***Christmas Mislaid***

***Disaster struck! Two days before Christmas!***

a short story by Veronica Heley

Instead of helping to prepare Christmas lunch at church, Sally and Bruce packed their car with food and essentials and drove south. This was because Sally’s nephew, Oliver – or rather, her first husband’s nephew – was in trouble. Oliver had hurt his leg and was stuck at home, unable to move. He couldn’t go away for Christmas as planned, and he couldn’t shop for food.

Sally offered to go down by herself to look after him but Bruce didn’t want to be parted from her at Christmas time so said he’d take her. Neither of them was looking forward to it.

Bruce remembered his first encounter with Oliver. Bruce had been sitting in a cafe when he overheard a pompous, middle-aged bully trying to get a recently widowed woman – whom Bruce knew slightly – to sign over some money to him.

Bruce told himself it was none of his business but, as Oliver kept hammering away at Sally, Bruce ‘accidentally on purpose’ tossed his cup of coffee over Oliver’s paperwork. One thing had led to another, and in due course Bruce and Sally had got married and lived happily ever after.

Although Oliver was no blood relation to Sally and her first husband had told her he didn’t want his money going to his nephew, she did send him a cheque every Christmas and birthday even though he never thanked her for them, nor reciprocated with a gift of his own.

Sally always tried to look for the good in people. As they drove along, she said, ‘Oliver didn’t have a good start in life, with his parents dying just as he left school. We used to invite him to stay in the holidays but I’m afraid we never matched up to what he expected of us. He doesn’t mean to be rude; it’s just his way. I believe he’s doing well now, though I don’t know precisely what it is that he does. My dear husband told Oliver that he was too mean to sneeze when he caught a cold. That was a bit harsh, wasn’t it?’

Bruce thought the remark would have bounced off Oliver without making any impression but said, ‘My dear, I promise to keep my temper and not to throw my coffee over him again. After all, it’s only for a few nights. After Christmas he’ll be able to get a carer to go in and look after him.’

Sally still looked worried. ‘I sent him the usual cheque a week ago but it seems a bit mean not to give him something extra if we’re staying with him over Christmas. He said there was a village shop where we can buy the necessities but they wouldn’t have anything suitable to give him, would they? Which reminds me that we’re short of milk.’

Bruce didn’t think Oliver would have thought of getting a present for them, but didn’t say so.

Sally looked out the instructions Oliver had given her. ‘He’s moved out of his town house for a few months and is renting somewhere in this next village. Ah, there’s the church! He said his cottage is sandwiched between two old houses opposite.’

The afternoon was darkening. There were lights on in the other houses, but not in Oliver’s. Bruce parked, got out of the car and stretched. He thought Oliver’s rental place looked as if it could do with some tender loving care. Why on earth had he moved out here? He said, ‘You go and knock on the door, and I’ll bring the things in.’

Sally’s voice quavered. ‘Do you think he’s forgotten to pay the electricity bill?’

Bruce swung their bags onto the pavement. ‘It’s hard to manage when you’re on crutches and he didn’t expect to be here over Christmas. We’ll make it a special one for him, won’t we? Christmas always works its magic on people, even if they only think of it as an excuse for a party.’

The door opened to Sally’s touch, and she was greeted by a fretful wail.

‘You’ve taken your time! I’ve been sitting in the dark waiting for you ever since they dumped me back from the hospital. Don’t just stand there. Put the heating on! I’m catching my death of cold! I can’t even get myself a hot drink or turn the telly on . . .’

‘We came as quickly as we could.’ Sally found the light switch and blinked as an inefficient central light came on, revealing that the main room was entered direct from the pavement. An open door at the back led to a kitchen and a narrow staircase rose to the left. The furniture was elderly, the carpet worn, the television ancient and thin curtains at the window wavered in a draught.

The was no sign of preparations for Christmas except for one card – which Sally recognised as the one she’d sent to Oliver at his old address.

