***All Change – or, The kindness of strangers***

 *Three friends meet for coffee – and a gossip.*

‘It’s not gossip.’ Bruce, brown and bald, was a retired accountant. ‘It’s . . . wait for it . . . my wife says that it’s “essential information for prayer purposes.”’

 ‘In my book, it’s gossip,’ said Kerry, but his tired, lined face relaxed into a smile. ‘I’ll give you this, it does need praying about.’

 Leo, the third member of the group stirred sugar into his hot chocolate, frowning. ‘It’s all very well for you to make a joke of it, but now I’m a steward at church I’m fielding complaints from all sides. I can’t ignore what’s happening, much as I’d like to. The woman’s a menace and we’re stuck with her for the foreseeable future.’

 Bruce sipped his Americano. ‘Come on; she can’t be that bad.’

 Leo was upset. ‘She wants everything done her way, and won’t listen when we say we’ve tried that and it hasn’t worked.’

 Bruce spread his hands. ‘So, let her try it out and come a cropper. Then she’ll listen to you in future.’

‘You don’t understand. She wants to change the time of the Sunday morning service. If we do, we’ll lose the uniformed organisations who want an early service so that they can go on to their football or whatever at noon. If we lose the young people, the church will slide into catering for a few old timers. And then we’ll die. When she told us what she wanted, you could have heard a pin drop. The chief steward started to object and had her head bitten off. Afterwards, I tried, too. It was no good. She wasn’t listening. It’s a rotten start to her time with us.’

‘I’m sure you’ll find a way out.’ Bruce was relaxed about it. ‘We’ve got a new minister, too. He’s burned out and just going through the motions. But it does mean he won’t interfere with the way we do things.’

 ‘I’m appalled,’ said Kerry, distressed. He attended a different church where they hadn’t had frequent changes of minister and had been blessed with an incumbent who was sound in theology, conveyed the message about the Good News with enthusiasm, and made changes only when the church council was ready for them. ‘How can you have strong leadership if you don’t respect your leader?’

 ‘True,’ said Leo. ‘But that’s the Methodist system. Every few years our ministers move on.’

 ‘I suppose,’ said Bruce, idly, ‘that if there’s a strong faith in the community, it doesn’t matter so much who’s in the pulpit. At our church we’ve got a prayer group, a weekly drop-in centre, monthly lunches and all that.’

 Leo said, ‘We’ve got a lively youth group and coffee mornings. Now I’m property steward, I can make sure the church premises are well used for community organisations, with never an evening free from some booking or other. It’s the renting out of the premises which keeps the church afloat. And before you say it, Kerry; maybe that’s not what a church should be about, but it does help.’

 Bruce, the accountant, agreed. ‘Without the lettings, we couldn’t pay the minister’s stipend.’

 Leo nodded. ‘Ministers come and go. It’s the spirit of the congregation that keeps the church going.’

 Kerry shook his head. ‘You’re missing something. Buildings are only bricks and mortar. A congregation is nothing more than a gathering of people unless they come together to worship God and to hear his word. Surely your minister is the vital link between congregation and God?’

 There was a short silence.

‘I suppose you’d say we should pray about it,’ said Bruce, who was diffident about speaking of his prayer life. He did pray, of course. But not regularly. Only when some problem came up and hit him in the face. For some reason he hadn’t thought the advent of a new minister was something to pray about. Perhaps because he’d not had anything to do with his selection? Perhaps because he’d already written the new man as a weakling? He shifted in his seat. That was an uncomfortable thought.

Leo gave a great sigh. ‘I’m not much for going to prayer groups. Tell me the boiler needs attention, and I’ll see to it. A man of action, I.’

 Kerry smiled and shook his head at Leo. ‘Don’t underrate yourself. Actions can be prayers. Prayers need not be put into words.’

 Bruce looked hard at Kerry. ‘I’ve often wondered. Did you never think to train for the ministry?’

 Kerry laughed. ‘I never felt “called”. I don’t think I’d have been much good at it, anyway. I must go. See you same time next week?’

