



# Christmas Dinner of Souls

ROSS MONTGOMERY

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FABER & FABER

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*To Lian –  
boo.*



**T**he good children were all in bed by now. The good children were fast asleep, tucked up in warm pyjamas and dreaming of Christmas.

But not Lewis. He wasn't one of the good children. That was why he was trudging alone through the bitter cold to work on Christmas Eve.

'Bah humbug,' he muttered.

Lewis made his way out of the village. Every doorway twinkled with fairy lights; every windowpane glowed with the warmth of a family

fireplace. Lewis could see parents inside cuddled up on sofas, mantelpieces hung with stockings, hopeful children peeking down through the banisters. Every house was a Christmas box, full of wonders.

And then there was Soul's College.

It sat on the tallest hill beside the village. It was an ancient building, grim as a scorched fireplace. It glowered over the rooftops like a crow on a fence post.

That was where Lewis was spending his Christmas Eve.

'Stupid College,' he moaned. 'Stupid Mum. Stupid Dean!'

It hadn't been Lewis's idea to throw stones through the College windows – but as usual, he was the only one who got caught. The rest of his gang had scattered when the guards appeared, leaving Lewis to take the rap by himself. No one had expected there to be anyone inside

Soul's College – after all, it was the day before Christmas. The few students who still attended the crumbling old building should have left for the holidays ages ago.

The guards had dragged Lewis by the scruff of his neck through long, winding corridors to the office of the Dean – the head of Soul's College. He was a thin spike of a man, who looked exactly like the building he sat in – cold, dark and barren. He had taken Lewis in with a long, silent look . . . and smiled.

Lewis had expected him to shout – but he didn't. It was much, much worse than that. Instead, the Dean told Lewis to come back that night – Christmas Eve night – and work for the College until he'd repaid his debt. Lewis had begged his mother to say something, but to his dismay, she'd agreed with the Dean.

'Serves you right for spending all your time with those horrid friends of yours! You'll have to

*make a choice one day, Lewis: do you want to be good, or do you want to be bad?'*

*Lewis reached the forest that surrounded Soul's College. It was dark inside: very dark. The air was as still as a snow globe and the ground sparkled with frost. The trees almost seemed to glow in the moonlight. Lewis took one final look at the village behind him. The old church steeple stood cold and grey on the horizon; the clock on the bell tower read half past eleven. Almost Christmas Day.*

*Lewis trudged up the hill, his breath curling out between his teeth in fingers. He had to admit that being asked to come to the College in the middle of the night seemed . . . well, a little strange.*

*But then, everything about Soul's College was strange. It had once been the best university in the country, but that was hundreds of years ago. Over the years the students had dwindled,*

*and the building had darkened and decayed. Hardly anyone went there any more – no one even knew what went on inside.*

*There were rumours, of course.*

*Everyone at school had been talking about it for years. On Christmas Eve, when Soul's College closed and all the lights went out, something about it . . . changed. It was as if the building suddenly came alive. Those who were brave enough to stay up late and watch it – at least, those who said they did – whispered about seeing shadows at the windows. They even said that if you listened carefully enough, you could hear voices coming from inside.*

*No, not just voices. Screams.*

*Lewis shivered, and wrapped his coat tight around himself.*

*'Come on – it's Christmas Eve. Nothing bad can ever happen on Christmas Eve. Family, warm socks, eggnog . . .'*

*The hill crested, and Soul's College rose out of the ground like a gravestone.*

*Lewis gulped. The building seemed somehow bigger than he remembered. It was surrounded by black metal gates and a high spiked fence. There was a wooden model of Father Christmas on the roof, but it didn't seem particularly cheerful. In fact, from where Lewis was standing, it almost seemed like it was leering down at him with a malevolent grin on its face.*

*'Hello?' Lewis called out.*

*His voice went into the cold night air, and didn't come back. It was like the darkness ate it. Lewis tugged at his scarf nervously.*

*'It's Christmas Eve,' he repeated. 'Nothing bad can happen on Christmas Eve.'*

*He stepped bravely through the gates and made his way to the dining hall, just as the Dean had told him to. It was big and cold and empty inside. There was a fire at one end that gave no*

warmth, and a high ceiling lost to darkness. The walls hung with heavy tapestries.

In the centre of the room was a long dining table, set for fifty guests.

So that was it – the College was holding a dinner. Lewis was going to work as a serving boy. But it didn't look like a dinner was about to start any time soon – especially not a Christmas one. No one could be festive in a room as cold and miserable as this. The only sign it was Christmas at all was the scraggly tree beside the fireplace, decorated with a sorry string of tinsel and seven sad baubles.

Lewis gazed at the enormous portrait hanging above the mantelpiece. It was the only part of the room that was warm and friendly. Lewis knew the man in the painting – everyone in the village did. It was Lord Caverner, the man who had built Soul's College hundreds of years ago. He'd been much loved in his time, and it was easy to see why: he had a warm, kind face, with a thick

*beard and a smile that reached his eyes. Lewis felt safer just looking at him.*

*‘Come on – it’s Christmas Eve. Nothing bad could ever happen on Christmas E—’*

*Creak.*

*A door had opened at the other end of the room. Lewis turned round . . . but there was no one there. The far wall was lost to darkness.*

*‘Hello?’*

*Nothing – the room was silent.*

*Then – ever so quietly – Lewis heard something move. The steady scrape of dead feet on flagstones, one after the other. They grew out of the darkness, getting closer.*

*Then they stopped.*

*Lewis stood still, his breath held in his throat.*

*There was someone standing in the darkness in front of him.*

*Lewis couldn’t see their face . . . but he could make out their shape. They were hunched double,*

*as if they were in terrible pain. Their chest swelled and shuddered with every breath.*

*‘What are you doing here?’*

*The voice was hoarse and rasping: it sounded like it hurt just coming out of them. Lewis swallowed hard.*

*‘I—I’m supposed to work here tonight.’ He glanced at the table. ‘For the Christmas dinner?’*

*The man convulsed. He gave a high, hacking cough that was almost a laugh . . . then stepped into the firelight. Lewis could finally see his face.*

*But it wasn’t a face.*

*The man had no lips. He had no eyelids. His skin was like cold, cooked meat packed into clumps against his skull. He wore ragged overalls, streaked with blood and grease. On top of his head was a high white chef’s hat.*

*‘Like Christmas, do you boy?’*

*Lewis didn’t answer – he couldn’t speak. There was nothing he could do, nothing except*

*stand frozen to the spot in terror. The Cook came slouching out of the darkness, his red eyes boggling in their lidless sockets.*

*‘I said: do – you – like – Christmas?’*

*Lewis had no idea what the Cook wanted – but he had a sickening feeling that something terrible would happen if he didn’t do whatever he asked. He nodded frantically.*

*‘Good,’ said the Cook. ‘Then listen to everything I say – that is, if you want to live to see Christmas morning.’*

*Lewis gasped. The Cook leaned in close – close enough for Lewis to smell the years of cooking which clung to him like ghosts.*

*‘They’re coming, boy. They’ll be here any moment. Don’t talk to them. Don’t speak at all if you can help it. And for pity’s sake, boy – DON’T MAKE THEM ANGRY!’*

*Lewis’s mind reeled. ‘Th–them? What do you mean, them ...’*

*Outside, a smash of glass – Lewis spun round. The building wasn't empty any more – oh no. It was surrounded. He could hear things moving towards the dining room from all sides, growing louder, getting closer. Crashes, bangs, wheels on gravel . . . Lewis could hear voices, too.*

*But they sounded like screams.*

*'Get ready, boy,' said the Cook. 'Our guests have arrived.'*