

# *A Christmas Conundrum*

*“For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”*

*–Mark 8:36*

**D**ETEKTIVE Emmett Harding of 27 Linden Avenue was well-known for his genius mind.

In fact, he'd cracked several cases that even Scotland Yard had given up on. He had no lack of mysteries to keep him occupied, nor money to keep him comfortable.

Yes, it was safe to say that Detective Harding was doing quite well in his line of business. He'd never once met a case that baffled him. That is, until he met this one.

It was the day before Christmas when it all began. The holiday spirit was in the air, and the passersby seemed to walk with springs in their steps. Some of the more well-to-do households had decorated their homes with garlands and holly, while cries of “Merry Christmas!” filled the streets.

Such was the scene through which Detective Harding and his friend and colleague, Walter Bennet, strolled that afternoon. They had been out all morning and were now returning to their office with another case successfully solved.

“Well, Walter,” Detective Harding said at last. “I suppose now all we have left to do is to put it on file.”

“Paperwork sounds like a delightful way to spend the afternoon.” Walter drew his overcoat closer around him. “We've been so busy lately.

The detective chuckled. “Yes, three cases in one week must be a record.”

Walter only shook his head. “Emmett, I still wish you wouldn’t have charged that woman as much money as you did. Her husband is out of work, you know, and they have four children.”

“It’s none of my concern how many children they have,” Detective Harding replied coolly. “I charge a fair price. I’m not going to risk my life and reputation for free.”

“I know, but it just doesn’t seem right to take what little money she had.”

An irritated frown tugged at the detective’s lips. “We cleared her name, didn’t we? That’s our job—we’re *supposed* to get paid for it. How else do you expect to make a living?

For a moment, Walter looked as if he would argue, then he sighed. “I’m just glad it’s all over. No one wants to spend the holidays hunting for a murderer.”

“Perhaps *you* wouldn’t.”

“Oh come, now... it *is* Christmas Eve, after all.”

“I don’t much care for Christmas,” the detective said matter-of-factly. “I mean, why on earth do people go around giving each other gifts, anyway? They haven’t asked for it, and surely they don’t deserve it.”

Walter let out a chuckle. “That’s why it’s a gift, Emmett. You don’t have to deserve it... you only have to receive it.”

“Well, I for one, won’t be celebrating Christmas,” Detective Harding turned his head, his voice sharp and irritable. “And I certainly won’t be receiving any gifts.”

The smile disappeared from Walter’s face, and he put a hand on his friend’s arm. “Won’t you at least attend church with me tonight?”

The detective sighed heavily. “Every year, you ask me, and every year I have the same answer.”

“Please, Emmett?” Walter continued in earnest. “Just this once?”

“Sorry, Walter.” Detective Harding met his friend’s eyes with an indifferent look. “I don’t see the point of a religion in which a God who has everything decides to give it all away. It’s unrealistic, unintelligent, and terribly unbusinesslike.”

Walter shook his head but said no more. Their discussions always seemed to end like this... especially lately.

Detective Harding appeared content with the silence, so they continued on in that fashion until they’d reached Linden Avenue.

Upon arriving inside the entryway, the men removed their long coats, preparing for a much more restful afternoon than the morning had been. But no sooner had they ascended the stairs to the office, than their secretary approached them.

“Merry Christmas, Mr. Harding,” the young woman said, her head and eyes lowered.

“Hello, Ms. Gardner,” the detective responded carelessly, turning towards his desk.

The secretary stepped forward to stop him. “Oh, Mr. Harding, sir, may I ask you something?”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Well, you see, tomorrow is Christmas Day, and—”

“I am well aware of what day it is, Ms. Gardner,” Detective Harding interrupted irritably. “And I suppose you’ll be wanting the day off?”

“Y–yes sir.” Ms. Gardner dipped her head again. “If it’s no trouble to you.”

“That never stopped anyone before,” the detective muttered under his breath. He turned back to the woman. “Very well, but you must stay and finish up the files tonight to make up for it.”

“Oh, but, sir, my grandmother will be waiting for me at home tonight,” Ms. Gardner began. “She’s ill, you see, and—”

“Ill?” Detective Harding shook his head. “I could have sworn she was ill just last month.”

