



CHAPTER I

*D*r. Timothy Cratchit emerged from his Harley Street office shortly after six-thirty in the evening. He was surprised to find that the yellow-gray fog that had blanketed London for the past week had disappeared, swept away by a biting north wind. He paused for a moment to gaze up at the stars, a rare sight in the usually haze-choked city. Then, pulling his scarf tightly around his neck, he walked quickly down the steps and along the path to the curb, where his brougham waited. The horses, a chestnut gelding and another of dappled gray, stomped their hooves on the cobblestone pavement. They made an odd pair, but Tim had chosen them for their gentle nature rather than their appearance. As the doctor approached, his coachman smiled and swung open the side door. The coach's front and rear lamps barely pierced December's early darkness.

“Good evening, Doctor,” the coachman said as Tim approached.

“Good evening, Henry,” the doctor replied. “How are you tonight?”

The coachman, who was tall and lean, wore a knee-length black wool coat and a black top hat, his ears covered by an incongruous-looking strip of wool cloth below the brim.

“Cold, sir,” Henry replied. Tim grasped the vertical rail alongside the carriage door and was about to hoist himself inside when he heard a shout. Stepping back from the carriage, he turned to his left, toward the direction where the sound had come from.

The gas lamps along the street penetrated just enough of the gloom to allow Tim to distinguish a figure hurrying toward him. As the person drew nearer, Tim could see that it was a woman, clutching a dirty bundle to her chest. Thousands of poor women in London made a meager living sifting through the city’s dustbins for usable items and selling them for whatever pittance they could fetch. The bundle this woman cradled so carefully probably contained an assortment of odd candlesticks, worn shoes, frayed shirts, and the like. Still, this was not someone who would normally frequent Harley Street.

“Wait a moment, please,” Tim told the coachman, resignation in his voice. He was eager to get home, and too tired to wait while the woman unwrapped the bundle. He reached into his trousers pocket, found a half crown and two shillings to give her so that she would continue on her way.

When the woman came to a stop in front of him, Tim noticed with surprise that she was young, perhaps twenty years old. She was small, not much over five feet tall, clad in a tattered dress covered by a dirty, threadbare gray blanket that she had

fashioned into a hooded cloak. Her dark brown hair was matted in greasy clumps, and a smudge of dirt smeared her right cheek. Her face, though it was beginning to show the premature wear of a hard life, was still quite pretty. She stood with her brown eyes downcast, silently waiting for Tim to acknowledge her.

“Can I help you, miss?”

“Thank you for waiting, sir,” the woman said, still struggling to catch her breath. “I was hoping that you could take a look at my son. He’s very sick.” She tugged back a corner of what appeared to be a piece of the same blanket that constituted her cloak to reveal the face of an infant.

Tim suppressed a groan. It had been a long day—all his days seemed long now—and he was eager to get home. “Come inside, please,” he instructed the woman. To Henry he said, “This shouldn’t take too long.”

Unlocking the office door, Tim went inside, lit a lamp, and then held the door for the woman and baby to enter. Inside, the woman gazed at him with an earnestness that aroused his sympathy.

“I’m very sorry to bother you like this, Doctor. I didn’t mean to come so late, but I had to walk all the way from the East End, and it took longer than I thought,” she explained. “I never would have found your office yet, except that a kind old gentleman asked if I was lost and then pointed me to your door. A friend of yours, he said.”

“Well,” Tim replied in a reassuring tone, “you’re fortunate that I had to work late; I usually close the office at six.”

The woman shuffled her feet uneasily. “If it’s too late, sir, we can come back tomorrow.”

“No, no, that’s all right. Now tell me, what is the matter?”

“It’s my Jonathan, sir. He’s been sickly since birth, and now

he's getting worse," she said. Tim noticed that her eyes were moist.

"Let's take him into the examination room." Tim led them in, lit the lamps. The woman laid the child on the table and pulled back the blanket and other wrappings. Tim was shocked to see that the boy was not an infant—his facial features were too developed—but he was clearly undersized, and Tim did not dare hazard a guess as to his age.

"How old is the little fellow?"

"Three last summer, sir."

Tim studied the boy. His eyes were open, brown like his mother's, and though they gazed intently at Tim, the little body was limp. No mental defect, but something physical, and severe. Tim placed a thumb in each of the tiny hands.

"Can you squeeze my thumbs, Jonathan?" he asked. The boy did so, feebly.

"Very good!" Tim said. Jonathan smiled.

"I didn't know who else to go to, sir," the woman explained as Tim flexed the boy's arms and legs. "There's no doctors who want to see the likes of us, but then I remembered you, sir. You took care of me many years back, when I had a fever. You came by the East End every week then, sir, and took care of the poor folk."

