When Snow Decides: S.R. Crockett's Counter-Christmas

A Deep Dive article on "The Packman's Pool" and the Gift of Death

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In Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Scrooge's nephew poses a question to his miserly uncle: "What reason have you to be morose? You're rich enough." Half a century later, in the Galloway hills, a twelve-year-old boy asks a very different question about Christmas. "Kirsmas—I think I hae heard tell o' that afore—what is't?" Robin Stiel's innocent inquiry opens S.R. Crockett's "The Packman's Pool" (1901), and in that gap between the nephew's assumption and the child's ignorance lies a chasm between two worlds, two Christmases, two utterly different understandings of winter, mercy, and survival.

Where Dickens created the template for Victorian Christmas—transformation through abundance, redemption through generosity, celebration through community—Crockett offers something far stranger and more unsettling. His is a Christmas where nature itself intervenes in human affairs, where the greatest gift is what gets taken away, and where a child's contentment comes not from plenty but from the stark recognition that "porridge is hard to beat." This is Christmas written from inside winter, where snow doesn't merely decorate the season but actively shapes destiny.

The contrast between these two visions reflects more than theological difference. It is fundamentally geographical. Dickens writes from London, where winter is inconvenience rather than existential threat, where warmth can be purchased and cold signifies moral failure more than meteorological fact. Crockett writes from a place where nature determines survival, where hill farmers count their wages to the shilling, and where a heavy snowfall can mean the difference between life and death. When Dickens's snow falls, it creates atmosphere; when Crockett's snow falls, it executes judgment.

The Dickensian Template

To understand what Crockett is writing against, we must first acknowledge what Dickens created. *A Christmas Carol* essentially invented the modern Christmas, or at least codified its essential elements: the transformation of the miser into the benefactor, the feast (however modest) shared in community, the revelation that generosity enriches the giver, the insistence that Christmas spirit can overcome material hardship. Scrooge's redemption is fundamentally about human agency—he chooses to change, and that choice radiates outward, warming the world around him.

The story's structure moves relentlessly toward abundance. The Ghost of Christmas Present appears amid a cornucopia of plenty—"turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch." Even the Cratchits, in their poverty, achieve a feast of sorts—their goose may be small, but it is savoured, supplemented by pudding and punch, made warm by family affection. The story's

emotional climax comes when Scrooge determines to make their Christmas more abundant still, sending the prize turkey, raising Bob's salary, becoming "a second father" to Tiny Tim.

This is Christmas as solution. Human transformation leads to material improvement, which manifests as increased consumption and communal celebration. The city itself becomes the site of redemption—cold streets warmed by lit windows, closed hearts opened by seasonal fellowship. Dickens's implicit theology is Arminian: human choice determines destiny, and that choice tends toward the good when properly awakened. His Christmas is optimistic, urban, mercantile, and fundamentally about addition—more food, more warmth, more love, more life.

The Geography of Violence

Crockett's world offers no such comforts. "The Packman's Pool" is set in "the wild hills of Galloway," at a place called Nethertoun that cannot easily be traced on any map. This vagueness is deliberate—Crockett writes type rather than specific location, creating a composite hill farm that represents the economic and geographical margins where most of his characters struggle to survive. The name itself—Nethertoun, the lower town—signals marginality, a place at the bottom of hierarchies both topographical and social.

The economic architecture of this world is rendered with brutal precision. Gray Stiel, the story's protagonist, has been herd to Ralph Edgar of the House of Folds for fourteen years. His wages are "five-and-twenty pounds," supplemented by "a cow's grass, one lamb in every two-score of those drafted off the farm at selling time." These are not romantic details but the mathematics of rural poverty, each element calculated to show a life lived at the edge of subsistence. When the story mentions Gray's savings—"seventeen-and-ninepence"—the specificity is devastating. This is years of careful hoarding, every penny accounted for, rendered down to the precise sum that represents the difference between hope and despair.

Gray's employer, Ralph Edgar, is known universally as "Hoppety-Skip," a nickname revealing the contempt workers hold for a master whose physical disability (a leg "put out of joint, it was said by an indignant former herd") marks him as both vulnerable and tyrannical. The detail about how he acquired this injury—violence from a previous employee—tells us everything about labour relations at Nethertoun. This is a world where frustration can erupt into physical assault, where workers and masters exist in barely suppressed mutual hostility.

