ACCIDENT & EMERGENCY

 *by Veronica Heley*

 *Three men meet for coffee and two wives take action.*

‘I always feel depressed at this time of the year.’ Leo, the retired sales director, added sugar to his hot chocolate. ‘The first Christmas catalogue arrived last week, and Dora’s got me on a diet. I’m hungry all the time.’

 Bruce, bald and sprightly, sipped his cappuccino. ‘I know what you mean. The nights are drawing in. Soon we’ll have the first frosts and my dear Sally will be in mourning over the death of her bedding plants.’

‘Buy her some bulbs,’ said Leo. ‘Give her something to look forward to.’

‘She’s already bought some. This afternoon I have to help her plant them out. When do the clocks go back?’

 ‘Spring forward, fall back,’ said Leo. ‘That’s the way I remember it.’

 ‘The autumn term is upon us.’ Kerry’s lined face and gentle manner caused him to look much older than the others. He smothered a cough. ‘The first of my new intake of students arrives this afternoon, and I’ve yet to master the settings for the new boiler. Am I still up to it, I wonder?’

 The other two regarded him with concern. Kerry ran a hostel for students in his big old house but had returned from a summer holiday with a nasty cough, which he refused to take to the doctor.

‘What you need,’ said Leo, ‘is a tonic to set you up for the winter.’

 ‘Harvest time,’ mused Kerry. ‘How many more harvests will we see? We are here for such a short length of time, comparatively speaking. A blink of an eye. What have we done with our lives? What does God want us to do in the time left to us?’

 Leo shivered. ‘Someone walked over my grave. I think I’ve done what he’s wanted me to do.’ When Leon had first retired, he’d spent all his energies on running a local football team. After that he’d taken on the job of property steward at church, which had nearly given him a nervous breakdown. Now he’d given that up and enjoyed a good holiday, he wasn’t anxious to sign up for anything else. He said, ‘Haven’t we done enough?’

 Kerry said, ‘Leo, you’ve always thrown yourself into everything you’ve taken on. I was really talking to myself.’ He smothered another cough.

 Bruce said, ‘Running a hostel for university students must be like herding cats. Surely that’s enough?’

Leo stirred more sugar into his drink. ‘You’re not thinking of giving up, are you?’ Kerry shook his head. ‘Not yet.’ But his eyes were tired.

 When Leo had gone off to do his weekend shopping, Bruce offered Kerry a lift back up the hill. He’d never done so before and Kerry registered the fact.

 ‘You think I should give up?’

 ‘I think you need some antibiotics for that cough of yours, and I’m wondering if there’s a way to ease your work load.’

 ‘So you do think I should give it up?’

‘It’s valuable work, but you’re looking tired. You’ve asked God what you should do?’

Kerry grimaced. ‘He says, “wait and see”.’

Bruce drew up in Kerry’s driveway. Kerry got out . . . his foot rolled over on a small stone and he went down with a thud.

Bruce hastened to Kerry’s side. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Of course I am. Don’t fuss.’ But Kerry’s colour was poor and, when he attempted to stand, he couldn’t make it. His ankle was swelling. A bad sprain? Hopefully it was no worse.

Bruce said, ‘That needs looking at. I’ll take you down to A & E in the car.’

Kerry demurred. ‘I can’t. I’ve got students arriving this afternoon, and before that I have to find out how the central heating clock works.’

‘No arguments.’ Bruce helped Kerry back into the car.

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Leo put the shopping on the kitchen table, and looked at the calendar on the wall. Since they’d downsized and moved nearer the town centre, Dora had taken on a new lease of life. She had commitments for almost every day of the week; she helped out at the Senior Citizens’ afternoon Tea Club at church, and did two mornings a week at the charity shop. She was meeting an old friend for coffee that morning and was going out the following day with the local historical society.

 None of these activities appealed to Leo. There was a whole lot of nothing on the calendar for him, and his diet was taking all the fun out of life. He tried to tighten his belt one more notch, but had to give in and return it to its original hole.

*Dear Lord, here I am. At a loose end for once. Any ideas?*

 Bruce rang. ‘Leo, bad news. Kerry fell and hurt his ankle. I’m in the hospital with him now, waiting for the result of an X-ray.’