Walter stepped forward, clapping a hand on his friend’s back. “Oh, come now, Emmett, give the poor girl the night off.”

“No, I’m afraid I must remain firm.” Detective Harding glanced at Walter, his tone chastising. “This is why *I* am the senior partner, Walter. You’re too soft on everyone.”

Detective Harding turned again to his desk and rummaged around for a moment. All at once, his sharp eyes caught something among the usual clutter of papers and writing utensils. “Hello, what’s this?”

“Oh, I nearly forgot.” Ms. Gardner looked up from the other side of the room. “A man was here to see you a little while ago. He couldn’t stay, but he left that note for you.”

“A note, eh?” Detective Harding raised his eyebrows in intrigue. “Well, let’s see what it says.”

The detective picked up the scrap of paper and unfolded it. Walter came to look over his shoulder as he read the note aloud. “Where-e’er we go, what-e’er our lot, gold and silver matter not. Neither tarry nor delay, to seek the path, to find the way.”

Walter frowned. “What on earth could *that* mean?”

“I’m not sure...” Detective Harding said slowly. He looked over at his secretary. “Ms. Gardner, did you see what this man looked like?”

She shook her head. “I– I don’t really recall much. He didn’t stay very long... he didn’t even take off his hat or coat.”

The detective turned back to his friend with a small smile. “Well, Walter, it would seem that we have another case on our hands.”

Walter let out a groan. “Another case. We only just finished the last one!

“Yes, isn’t it grand?” Detective Harding said excitedly. “Now let’s see about this note...”

He studied the piece of paper for a long moment, turning it over in his hands and holding it up to the light.

“Well,” he began at last. “It seems our man used to be wealthy, but has fallen on hard times in recent years.”

“And how can you tell that?” Walter asked.

This paper has been sitting unused for a while, but it’s of extremely good quality,” the detective replied. “In fact, it’s very much like the paper we use at this office. However, the ink is of quite a different variety—much cheaper and very thin, too.”

“Oh, right... I see it now,” Walter said, in a tone that implied the opposite. He turned to Ms. Gardner and gave a confused shrug.

“The words of the note itself are much harder to decipher,” Detective Harding continued, not noticing his friend’s bewilderment. “It would seem by the second line that we’re dealing with something more valuable than gold.” He stared off into space thoughtfully. “But what would a poor man have that’s better than gold?” After a moment, he addressed Ms. Gardner again. “Did you notice anything else about the man?”

She shrugged. “Only that he took a cab when he left... I watched him through the window.”

“Come on, then, Walter,” the detective said abruptly. “Perhaps the cabbie is still around somewhere.”

Stuffing the note into his pocket, Detective Harding turned swiftly on his heel and headed for the door.

Walter stared after him in confusion. “You aren’t really going to try to find him, are you?”

“And why not?” The detective paused in the doorway. “Besides, this is so much better than sitting around in an office.”

“Well, actually,” Walter began. “I was looking forward to—”

“No time for idle chatter, Walter.” Detective Harding interrupted, his eyes shining with excitement. “We may even solve this case today!” With those words, he strode purposefully out of the room.

Looking a bit less enthused, Walter heaved a sigh and followed. The two men quickly pulled on their coats at the bottom of the stairs, then ventured out into the frigid air once more.

Only one cab was in sight when they stepped outside, but it seemed to be sitting idle for the moment. The horse was eating contentedly out of a feed sack, while its master lounged atop the carriage.

Detective Harding walked right up to the cab, rapping sharply on the side to get the cabbie’s attention.

“Wha—” The cabbie raised his head, then sat up quickly as he spotted the two men. “Oh, ‘ello, there, gentlemen. Merry Christmas to ya! Be you lookin’ for a ride?”

“That depends,” the detective said in a businesslike tone. “Did you give another man a ride from this address?”

“Aye, not an hour ago.” The cabbie frowned. “But what’s it to you?”

“Perfect!” Detective Harding exclaimed. “Take us there, and be quick about it!”

He leaped inside, followed by Walter, who nodded politely to the cabbie. In another moment, they were off down the streets, the horse moving as though he were eager to get back to his meager supper.

They traveled mostly in silence, Detective Harding staring out the window in deep thought. Walter would have preferred to have a conversation, but he knew better than to interrupt his friend when they had a case to solve.