Into this precarious world comes Allan Stiel, Gray's brother. Allan is a drunkard and a failure, described with a careful balance of contempt and pity. He has squandered whatever prospects he once possessed and now makes claims upon his brother—most pressingly, a demand for the return of his son Robin, who has been living in Gray's care. The child is twelve years old, "small for his age," and terrified of his father. Gray knows what surrender means: Robin will be beaten, neglected, possibly worked to death in service to Allan's drinking. The choice before him is stark—give up the child or refuse his natural father.

But there is another layer to Gray's desperation, revealed in a single, quietly devastating detail. Years ago, Gray loved Peggy Sinclair. She married his employer instead, choosing economic security over affection. Gray now lives in daily proximity to his lost love, his economic dependence a constant reminder of romantic humiliation. The trap is complete—he cannot leave without

abandoning Robin, cannot stay without enduring his thwarted life, cannot advance because every penny goes toward an impossible dream of independence.

On Christmas Eve his humiliation is complete when he turns to Peggy, and then her hubsand to borrow the ten pounds required to save Robin from his father. In turning him down Peggy makes it clear that her marriage was not of her choice. Hoppety-Skip is more brutal in his refusal to lend the money.

The story's inexorable movement toward violence begins with a carefully drawn distinction: "Gray Stiel came of a race which loves not murder, but is not averse to slaying in a just cause." That sentence repays close attention. The distinction between "murder" and "slaying" is not mere euphemism but a moral gradation preserved in Scots usage—murder is unlawful killing, slaying is killing that might be justified. Gray's people are not naturally violent, but they understand that sometimes violence becomes necessary. The language itself provides the ethical framework for what Gray is preparing to do. Even in contemplating violence, he observes the proprieties. This will not be murder done in passion but slaying done in righteousness, a distinction that matters profoundly to Gray even as he prepares to kill his own brother.

When Nature Intervenes

The crisis arrives on Christmas Day, though neither Gray nor Robin understands the day's significance. Robin silently watches his uncle load his musket and put his life’s savings in his pocket. His face is described as ‘the face of the dead, for he had not slept since he had met with his brother Allan three days before.’

Robin feels sorry for his uncle but believes he may be out to shoot a deer. ‘That might be God’s Christmas gift. Robin had once tasted venison and the flavour remained with him yet.’ It seems Robin can dream, if not hope, of some Christmas cheer even as he is unconscious of what Christmas really means. It might, perhaps, mean food.

Gray sets out through falling snow toward the Packman's Pool, the appointed meeting place. The description of his approach deserves careful attention:

"The snow fell softly, whisperingly. It was powdery with frost, and slid off the plumy branches of the fir trees with a hushing sound. There—there was the Packman's Pool, dead black amid a perfection of whiteness."

This is nature writing of a high order, but it is also something more. The adverb "whisperingly" makes snow animate and communicative—it speaks, even if humans cannot parse its language. "Powdery with frost" offers specific material observation rather than romantic description; this is the kind of detail noticed by someone who knows what different snow textures mean for survival. The "hushing sound" makes the snowfall audible through onomatopoeia, creating a sensory fullness that places the reader directly in the scene.

But notice the doubled deictic—"There—there was the Packman's Pool." That repetition, that gesture of pointing and locating, builds tension through the simple act of spatial designation. And then the visual contrast: "dead black amid a perfection of whiteness." The adjective "dead" anticipates what will be found, whilst "perfection" applies a word usually reserved for moral or

spiritual states to the physical landscape. The pool becomes a void, a negative space, a place where something is missing from the surrounding whiteness.

As Gray approaches, his body prepares for violence with physical precision: "A mist as of blood ran redly across Gray Stiel's eyes. His ears drummed and he gripped the old gun that had been his father's. He could feel his heart beating in his throat." This is naturalistic writing that refuses psychological interiority in favour of pure sensation. We do not learn what Gray thinks or feels—we learn how his body responds to imminent murder. The redundancy of "ran redly" (like "fell deadly down") emphasises through repetition, whilst the progression of physical symptoms—vision occluded, hearing disrupted, heart displaced—charts the body's preparation for lethal action.

But Allan is not there. An empty bottle "winked at him with one black eye from under a hoary eyelid of snow"—the personification making even refuse seem animate and knowing. Beyond the bottle, at the pool's edge, lies "a curious mound of snow hunched together." Gray recognises the shape before he touches it, and when he does, he discovers his brother "frozen dead, all his evil days and evil deeds covered with the spotless righteousness of the snow."

