

THE CHRISTMAS MARKET

A detailed illustration of a Victorian Christmas market stall. The stall has a red and white striped awning and is filled with various glassware and ornaments. A man in a black top hat and a woman in a red and black Victorian gown stand in front of the stall. The scene is set on a cobblestone street with other stalls visible in the background.

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Market
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Chapter 1. The Market

Polly meandered through the festive shoppers, entranced by the mulled wine's sweet, oaky fragrance and the prospect of something to heat her insides on this bitter evening. The queue for the kiosk was more than ten deep, so Polly decided to return later. Besides, she was distracted by a new spicy whiff from behind her. When she turned around, an eager stallholder asked Polly if she'd like to sample some freshly baked gingerbread cookies – an offer Polly couldn't refuse. After tasting the biscuits, Polly felt obliged to buy a box.

“Is this your first visit to York's Christmas Market?” the trader asked, packing Polly's purchase.

Polly smiled. “No, I come every year. I love the Christmas markets.”

“Not much success with the present buying, though?” replied the stallholder, noticing Polly's lack of bags.

“Oh...I've bought most of them already,” said Polly. “Just after an extra something for my husband.”

“Ah, husbands are very tricky to buy for.”

Polly sighed and nodded in agreement. This Christmas would be her husband's first without his father, who had died earlier in the year. She had already created a poignant gift for Stuart – an album of his father's life story, using the photos they collected for a montage at the funeral. But

Polly also wanted to procure a special gift for Stuart to furnish some magical seasonal cheer. She surveyed the long rows of market stalls: little wooden huts, open on one side to display their festive wares. Surely there must be something for Stuart.

The weak December sun had long since conceded to the illuminations beading over trees and shopfronts. A faint mist endowed a shimmering starburst to every luminescent source. Christmas songs echoed above the hubbub of excited children on the merry-go-round and tipsy adults exiting the beer tent. Polly shifted along the line of stalls, examining their offerings. Stuart would like plenty on sale: cheeses, chocolate, chilli sauces, belts, wallets and alcohol of every description – but there was nothing to really excite him.

A jewellery stall attracted Polly's interest. Despite trying to stay on task, a pendant on a silver chain intrigued her. It was part of a display of black Whitby jet jewellery.

“Do you want to try it on, love?” the trader asked.

“Yes, please.”

The man took the knight chess piece pendant, a black horse's head, and placed it around Polly's neck.

“I handcraft everything myself,” he said. “It looks lovely on you.”

“Thanks. The knight is my husband's favourite chess piece. It was his dad's too. I'll take it.”

Polly felt a little guilty buying something for herself. But Stuart would approve, and Polly could hold it in reserve just in case he hadn't bought her anything. Stuart wasn't usually very organised when it came to buying presents.

Polly reached the end of the first row of stalls and then ventured along the second in the opposite direction. To her frustration, the merchandise offered started to repeat itself. Just different versions of leather goods, jewellery, and fancily packaged food and drink – nothing to thrill her husband. After perusing every stall, Polly found herself back at the mulled wine kiosk, still without an inspired gift for Stuart.

The queue for mulled wine had shortened, so Polly treated herself to a drink before going home. The sugary, warm liquid tingled down her body. She noticed the mist had thickened into dense fog, obscuring the shop fronts on either side of the broad Parliament Street. Polly slipped between two stalls to escape the throngs clogging the main shopping thoroughfare. But, disoriented by the fog, she couldn't figure out the train station's direction. Perhaps the mulled wine was more potent than she thought.

Something brushed Polly's arm. She jumped and spun around. A raven-haired woman faced her, wearing a maroon dress with a bustle skirt and a black velvet jacket with embroidered flowers.

"Not found what you're looking for?" the woman said in an exotic accent.

"Wow, your costume looks amazing," Polly replied, assuming the woman was drumming up business for one of York's ghost tours. Polly had never encountered a spooky outfit as convincing as this one. The woman's attire and ethereal beauty radiated a spectral presence.

The woman handed Polly a card; its ornate handwritten text was impossible to decipher in the dim light. Polly

pointed her phone torch at the writing. It said: *Nicholas Koliada's WORLD FAMOUS figurines*. The name sparked a vague tinge of recognition.

“This way, madame,” the woman said.