"I'm sorry, but I treated so many patients that I can't recall you, Miss, ah, Mrs.—"

"It's Miss, Doctor. Jonathan's father was a sailor. We were supposed to marry, but I never seen him since before Jonathan was born. My name's Ginny Whitson."

It was already clear to Tim that the child, like his thin, almost gaunt mother, was badly malnourished. That accounted in part for his small size. Tim also noticed that the boy's leg muscles

were extremely weak. Jonathan remained quiet, looking at the strange man with a mixture of curiosity and fear.

“Does Jonathan walk much?” Tim asked.

“No, sir, never a step. He could stand a bit until a few weeks ago, but now he can’t even do that. I think it’s the lump on his back, Doctor.”

Tim carefully turned the boy over to find a plum-sized swelling along the left edge of his spine at waist level. He touched it lightly, and Jonathan whimpered. “How long has he had this?” Tim asked.

“I didn’t notice it till a year ago, sir. It was tiny then, but it’s grown since. In the last month or so it’s gone from about the size of a grape to this big.”

Tim hesitated. He needed to do some research and then give Jonathan a more thorough examination before he could accurately diagnose and treat the boy’s condition. He did have several possibilities in mind, none of them good, but there was no sense alarming Ginny prematurely. After she had swathed her child in the bundle of cloth, Tim ushered them back into the waiting room, where he studied his appointment book.

“Can you come back at noon on Saturday? I’m sorry to make you wait that long, but I have some things to check, and it will take time.” Ginny nodded. “I’ll see then what I can do,” Tim said.

“Oh, Doctor, thank you so much,” Ginny blurted, grateful for any help regardless of when it might come. She shifted Jonathan to her left arm, and thrust her right hand into the pocket of her frayed and patched black dress. Removing a small felt sack, she emptied a pile of copper coins onto the clerk’s desk. Most were farthings and halfpennies, with an occasional large penny interspersed among them.

"I know this isn't enough even for today, sir," she apologized. "But I'll get more, I promise. I'm working hard, you see, sir. Every day I go door-to-door and get work cleaning house and doing laundry, and save all I can."

With his right hand, Tim swept the coins across the desk-top into his cupped left palm and returned them to Ginny. He was touched by her attempt to pay him, knowing that she must have gone without food many times to accumulate this small amount of money. Her devotion to her son and effort to demonstrate her independence impressed him.

"There isn't any fee, Miss Whitson. I'll be happy to do whatever I can for Jonathan at no charge."

"But I can't accept charity, Doctor," the surprised woman answered. "It wouldn't be right, taking your time away from your paying patients."

"We all need charity in one form or another at some time in our lives," Tim said. "I wouldn't be where I am today if not for a great act of charity long ago, and as for taking time away from my paying patients, that may be more of a benefit than a problem. Come along, now, and I'll give you and Jonathan a ride home."

Tim locked the office door and escorted Ginny and Jonathan to his coach as tears trickled down her face, picking up dirt from the smudge on her cheek and tracking it down to her chin. Jonathan began to cry soon after the coach got under way, and Ginny comforted him with a lullaby, one that Tim remembered his own mother singing to him. When the child finally fell asleep, both remained silent, afraid to wake him. Once they reached the narrow streets packed with sailors, beggars, drunks, and an assortment of London's other poor wretches, Ginny asked to be let out. Tim knocked twice on the roof, and Henry reined in

the horses.

As she was about to step out of the carriage, something she had said earlier occurred to Tim. "One moment, Miss Whitson. You mentioned that someone directed you to my office. Do you know who he was?"

"No, Doctor," she replied, "and he didn't say. He was an old gentleman, thin, with a long nose and white hair. Neatly dressed, but his clothes weren't fancy, if you know what I mean, sir."

Tim bade her good night and watched as she walked down the sidewalk, past gin mills and dilapidated rooming houses. She soon turned into the recessed doorway of a darkened pawnshop and settled herself on the stone pavement. Tim briefly thought of going back to find out if she even had a home, or if she was going to spend the night in the doorway. Fatigue slowed his thoughts, however, and by the time the idea took root, the carriage was a block away and gathering speed.

Tim lay back against the soft, leather-covered seat cushions, pondering which of his Harley Street neighbors had directed her to his office. Most of them would have ignored such a woman, or ordered her back to the slums. Her description, though, didn't fit any of them. He shook his head, trying to remove the cobwebs from his tired mind. It must have been someone else, someone he just couldn't recall in his fuddled state. No sense wrestling with the question, he concluded.

