**‘I have a difficult job for you . . .’**

A short story by Veronica Heley

Dora was good in a crisis.

She might have headed up a government department if she hadn’t married young, produced a family and turned her considerable talents to running church organisations. Over the years she’d headed up Junior church, Guides, church fellowship meetings, coffee mornings for different charities, outreach into the community . . . you name it, she’d done it.

 When the minister asked her to call, Dora wondered if she were to be asked to take on the lettings which brought the church in so much badly-needed income, or perhaps master-mind a refit of the church kitchen? Dora knew she could tackle either of those tasks.

 The minister said, ‘I’m looking for someone to do a particularly difficult job. I want you to think very carefully and to consult your husband and your friends before you give me an answer.’

 Dora didn’t see why her family and friends needed to be asked their opinion, but she nodded.

 The minister fingered the cross she wore. ‘I need to find someone – or possibly several people – to look after an elderly man. Physically, he’s very frail, but he refuses to go into care. I visited him yesterday. His house needs work on it and he himself is in a bad way.’

 Dora nodded. She’d met elderly people like that before. They forgot to eat and wash and didn’t change their bedding. Eventually they went into a home where their physical needs could be dealt with. She could cope with that. She asked, ‘Are Social Services involved?’

 The minister said, ‘When he discharged himself from hospital, Social Services were asked to call, but he refused to let them in. He did, however, ask to see a minister. When I arrived he said he’d been joking. Then he asked if I’d come again if he did need me. I said I would.’

 Dora nodded. Of course.

 ‘The tyres of my car were slashed while I was visiting him. He’s living in the back room of his house because the front windows have been broken and he can’t get anyone to repair them. Stones were thrown the last time he tried to leave the house. His name is Peter . . .’

 Dora sat very still.

Peter was a convicted paedophile who had recently returned home after having served a long sentence in prison. He’d been a teacher, whose abuse of his pupils had lasted two decades before he was exposed and sent to prison.

Yes, of course Dora knew about him. Everyone locally had been talking about him. Most people thought he should have been left to die in prison, and were furious that he’d returned to the neighbourhood.

 Dora’s family had escaped his attentions in the past but she’d done her bit, comforting mothers whose children had been abused by the man. The very thought of him made the hairs stand up at the back of her neck. Ugh!

 Dora said, ‘I hope he burns in hell.’

 The minister sighed. ‘He’s a lost soul. He loathes himself one minute and defends his sins in the next. He needs help.’

 ‘Not from me.’ Dora got up to leave. ‘No, it’s too much to ask.’

 The minister rose, too. ‘Talk it over with your husband and let me know what you decide.’

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That evening Dora and her husband Leo met up with two of their very good friends. Leo was a retired sales manager who could turn his hand to anything practical. Bruce, bald and brown, still did the occasional spot of work as an accountant while his quiet wife, Sally, devoted herself to her garden.

 Dora made a good story about the minister asking her to undertake this most impossible of tasks. She even managed to laugh when she’d finished. ‘Can you imagine? The nerve of her asking me to do that!’

 Her husband Leo shook his head. ‘I remember when it came out. The boy who blew the whistle committed suicide, didn’t he?’

 Bruce said, ‘He did. His mother got cancer and died within months. It broke his father.’

 Dora said, ‘The evil men do lives after them. How dare he come back here?’

 Sally lacked self-confidence and rarely ventured an opinion of her own, but this time she had a point to make. ‘He asked the minister to call again. Perhaps he’s thinking of making his confession?’

Dora said, ‘Oh, come on! Leopards don’t change their spots.’

Sally flushed, but persisted. ‘If he’s asking to see the minister again, surely it means he’s hoping for something from her? Understanding? Perhaps even forgiveness?’

She looked from one frowning face to another. Perhaps she’d got it wrong, but . . . ‘I’ve got pots of spring bulbs coming along nicely in the greenhouse. Perhaps I could drop one in to him? They might remind him that change and growth are still possible, even for him.’

Bruce got up, went round the table and kissed his wife. ‘You put us all to shame. Dora, can you find out what he needs? Some shopping, perhaps, if he’s confined to the house?’

Dora blinked. ‘But I don’t want to—’

Leo said, ‘I suppose I could replace the glass in the front window for him.’ He grinned. ‘I’m so big the local yobs won’t dare to throw stones at me.’

‘I’ll come and hold the ladder for you,’ said Bruce, ‘but we’ll park the car round the corner, just in case.’

Sally said, ‘When are you starting, Dora? I can meet you there any time after ten tomorrow.’