At last, the detective’s eyes lit up, and he suddenly began to rummage around the inside of the cab.

“Emmett, what on earth are you doing?” Walter asked, his eyebrows raised.

“Searching for clues, Walter. Our mysterious man may have left something of his in this cab.”

“Oh, right you are.” He paused. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Yes, if you would be so good as to switch places with me,” Detective Harding said distractedly. “I must search the seat where you are.”

Walter gave a start. “O—oh... yes, of course.”

Soon after the two men had switched places, Detective Harding suddenly gave a cry of triumph, holding up something in his hand. It was two small pieces of rope, knotted together in the middle.

“A knot!” Walter cried.

“A rolling hitch, to be more precise,” the detective replied. “It appears our mystery man has had some maritime experience.”

Walter looked at his friend curiously. “And how is it that you know so much about knots?”

“Oh, well it’s quite paltry, really,” Detective Harding said. “My brother wanted to be a sailor when he was young... he was always tying knots.”

Walter’s face morphed into a look of befuddlement. “I didn’t know you had a brother.”

“No...” The detective turned to look out the window, a strange look on his face. “No, I suppose you didn’t.”

Both men were silent for a moment, then Walter spoke up again. “So if our man is a sailor, then what do you suppose his note meant?”

“I’m not sure,” Detective Harding said slowly. “It must fit together somehow, but we don’t have all the pieces yet.”

They fell into silence once more, until the cab finally slowed to a stop. Detective Harding and Walter climbed out, scanning the area. The houses were much less grand in this part of the city, and the people who walked the streets were dressed much more plainly.

“Well, this is where ‘e got out,” the cabbie leaned down from his perch. “If you be wantin’ information, you might try askin’ those carolers over there.”

He gestured to a small group of children who were standing on a nearby street corner, singing Christmas hymns.

“Yes, that’s exactly what we’ll do.” Detective Harding turned, then paused. “Oh, and wait here for us, will you? We might need you before the night is over.”

“Aye, sir, I’d be glad to.” The cabbie nodded cheerfully. “But... well, do y’think I could get a wee tip for my trouble? Me wife an’ children be wantin’ their Christmas dinner, but I ain’t got but tuppence to spare.”

“I’m sorry, my good man, but I don’t give tips,” the detective replied. “Your job was to bring us here, and I’ll pay you for that and not a cent more.” He pulled a few coins from his pocket and placed them into the cabbie’s hand.

“Oh, give the man his tip, Emmett,” Walter interjected. “Heaven knows you’ve got plenty more coins in that pocket of yours.”

The annoyed frown returned to Detective Harding’s features. “Well, if you’re feeling so charitable, Walter, why don’t *you* tip him?”

“I would, but I’ve only got a few farthings with me.”

The detective sighed. “Come on, Walter, we have work to do.”

He turned away, but Walter paused to fish the farthings out of his pocket, handing them to the cabbie.

“Thank you, sir.” The cabbie dipped his head. “Much obliged. I’ll be waitin’ for you when you come back.”

“Thank you,” Walter replied. “And I’m sorry about my friend.”

“Aw, I don’t take it to ‘eart.” The cabbie raised his head, watching Detective Harding’s retreating figure. “But ‘e don’t seem to care much for other folks, does ‘e?”

“Yes, I suppose you could say that.” Walter turned. “Well, I should go. Merry Christmas to you!”

“Merry Christmas!”

Walter hurried away, catching up with Detective Harding just as he reached the group of carolers.

“O come, let us adore Him,” the children sang. “O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him—Christ the Lord!”

As the last notes faded away, the detective cleared his throat. “Excuse me, children. I’d like to have a word with you.”

One of the little girls looked up at him with wide, unblinking blue eyes. “Would you like to sing with us, mister?”

“No, I want to ask you a few questions,” Detective Harding replied. “Did you see a man get out of a cab on this corner a few hours ago?”

“Oh, yes,” a girl with freckles said. “He was very nice.”

The third girl bobbed her head up and down, her brown ringlets bouncing lightly. “He stopped to sing with us.”

“I’m sure he did,” the detective muttered, almost to himself. “Did you notice anything else about him? What he was wearing, maybe?”