During the long drive across town to his home in the western outskirts of London, Tim tried to relax. It had been another in a seemingly endless string of days filled with consultations and surgeries. Tim had arrived at his office at five-thirty that morning, half an hour earlier than usual, to prepare for a seven o'clock operation on the Duchess of Wilbersham. She had been

complaining for weeks about pain in her left shoulder, which she attributed to a strain that refused to heal. Since she never lifted anything heavier than a deck of cards at her daily whist game, Tim doubted the explanation, and several examinations showed no sign of any real injury. The duchess had a reputation as a hypochondriac who sought treatment for her phantom ailments from the best doctors in London, then bragged about how she managed to maintain her health by not stinting on the cost of good medical care. To placate the pompous woman, Tim had finally caved in to her demand that he operate to repair the tendons and ligaments she insisted had been damaged. Because the surgery was minor and the duchess, with good reason, abhorred hospitals, Tim performed the operation in his office, which was equipped for such tasks. A small incision and internal examination verified his suspicion that the duchess's shoulder was perfectly sound. When she awoke, with more pain from the surgery than she had ever experienced from her imaginary injury, along with sutures and an application of carbolic acid to prevent infection, she swore that the shoulder had not felt so well in ten years. Tim wondered if she would be so pleased when the effects of the morphine wore off.

"Just give the doctor that bag of coins I asked you to bring," the duchess had ordered her maidservant. "I won't insult you, Dr. Cratchit, by asking your fee, but I'm sure there's more than enough here to cover it, and worth every farthing, too."

When Tim's clerk opened the leather pouch, he found it contained one hundred gold guineas. Tim could not help contrasting the way his wealthy patients tossed gold coins about with Ginny Whitson's offer of her pathetic little hoard of coppers. The thought stirred memories of his own childhood, when pennies were so scarce that he and his brothers and sisters

sometimes had to roam through frigid alleys to scavenge wood scraps to keep a fire burning on winter nights. It was on one such night when he lay awake, shivering on his thin straw mattress, that he overheard the conversation that changed his life.

"I'm to get a raise in salary," his father murmured excitedly, trying not to wake the children.

"I don't believe it," Mrs. Cratchit declared. "That old miser would die before he parted with an extra farthing."

"It's true, dear," Bob Cratchit insisted. "I've never seen Mr. Scrooge like that. We sat for an hour this afternoon, talking. He asked a lot of questions about our family, Tim in particular."

"I'm surprised that he even knew you had a family, Bob."

"I was, too, dear, but he seemed to know a good bit about us. Why, from a few things he said about hoping we had a good Christmas dinner, I think he's the one who sent the turkey yesterday. Who else could have done it?"

"Well, I hope you're right, Bob. I'll not believe any of it until I see the proof."

Tim smiled at the recollection of his mother's skepticism. She had always been the realist in the family, Bob the optimist. Tim had shared his mother's doubts. She and the children had despised Ebenezer Scrooge, blaming his greed for the family's struggles. But with his stomach filled to bursting with turkey left over from Christmas dinner, Tim dared to hope that his father was right, and that old Scrooge might truly have undergone a change of heart. After all, it was Christmas, a time when good things were supposed to happen.

The sudden stop as the carriage arrived at his front door shook Tim from his reverie. He was out the door before Henry could dismount from the driver's seat and open it for him, a habit that Tim had observed left his coachman more amused

than chagrined.

“That’s all right, Henry,” he said, waving toward the carriage house. “You and the horses get inside and warm up.”

Entering the large, well-lit foyer, Tim was greeted by his maid. Bridget Riordan was a pretty Irish girl, with long, flaming red hair pinned up under her white cap, numberless freckles on her cheeks and small nose, and green eyes that always seemed to sparkle with happiness. She took Tim’s top hat, coat, and scarf. “Dinner will be ready in a half hour, Doctor,” she announced, “so you can rest a bit if you’d like.”

“Thank you, Bridget,” Tim replied, watching her walk gracefully toward the kitchen. He loosened his cravat as he climbed the stairs, thought briefly of skipping the meal and going directly to bed, and decided that he could not afford the luxury since he had a long evening of work ahead of him.

As usual, Tim dined alone. At the time he had purchased the large house, Tim had expected that he would one day need the space for the family he hoped to have. However, the demands of his practice and the memory of his one previous and unsuccessful attempt at courtship kept him from actively pursuing any romantic interests. Now he sometimes wondered whether he would spend the rest of his life a bachelor, without the happiness he had enjoyed as a child in the crowded and bustling Cratchit home.

