseph Bowley, MP, a rich paternalist

Lady Bowley, his wife

Mr Fish, his confidential secretary

Tugby, his porter

Will Fern, a poor, honest countryman

Lilian Fern, his orphaned niece, as a child

Lilian, 9 years later

Mrs. Anne Chickenstalker, a local shopkeeper

Spirits (there can be one Spirit or any number of Spirits with lines distributed among them)

Time: London in the 1840s - the "Hungry Forties".

Running time: 50 minutes.

Church bells are ringing and there's the sound of a strong blustery wind. As a spotlight comes up, Trotty is revealed in front of the church. The lighting gradually increases during the following

Trotty Dear old Bells. Often heard, never seen, they're in my ears and in my thoughts. There's times I looks up at them dark arch windows in the tower and expect to be beckoned by something that an't a Bell - but I don't believe them Chimes is haunted. Many's the thing they says to me. Well, seems to me they do, an' if I hears 'em what does it matter whether they speak or not? I've heard 'em saying 'Toby Veck, Toby Veck, keep a good heart, Toby! Toby Veck, Toby Veck, keep a good heart, Toby!' Them Bells is company, hanging there all weathers with wind and rain driving in upon 'em. Like my own situation, standing here all day long waiting for jobs. And a breezy, goose-skinned, blue-nosed, red-eyed, stony-toed, tooth-chattering place it is to wait in winter when the wind comes tearing round the corner...

The wind increases, and Trotty demonstrates being blown about

Here we go and there we go! Banged and buffeted, tousled and hustled and lifted off my feet! It's a miracle I'm not carried into the air and rained down again on some corner of the world where ticket porters are unknown!

The wind dies and the bells begin to strike twelve

Dinner-time! There's nothing more regular than dinner-time - and nothing less regular than dinner. I wonder if it'd be worth any gentleman's while to buy that observation for the newspapers. I likes to know the news as well as any man, but it frightens me to read a paper now. Seems we poor people can't go right, or do right, or be righted. I han't much schooling when I was young and can't make out whether the poor have any business on the face of

the earth or not. Can't make up my mind if there's any good in us or whether we're born bad. We seem to give a great deal of trouble. Always being complained of and guarded against, one way or other we fills the papers. (*He feels his nose.*) No, still there. Thought my nose was gone! Couldn't blame it if it was to go. Has a hard time of it in this bitter weather. Precious little to look forward to. When it gets hold of a pleasant whiff or so - which an't too often - it's gen'rally from somebody else's dinner coming from the baker's. But wait...

Trotty sniffs the air. Meg enters, carrying a covered basket. Trotty closes his eyes, sniffing as Meg approaches behind him, holding up the basket and changing its position as Trotty turns his head this way and that, seeking the source of the aroma. She suddenly bursts out laughing

Meg Father! Dear Father!

Trotty What's in the basket, Meg? That's what my poor old nose got a whiff of!

Meg Don't be in such a hurry, father! Let me lift up the corner of the cover. There now. What's that?

Trotty (*sniffing*) Ah! It's very nice. Too decided for trotters, an't it? Liver? No. There's a mildness that don't answer to liver, and I know it an't sausages. Why, what am I thinking of! It's tripe!

Meg Tripe it is! And in half a minute you'll say it's the best tripe ever stewed. I've tied the basin up in a pocket-handkerchief. If I'd like to be proud for once and spread that handkerchief and call it a cloth, there's no law to prevent me, is there, father?

Trotty Not that I know of. But they're always bringing in some new law or other - and we poor people is supposed to know 'em all!

Meg Where will you dine, father? On the steps?

Trotty Steps in dry weather, my pet. There's a greater conveniency in steps because of sitting down, but they're rheumatic in the damp.

Meg spreads the handkerchief on the L steps and puts the basin on it

Meg Then here it is. And beautiful it looks. Come, father, come!

As Trotty sits, the Chimes ring. Trotty pulls off his hat and looks up

Trotty Amen!

Meg Amen to the Bells, father?

Trotty They broke in like a grace, my dear. They'd say a good one I'm sure, if they could. When things is very bad, almost at the worst, then it's 'Toby Veck, Toby Veck, job coming soon, Toby! Toby Veck, Toby Veck,

job coming soon, Toby!

Meg And does it come, father?

Trotty Always, my pet. Never fails. Why, Lord forgive me! Here I am sitting to gorge myself and you standing before me never so much as breaking your fast.

Meg But I have broken it, father – broken it all to bits! I had my dinner with Richard. His dinner-time was early and he brought his dinner with him when he came to see me, and we had it together. And Richard says, father...

Trotty What does Richard say, Meg?

Meg Richard says...

Trotty Richard's a long time saying it!

Meg He says then, father - another year's nearly gone and where's the use of waiting when it's unlikely we'll ever be better off than we are now? He says we're poor now and we'll be poor when we're old, but we're young now and years will make us old afore we know it. He says if we wait 'til we see our way clearly all we'll see will be the way to the grave. How hard to grow old and think we might've cheered and helped each other! So Richard says – oh, father, he says will I marry him on New Year's Day? The best and happiest day in the whole year. One that's sure to bring good fortune with it. It's a short notice, father, but I haven't my fortune to be settled or my wedding dress to be made like the great ladies, have I? He said so much, and said it so strong and

earnest, and all the time so kind and gentle that I said I'd come and talk to you.

Richard enters DL, unseen by Trotty and Meg, and listens

And as they paid the money for that work of mine this morning, and as you've fared very poorly for a whole week, and as I couldn't help wishing there should be something to make this a sort of holiday to you as well as a dear and happy day to me - I made a little treat and brought it to surprise you.