“No, mister,” the blue-eyed girl answered. “But he did give us a half-pence for our singing.”

“Ha!” Walter burst out triumphantly. “What do you say to that, Emmett? Even the sailors give out their money more readily than you do.”

Detective Harding glared harshly at his friend. “Oh, do be quiet, Walter.” He turned back to the carolers, now quite annoyed. “Did you see where this man went?”

“Yes, he went into that house over there.” The girl with the freckles pointed down the street.

“He and his wife just moved in a few days ago,” the brown-haired girl interjected.

The intrigued gleam came back into the detective’s eyes. “So we’ve found his home, have we? Come on, Walter.”

“Wait, mister,” the blue-eyed girl said. “Won’t you sing with us?”

Detective Harding shook his head impatiently. “Sorry, children, I don’t sing.”

“Oh, but these are Christmas songs,” the girl with the freckles said matter-of-factly. “Everybody sings Christmas songs.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Why not?” The brown-haired girl frowned. “Don’t you like Christmas?”

“As a matter of fact, I do not,” Detective Harding replied flatly. “It’s quite a ridiculous notion if you ask me... all this singing, and giving gifts, and going to church.”

“But Christmas is about Jesus!” The girl with the blue eyes exclaimed. “And that’s the best part of all!”

“Well, you’re out of luck, I’m afraid. I don’t much care for Jesus, either.”

“I bet you would if you knew what He did for you,” the freckled girl said.

Detective Harding fidgeted uncomfortably. “Children, I really am in a hurry...”

“I’m gonna pray for you, mister,” the girl with the brown curls declared.

“What?” The detective’s eyes widened. “No, no, you don’t need to do that. I’m quite alright, thank you.”

“I’m gonna pray for you, too, mister,” the blue-eyed girl said.

The freckled girl nodded. “Me, too.”

Now thoroughly flustered, Detective Harding turned away hastily. "Alright, I'm leaving now. Thank you for the information... goodbye."

"Bye, mister!" The brown-haired girl called after them. "And Merry Christmas!"

As the two men left the street corner, the children began to sing again, their joyful voices falling unheeded on the detective's ear. "O come, all ye faithful, joyful, and triumphant..."

Detective Harding and Walter headed in silence towards the house the carolers had pointed out. It was small and shabby, and a few of the windows had been boarded up. As soon as they had reached the door, Detective Harding knocked sharply on it.

After a few moments, the door swung open to reveal a young woman wearing an apron and covered in flour.

"Oh... hello!" The woman looked surprised, but her face quickly morphed into a pretty smile. "Merry Christmas! I- I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting visitors today."

"Quite alright, madam," Detective Harding replied. "We're simply here on a matter of business."

"Well, do come in." The woman stepped back to hold open the door. "I'm Marianne, by the way."

The woman led them into a tiny sitting room with a crackling fire on the hearth. The two men seated themselves on a set of wooden chairs, catching a whiff of the bread baking in the kitchen.

Marianne brushed her flour-covered hands on her apron and sat down on a rocking chair near the fire. "Now, then, what can I do for you gentlemen?"

"Well, we've come about your husband," the detective began. "I'm a private investigator, and it seems that he came to my office today while I was out."

Understanding dawned on Marianne's face. "Oh, you must be Emmett Harding... my husband told me he'd paid you a visit."

Detective Harding leaned forward, suddenly alert. "Did he, now? I don't suppose he told you why he wanted to see me."

"I... think it would be best if he told you that himself," Marianne said hesitantly. "He should be home soon if you care to wait around until then."

"I believe we will, thank you." Detective Harding sat back in his chair. "I understand your husband is a seaman?"

Marianne's eyebrows raised in surprise. "Why, yes... he was a sailor for seven years, but now he's taken a job at the church."

"I'll wager it's taken quite a toll on your pocketbooks," the detective replied. "You're not used to such a meager living, are you, madam?"

"No, I suppose not," Marianne admitted. "It's true, we were better off when my husband worked at sea, but he wanted to do something better with his life... he wanted to be able to serve the Lord and his fellow neighbors."

Walter sat up straight as though he'd suddenly remembered something "I don't suppose your husband would be the new custodian at the church on Hartford Street?"

Marianne nodded. "That's the very church! Do you attend there?"