The invalid was huddled in a blanket on a big armchair, with one leg up on a stool. His laptop and smartphone lay nearby, together with a stout walking stick. ‘How many times do I have to tell you? Central heating! Where’s Bruce? I need his help to get to the toilet.’

Back on the pavement, Bruce had been waylaid by a mother and teenage daughter, who thought he was the television repair man.

Bruce protested, ‘Sorry, but no. And no, I don’t know what’s happened to him.’

The woman wailed, ‘He promised! We can’t be without the telly over Christmas! It a fuse, I think. Or maybe it’s the battery. Can’t you just look at it?’

The teenager hugged herself. ‘You can’t expect some fat cat from the city to care about the likes of us.’

Bruce kept his temper, just. ‘My wife and I have been called down to look after her nephew who’s had an accident. You know him?’

‘Him? Old Grouchy Chops. Mum went in when they decanted him from the ambulance and asked if we could do anything. He bit her head off. Come on, Mum, let’s call that repair man again . . .’

Bruce took the luggage in and helped Oliver to the downstairs toilet and back while Sally made tea. Oliver’s cupboards were bare. He must have cleared out the fridge/freezer when he planned to be away over Christmas.

Sally unpacked the food they’d brought and went upstairs. She found Oliver’s bag in the front bedroom, ready packed to go. There was an unmade small double bed in the second bedroom, a bathroom but no shower.

She went back downstairs. ‘Oliver, wouldn’t you be better off in hospital over Christmas? I don’t see how you’ll ever be able to get up those narrow stairs to bed.’

‘I’ve no intention of trying. I’ll sleep down here on the settee. You can manage in the back bedroom, can’t you? There’s some of the old lady’s blankets in the cupboard in the bathroom.’

Bruce said, ‘A shame about your holiday.’

Oliver brayed out a laugh. ‘I had a stroke of good luck, letting my house in town for three months to some tourists. My boss at work had an aunt who’d died and left him this place but it’s the wrong time of year to put it on the market, so he’s paying me to move in and keep the place aired. That way I get my holiday in the sun for free.’

His face dropped back into its usual discontented lines. ‘That is, I would have done till I tripped and did my leg in. I’ve paid for the holiday on my card, so I’ll get a refund and the hospital is arranging for me to get a Home Help but not till after the Christmas break. That’s when I thought of you. You’re my only relatives and I knew you wouldn’t let me down. Now, what’s for supper?’

Sally put the cottage pie they’d brought with them into the oven - there was no microwave - while Bruce said he’d check that the car was locked up and see what time the church services were over Christmas.

‘You want to go to church?’ Oliver thought that was amusing. ‘Are you mad? The church is dead. Christianity is on its last legs, everywhere. Hadn’t you heard?’

Bruce crossed the road to the church. As he peered at the ancient, torn notices on the board, the teenage girl from next door appeared at his side. ‘I suppose you’re one of those happy clappy Christians who spend hours on their knees but can’t help a neighbour in distress.’

Bruce sighed. ‘Tell me what time the Christmas services are, and I’ll see what I can do.’

The girl swung her arms back and forth. ‘Dunno. I think someone comes from the town to take a service once a month. The last minister was old and didn’t care about us. The old biddy next door – where you are now with Grouchy Chops – she used to be the only one in church sometimes, apart from the organist and he can’t always remember which day of the week it is. Now Miss Smythe’s in the graveyard, and that’s it. A new minister’s supposed to be coming soon, but no-one’s seen him yet.’

She peered at the notice board with him. ‘It says there’s to be a service at eleven on Christmas Day. You won’t be going though, will you?’

Bruce thought of his own friendly church back home, which would be filled with people praising God in two days’ time. He thought of the neglect in Miss Smythe’s house and the downright nastiness of Oliver, and felt depression descend. Well, there was one positive thing he could do about the situation. ‘Let’s have a look at your telly then, shall we?’

It was a fuse. Bruce replaced that, gave the telly a scan – which it needed – and was provided with a hot cuppa, a mince pie and some gossip in front of a sparkling Christmas tree.