 ‘What! Oh, dear Lord!’ Leo glanced at the clock. ‘I’ll leave a note for Dora and be with you in ten minutes.’

 ‘No. Wait. I’ve phoned Sally and told her I’ll stay with Kerry till we get the results, but he’s fretting because he’s got students arriving this afternoon and he hasn’t yet worked out how to adjust the clock on the new boiler. I’ve got his keys here. Can you drop round to the hospital – I’ll be at the main entrance in ten minutes time – collect his keys, and hold the fort at the house till the first of the students arrive? With any luck you’ll find a responsible one who can take over till Kerry gets back.’

 ‘How bad is he? He’s much more than a landlord to the students.’

‘If it’s just a sprain they’ll strap him up and send him home—’

 ‘His flat is up two flights of stairs, at the top of the house!’

 ‘I know. It’s not good. Actually, I’m more worried about that cough of his. He needs antibiotics but won’t mention his cough in case they try to keep him in. Thinks he’s indispensable.’

 ‘No one’s indispensable,’ said Leo, who’d learned that from hard experience. He followed that up with the thought that sometimes when a key person is removed, the project fails. Did God want the hostel to fail? He sent up an arrow prayer.

*Dear Lord, do you want . . .? No, I didn’t think you did. So. . . ?’*

 Leo looked at the calendar, which had nothing on it for him, and laughed. He said, ‘Bruce, God works in mysterious ways. Tell Kerry I’ll take over till he gets back this evening. Dora won’t mind.’

‘I thought you’d say that. See you in ten minutes.’

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At the hospital, Bruce handed over the keys to Leo and returned to Kerry’s side in the Accident and Emergency department.

‘I’m told I’ve been shaken, not stirred.’ Kerry had indeed been badly shaken, but still tried to crack a joke. His cough was worse. ‘Nothing’s broken but I’ve pulled a ligament. I told them to strap me up so that I can hobble home but they say the swelling’s got to go down before they can strap me up and now they’re going on about this stupid cough of mine. I told them I’ve had it for ages but they won’t listen. I’ve no intention of staying in overnight. Can you give me a lift home?’

 ‘You don’t have to worry about the hostel. Leo’s taking over for the moment. He’ll let the students in and deal with the central heating.’

 ‘Ridiculous!’ Kerry was overtaken by another coughing fit, which exhausted him.

 Bruce went in search of help – and information. He found both and, while a nurse gave Kerry some pain medication, Bruce got back on the phone to Leo. ‘How are you doing?’

 ‘Fine. Three students have arrived, wanted a list of rules, mealtimes, etcetera. I’ve been poking around in Kerry’s office and can’t find . . . ah, got it. I’ll take the lists up to them in a minute. How’s Kerry?’

‘Poorly. Nothing broken, but a ligament pulled. He’s just going down to have his chest X-rayed. I think they’ll keep him in, which is a good thing.’

‘I suppose he’s fretting about the hostel? Never fear, Leo’s here. I’ve been on the phone to Dora and she’s agreed that I should stay overnight. All these stairs . . . I hadn’t realised I was losing my ability to climb stairs when we moved into our ground floor flat, so this will be good exercise. Dora says she’ll bring some supper over for me, but I can’t work out how much the students cater for themselves. Do they have to sign up if they want a meal provided for them? The students don’t seem to know. Kerry’s got a cook who comes in, but I don’t know how many days she’s supposed to work.’

‘I’ll ask him when he comes back from X-ray.’

‘The place is spick and span, so someone must have been cleaning here recently . . . and . . . Ah, one of the students has just knocked on the door with a query. I’ll ring you back, shall I?’

‘Before you go, Leo; did you get the heating sorted?’

But Leo had already cut the call.

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Bruce’s wife Sally had never rung Dora before, but this was an emergency.

 ‘Dora, it’s Sally here. You’ve heard about Kerry?’

 ‘Yes, isn’t it a shame, though I suppose it could happen to any of us. Leo thinks he may have to stay overnight as more students are expected early tomorrow. I’m going to take him his overnight bag and a chicken casserole I’ve got in the freezer. Some of the students have arrived and he thinks they might like to join him for supper. After that I’ll drop by the hospital to see how Kerry’s doing.’