"I do indeed!" Walter's face split into a grin.

"Do you plan on going to the service tonight?" Marianne continued.

"Yes, and tomorrow's service, as well," Walter replied. "Emmett, here, is quite a lonesome fellow... he hasn't got any plans for the holidays."

“No plans for Christmas?” Marianne turned to Detective Harding. “You ought to celebrate with us, then! We’ve only just moved here, so we haven’t many friends.”

The detective gave a start at the unexpected offer. “Oh, we couldn’t possibly...”

“Nonsense,” Marianne interrupted, her tone warm and gracious. “My husband and I would be glad to have guests. You can attend church with us tonight, and then come back here for Christmas Eve dinner.”

“I– I don’t want to impose,” Detective Harding stuttered.

“Oh, come on, Emmett...” Walter clapped a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Just say yes already!”

Detective Harding felt his resolve weakening from the woman’s generosity. To receive such a kind offer—and from a stranger, too. His mind told him to refuse, but something deep inside him wanted to say yes.

His eyes roamed around the room in thought, moving from one piece of furniture to another. All at once, his gaze landed on a shelf on the wall, upon which sat a thick, aging book. Immediately, his face froze, and all of his inner turmoil ceased. He rose quickly to his feet.

“I should have known,” Detective Harding muttered angrily. “The poem... the sailor’s knot. The generosity to the carolers! How could have been so blind?”

Walter frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“I think it’s time we took our leave,” the detective said, his face as cold as stone. “Come, Walter.”

Marianne stood up hastily. “Wait, please don’t go!”

“What about our mystery man, Emmett?” Walter asked. “Don’t you want to find out who he is?”

“I *know* who he is!” Detective Harding said sharply.

Walter stopped short, looking more confused than ever. “You do?”

“Please, Detective Harding!” Marianne pleaded. “At least speak to Charlie first!”

“No!” He snapped. “I’ve wasted enough time on this already. Walter, let’s go!” With those words, Detective Harding strode out of the room, Walter following bewilderingly behind him.

As soon as he was out of the house, the detective headed down the street at a brisk pace.

“Emmett, where are you going?” Walter called after him. “The cabbie’s waiting for us!”

Detective Harding turned but didn’t slow his pace. “You go along without me... I think I’d rather walk home.”

Walter glanced up at the snowflakes that had started to fall, then hurried to catch up with his friend. They walked along on the slippery cobblestone, towards a bridge that loomed in the distance.

“Emmett, will you please explain yourself?” Walter asked, as he came alongside the detective.

“Who on earth is Charlie?”

“His full name is Charles Harding,” Detective Harding replied, not looking at his friend.

“He’s... he’s my brother.”

Walter’s eyes widened. “Your brother?”

“Yes.” The detective paused for a long moment. “Charlie and I got into the private investigating business as colleagues. I was the brains of the partnership, and he was the

brawn. We started off with hardly a penny to our names, but, over time, our reputation began to grow. Together, we cracked some of the toughest cases I've ever come up against."

Walter shook his head incredulously. "I didn't know any of this... why, I didn't even know you *had* a brother until today."

"Yes, well, I don't speak of him much these days. Charlie always did have a soft heart—too soft for his own good. He believed in Jesus, like you. I suppose that's one of the reasons we didn't get along very well."

"So what happened between you two?"

"Well, I guess you could say we had a falling out." Detective Harding stared out into the falling snow, his eyes taking on a distant look. "Seven years ago, on Christmas Eve, it was... Charlie was out on an errand when an old woman came in and poured out a story about her missing husband. Trouble was, she hadn't anything to pay us with, or so she told me.

"I knew accepting her case without charge would only bring more freeloaders to our doorstep. So, I turned her away. When Charlie came back and heard the story, he was furious and started to scold me for being so frugal. I stood my ground, knowing that I had simply made a wise business move.

"We began to get more and more heated—I said many things I would later regret. It was as though all of our differences over the years came pouring out all at once. Finally, in a fit of anger, I told him to go out and help the old woman himself if he so desired. So Charlie snatched up his overcoat, gave me one last look of disappointment, and headed out into the night."