Polly hypnotically advanced in the direction indicated by the woman’s pointing finger. She entered a snickelway, one of the many narrow passages lacing the city’s medieval buildings. Polly knew York well, but everything about her location seemed unfamiliar. Shadowy buildings loomed claustrophobically. Underfoot, the ground was rough and littered with straw. The background buzz had diminished; only the distant clip-clop of what sounded like trotting horses was audible. And the smell. Gone was the aroma of waffles and pretzels, replaced by the stench of sewerage and blocked drains.

Polly reached for her phone again, seeking the torch to illuminate her surroundings. A wave of panic swept through her when it wouldn’t switch on. The battery shouldn’t have run out. Her train ticket was on it, and how would she pay for anything? Polly had used the last of her cash to buy the gingerbread cookies and had left her cards at home. She looked around again. Perhaps she could charge the phone in a shop. A flickering light offered hope, so Polly crept towards it.

The stall she reached was different from the others. It was more like a tent than a wooden hut – with a red and white striped veranda. What seemed like authentic oil lamps emanated an eerie glow. A man sporting a full beard and wearing a long black coat and a top hat stood by his wares. He towered over Polly like a giant. Had she inadvertently

stumbled into a scene created for the ghost tour?

“See anything you like?” the man asked in a deep accented voice.

Polly browsed the shelves of figurines, including angels, ghosts, soldiers, kings and queens. They were carved from rocks of multiple colours – black obsidian, violet amethyst, pink and clear crystal.

“They’re wonderful,” replied Polly, momentarily forgetting about her phone. Something on the middle shelf made her heart leap – a chess set featuring crowned dragons as kings and horse-mounted soldiers bearing lances as knights. The style and craftsmanship reminded her of the antique set that Stuart and his father, George, used to play on for hours. George usually won, of course; he used to be county champion. But Stuart was an accomplished player too. To Polly’s disappointment, the set was passed on to Stuart’s older brother after George’s death. Stuart loved it so much. George’s set was unique – designed by a famous Victorian craftsman. It was probably now worth thousands of pounds, not that the family would ever sell it.

Had she stumbled on the elusive present for Stuart? “Can I have a look at the chess set, please?” Polly asked.

“Ah, you like my masterpiece?” the man said as he lifted it to the counter. “This is the first chess set I made, and it’s special. I’ll never make another one like it.”

The pieces were hand-carved quartz – black from smokey crystal and white from pale crystal with a pinky tinge. The thick board was suspended on a metal frame, and the crystal squares matched the colours of the pieces.

“It’s exquisite,” Polly said, picking up the black dragon

king. “It’s funny. It reminds me of a set my father-in-law owned. The style is so similar.”

“Describe it for me.”

“It’s themed, like this one. Our set is based on African animals – lion kings, leopard queens, rhino rooks, giraffe bishops, zebra knights and antelope pawns. But the design is almost identical.”

“Ah. Jungle animals...I’ve never made such a set. It’s not one of mine. But I must try that.”

Polly laughed. “No...no, I know it couldn’t be yours. My father-in-law’s set must be a hundred and fifty years old. I can’t remember the designer’s name, but it looks like he influenced your work.”

The man frowned. “My work is unique. I copy no one,” he asserted.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you,” Polly replied.

The man glared at Polly for a few seconds, then asked, “Can your set do this?”. He dimmed the oil lamps, lit a match and placed it in a gap in the board’s side. Polly gaped in amazement at the spectacle. She realised she had to get the set for Stuart, whatever the cost.

“My husband would treasure this forever. I’d like to buy it, please,” Polly enthused. She checked her phone. Still not working. “But I have no money on me today. Are you here tomorrow? I can pay for it and collect it then?”

“No. We travel for France tomorrow.”

Polly cursed and tried to think of a solution.

“What do you have?” the man asked. Before Polly could react, he grabbed her shopping bag.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Polly yelled, looking for help. But there was no one around.

The man inspected the box of biscuits and opened the velvet pouch containing the black knight pendant. He brought the pendant close to his eyes. “Of what is this made?” he asked.

“It’s Whitby jet. Local. From the North Yorkshire coast. Give it back, please.”

“I take it.”

“No you won’t,” screamed Polly. This wasn’t part of a ghost tour. It was more like a scam to snare gullible tourists.

“We swap,” he said, clutching the items. “The dragon set is yours.”