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Leaves drifted down from the trees as Kerry turned up the hill. He used to take the slope at a fast pace, but nowadays he allowed himself to sit down for a breather on a low wall half way up. Only today there was a man already sitting there. Casually dressed, grey of hair, thin of face; not that old, though he looked hardly strong enough to work as a road-sweeper though that was evidently what he was, since his cart was standing nearby.

The poor man looked as if the job were too much for him. But there! Who was Kerry to judge, since he’d chosen in his retirement to let rooms in his house to university students, and looking after them twenty-four seven was more stressful than a nine to five job?

 Kerry said, ‘Mind if I join you for a moment?’

 The man gestured acceptance.

 Kerry sat, closing his eyes, enjoying the sunshine. Thank the Lord for a sunny day. It eased the aches in his joints, soothed his problems away as if a warm hand had been placed on his shoulder. Praise the Lord.

 The man at his side turned to Kerry as if to ask a question – had Kerry actually spoken aloud? – but was interrupted as a burly man in overalls shuffled up, dragging a broom behind him.

 Kerry realised he’d jumped to the wrong conclusion, and that the man taking a rest beside him, was not the street cleaner. Embarrassed, he hailed the workman. ‘A never-ending job at this time of year. No sooner do you clear the pavement than more leaves come down.’

 The street cleaner grinned. ‘It’s dogged as does it. I always win.’ He loaded his broom onto the cart and pushed it off down the hill.

 Kerry invited the other man to laugh with him. ‘Trust me to jump to the wrong conclusion. I thought you were the road-sweeper, taking a rest from your daytime job.’

 ‘I was taking a rest from the job,’ said the other. ‘Wondering whether to pack it in or not. Then you spoke of God. You are in the ministry yourself?’

 ‘Not I. A follower of Christ, but not a leader of men. The name is Kerry, by the way. Which church do you attend?’

 A sharp laugh. Over bright eyes scanned his. Kerry felt weariness descend on his shoulders as he recognised desperation. Dear Lord above! Hadn’t he enough to cope with already? Increasing age, one of his students dropping out, another suspected of drinking too much . . .

 ‘My name is Petroc, and I’m the new minister at the church at the bottom of this road. I’ve been in place for two weeks and I know already that I’m going to fail here . . . as I’ve failed in my previous two places.’

 Kerry felt his heart go thump, thump. This was the new man at Bruce’s church, the one who had so far failed to match up to expectations. What could he say or do? ‘I’m afraid I—’

 Petroc held up his hands. ‘I’m running on empty, so what use am I to my parish?’

 ‘There must be some professional you can go to.’

 ‘I was praying for someone to help me, and you spoke of God.’

 Kerry blinked. A series of easy responses to Petroc’s dilemma passed through his mind and were rejected. Had Petroc lost his faith? No. Had he prayed for help? Yes.

 Petroc took Kerry’s silence as a rebuff. ‘Forgive me. I shouldn’t have taken up your time with—’

 ‘I’ll pray for you,’ said Kerry.

 A meaningless smile as Petroc got to his feet. ‘Thank you. Yes. Prayers are always appreciated. Perhaps I’ll see you in church some time.’

 Kerry wanted to explain that he attended a different church, but Petroc was consulting his iPad, moving on to his next appointment.

 Kerry said, ‘I live in the big house at the top of the hill. Student accommodation. If ever you’d like to drop in for a cuppa—’

 ‘Yes, of course,’ said Petroc, not meaning it, and went on down the hill.

 Kerry was ashamed of himself. He’d been self-righteous and judgmental when his friends told him of their problems, but when he’d been given an opportunity to help, what had he done? Volunteered to pray for Petroc.

*Dear Lord, I messed that up good and proper, didn’t I? Well, at least I can fulfil my promise, and pray for him. And I will. Dear Lord above, you know how worn out we can feel after long years of service under your banner. The road seems hard, and the future dark. Comfort your servant Petroc, and surround him with your love. Plant seeds of hope and courage in his heart. Let him meet with encouragement along the way.*

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Bruce was dissatisfied with himself. He finished doing the weekend shopping, arguing with Kerry in his head all the time. It wasn’t wrong to be thankful for small mercies, was it? The fact that they’d got an uninspiring minister was neither here nor there. They’d manage better with him than with the woman Leo’s lot had got. Was it so wrong to take a short nap during the sermon? Hadn’t they heard it all before?