They'd reached the bridge by this point, and Detective Harding placed his elbows on the stone wall, looking out over the half-frozen river. "After he left, the snow came down thick,

erasing all traces of Charlie's steps. He never returned that evening, nor any of the days following. Finally, I was forced to assume that he had perished in the cold that night."

The detective's voice softened until it was hardly perceptible. "His act of folly led to his very demise."

"But... he's *not* dead," Walter said simply.

"Apparently, no."

"Then— then what is this all about, Emmett?" Walter's voice was a mix of confusion and firmness. "Surely you can forgive each other after all these years."

"This has nothing to do with forgiveness," Detective Harding replied stiffly. "I made my peace with Charlie a long time ago. But he's so set in his ways—as much as I am in mine. We never thought the same about anything back then, and I suspect it would be the same way now."

"But you don't *know* that."

"I do know it. I know it because I know *him*." The detective waved a hand at his well-pressed suit. "Here I am, living a successful life, and there he is, with barely a roof over his head. He was always stopping to help any poor soul he came across, as though time and money were things to be thrown about."

"Now, that's hardly a fair judgment," Walter began defensively. "Your brother sounds quite noble, actually."

"Noble?" Detective Harding turned, his eyes burning with indignation. "He's nothing short of foolish, Walter! To take his hard-earned living and waste it on those who cannot help themselves!"

Walter's frown deepened. "Emmett, I just can't believe you. You're wealthy and prosperous, yet you've driven every speck of human kindness out of your life! You bury yourself in your work, and you hoard your time and money as though they were your prized possessions!"

"Because they *are!*" The detective snapped. "There are only a certain amount of years a man can live, or gold he can obtain, so why squander it away?"

"But why keep it to yourself?" Walter challenged. "Why search for happiness in something so- so limited?"

"And I suppose you and Charlie somehow find happiness in giving it all away?"

Walter took a step back, his tone becoming calmer. "No, Emmett. My happiness is found in Christ, who gave His life for me. When I turned to Him for salvation, my love for material things paled in comparison to the satisfaction He gives." His eyes shone brighter as he continued. "I share with others *because* of my joy, not to- to somehow earn it."

Detective Harding turned away from Walter in silence, his face as hard and cold as the stones beneath their feet.

Walter sighed. "Emmett, listen to me. You may have wealth and prosperity now, but that's not going to matter someday. The Bible puts it this way, 'For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?'"

"Jesus came to earth to die for your sins... that's why we celebrate Christmas! He gave Himself as a gift so that we might have eternal life." He put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Don't lose your soul over a pile of money, Emmett. It's not going to last, and when it's all stripped away, you'll have nothing left."

"Stop, Walter!" Detective Harding said sharply. "I don't want to hear any more of this."

Walter drew back for a moment, then finally spoke again. “Alright, then... I’m going home.” He paused, then his hand dropped from his friend’s shoulder. “I’ll see you after the holidays, Emmett.”

Quietly, Walter drew himself up and began to walk away. The detective remained rigid for a few moments but, at last, he slowly turned. The coldness of his expression melted away as he watched his last friend in the world disappear into the falling snow.

And Detective Harding was left alone on the bridge.

He shook himself, as though to brush away the remorse that tugged at his heart. “Well, he can go if he wants to. He’ll see how it all works out for him.”

Feeling a sudden chill come over him, the detective put his hands into the pocket of his overcoat. His right hand closed over a scrap of paper, and he pulled it out with a frown.

Slowly, Detective Harding read the note aloud for the second time that day. “Where-e’er we go, what-e’er our lot, gold and silver matter not. Neither tarry nor delay, to seek the path, to find the way.” He paused as the words began to take on a meaning. “Gold and silver matter not... For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Neither tarry nor delay, to seek the path...” He lifted his head to look down the road where Walter had disappeared. “To find the way.”

All at once, the words became clear to Detective Harding. They spoke of the years he’d labored to earn his wealth—all of the toil and effort he’d put into his work. But what had he been working towards? What would he have to show at the end of his life except a useless pile of money?

It was all emptiness, he realized. He’d spent his life chasing emptiness, while the path to joy had been right in front of him the whole time.