Polly furrowed her brow, confused. “No, you don’t understand. It’s just cheap jewellery from the market, nowhere near as valuable as your chess set.”

“You have given me something else too.”

“What?” Polly asked in alarm, checking her handbag for her phone.

“Inspiration,” he declared before pausing. “I sense you will provide a worthy home for the set, one where it will be used and not gather dust as an ornament. That way, its remarkable powers will be revealed.”

“You’ve already shown me what the chess set can do,” Polly said.

“No. You have not seen everything.”

Polly didn’t linger to unravel the man’s cryptic musings. She accepted the boxed chess set and strode in the direction she thought she had come. Suddenly, the fog cleared, and Polly was back on Parliament Street among the festive shoppers. She looked at her phone – thankfully, it was working again, and she could retrieve her train ticket.

Polly was relieved to be returning home after that unsettling encounter. Still, at least it had yielded what she hoped was the perfect present for Stuart.

Chapter 2. The Gift

Christmas Day was a quiet affair for Polly and Stuart. In recent years, they had hosted Stuart's dad for Christmas lunch. But this year, it was just Polly, Stuart, and their ginger cat, Rupert. After a leisurely lunch and a walk around the village, returning just before dark, Polly asked Stuart if he'd like to open his presents. He smiled and said, "Sure," with muted enthusiasm – clearly expecting a few books from his Amazon wish list or a craft beer selection box.

A tear rolled down Stuart's cheek as he leafed through the album Polly had lovingly curated for him. It started with a copy of his dad's birth certificate and was followed by photos and mementoes from each stage of George's life. Throughout the album, it was clear how important chess was to George, with images of him playing with his sons, competing at chess tournaments and childhood certificates of merit. Stuart embraced Polly, "Thank you so much," he said. "It's beautiful."

"I'm glad you like it," Polly replied. "It took me ages to put together. But I have a question about your dad. Why did everyone call him George when his birth certificate states his real name is Neil?"

Stuart laughed. "You won't be surprised to discover it's because of chess. He secured a crucial game by deploying

the St George defence when he won the county chess championship at sixteen. It's an unorthodox opening for black and surprised his opponent. Dad always liked to think of himself as a maverick, so the name stuck. He'd been called George for so long that no one remembered his real name."

Polly smiled and clasped Stuart's hand. "No, that doesn't surprise me."

"Do you want to open my present to you now?" Stuart asked.

"In a minute. But I've got another gift for you first," she replied.

Polly fetched the box and handed it to Stuart. He unwrapped it in silence. His eyes sparkled in wonder as the chess pieces were revealed. He picked up each figure and spent a few minutes examining them. He caressed the board's surface and ran his hands along its sides.

Stuart turned to Polly and whispered, "Where did you get this?"

"At the Christmas Market."

"No...it can't..." Stuart was lost for words. Finally, he said, "It doesn't make sense."

"To be honest, the way I got it was kind of weird," Polly said.

"B...But it looks like the dragon set."

Polly had hoped the present would excite Stuart, but she wasn't expecting a reaction as extreme as this. He looked like he'd seen a ghost. "Yes, it's a dragon set."

"No. THE dragon set."

"What do you mean?"

"You remember my dad's African animal chess set?"

“Of course.”

“It was made by an acclaimed Victorian craftsman, who only completed twenty-five sets. Twenty-four have been accounted for, including Dad’s. But records suggest there was a twenty-fifth. Collectors point to Victorian journals that quote the designer, saying he once built a masterpiece – a set with dragon kings that breathed real fire. The dragon set has attained legendary status in the collector community. Some believe it’s a myth, like the holy grail. But Dad thought it was real – he spent weekends at antique shops and car boot sales hoping to miraculously discover the set.”

“That’s what drew me to it. It bears a remarkable resemblance to your dad’s set. But it surely can’t be *the* dragon set. Look, it’s new. Not worn like the antique animal set.”

Stuart examined the pieces again. He furrowed his brow in confusion. “You’re right. It’s too pristine to be that old. But the craftsmanship is so authentic. It must have cost a lot.”

Polly stared at Stuart in mock disappointment. “I paid for it with a packet of biscuits,” she said.

Stuart took this as playful sarcasm. “Perhaps someone’s making reproduction sets, although I’m sure I would have heard about it through the community. Can you remember the stall’s name?”

Polly went to her coat, hanging by the front door. “Here, I have a card. Not that there’s much information on it.”

