***Operation Christmas***

 Three retired men meet for a coffee . . . and a grumble.

‘I have a problem.’ Kerry’s gentle, lined face looked tired.

 ‘*You* have a problem?’ Leo, the retired sales manager, had treated himself to a hot chocolate with cream in defiance of his diet, because he said he needed cheering up. ‘For years now we’ve all met at your house for Christmas lunch. I look forward to it. So does Dora. But today she said – and I still can’t believe it – that my son is taking the children and going to his wife’s family for Christmas. How about that?’

 ‘Is it the in-laws’ turn?’ Bruce was the third member of the trio. Bald and brown, he was a retired accountant and considered to be the brains of the group. ‘One year with you and the next with them. You get on all right with your daughter-in-law, don’t you?’

 Leo brushed that away with a wave of his hand. ‘She’s all right. A bit limp, if you know what I mean. Of course they have every right to go to her people if they wish, but it won’t be the same without them.’

 Bruce nodded. ‘Sometimes arrangements for Christmas don’t work out. Sally says we’re to be blessed with her sister’s presence again this year.’

 His two friends shook their heads, understanding what this meant.

 ‘My condolences,’ said Leo. ‘How your dear wife puts up with that woman, I do not know.’

 ‘Chalk and cheese,’ said Bruce. ‘Sally lives in the light, while Fiona’s permanently blacked out. Last time she came, I nearly bit my tongue in two trying not to start an argument. She never thanked us for having her, complained it was uncomfortably crowded at Kerry’s for lunch and worst of all, she made Sally cry. I can’t abide the woman but Sally refuses to tell her she’s not wanted.’

 ‘She must like being with you,’ said Kerry, who looked for the best in everyone, ‘or she wouldn’t want to come again.’

 Bruce shrugged. ‘I think I shall move out for the duration.’ He only half meant it.

 Kerry said, ‘I have a problem, too.’

 ‘I suppose,’ said Leo, ‘that it’s the empty nest syndrome. The house will seem so empty. How can we enjoy Christmas without the grandchildren?’

 Kerry picked up his sugar spoon and tapped it against his coffee cup. Mock severe, he said, ‘May I have your attention, please? As I said, I have a problem, too.’

 Bruce grinned. ‘Sorry, Mr Chairman. We do go on a bit, don’t we?’

 Leo also smiled. ‘The trouble with you, Kerry, is that you’re too polite. You should have knocked our heads together, or shouted at us.’

 As if! Kerry was the quiet one, who’d turned his house into accommodation for students. He was the one everyone went to in times of trouble. He said, ‘My daughter Judith will be with us for Christmas.’

 The other two nodded. Judith was a chilly, forceful business woman based in London but as often as not to be found in New York or Munich. She’d joined them for Christmas last year and had graciously attended the celebratory lunch which her father served up for his friends, their families, and a couple of stray students every year.

 ‘Fine,’ said Bruce.

 ‘Good news,’ said Leo. Both of them tried to sound pleased about it.

 ‘She’s bringing a man. She’s had various partnerships over the years but none has lasted. His name is Spencer and he’s something senior in her firm. Married in his teens, no children, divorced in his twenties, has played the field ever since. He and Judith have been together for a couple of months now and he says he wants to make it permanent.’

 ‘Well, good,’ said Bruce.

 ‘Humph!’ said Leo, ‘What does he mean by “permanent”?’

 Kerry tried to smile. ‘I agree. Judith put him on the phone to me last night and we had a pleasant chat. He says how much he’s looking forward to meeting me and that he’s sure we’ll get along. The problem is that he doesn’t ‘do’ Christmas. He doesn’t believe in God. He thinks anyone who does, is seriously lacking in the upper storey.’

Bruce said, ‘You mean he won’t want to go to church on Christmas day? Well, that’s his choice. Will Judith opt out as well?’

 ‘She’s never been much of a church-goer,’ said Kerry, ‘but it goes further than that. He thinks it’s hypocritical to send Christmas cards or have a tree, decorate the house or listen to carols. Oh, and no turkey, by request. Nor any Christmas pudding, crackers or mottos.’

 The others digested this in silence.

 Bruce said, in a flat voice. ‘He wants you to cancel your Christmas.’

 Kerry sighed. ‘I said that I always invited friends to Christmas lunch, that one or two of my students are staying on as well, and that we all chip in to celebrate. He said, “Bah! Humbug!” and expected me to laugh. He suggested I made “other arrangements” for my guests, so that he and I and Judith could have a “grown-up” time together.’