Solitary meals in the cavernous dining room always seemed to dim Tim’s pleasure despite the hot, tasty food that Bridget prepared. When he had hired them after buying the house, he had often insisted that she, Henry, and William, the gardener, join him in the dining room. But the trio had been servants since their childhood, and their previous masters, who had not shared Tim’s lack of concern with class distinctions, had im-

pressed upon them the idea that it was improper for servants to associate with their master outside the scope of their duties. The dinner conversations had been stilted, with Tim trying to make conversation and Bridget, Henry, and William replying in monosyllables punctuated by “sir.” Tim had quickly given up the experiment, yet he still could not help feeling a pang of sadness, mixed with a bit of jealousy, every time the sound of their friendly conversation and laughter in the serving room rose high enough for him to hear. Still, he admitted that all three servants had warmed to him over the past two years, and had grown more willing to engage him in informal conversation. Perhaps one day they could dine together without the awkwardness of his previous attempts, he thought.

Shortly after nine o’clock, Tim retired to his upstairs study. There each night he reviewed the next day’s cases, looked up information in his medical books that he might need, and, if time permitted, read the most recent scientific journals to keep up to date on the latest advances in medicine and surgery. At one time he had contributed his share of new knowledge to the medical profession, but for the last several years he just could not find the time to do so. He really didn’t have the opportunity, anyway. How could he devise innovative treatments, he asked himself, when most of the patients he saw, like the duchess, had nothing seriously wrong with them to begin with?

Having finished his preparation for the next day’s work, Tim drew out his pocket watch. Not quite half past ten. He reached across the wide mahogany desk for the latest issue of the *Lancet*, which had lain unread for more than a week. Tim pushed it aside. It would have to wait until he had researched Jonathan’s condition. Tim walked over to the bookcase, scanned several volumes, removed a reference book, and returned to his chair.

The coal fire that Bridget had stoked was still burning strongly; he would see if he could find confirmation of his suspicions regarding the boy's problem, or alternative, less dire diagnoses, before retiring. Balancing his chair upon its two rear legs, he put his feet on the desk and opened the volume.

Tim did not know how long he had been reading. It seemed he had gone over the same paragraph a dozen times without registering the information in his mind when he felt how cold the study had become. He glanced toward the fireplace, where a single small log emitted a parsimonious warmth. The room seemed dark—looking over his shoulder at the gas lamp, he was surprised to see only a candle in a tin wall sconce, flickering in a chill breeze that came through a cracked windowpane. Strange, Tim thought, he was certain Bridget had closed the curtains. And when had the window broken?

His eyes better adjusted to the gloom, Tim turned back toward the fireplace. His surprise turned to shock when he looked down at his legs and saw that the new black trousers he had been wearing were now coarse brown cloth through which he could see the outline of his legs, withered and weak. The elegant marble of the fireplace had been replaced by cracked, ancient bricks. Leaning against them was a crutch. His childhood crutch.

Tim stared at the hearth, baffled, for how long he did not know. Then he started to get up, reaching for the crutch, only to find that his legs were so weak he could not stand. He gazed at his extended right hand. It was that of a child. He leaned back in his chair, rubbed his eyes, and when he looked around again, he was back in his own comfortable study. The gas lamp burned brightly, the fire still blazed in its marble enclave. There was no crutch to be seen. He flexed his legs. They were strong. He

shuddered, perplexed at what had occurred. Although he was quite sure that he had not fallen asleep, he reassured himself that it must have been a dream. Not surprising, considering his thoughts about Jonathan, and the unavoidable realization that the boy's plight reminded him so much of his own childhood illness. Tim stood, uneasy, and dropped the reference book on the desk before heading to bed.

Standing over the washbasin, he poured water from a pitcher into the ceramic bowl. He wet a washcloth and rubbed his face. Even in the light of the single gas lamp, he could see the creases beginning to form on his forehead, the dark circles under his blue eyes. A few strands of gray were sprinkled through his blond hair. He thought he looked at least a decade older than his thirty-two years. Combined with his short stature and thinness, Tim reflected that in a few years he would look like a wizened old man.

Too much work, that was the cause, he thought. Unpleasant work. And now he also had to do something about Jonathan Whitson, who had what was likely a malignant tumor. A boy not yet four, probably sentenced to death by nature before his life had a chance to begin. Five years ago, Dr. Timothy Cratchit would have tackled the child's case enthusiastically and with optimism. Now he was reduced to performing fake surgeries to placate hypochondriacs.

Ginny Whitson had met him years earlier, and believed in his abilities. He only wished that he shared her confidence.