Dora found herself saying that ten would be fine. And then she thought, *I must be mad!*

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The house was a semi-D. The graffiti scrawled over the door and what remained of the windows made it look derelict. The bay windows at the front, top and bottom, had been smashed and cardboard roughly taped over the gaps inside. There was no car on the short driveway, and the garage doors hung aslant.

 Bottles had been thrown against the house and the shards left where they had fallen. And eggs. Refuse littered the tiny front lawn, which was a mass of weeds with no grass to be seen. Discarded paper wound itself round Sally’s leg. Something stank.

 ‘What you doing?’ a youth on a bike came riding up on the pavement. ‘Bailiffs, are you? Come to evict him? Not paid his bills, right? What a laugh! The sooner he’s outa here, the better.’

 Leo said, ‘We’re on a recce. See what needs doing. Clean the brickwork, measure up for new windows. Do you know if he’s got a ladder and tools?’

 The youth tipped onto his back wheel and spun the front one. ‘Nah. What was in the garage has long gone.’

 ‘You mean someone pinched it? That’s theft.’

 ‘Not when it’s from the likes of him, right?’He cycled off down the pavement, laughing.

 Dora couldn’t seem to move. She did not want to be there. The task was beyond her. She felt sick. Surely the others could see it was impossible?

 Sally said, ‘Oh, well. Into the breach.’ She held her pot of daffodils in front of her like a breastplate as she marched up the short drive. For a miracle, the doorbell was still intact. She rang it.

 Nothing happened. The other three stayed on the pavement.

 Sally rang again. She tapped on the small side window next to the door. She called out, ‘May I come in, please?’

 The door opened on the chain. Beyond was nothing but darkness.

 Sally held out the daffodils. ‘The minister said you might like some flowers. My husband and his friend have come to mend the windows. I’m not much good at cleaning, I’m afraid, but my friend Dora is. So, may we come in, please?’

 The door closed.

 Bruce stirred. ‘He’s not going to let us in.’

 Leo said, ‘I might try the back?’ He made no move to do so.

 Dora clapped her hands. ‘Coffee, anyone? We could try that new place in the High Street.’

 Sally put her finger back on the bell and kept it there. The door opened, wider than before. A creaky voice said, ‘You still here? You need your heads examining. Come in if you like, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.’ He stepped back to let them in.

The others followed Sally into a dark hall. There was a drift of unopened letters on the floor, and more on a ledge which also contained an old-fashioned telephone. It was freezing cold.

Their host led them passed the front room, which was dimly-lit because of the broken windows. In the back room French windows gave a view of a neglected patio. The windows here were still intact, probably because the area outside was surrounded by a high fence.

There wasn’t much furniture; an armchair covered with a blanket, four dining chairs round a table and a small television on an otherwise empty bookcase. More envelopes – some opened, and some not, lay around on every surface. There was no heating.

Peter waved them to the dining-chairs and groped his way into the armchair. Once he’d been a tall man but he was now bent over, leaning on a stick. He had the skeletal, hollow-chested look of one whose lungs were beyond repair and he’d bundled himself up against the cold in an overcoat and scarves. His eyes were sunken and his nose sharp. He looked as if he hadn’t seen the sun for a long time.

 The four friends looked at one another. What were they supposed to do here?

Peter said, ‘Come to gloat, have you?’ He coughed into a tissue. ‘I was brought up in this house and I’ll die in it. I had a tenant till I came out a fortnight ago but I made the mistake of letting him access my bank account to pay the council tax and it turns out he’s not only drained my account but omitted to pay the bills. So the services have all been cut off, including the landline. And, before you ask: no, I haven’t got a mobile phone.’

He shifted in his chair, trying to get comfortable and failing. He was in pain, wasn’t he? ‘I can’t think why I let you in. Yes, I do. Do me a favour. Tell the man across the road that I’m dying and maybe he’ll let me sleep through the night without ringing the door bell every few minutes. I’ve tried to disconnect it, but I’m not handy with tools. Many years ago I found his son rather attractive and he wants to see me suffer for that . . . as if I could help myself.’

 Silence.

 Bruce thought, *He’s taunting us. He wants to see how far we’ll go to help him, and he’ll despise us if we do so. He’s torn between self-hatred and rage at the world.*

 Dora thought, *He looks clean enough in himself. There’s no cooking smells. If he can’t get out and has no phone, how is he getting food? He’s going to starve to death, unless we help him.*

 Leo thought, *‘I wouldn’t leave a dog to die like this . . . the cold . . . those broken windows, the muck on the walls . . . it’s too much for me to handle. I wonder if I can get one of my old mates to do the job?*

Sally put the bulbs on the table. ‘Peter, you are not alone, unless you wish to be so.’