‘Whatever did you say?’

 ‘I didn’t know what to say. Judith rang me this morning to say how much it means to her that I get on with Spencer, and that surely I can see his point of view. Apparently he was adopted, never experienced proper family Christmases when he was young. She thinks this excuses his behaviour. It explains it, I suppose; but it doesn’t excuse it. I nearly put the phone down on her, but of course I didn’t. I can’t quarrel with my only child. She says he’s planning to buy her an engagement ring for Christmas.’

 Leo considered the ruins of their plans for Christmas and didn’t like what he saw. No lunch at Kerry’s. A too quiet house, a lunch for two. Dora trying to make the best of it, and failing. Nevertheless, he was the first to recover. ‘That’s good news, Kerry. You’ve always hoped she’d settle down with a good man some time. Don’t worry about us. We can easily make other arrangements for Christmas Day.’

 Bruce stared into his empty coffee cup, and said nothing.

 Kerry put his hand on Leo’s sleeve in an unusual gesture of affection. ‘It’s emotional blackmail, Leo, and I’m not giving in to it. Of course I’m pleased if she’s found that Spencer’s the right man for her. I told her so, too. But Christmas means a lot to me. Not the trimmings, the tree, the turkey, the presents; they’re just the way in which we celebrate the birth of Jesus in our culture.’

 ‘True, but—’

‘I’ve been trying to think myself into the heads of people who can celebrate Christ’s Mass without thinking about the Nativity, and it seems to me that they are only thinking of what *they* can get out of it, about the value of the presents they receive, the quality of the food and drink. I suppose I shouldn’t say so, but their celebrations seem to be very “self” centred. But then, they lack an extra dimension in their lives. They lack everything that underpins the life of a Christian; a belief in God, and the knowledge that God cares for us.’

 Bruce went on staring into his empty cup. ‘You disapprove of Spencer.’

‘I am sad for him. Of course we could please him by celebrating the Nativity without the usual Christmas trimmings—’

Leo grimaced. ‘On bread and water, fasting?’

Kerry laughed. ‘You could do with losing a few pounds, Leo. But perhaps none of us are ready for that. I see no reason why we shouldn’t lift our spirits with good cheer. We are celebrating the birth of someone who means everything to us. Of course the tree and the trimmings are not essential, although the star is a symbol of hope for me and I wouldn’t do without that for anything, whether in the form of a candle or lights strung across the window.’

Bruce said, ‘The question is, when faced with this situation, what would Jesus do?’

 Leo was flippant. ‘Invite the five thousand to lunch? Lose the spoil sports in the multitude?’

 Bruce put down his cup. ‘We need a plan of action. We could call it “Operation Christmas”.’

 ‘A plan of campaign?’ said Leo. ‘How each of us will deal with a problem this Christmas?’

‘Something like that,’ said Bruce. ‘I’m speaking off the top of my head here. We talk glibly about giving presents at Christmas. Perhaps what we give or do for other people at Christmas may cost us more than money? We could try to give them something they really need.’

 ‘Like, your sister-in-law needs a sense of humour?’ said Leo, thinking of Fiona’s sharp tongue.

 ‘Indeed,’ said Bruce. ‘If only I could buy one for her.’

 Kerry sat back in his chair. ‘Perhaps you’re on to something there. How can I arrange a Christmas celebration for Judith and Spencer that would mean something to them, but not interfere with our own celebrations? This needs thinking about.’

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Leo went home to find Dora in the kitchen, mixing dark, spicy ingredients in a pudding basin.

 ‘You’re making a Christmas cake? But the family won’t be here to eat it, will they?’

 She continued to add ingredients. ‘I said I’d send a cake along with them to help out. They’ll have four extra mouths to feed.’

 Leo sagged into his chair. ‘I wish they weren’t going.’

 Dora was terse. ‘It’s their turn. We have them all year round, and it will give us a bit of time to ourselves.’ It was Dora who bore the brunt of sharing the house with their family and, much as she loved them, Leo knew she often found it tiring. She handed him a wooden spoon. ‘Here you are. Give it a good stir and make a wish.’

What should he wish for? Peace and goodwill, perhaps? No. He would wish that his

family should remember the real meaning of Christmas wherever they happened to be. The mixture almost filled her biggest bowl. There was more than enough there for two cakes. *Two* cakes? He stirred, wished, and handed the spoon back to Dora.