Richard And see how he leaves it cooling on the step!

Trotty Why, Richard, my boy!

The door L suddenly opens and Mr Filer enters through it, followed by Alderman Cute. Richard pulls Trotty to his feet and Meg snatches up everything from the step

Filer Out the way there! Clear the road!

Cute What's the matter, Mr Filer, what's the matter?

Filer This man, Alderman Cute. This porter. Causing an obstruction by sitting on your steps! I've spoken to him about it countless times, but still he sits!

Cute Now Mr Filer, I'm a plain man. A practical man. I go to work in a plain practical way. There's not the least difficulty in dealing with this sort of people if you understand 'em and talk to 'em in their own manner. Porter! What's that? Bring it here. This is your dinner, is it?

Trotty Yes, sir.

Cute Look at this, Mr Filer. What's this, eh? What is it? What is it?

Filer This is animal food, Alderman Cute, commonly known to the labouring population by the name of 'Tripe'. Tripe is the most wasteful article of consumption the markets of this country can possibly produce. The loss upon a pound of tripe has been found to be seven-eighths of a fifth more than the loss upon a pound of any other animal substance. Taking into account the number of animals slaughtered yearly and forming an estimate of the quantity of tripe which the carcasses of those animals would yield, the waste on that amount of tripe would victual a garrison of five hundred men for five months of thirty-one days each, and a February over. The waste! You snatch your tripe, fellow, out of the mouths of widows and orphans! You're a robber, sir!

Trotty I hope not, sir. I'd sooner die of want.

Richard opens his mouth to object, but Meg pulls his arm to stop him

Cute Listen well, Porter. Don't tell me or anybody else that you haven't enough to eat, because I know better. There's a great deal of nonsense talked about Want. Hard Up. That's the phrase, isn't it? I intend to Put it Down. You may Put Down anything among this sort of people if you only know the way to set about it, Mr Filer. Porter, is this your daughter?

Trotty Yes, sir.

Cute Where's her mother, eh?

Trotty Dead, sir. Called to Heaven when my daughter was born.

Cute And you, young man. You're making love to her, are you?

Richard Yes. We're going to be married on New Year's Day.

Filer Married!

Richard We're thinking of it, Master. We're in rather a hurry you see, in case it should be Put Down first.

Filer Ah! Put *that* Down, Alderman, and you'll do something. Married! The ignorance of the first principles of political economy on the part of these people! Their improvidence, their wickedness! A man may live to be as old as Methuselah, may labour all his life for the benefit of such people as these, may heap up facts on figures, facts on figures, and he can no more hope to persuade 'em they have no right or business to be married than he can hope to persuade 'em they've no right or business to be born - and that we know they haven't. We reduced it to mathematical certainty long ago!

Richard steps forward angrily, but Meg pulls him back

Cute Now, my girl, come here.

Meg comes forward and Cute chucks her familiarly under the chin. Richard again steps forward, but this time Trotty holds him back

I'm going to give you a word or two of good advice. It's my place to give advice, because I'm a Justice. You know I'm a Justice, don't you?

Meg Yes, sir.

Cute You're going to be married, you say. Very unbecoming and indelicate in one of your sex, but never mind that. After you're married you'll quarrel with your husband and come to be a distressed wife. You may think not, but you will, because I tell you so. Now, I give you fair warning that I've made up my mind to Put distressed wives Down, so don't be brought before me. You'll have children. Boys. Those boys will grow up bad, and run wild in the streets without shoes and stockings. If they come before me I'll convict 'em every one, for I'm determined to Put boys without shoes and stockings Down. Most likely your husband will die young and leave you with a baby. You'll be turned out of doors to wander up and down the streets. Don't wander near me, for I am resolved to Put all wandering mothers Down. All young mothers, of all sorts and kinds, it's my determination to Put Down. Don't think to plead illness as an excuse with me, or babies as an excuse with me, for all sick persons and young children I'm determined to Put Down. If you desperately and ungratefully attempt to drown yourself or hang yourself, I'll have no pity for you. If there's one thing on which I've made up my mind, it's to Put suicide Down. So don't try it on. That's the phrase, isn't it? Now we understand each other.

Cute pinches Meg's cheek, to Richard's fury. Meg indicates that Richard doesn't need to protect her but he shakes off Trotty's hand. Cute takes the precaution of taking a step back

As for you, you dull dog, what do you want to be married for? If I was a fine, young, strapping chap like you I'd be ashamed to pin myself to a woman's apron-strings. Why, she'll be an old woman before you're a middle-aged man! A pretty figure you'll cut then, with a draggle-tailed wife and a crowd of squalling children. Don't be such a fool as to get married. You'll think very differently of it before next New Year's Day, I assure you. A trim young fellow like you, with all the girls looking after you. Go along with you!

The Chimes

"The Chimes" is the second in the series of 'Christmas Books' written by Charles Dickens between 1845 and 1848.

Plot Summary

One New Year's Eve, Trotty Veck is filled with gloom at reports in the newspaper about crime and immorality, and wonders if the working class is wicked by nature. Encounters with Alderman Cute and MP Joseph Bowley make Trotty's daughter Meg and her fiancé Richard doubtful about their forthcoming marriage. When Trotty meets homeless vagrant Will Fern and his orphaned niece Lilian, he offers them his hospitality. That night Trotty is summoned to the church by the Bells, who in a series of visions show him how dismal his future might be. In despair, Trotty confesses to all his doubts. He wakes to find that the visions are only dreams, and that the New Year has dawned happily.

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