This sentence is the story's moral and imaginative centre, and it repays the closest attention. "Frozen dead" offers brutal directness—no euphemism, no softening. "All his evil days and evil deeds" adopts Biblical rhythm, echoing the repetitive structures of Ecclesiastes. "Covered" identifies snow's action: concealing, protecting, transforming. And then the extraordinary phrase: "the spotless righteousness of the snow."

Whose righteousness? The language could be read as theological—snow as agent of divine will, executing judgment and extending mercy. But it could equally be read as naturalistic—snow simply possessing its own rightness, its own order, its own way of resolving what humans cannot. The ambiguity is deliberate. Crockett writes for multiple audiences: those who will read it as providence, those who will read it as natural determinism, and those who understand these are not necessarily different things.

Gray's response confirms the complexity: "And Gray Stiel fell on his knees and lifted up his hands in thankfulness to heaven that the sin of Cain was not to be his that bitter Christmas Day." His thanksgiving is directed not to God but "to heaven"—a vaguer, more encompassing term. What he gives thanks for is prevention rather than death itself. The snow has removed not just the threat but the temptation, sparing Gray the moral destruction that would have followed fratricide, justified or not.

The gesture is religious, but the object of gratitude remains usefully ambiguous. Nature has intervened, and whether one calls that intervention providence or simple meteorological fact matters less than the intervention itself. The snow fell, Allan died, Gray was saved. In this vision, mercy looks like a frozen corpse covered with fresh whiteness.

The Economics of Sufficiency

Away from the Packman's Pool, unconscious of the violence nearly done in his name, Robin Stiel prepares for his evening meal. He draws "a creepie stool to his porridge and milk," the diminutive "creepie" (a low stool, child-sized) emphasising both his age and the modest scale of his world. The

meal itself—porridge and milk listed separately rather than porridge with milk—suggests these are two distinct elements, not a single enriched dish. This is subsistence, not abundance.

Robin remembers his uncle's explanation of Christmas: "a time when folk hae mair to eat than they ken what to do wi', and mair to drink than is guid for them." His response had been immediate longing—"I wuss Kirsmas wad come to the Nethertoun. I'm no mindin' what I hae to drink. There's naething sae slockenin' as cauld water, but to hae mair than ye can eat, it's just heeven to think on!" The vocabulary of want saturates his speech: "slockenin'" (quenching), "cauld water" (the default, the given), "muckle" (the Scots intensifier suggesting unimaginable quantity), "heeven" (heaven, but deliberately misspelled to capture pronunciation and to suggest something beyond experience).

Now, confronted with his actual Christmas meal, Robin remembers to observe the social discipline of grace. He takes a spoonful, realises his omission, "reverently took off his bonnet and asked a blessing." Only then does he eat. And only then does he deliver his final assessment of Christmas:

"'So this is Christmas Day,' he said, 'and in England where they hae a' the siller they want, folk get presents, and grand gifts, and as muckle as ever they can eat?' He took one spoonful and then, recollecting that he had forgotten to say grace, he reverently took off his bonnet and asked a blessing. Then he took another spoonful. 'But after a',' he added thankfully, 'Christmas or no Christmas, porridge is hard to beat!'"

The geography of plenty is foreign—"in England where they hae a' the siller they want." Money exists infinitely elsewhere, in a place Robin will never see. "Grand gifts" is a phrase learned second-hand, imagined rather than experienced. But the conclusion—"porridge is hard to beat"—uses colloquial idiom ("hard to beat" meaning "difficult to surpass") to express profound contentment. This is not resignation but genuine satisfaction. The adverb "thankfully" makes the contentment active rather than passive. Robin is not making the best of deprivation; he is recognising sufficiency.

Compare this to Tiny Tim, Dickens's emblematic child. Both boys find grace in want, but Tim's story requires transformation. His crippled body needs healing, his family needs intervention, and Scrooge must change for Tim's "God bless us, every one" to have meaning. Tim's contentment is provisional, dependent on adult action. Robin's contentment is absolute. Nothing changes, nothing improves, and yet he declares it good. Christmas or no Christmas, what he has is enough.

It is a small, but perhaps significant touch that Robin is on his own for his Christmas porridge while Gray remains out on the hill. We do not get to postulate on Robin’s response if Gray came home without venison. That dream was fleeting and long gone in the reality of his situation.

The Narrator's Moral Distance

The story's narrative voice deserves attention for what it reveals about Crockett's technique and audience. The narrator occupies an interesting position—omniscient but not intrusive, educated but sympathetic, capable of moving between registers with strategic purpose.