After a long moment, Detective Harding turned again to look out over the river, his brow furrowed in thought as he spoke aloud. “God... I– I suppose I’ve tarried long enough, haven’t I?” He gave a low chuckle. “It didn’t make sense... all this talk of You giving Your Son for me. I mean, why on earth would You do that? I didn’t ask You to—I don’t even deserve it. But... I suppose that’s why it’s a gift, isn’t it? I only have to receive it.”

Pausing, he took a deep breath. “Well, I’m receiving that gift right now, God. I give up trying to gain everything I can from this world... I need *You* to save my soul.”

In that moment, an overwhelming joy swept over Detective Harding. He turned from the bridge, looking about him in wonder. Everything was exactly the same as it had always been, but, to him, it was all so different. Never had a snowstorm looked so beautiful... never had a darkening sky seemed so bright.

But then, from out of the fog and snow, a man stepped onto the bridge. His long overcoat had been thrown carelessly over his shoulders, and he seemed to have forgotten his hat.

Detective Harding sucked in a sharp breath as he recognized the man. Seven years, it had been.

But, in that moment, it was as though those years had never gone by.

“Charlie,” the detective breathed.

“Hello, Emmett.” The man shifted uncomfortably. “Marianne told me you’d been to the house. I thought perhaps I could catch up to you.”

“You came to my office,” Detective Harding said slowly. “You left me a note.”

“Yes, I– I’m sorry about that, Emmett.” Charlie lowered his eyes, not looking at his brother. “I didn’t know what to say to you, and when I heard you were out... well, I suppose I was too scared to talk to you myself.”

The detective shook his head. “Oh, Charlie, I’ve been so wrong... I realize that now.”

Charlie’s head shot up in surprise. “You– you do?”

“Yes.” He smiled sadly. “I didn’t understand the true spirit of Christmas, I suppose. I didn’t realize what a priceless gift God was offering to me.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“Well my friend, Walter, has been trying to reach me for quite some time now.” Detective Harding paused. “But it was your note, Charlie, that finally got my attention.”

“Do you mean that my note... actually worked?” Charlie stammered.

The detective chuckled. “Well, I can’t say much about your poetic abilities.” His voice softened. “I didn’t understand what it meant, at first. But God brought it back to me just when I needed it.” A long silence hung in between them, then he spoke again. “I– I’m sorry, Charlie. For everything. I was so selfish and blinded by greed, and I–”

All at once, Charlie strode forward and wrapped Detective Harding in a tight embrace, his overcoat falling unheeded to the snow-covered ground. “It’s alright, Emmett. I forgive you.”

The detective pulled away, his eyes glinting with tears. “Thank you, Charlie.” He glanced around thoughtfully. “You know, I– I feel different somehow. I’ve been happy before, but this isn’t happiness, it’s...”

“Joy?”

“Yes, joy!” Detective Harding repeated. His face split into a wide grin as he became more and more animated. “Like I could sing at the top of my lungs, and do a million things, and never get tired of doing them. Have you ever had that feeling before?”

Charlie let out a laugh. “As a matter of fact, I have.”

“I’ve got to do something, Charlie!” The detective grabbed his brother by the arms in excitement. “I want to do something for somebody!”

At that moment, a cab emerged from the snow and pulled to a stop next to the two men.

The cabbie leaned down to address them. “Are you still needin’ a ride, gentlemen?”

“Oh, what perfect timing!” Detective Harding exclaimed. “Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas, sir,” the cabbie replied, the surprise on his face mirroring his tone. “You’re sure in a fine mood.”

“And why shouldn’t I be?” The detective asked. “It’s a beautiful evening!”

The cabbie glanced around at the icy roads and wet snow, his eyebrows raised. “Yes, sir, whatever you say. Now where are you headed off to?”

Detective Harding turned to his brother with excitement gleaming in his eyes. “I want to do something special for Christmas, Charlie. Will you help me?”

Charlie hesitated for a moment. “But I’m to meet Marianne at the church for the Christmas Eve service.”

“Then– then I’ll come with you,” the detective responded. “Can we make a stop on the way?”

“Certainly, but we’ll have to hurry,” Charlie said.

“Perfect!” Detective Harding turned back to the cabbie. “To 27 Linden Avenue, please! And thank you kindly for your help!”

“Well ‘e sure got perky all of a sudden,” the cabbie muttered to himself, settling himself in his seat and taking up the reins.

The two men climbed into the cab, and they were off down the road.