 ‘You’ve already got a lot on your plate. I feel so helpless. Bruce does all the cooking nowadays and . . . all I could think of when he rang was that he was supposed to help me plant the spring bulbs this afternoon, and that I’d have to find something for us to eat for supper. Poor Kerry. He must be distraught. I want to help, but I don’t know how. Can you think of anything I could do?’

 ‘Since you ask,’ said Dora, ‘there’s people who ought to know what’s happened, and I haven’t the time to contact them. If I give you Leo’s mobile number, could you ask him for the contact details for Ludmilla, Kerry’s cook. Presumably she’s starting back tomorrow, but I don’t know how many hours and days she works. Could you check? And there’s a cleaner . . . Ludmilla will know about her.’

‘Got it.’ Sally jotted down some notes. ‘What about Kerry’s daughter? She’s a high flyer in New York, isn’t she? Do we bother her with the news yet?’

A hesitation. ‘She’ll want to fly back straight away and . . . she’s awfully bossy. Perhaps tomorrow, when we have a clearer picture of what’s happening?’

‘Right. Dora, would you mind, could you spare a minute, before you dash off . . . could we just pray together?’

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Bruce got back home as Sally was taking delivery of a pizza.

 ‘Bless you,’ he said, taking off his tie and undoing the top button of his shirt.

 ‘How is he? Dora’s just rung to say she’s delivered Leo his overnight things and a large casserole, and is now on her way to the hospital. She says the three students who have already arrived are delighted to be given a meal – and so, of course, is Leo, who hates to miss his food.’

‘So he does. Good for Dora.’ Bruce began to relax. He even managed a smile.

Sally continued, ‘Leo’s given me Ludmilla’s phone number. I had a long talk with her. She’s been worried about Kerry and is pleased something’s being done about that cough of his at last. She wants him to know that she’ll hold the fort till he gets back. She went in yesterday to take delivery of a food order, and starts work officially tomorrow. She’s not full time, because nowadays the students are mostly supposed to cater for themselves. Kerry provides a cooked meal for them three evenings a week, but only if they sign up for it. I checked with Leo, and he’s getting the paperwork ready for the students to put their names down for the week ahead. Oh, and Kerry’s cat is searching for him, so Leo’s paying him extra attention.’

‘You’ve been busy,’ said Bruce, smiling. His Sally liked to pretend she was just a

pretty face who happened to be interested in gardening, but he’d always known she had a good head on her shoulders. ‘Anything else?’

‘Ludmilla’s got the cleaner’s details and will make sure she comes in when she should. Dora and I decided not to ring his daughter Judith till we know the prognosis. How is Kerry?’

 ‘Poorly. The shock of the fall seems to have made his cough worse, but at least he’s in the right place. He’s on oxygen and getting antibiotics and painkillers and goodness knows what. He looks terrible.’ He suspended operations on his pizza.

 Sally put her hand over his. ‘He’ll bounce back, won’t he?’

‘Yes, of course.’ He cleared his throat and tackled his pizza again. ‘He says he’s going home tomorrow, but he isn’t, is he?’ He swallowed hard. ‘I saw him realise it. The look that crossed his face . . .! If he can’t get back to the hostel straight away, I daren’t think what will happen. He’ll lose his livelihood because he can’t stay on in that big house unless he makes it pay for itself. And what will the students do? I doubt if they’d be able to find somewhere else so close to the start of term.’

‘No,’ said Sally, who for once was ahead of him. ‘There’s you and me, Dora and Leo, and Ludmilla. If we can’t run that hostel between us for a week or so, we ought to be ashamed of ourselves.’

‘But you and Dora have your own lives to lead—’

‘Oh, you men! Dora and I had a little prayer time while we were on the phone this afternoon, and we decided that planting spring bulbs and attending coffee mornings comes under the heading of leisure and pleasure, while helping Kerry and his students is work that’s needed.’

‘Wait a minute. We don’t know the first thing about how to run a hostel.’