The girl explained, ‘Dad’s on his way back from a job in the States, He’s arriving tomorrow and Mum’s hopeless with a screwdriver. Me, too. I can’t be bothered with anything much except drama.’

Mum said, ‘She sang a carol ever so well at the school concert last week. We were sorry Dad had to miss it.’

Bruce felt a stirring of hope. ‘Are you singing in church on Christmas Day?’

Mother and daughter thought that was funny. ‘No one goes to church here.’

‘That’s so uncool.’

Bruce returned to find Oliver still complaining about this and that. An uneasy supper followed and then – Bruce thought afterwards that he should have seen it coming – Oliver coughed to draw their attention.

‘It’s good for families to get together. I hadn’t planned it, but as it turns out this is a great opportunity for us to settle matters for the future. I’m your only relative and I know you’ll leave everything to me. Why not make your wills here and now? We can get a neighbour to witness your signatures and then that will be a job well done.’

Sally turned scarlet with embarrassment. How dare Oliver suggest that!

Bruce wished he hadn’t promised Sally to behave himself. What pleasure it would have given to throw another cup of coffee over Oliver! He said, ‘We both made new wills when we married. They stand.’

‘I need to be sure you’ve done it properly. As your only relative, it stands to reason I will inherit everything.’

Sally hated confrontation but forced herself to speak. ‘Oliver, you are not my only relative. I have a sister and some cousins. I have mentioned you in my will but you are not the sole beneficiary.’

Oliver was taken aback, but recovered to say, ‘What proportion, may I ask–?’

‘No, you may not,’ said Sally, rising to gather the plates and take them to the kitchen. ‘I might as well ask if you’ve made a will in our favour? No? I thought not! Have you really called us down here to talk about making wills? If I’d known . . . Oh, it’s too bad of you!’

Oliver gobbled. ‘Yes, but . . . look at it from my point of view.’

Bruce considered putting everything back in the car and returning home that night. But then he reflected that Oliver really did need help, so they’d have to stay. He said, ‘Well, now. What’s on the telly tonight?’

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Bruce and Sally made Oliver comfortable downstairs and went up to bed early, huddling together under some ancient blankets and an eiderdown.

Sally was still distressed by the scene at supper. ‘I’m so sorry about this. If I’d known what he was up to . . .! What a Christmas this is going to be!’ She attempted to laugh. ‘I suggested putting up some Christmas decorations and he turned purple!’

‘We’ll make our own Christmas. There’s a service in church on Christmas morning. I’ve been wondering what exactly is wrong with Oliver’s leg? He hasn’t got a plaster on it, or a special boot. And no crutches.’

‘I wondered that, too. But he *was* looking forward to his holiday, he *has* hurt himself, and he *does* need help. Which reminds me, I must buy some milk in the morning.’

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Next morning; Christmas Eve. Oliver told Sally and Bruce he’d be fine by himself if they wanted to go to the shops, since he had a list of things he wanted such as toothpaste and the day’s paper. Relieved to be out of the house, they walked along to the busy village shop, where they gradually became aware that they were being checked over by other customers.

The woman behind the till said, ‘You’re the ones helped Mrs Trenchard with her telly?’

Nothing happens in a village without everyone knowing about it.

‘We came to look after a relation who’s hurt his leg but yes, that’s us.’

‘Ah,’ said a big woman with a double push chair. ‘You’re staying with our Mr Scrooge as doesn’t believe in buying stuff local even at Christmas. He gets it cheaper delivered from town, but he wouldn’t give us nothing for our local charity even though it’s toys for kids in hospital.’

Sally dug into her purse. ‘We’ll be happy to donate for him. But you’re right, he doesn’t want any decorations. I usually help decorate the church at home. Do you think I could help here?’

‘There’s just one tree left,’ said the shop keeper, waving at a lopsided spruce whose top half was at right angles to its trunk. ‘Half price to you.’

Bruce said, ‘Ah, now . . . if I only had a bit of wire, I could make it look all right to put in the church. Then my wife could spread some glitter around . . . like a Christmas angel?’