 He heaved the shopping into the boot of his car. He was lucky to have found a parking place behind the shopping centre. He checked; he still had a few minutes’ grace on the meter. Now for home and an early lunch.

 Whirr, whirr. It sounded as if the car in front of him had a flat battery. A woman driver, of course. Women, in Bruce’s opinion, never maintained their cars properly. He could ignore her with a clear conscience. He got into his car and fastened his seat belt.

 She got out of her car, producing a mobile phone. Ah, good. She was phoning for assistance.

 Then he saw that she was wearing a dog collar. The only woman minister around here

was the one who’d just moved into Leo’s church, the one who’d got everyone’s back up. Hah! Serve her right.

 Whoever it was she’d phoned, wasn’t picking up. She was a nice-looking woman about forty, perhaps. Good haircut, well-dressed. She tried another number. Perhaps she was trying someone from the church – the church whose members she’d been busy alienating. Well, you reap what you sow, don’t you? Bruce reminded himself that he was running out of time on the meter, and checked his wing mirror to see if he could move off into the traffic.

 The woman in the dog collar put down her phone, biting her lip, looking around her. Along the street came the parking warden on his bike. He’d have her for sure. And Bruce too, if he didn’t move sharpish.

 He undid his seat belt, and got out of the car. ‘Can I help?’

 ‘Could you? This is my husband’s car and he did warn me the battery was low, but I had a meeting so I thought . . . but no excuse. He’s not answering his phone. Do you know where the nearest garage is?’

 Bruce fed his meter with some more money, causing the parking warden to scowl and pass on. ‘I’ll give you a jump start, if you like. Have you enough money on your meter?’

 ‘How kind.’ She reddened. ‘I’m sorry. It’s just that everything . . . Kindness from a stranger . . . I’m a stranger around here.’

 ‘Yes, I know.’ He held out his hand. ‘I’m Bruce. My friend Leo is a steward at your church. Would you open the bonnet for me? Luckily we’re parked nose to nose, so to speak.’

 ‘Leo?’ She frowned. ‘Oh yes. I remember.’

 Bruce buried his head in her bonnet. He wouldn’t say anything else. It would be regarded as interference. She’d probably bite his head off. On the other hand, a courteous observation which could not be mistaken for criticism might help. ‘It must be difficult, coming to a new parish, in a part of the country new to you. We’re an awkward lot down here, as I expect you’ve discovered.’

 She smiled. ‘I come from Yorkshire. We get medals for being awkward.’

‘Easy does it,’ he said, attaching leads.

She gave him a sharp look. ‘Easy does it?’

‘With the leads.’ He treated her to a bland smile and started his engine.

She was no fool. Her eyes narrowed. He could see her wondering whether or not to challenge him to explain himself – and decide not to do so. ‘You are a churchgoer?

‘A different church. Leo and I meet up every now and then with another friend on Saturday mornings in the town centre for a coffee and a chat. Being new around here, you might like to join us some time?’ Then he cursed himself. Why on earth had he had to issue such an invitation, and without consulting the others?

She said, ‘I’d like that. May I bring my husband? We moved down here because of his job and we don’t know anyone yet.’

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The woman in the dog collar drove away from the town centre, fighting a desire to hit someone. *Take it easy.* That man – what was his name, Bruce? – it had been good of him to help her, but . . . Grrr! He’d known exactly what he was saying when he’d told her to take it easy. How dare he judge her?

 She was due at an important meeting in ten minutes time. She must calm down.

Take it easy, indeed! That man had no idea how much it had cost her and her family to leave their beloved Yorkshire and move down to the soft South, away from their friends and relations, and to have to start all over again with a new set of stewards who automatically opposed everything she wanted to do.