For exposition, the voice uses standard English with occasional Scots-inflected syntax: "Gray Stiel came of a race which loves not murder, but is not averse to slaying in a just cause." That "loves not" construction, placing the negative after the verb, echoes both Biblical and Scots phrasing whilst remaining fully comprehensible to English readers.

For dialogue, the voice shifts to broad Scots: "'I wuss Kirsmas wad come to the Nethertoun.'" The vocabulary and syntax are distinctively regional, but the meanings remain accessible through context.

For interiority, the voice employs free indirect discourse that accesses character consciousness whilst maintaining narrative authority: "A mist as of blood ran redly across Gray Stiel's eyes." We experience Gray's perception without the narrator disappearing entirely.

This strategic deployment creates a double audience—those who speak Scots find authenticity in the dialogue, whilst those unfamiliar with the language can follow the story through the narrator's guidance.

The narrator's most significant intervention comes at the story's end:

"But though he knew it not, out by the Packman's Pool, God had placed the best Christmas gift that could have come to the cothouse of Nethertoun, or into the life of young Robin Stiel, the nephew of one Gray, a brave man of that name. But that is not the end of the story. Other things even more interesting occurred after the death of Hoppety-Skip, which happened also before that Christmas snow melted. For death as well as life is the gift of God."

This is the only moment when the narrator speaks overtly theological language, and even here the theology remains strategically ambiguous. "God had placed the best Christmas gift"—but which God? The Free Kirk God of Crockett's upbringing? Nature's God? Or simply the narrative convention of divine agency applied to natural event?

The final sentence—"For death as well as life is the gift of God"—works multiple ways simultaneously. As religious orthodoxy, it expresses the radical acceptance that both creation and destruction serve divine purpose. As naturalistic observation, it acknowledges that death is as much a part of the natural order as birth. As narrative commentary, it reframes Allan's freezing not as tragedy but as mercy—mercy for Gray, prevented from murder; mercy for Robin, freed from his father; even mercy for Allan, whose "evil days and evil deeds" are covered and, perhaps, forgiven by that spotless snow.

It also gives us the promise of a future for both Gray and Robin. Perhaps (we may hope) as a result of Hoppety-Skip’s death, Gray may find a wife and Robin a new mother. A new life for both may beckon – but is not ‘given’ by the storyteller. Like all hopes it is offered up to the reader – a new beginning beyond the end of this telling of a story.

The ambiguity in Crockett’s ending shows sophistication. He writes for readers who will interpret the story through different frameworks—religious, naturalistic, literary—and his narrative voice accommodates all whilst committing fully to none.

The Textures of Scots

The story's use of Scots dialect repays linguistic attention, particularly in how Crockett deploys its vocabulary for specific effects.

The diminutives create intimacy and scale: "cothouse" rather than cottage, "creepie stool" rather than low stool. These forms suggest both smallness and affection, making poverty familiar rather

than picturesque. "Slockenin'" (quenching) offers a specifically regional term when standard English would have served—the choice marks authenticity, grounding the story in place. "Awfu' ignorant" uses "awfu'" (awful) as intensifier meaning "very," a common Scots usage that adds emotional force.

The syntax mirrors standard English whilst remaining audibly other. "'I wuss Kirsmas wad come to the Nethertoun'" can be parsed by anyone familiar with English—the meaning is transparent—but the sounds are distinctive. "Wuss" for "wish," "wad" for "would," the slight reordering that feels both familiar and foreign. This balance allows Crockett to maintain regional authenticity without sacrificing comprehensibility to wider audiences.

The narrative voice reserves certain effects for specific purposes. Latinate formality—"indurated" (hardened)—appears in standard English passages, marking the narrator's education. Anglo-Saxon directness—"frozen dead"—provides brutal simplicity at moments of crisis. Biblical echoes—"all his evil days and evil deeds"—invoke King James cadences to signal moral weight.

This mixing of registers shows a narrator moving fluently between worlds, choosing which voice serves each moment. The technique allows the story to honour its regional origins whilst reaching beyond them, to speak both to those who know Galloway and those who know only its representation on the page.

Writing Christmas Differently

"The Packman's Pool" was first published in 1901 through syndication, then collected in *The Bloom o' the Heather* (1908). By this time, Christmas had been thoroughly established as a cultural institution along Dickensian lines—a season of celebration, gift-giving, family gathering, and sentimental affirmation. Publishers regularly commissioned Christmas stories from popular authors, and Crockett was repeatedly asked to provide seasonal material.