 He struggled with himself. ‘I’m only seeing things from my point of view, aren’t I? You should have a good rest while they’re away. Suppose we go to a hotel for the holiday period?’

 She started to ladle the mix into cake tins. ‘I’m really looking forward to going to Kerry’s on Christmas Day . . .’

 Leo nodded, crossing his fingers under the table. He certainly hoped they would.

 ‘. . . but I thought that we might invite one or two neighbours around on Boxing Day for tea and cake.’

 ‘Which neighbours? Not her at number ten? She drinks too much.’

 ‘Perhaps she wouldn’t, if she knew someone cared. Then there’s the girl in the wheelchair . . .’

 Who was no girl, being forty plus and grumpy. Her mother was a foul-mouthed old harridan.

 ‘. . . and her mother, of course. Then there’s the gay men who’ve just had a civil wedding, and—’

 ‘Everyone no one else wants to know. Dora, you’ll tire yourself out.’

‘A friend from church has promised to help me because she’s going to be all alone, too. I expect I will get tired, but I’d rather wear out than rust out.’

He thought about it. ‘I’ll help, of course. Dora, I’m a lucky man to have you. It’ll be the best Christmas present ever.’

 ‘The best Christmas present for who?’

 Leo grinned. ‘For Jesus, of course.’

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Bruce stretched out on the settee watching Sally, who didn’t like to cook much herself, but did like to watch the cookery programmes on television. He loved to see her smiling and happy, and he heartily wished her sister to the ends of the earth.

 ‘Why is Fiona always so hard on you?’

 ‘Um? Oh, well, she was always the clever one. She was the one who went to University and ended up as headmistress of a private school. She was the one who wrote articles in learned magazines, and had good reviews for that book she had published. I was the dum-dum who’s never done anything. I married straight from school and have never had a proper job in my life.’

 Bruce stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. His dear Sally was belittling herself as usual. She’d married young, and with love and tenderness had looked after a clever, difficult, older man until he died. Then she’d married Bruce, who gave thanks every day for her coming into his life.

 He wondered if the plain, clever elder sister might have envied the younger, prettier one. Sally liked people and they liked her. Fiona didn’t seem to like anyone. Perhaps because no one liked her?

 Sally sighed. ‘I wish Fiona had married, but she always said she couldn’t bear to play second fiddle to a man.’ She turned her head to kiss Bruce’s cheek. ‘She doesn’t know what she’s missed.’

 She turned her attention back to the television, and Bruce went to look for Fiona’s book. It was a thick hardback from a reputable publisher who had eventually been subsumed into an international conglomerate. It was an erudite, well-researched and well-written book about nineteenth century women writers. The sort of book which was set for degree courses at universities.

 He took it back to Sally. ‘Didn’t you say that Fiona wrote another book later? What happened?’

 ‘I’m not sure. Her editor left, the new one wasn’t interested. She tried a couple of other places, I think, but about that time she got the headship and . . . I don’t know. I think she just lost hope.’

 Bruce thought about it. His old firm had had clients in the publishing world, and he could perhaps ask around . . . but why should he do Fiona good turn? This needed a lot more thought.

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Christmas Day, and all the bells were ringing.

 ‘Bright and early!’ said Leo, ringing the bell at Kerry’s door. He looked down at his wife, ‘Dora, you look as bright as a Christmas robin in that red coat.’

 ‘God rest ye merry, gentlemen,’ sang Bruce, handing Sally and Fiona out of his car. ‘And please welcome our famous authoress to these hallowed halls.’

 ‘Isn’t it wonderful?’ cried Sally, who hadn’t an envious bone in her body. ‘She’s just had her second book accepted for publication. We’ve been on such a high since we heard.’

 ‘Welcome all,’ cried Kerry, opening the door and drawing them inside. ‘I hope you don’t mind, Fiona, but we’re having a glass of champagne to celebrate your success.’

 ‘It’s not just one book,’ said Bruce, ‘they want to reprint the first one, give a big splurge to the second and put both into Ebooks as well.’

 Fiona was all smiles. Success had improved her temper and she hadn’t let fly with a sarcasm for two whole days. Well, one and a half, but that must be a record.

 ‘Something to celebrate, indeed,’ said Kerry.