“Oh, I haven’t been this excited in years, Charlie,” the detective said as they rode along. “And I can’t wait for you to meet Walter! He’ll be at the service tonight, too. You’ll get along grandly together!”

In no time, they arrived at the detective’s office, and he jumped out hastily and headed inside. “Ms. Gardner! Ms. Gardner, are you still here?”

After a moment, the secretary appeared at the top of the stairs, her face alarmed. “Yes, sir? Is something the matter?”

“No, no, just opposite, actually. You’re free to go tonight, Ms. Gardner. And you won’t have to worry about your grandmother anymore... I’m going to raise your salary.”

Ms. Gardner’s face lengthened in surprise. “Sir... thank you ever so much! I am deeply grateful!”

“I am the grateful one, Ms. Gardner.” The detective turned towards the door. “I must be off now, but won’t you join us at the church later?”

“I- I might do that, sir.” She smiled, waving at him. “Goodbye, now!”

“Goodbye, and Merry Christmas!” Pulling his coat tightly around him again, Detective Harding headed back out onto the street and climbed into the cab. “Thank you, cabbie! Now would you be so good as to take us to the church on Hartford Street?”

“Of course, sir! Right away!” The cabbie called from above.

Charlie turned to his brother curiously. “What was that all about?”

Detective Harding grinned. “Just delivering an overdue Christmas gift, Charlie.”

Before long, the cab pulled to a stop in front of a tall church building, and the two passengers climbed out.

“Ere you are, sir!” The cabbie hopped down from his perch, waving a hand at the building. “This is the church you wanted, ain’t it?”

“It is indeed, my good man! Now, I’ve something to give you for your service.” The detective dug into his pocket and pulled out a few bank notes, placing them into the cabbie’s gloved hand. “There you are... that ought to cover a Christmas meal for your family, eh?”

“Sir, you must be joshin’!” The cabbie’s mouth dropped open, but he quickly extended the money to Detective Harding. “I– I can’t take this!”

“You can and you will,” the detective replied, pushing the money back at the cabbie. “Now go on home to your family... and perhaps you’d like to bring them back here for the service.”

“Of– of course, sir. And thank you.”

“You’re welcome, and Merry Christmas!” Detective Harding called.

Still looking quite incredulous, the cabbie turned away, leaving the two brothers on the church steps.

Charlie appeared at the detective’s elbow. “Well, shall we go in?”

Detective Harding nodded. “Right behind you, Charlie.”

Charlie headed up the steps and into the building, Detective Harding following at his heels. The service had just started, and they could hear the sounds of children’s voices singing. As they entered the sanctuary, the detective saw that the same carolers from before were now singing for the congregation.

Charlie slipped into a pew next to his wife and motioned for Detective Harding to follow. But just as the detective was about to do so, he noticed a familiar face across the aisle and moved in that direction.

“Hello, Walter,” Detective Harding said quietly.

Walter's face lengthened in surprise when he saw his friend. "Emmett! What on earth are you doing here?"

"It's the most wonderful thing, Walter," the detective replied. "You'll never believe it!"

"Never believe what?"

"You know how you said you gave gifts because of the joy you had?" Detective Harding asked.

"Yes..."

"Well, I think... I think I've found that joy, Walter." The detective smiled, his eyes shining. "It's amazing—I've never felt happier in my life!"

Slowly, Walter grinned and clapped his friend on the back. "You don't know how long I've prayed for this. Welcome, my friend."

"Thank you, Walter."

Seating himself in the pew next to his friend, Detective Harding turned towards the front of the church, his mind wandering back over all that had happened.

He'd begun the day like any other... as a well-to-do, industrious private investigator. No case could perplex him, no criminal could frighten him. His only care in the world had been to preserve as much of his wealth as possible, and his only confidence had been his own abilities and achievements.

And now, here he was—Detective Emmett Harding of 27 Linden Avenue—sitting in a church pew of his own free will, a few pounds poorer, but a thousand times happier than he'd ever been.

At that moment, one of the carolers looked up from the front of the church, and her face lit up with a grin when she spotted Detective Harding. Smiling widely in return, the detective listened as the last strains of the chorus echoed the song in his heart.

“O come, let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him—Christ the Lord!”