What makes his response significant is its consistency. Crockett never wrote Dickensian Christmas stories. He never softened his vision to accommodate seasonal sentiment. Instead, he stayed true to his roots and presented his own style, producing winter tales that acknowledge the season whilst refusing its conventional meanings.

For readers within the English Christmas consensus—urban, mercantile, celebrating abundance—Crockett's stories must have seemed almost perverse. A Christmas story where a child doesn't know what Christmas is? Where the central gift is a frozen corpse? Where the closing image is a boy eating porridge and declaring it sufficient? This is Christmas written from outside the cultural mainstream, acknowledging that not everyone shares or even knows the dominant narrative.

But for readers who lived where winter genuinely threatened survival, where hill farming meant constant calculation at the edge of subsistence, where nature determined human possibility more than human will ever could—for those readers, Crockett offered recognition. This is Christmas from inside winter, where snow doesn't merely decorate but decides, where the greatest mercy might be the violence you never had to commit, where contentment comes not from getting more but from recognising that what you have is enough.

The geographical divide matters profoundly. Urban versus rural, commercial versus subsistence, nature as backdrop versus nature as determinant, the assumption of warmth versus the reality of cold—these aren't mere setting differences but fundamentally different relationships to the world. Dickens writes from a place where winter is temporary inconvenience, where warmth can be purchased, where human agency transforms circumstances. Crockett writes from a place where winter is six months of grinding endurance, where cold can kill, where nature frequently overrules human intention.

He offers an alternative Christmas narrative for those who find the Dickensian consensus insufficient or false to their experience—acknowledgement that sometimes the greatest gift is what doesn't happen, that grace can manifest as removal rather than addition, that survival itself deserves thanksgiving.

Snow's Mercy

Robin's opening question—"what is't?"—receives no simple answer. Gray's initial response—a time of plenty—proves inadequate. The story itself provides the answer through action rather than explanation: Christmas is when nature intervenes in human affairs, when snow covers evil days and evil deeds, when the removal of threat becomes the gift, when a child eats porridge and recognises sufficiency.

Two characters give thanks on this Christmas Day. Gray kneels beside a frozen corpse, grateful that the sin of Cain will not be his. Robin sits at his creepie stool, grateful for porridge and milk. Neither scene involves abundance. Both involve profound relief—Gray saved from his own capacity for violence, Robin saved from threats he doesn't know existed. The story's mercy is double: prevention of sin and preservation of innocence.

The theology remains deliberately ambiguous. Has God acted through nature, or has nature simply followed its own order? Is Allan's death providence or accident? Does it matter? What matters is the result: violence deferred, a child protected, a man spared the destruction of his own soul. Whether we call this divine intervention or fortunate meteorology, the snow did the work that would otherwise have fallen to human hands.

The story's power lies in its refusal of comfort. This is not sentimental, not optimistic, not reassuring. Christmas brings no transformation, no abundance, no community celebration. A man dies alone by a frozen pool. A child eats his meagre supper. Nothing changes. And yet both survivors—Gray and Robin—find cause for thanksgiving. The gift is not what they received but what they were spared.

That image of the Packman's Pool—"dead black amid a perfection of whiteness"—persists. The void in the landscape, the place where exchange happens (the packman's commerce), where death waits, where on this particular Christmas Day nature executed judgment with soft, whispering snow. The pool represents all the dark places at the margins, where those who fail or falter go to die, where the lucky ones are found before they freeze, where the unlucky simply disappear beneath the snow's spotless covering.

Crockett offers Christmas not as answer but as question—what does mercy look like when nature rather than humanity holds the power? What is the gift when the gift is absence? How do we give thanks when what we're grateful for is what didn't happen rather than what did?

For Robin, still innocent, still ignorant of the violence nearly done in his name, the answer remains beautifully simple: "Christmas or no Christmas, porridge is hard to beat." That contentment, that genuine satisfaction with sufficiency, stands as radical counterpoint to every vision of Christmas built on abundance, consumption, and endless accumulation.

And for Gray, who will carry the knowledge of what he almost did and what the snow saved him from, Christmas becomes the day he learned that sometimes the greatest mercy looks like death—not his own, not the child's, but the death that removed temptation before choice became action, that covered evil with whiteness, that allowed him to remain the man he wanted to be.

The snow fell softly, whisperingly, and made its own decisions. In Crockett's vision, that is gift enough.