 That man had mentioned Leo. He was her new property steward, wasn’t he? A big, bulky man. He’d seemed capable enough but had sat through the stewards’ meeting, looking uncomfortable and had had the nerve to try to argue with her vision for the church. Perhaps she’d call on him sometime soon, convince him how wrong he and the others had been. They say a new broom sweeps clean, don’t they? Old hymn books can be recycled, older people can be cajoled into trying new tunes, youngsters can be encouraged to try out a new club . . . but Oh, No! You must never, ever try to change the time of the service! That way disaster lies . . . or so said her chief steward.

 Well, who was boss here? The chief steward, or the minister?

 *Take it easy*.

 She gave a sharp laugh. ‘Take it easy,’ indeed. She was responsible for two churches, not one. She’d assumed when she arrived that she could take the service at the first at nine thirty, and move on to the next at eleven. No problem. What was wrong with that?

 *Take it easy.*

 She shuddered. *Dear Lord above, am I missing something important here?*

 *Take it easy.*

 *All right, all right.* She knew when she was beaten. Let the service stay where it was; she would think up some way of getting from A to B in time. It would be stressful for her, she wouldn’t be able to spend as much time with the congregation at the first church as she would like, but perhaps she could arrange a coffee morning there on alternate Saturdays, say. Yes, why not?

She asked God what he thought of this. He seemed to be smiling. *Oh, all right, then! You win.*

She got out of the car, collected her notes, and rang the doorbell of the manse. She didn’t suppose their superintendent ever had this sort of problem. Now, what was this meeting about? A joint evening service for Harvest Festival in this part of town, embracing all three of the local Methodist churches? Well, why not?

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Petroc listened to the fine ideas the other two ministers were pouring out. Now and then he nodded. That was all he was good for nowadays. Rubber-stamping what other people decided. In the quiet at the back of his head he offered up his useless self to God . . .

*Dear Lord, let me be used for you, or let me be laid aside for you, according to your will.*

‘What do you think our harvest theme should be, Petroc?’

 What? Did they really want his opinion? He was out of ideas, as usual. Then from somewhere a thought came and crystallised in his mind. ‘Doesn’t it mean not only giving of what we have, the fruits of our work, but also about giving ourselves, to be used as He thinks best? The harvest may sometimes seem poor to us, but that’s not the way our Father looks at it. To Him, the fruits are always a matter of rejoicing.’

 He went on, ‘God calls us to His service, but only He knows what will happen. We may think we’ve failed when, despite all our efforts, we see our congregations dwindling. But, with a word here or a gesture there, someone’s life may have been touched, and that’s what God put us here for.’ He reddened. Had he expressed himself badly, as usual?

 ‘My life was touched today,’ said the woman in the dog collar, ‘A man came to my assistance when I had trouble with the car. He – and now you – have reminded me of what I’m inclined to forget. That under the terms of my employment, I’m here to serve.’

 Petroc said, ‘I had an interesting encounter today, too. A street cleaner was hard at work but as fast as he swept up the leaves, more fell. He said it was “dogged as does it, but I always win”. It made me smile.’ *And it’s true; perseverance is the name of the game.*

The woman in the dog collar nodded. ‘The kindness of strangers eases us into our new places. I’ve even had an invitation for myself and my husband to join some Saturday coffee mornings. I shan’t go because I’ll be otherwise engaged, but it was a nice thought.’

 Petroc said, ‘I’ve been invited to visit a man called Kerry, who runs a hostel for students. I might call in there later today.’

 The superintendent said, ‘Ah, Kerry. You’ll be in safe hands there.’

 ‘In God’s hands?’ said the woman in the dog collar, thinking she was making a joke.

 The superintendent smiled and said no more. He would pray for the two newcomers. They were bringing both strengths and weaknesses to their new postings but with the grace of God and the support of their congregations, they’d be salt and light to the neighbourhood.

 That evening Leo was surprised and pleased to receive a phone call from his new minister, suggesting they might get together with the chief steward to discuss plans for the future. She sounded a great deal more receptive than before. Hallelujah.

 Later that night, Kerry praised the Lord for sending him a new friend, with whom he could discuss the problems of his lodgers.

Bruce never gave another thought to his good deed.

Kindness counts. Pass it on.