Stuart gaped at the card’s writing.

“What’s the matter?” Polly asked.

“The name of the vendor.”

“Why?”

“Nicholas Koliada is the man who made my dad’s set and purportedly crafted the dragon set in 1870.”

“There must be a rational explanation,” Polly said.

“I suppose someone must be replicating Koliada’s work,” said Stuart. “Whoever it is could make a mint for craftsmanship of this quality. I’m surprised they have kept it so quiet. Although, it’s not as if it’s identical to Koliada’s description of the original dragon set – I mean, this one doesn’t breathe fire.”

“Let me show you something,” Polly said. She returned from the kitchen with a glass bottle, a matchbox and their pizza baking stone. She flicked the light off. The only illumination was from the Christmas tree and the streetlights outside.

“What are you doing?” Stuart asked.

“Watch.” Polly put the baking stone on their coffee table and placed the chess board on the stone. She pulled a small drawer from the board’s side and filled it with liquid from the bottle. “I need to be careful. I’m not quite sure how this passed safety regulations,” she said. Then she opened their front room’s window a few inches. The frosty December air caused them to shiver. Their cat, Rupert, jumped from the sofa, fur standing on end, and fled out the door. Finally, Polly lit a match and placed it in a hole in the board’s side.

Light spilt across the board. The chequers scintillated like a 1980s disco floor. The pieces flickered into life; somehow, they seemed to imbibe the light. Strikingly, the

dragon kings' eyes burned ruby-red, and flames erupted from their mouths inside the crystal.

Stuart sat shaking with his mouth open. "I've never seen anything like it," he said. "It's incredible."

"I knew I had to get it for you when the man showed me what it does."

"Let's play a game," said Stuart, mesmerised by the display.

"But I'm no match for you."

"It doesn't matter. Look, the board is pleading to be played."

"Shall we at least put out the flame and close the window?" said Polly, shivering.

"I think it's meant to be played in this state," he said. Polly put on her coat, a little concerned about the chess set's effect on Stuart.

Stuart played white and moved the queen's pawn forward two squares. After he placed the pawn on its new square, the board dimmed.

"I think the flame has blown out," said Polly.

"No, look," said Stuart. Two squares glimmered – one under a black rook's pawn, the other, the square in front.

"Maybe it's telling me where to move," said Polly. She shifted the pawn forward one square.

After Stuart's next move, the board did the same thing – illuminating two squares that signalled a valid move for black. Polly followed its instructions. The pattern repeated for ten minutes until Polly's final move forced checkmate. Then, the board's flame automatically extinguished.

Stuart shook his head. "How can this be happening?"

“You’re just a sore loser,” Polly joked.

“No. How did the board do that?”

“I really don’t know. Everything about it is strange.”

“It’s not just that the board knew how to guide you. It was like playing against my dad. You won using the St George defence.”

Half an hour later, Polly and Stuart sat silently on the sofa, sipping Christmas brandy, trying to calm their nerves. The room had warmed up after closing the window, but they were still chilled by their experience.

“You haven’t given me my present yet,” Polly said.

“Err...no. I’ll get it.” Stuart passed her a small ornate box. It looked old. She opened it and blinked in amazement. The chain was different, stained with age, although recently polished. But she recognised the necklace – chipped and worn but unmistakably the same black knight the market stall owner took.

Stuart opened the chain and fastened it around Polly’s neck.

“It looks as elegant on you as it did on Carol,” he said.

“Have you got another woman?” Polly teased.

Stuart laughed. “No. I bought it at auction. It used to belong to Carol Koliada, Nicholas’s wife.” He opened his laptop and searched for a page. “Look, here’s a portrait of Nicholas and Carol Koliada.”

Polly trembled. She was staring at an image of the man who had given her the dragon set. Next to him was the beautiful raven-haired woman who had directed Polly to the figurine stall. Around the woman’s neck hung a black knight horse’s head pendant on a silver chain.

About the author

After a career as an actuary in financial services, Stephen took redundancy in 2022. This freed him to focus on his passion for writing supernatural and techno fiction. His 2023 debut novel, *Dark Swans*, explores these themes. It's set mainly in Gothic North Yorkshire and York, where he lives with his wife, son and cat.

To learn more about Stephen Jackson and find out about new books, check out his website, stephenjackson.info.

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