Their coats were whisked away by a couple of Kerry’s students wearing chefs’ hats and aprons. The hall was decorated with swags of greenery, glistening with tinsel, and there was a bunch of mistletoe dangling from the centre light. A giant Christmas tree almost impeded access to the kitchen, from which came the delicious aroma of roast turkey and sausages. Carols were sweetly singing in the background, and from the sitting-room came the sound of toy horns tooting.

‘More guests,’ said Kerry. ‘A family from down the road. He’s just lost his job and they were in despair about not being able to afford a proper Christmas, so I invited them, too.’

One of the students appeared with a tray of glasses. ‘Champagne, anyone?’

‘The more the merrier,’ said Leo. ‘Kerry, what have you done about Judith and her bloke?’

Kerry glanced upwards, with what in anyone else would have been called a mischievous smile. ‘I explained that I was committed to having some neighbours round today, but that I was making arrangements for them to have everything the way they wanted it. I’ve given them my rooms at the top of the house. No decorations, no cards, no carols. I’ve supplied a hamper of goodies, non-Christmas, from Harrods, and said we wouldn’t on any pretext disturb them. I advised them, of course, to keep their door shut so they won’t be disturbed by our jollifications below.’

‘Brilliant,’ said Bruce. ‘I wonder how long they’ll last without wondering why we’re having fun, and they aren’t?’

‘Oh, come on,’ said Sally, dimpling. ‘They’re probably all wrapped up in one another, looking into one another’s eyes and dreaming of love everlasting.’

Fiona snorted. ‘Love everlasting? They should be so lucky.’

With a low bow, Kerry drew her under the mistletoe. ‘Then I wish you luck. You deserve a kiss for that, my dear.’

Four young children erupted from the sitting-room, blowing trumpets and banging on triangles. ‘Come and see what Santa Claus brought us!’

‘Hurry up!’ shouted one of the ‘chefs’. ‘Luncheon is served and the piper wants to know if he can start.’

A groaning sound in the doorway turned out to be, indeed, a real live piper tuning up.

The startled four-year old took refuge behind her father, who picked her up to make her feel safe.

Kerry shouted over the hubbub. ‘The piper’s a Scot, a friend of one of my students, who hadn’t anywhere else to stay. Have we all got something to drink? Then here’s a toast to our great host in the sky . . . and another to our famous authoress—’

‘Oh, my goodness!’ protested Fiona. ‘I’m all of a flutter!’

Kerry had undoubtedly got above himself. He offered his arm to Fiona. ‘My privilege to take you in. Piper, strike up the band!’

‘What is going on?’ A voice from above. Judith, looking rosily pleased with herself, descended the stairs followed by a tall man in expensive casual clothes and a frown.

Kerry gestured as if to push her back up the stairs. ‘Have I forgotten something you need? I’m sorry if we’re making too much noise, but I did suggest you kept the door closed.’

‘We’re engaged!’ Judith held up her left hand so that they might admire her diamond ring.

‘Congratulations!’ cried Kerry. He held out his arms to Judith. ‘Come here and let me give you a hug. And,’ shaking her fiancé’s hand, ‘welcome, Spencer. Normally we’d invite you to join us for a celebration of your news, but this is our Christmas party, you see.’

‘I’ve always enjoyed our family Christmases,’ said Judith. A smile came and went. She looked up at her scowling fiancé. Did she see into a future where Christmas was forbidden? Did she wonder how she could keep Christ in her life if this man refused to believe? She put her arm through his. ‘Let’s join in. I know you wouldn’t, normally, but—’

Spencer produced a stiff smile. ‘It’s a question of principle.’

‘Yes,’ said Judith, sadly. ‘I do see. Oh, Spencer; you’re missing so much. Life would be so grey and dull without a proper Christmas. Couldn’t you give it a try, for my sake?’

Silence. On the radio in the kitchen someone was singing, ‘Love came down at Christmas . . .’

Spencer said, ‘Judith, come back upstairs.’

She shook her head, smiling through tears. ‘We can be alone later. Spencer; this is really important to me.’

He stared down at her. Did he see that, if he didn’t yield he might lose her, condemning himself to a lonely future? He gave in with a frown rather than a smile. ‘Well, just this once.’

It was a start, anyway.

Kerry cried, ‘Piper, pipe us in!’

After the meal the ten-year-old sang, ‘Once in Royal David’s City’. Judith’s very new fiancé didn’t join in, but he didn’t make an excuse to leave, either.