That made people laugh. An elderly woman said it had been ages since anyone had taken the trouble . . . another said she knew old So and So had a church key but . . . There were shrugs and shuffling of feet. No one was going to offer help, were they?

‘I might have some wire back home,’ said a young man pushing a toddler in a buggy.

A middle-aged woman with hair dyed orange said she might drop in that afternoon and see how Bruce and Sally got on, if there was nothing on the telly and the kids weren’t playing up.

‘I’ve some old Christmas tree lights you could have,’ said a woman, breathing asthmatically.

An elderly woman volunteered, ‘I’ve a nativity set you could borrow. Haven’t had it out this year as my daughter broke one of the shepherds last Christmas. We stuck the head back on, and you’d hardly know. If that’s any good?’

‘Tinsel,’ said a woman leaning on a stick. ‘There’s great balls of it in a box at the top of my wardrobe. Mind you, I’m not going up no ladder to decorate no tree, right?’

‘I’ll do it for you, Gran,’ said a bright-eyed child, who was a bit of a lardass but looked as if he’d enjoy a challenge.

Someone fetched the key and they dragged the tree across the road to the church. Someone switched the church heating on, and the young father brought in some heavy-duty wire so that Bruce could straighten and install the tree. Together they strung the lights on and made them work. A stoutly-built man brought in a stack of holly branches bright with berries, and a bag of tinsel was dumped in the porch.

Sally was everywhere, creating beauty. She flew back to give Oliver his lunch and tea, reporting to Bruce on her return that she thought their host was up to something. He’d managed to get to the toilet by himself and make himself some coffee. What’s more, he’d closed his laptop in guilty fashion as soon as she’d appeared.

The Trenchards – Oliver’s next-door neighbours – brought in a pack of tea lights, which Sally stuck in empty jam jars donated by another neighbour.

More people dropped in as the day went on.

At dusk there were lights on in a church which had been dark for many a long day.

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On Christmas morning Bruce left Sally to start the lunch while he went across to the church to check the heating was on and to light the candles in the jars.

A woman was already there, looking around in wonder. She was wearing a black dress and a clerical collar. The new minister? ‘I heard the church would be deserted, but it seems God has not been forgotten here, after all.’

The organist arrived, rubbing his hands. ‘A pleasure to see the place looking good for once.’

The Trenchards came; the father safely returned from America, with his wife and daughter. The teenager said her dad wanted to hear her singing ‘Once in Royal David’s city’ and ‘Silent Night,’ and would that be all right?

The minister said that was fine by her and perhaps Mr Trenchard would like to read a lesson?

The young father who’d provided the wire brought his wife and their baby. The asthmatic came to make sure the lights worked, and the woman who’d brought the nativity set to check that the mended shepherd didn’t look too bad.

The woman from the shop came with an elderly husband, a plump daughter and grandchildren. Others came; some out of curiosity; some because they’d remembered they’d once held God central to their lives.

The new minister proved to have a warm personality. She was interested in everyone and people responded. The young father said they were thinking of a christening, a woman said her daughter might be needing to talk about a wedding. Faces all round were bright with smiles.

As Bruce and Sally crossed the road after the service, they spotted Oliver easing himself into a hired car. He called them over. ‘There you are! I rang my boss at work, and he was so disgusted at the way you’ve treated me that he said I should move into his place. He has a big house and live-in staff so I’ll be properly looked after.’ He smirked. ‘He’s no family and he does have rather a soft spot for me. So you two can clear up the mess you’ve made and drop the key back through the front door when you leave.’

Sally would have protested at the way they’d been used, but Oliver was already telling his driver to get a move on. Bruce tried not to grin till Oliver was safely away.

So Bruce and Sally exchanged presents, ate the Christmas lunch they’d brought with them, cleared up and contentedly drove back home.

Bruce mused, ‘We went where we were told to go. We did what we were given to do. And the result was . . .’

‘Surprising. Do you think the wise men were as happy as we are to get home after they’d seen the baby?’