Sally gave him one of her sweetest smiles. ‘Ludmilla is a fount of common sense and I know she’s a good cook. She’ll tell us all we’ll need to know about the catering and housekeeping. Leo is a real Jack of all trades, isn’t he? He can fix anything that needs a screwdriver, a spanner or a visit from a plumber. Also, he’s good with people, as is Dora. In the evenings one or other of us will always be at the hostel to deal with emergencies and help the students adjust to their new lives, while I plan to pop in for an hour every morning to deal with the post and make a note of any problems that might crop up.’

‘And what role have you cast me in, pray?’

‘You’re going to see that we cover all the bases, and deal with the paperwork. We’ve voted you the best person to deal with Judith, to stop her flying back till we know what’s going to happen. You’ll also have to deal with the university people, and reassure them that the hostel can carry on as usual. Dora and I are going to work a roster so that one of us visits Kerry every day to keep him in the picture. We’ll ask his advice about everything so that he doesn’t feel left out . . . but not until he starts feeling better. Meanwhile, we must all keep cheerful, and pray.’

‘Gracious heavens!’ said Bruce, touched and a trifle humbled. ‘You wonderful woman!’

‘Dora helped, too. Another piece of pizza?’

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They nearly lost Kerry the following night. The lights went out of his eyes, and he seemed to be looking ahead to another horizon. Then the antibiotics began to kick in, and gradually he began to inch back to this life and his responsibilities.

Judith got leave and flew in to create a whirlwind of fuss and worry, which didn’t help. Leo proved best at deflecting her energy into ways of improving the quality of Kerry’s life in the future.

Leo and Dora convened a meeting with the students, upon which three of them transferred to Kerry’s flat at the top of the house, freeing up their ground floor rooms for Kerry’s use. By dint of locking some doors and opening others, they created a self-contained flat for him, in which Judith arranged the best of Kerry’s furniture and furnishings.

Sally was worried that Ludmilla would take offence at Judith’s intromissions but that calm personage informed her she was not one to take offence easily, and that Judith would soon be returning to New York – which she eventually did.

The students found they all preferred Ludmilla’s cooking to doing it themselves, and it was agreed she’d work an extra day a week in future.

Bruce liaised with the university who pronounced themselves happy with the new regime, as long as it proved temporary. Leo, rushing up and down stairs so many times a day and with little time to snack, had to pull his belt in two holes. It was understood, without it being spelled out, that he would continue to act as odd job man for the hostel after Kerry’s return – which suited him fine.

The day Kerry returned home, the sky was blue, the trees were turning gold and red, and conkers were beginning to tumble to the ground. He looked better than he had for a long time, and his ankle was almost healed.

 The foursome gathered in his new sitting-room which overlooked the garden at the back. Sally had itchy fingers about that garden and vowed to put some colour into it soon. Peter the cat sat on Kerry’s knee and purred. Ludmilla brought in a delicious cake which was so crumbly they had to eat it with forks.

 Kerry was not quite himself. He knew that the changes they’d made at the hostel were designed to make his life easier, and he tried to be happy about them. He said, ‘You’ve all done so well and – don’t get me wrong – I’m grateful. But I do feel as if I’ve lost control over my life.’

You wait,’ said Bruce, with satisfaction. ‘Now you’re back, we can hand over a whole raft of problems for you to deal with. Most of them are trivial, and you’ll have no trouble with them, but we’re at our wits’ end about how to deal with one of your new students. Dora’s pretty sure she’s self-harming, though she denies it. Sally said you’d know what to do.’

Kerry threw up his hands, and laughed. ‘Well, well. Perhaps I can cope, now I’m feeling so much better. You know, I asked God if it were time for me to give up my job down here, and he said, “Not yet.” It seems you’ll have to put up with me for a while longer.’

‘But,’ said Bruce, ‘you also have to accept that we’re going to stick around and continue to poke our noses into your business in future.’

‘It was a heavy burden to carry on my own. I praise God for you, my friends.’

 ‘Praise God, indeed,’ said Leo, bringing them all back down to earth. ‘I’ve lost so much weight charging up and down your stairs that, if you’d been away much longer, I’d have had to get a completely new wardrobe!’

Veronica Heley’s latest book is Murder in Time, pub. Severn House.