 He barked out a laugh. ‘Haven’t I made myself clear? I’ve lived alone and I’ll die alone. I am not going to pretend to be a good little boy who’s “Oh, so sorry he’s been naughty in the past,” in order to get you to help me. I’m not going to pretend to be sorry for what I am.’

 Sally said, ‘We’re here to help you. That’s all. No strings . . .’ She hesitated, then went on, ‘At least, I suppose there are, in a way. We won’t speak of God unless you ask us to, and we’ll do what we can to make you comfortable.’

‘You promise you won’t try to convert me? As if you could! You do understand that I don’t believe in your heaven and hell? That it was all made up to frighten children into good behaviour. Hah!’

 Sally smiled at him. ‘But you don’t want to take a chance on it, do you? Deep down, you are afraid that it might be true and that’s why you asked our minister for help.’

 ‘I deny that!’

 Bruce stirred. ‘Give me your bills and I’ll . . .’ He looked around. ‘When did you last open your post?’ He scooped up a pile of envelopes and started sorting them out.

 Dora said, ‘I’ll need a black plastic bag to put the junk mail in, I’ll see if there’s one in the kitchen.’

 Leo was on his phone, scanning through contacts. ‘I wonder who might be able to handle the windows and perhaps get the brickwork cleaned . . .’

 Red spots appeared on Peter’s gaunt cheeks. ‘Fools! I haven’t any money!’

 ‘We know that.’ Sally moved her chair nearer to his. ‘My husband will do what he can to get your services back on. I have a bit of money put by, and the others have good pensions. We can cover it between us.’

 Dora appeared in the doorway. ‘There’s not a crust of food in the house! I must go shopping. Anything you fancy, Peter? Bread, milk, butter, fruit juice or soup?’ She checked her bag. ‘I’ve enough cash on me for that. I won’t be long.’

 Peter closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. ‘You won’t get far. The man across the road keeps an eye on me and alerts the neighbours to “have a word” with anyone who comes near.’

 Sally tried to take his hand. ‘You’re in pain. What medication are you taking? Who’s your doctor?’

 He pulled his hand away from her. ‘Don’t have one. No one would take me on.’

 ‘You should be in hospital.’

 ‘No. I’ll die here, and you can’t stop me.’

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Over the next week the four friends had to run the gauntlet of local people who were all outraged that ‘that pervert’ had dared to show his face again. One man put a note through the door to say that he was glad Peter was dying and hoped he’d take a long time over it as his son had endured two years, five months and three days of misery before he’d finally jumped off a bridge into the river.

Bruce managed to get the services reconnected, and the house gradually warmed up. He got an emergency doctor to visit and prescribe some pills but Peter refused to take them.

Leo disconnected the front door bell which a neighbour had been ringing at intervals throughout the night and, by promising a hefty bonus. persuaded a builder to replace the broken glass in the windows. He himself cleared the rubbish from the front garden and straightened the garage doors.

Dora shopped and cleaned and made up a bed for Peter downstairs, thinking to herself that the next day she’d wash her hands of the whole nasty business.

Sally sat with Peter as his breathing worsened. She coaxed him to take a mouthful of food now and then. Sometimes they watched the telly together.

Public opinion swung against them. What made it worse for Dora was that in many ways she agreed with the local yobs, but she was furious when she heard that she’d been censured by members of the Women’s Fellowship for visiting an evil man.

An egg was thrown at Bruce as he left the house one day, and an old friend rang to say that Bruce’s ‘charitable’ activities had been called into question and an invitation to a professional event might be revoked.

Leo was told that the local boys’ football club – which he’d supported for years – had considered barring him from their fixtures, because of the company he was keeping.

Sally wept when she was dropped from the flower arranging team at church but returned the next day to sit with Peter and encourage him to take a few sips of milk.

That evening Dora exploded. ‘It’s too much! Beyond the call of duty.’

It was thoughtful, serious Bruce who said, ‘In many ways, I agree. But I remember that Jesus didn’t confine himself to teaching. He washed the dirty feet of his disciples. He healed the sick of mind and body. He touched the lepers and spent time with outcasts. We’re supposed to be his hands and feet nowadays. Most of us are happy to do good works by organizing coffee mornings, which cost us nothing but a little time and trouble. Some of us have been asked to do more, to care for the weak and the sinful, people who may have done great harm in their lifetimes. We are not asked to judge. We leave that to God.’

There was no more talk of the inconveniences the four suffered, and they returned to their tasks the following morning, Sally bearing more flowers from her garden and Dora bringing a cushion to support Peter’s aching back.

Peter dozed at intervals throughout the day. But when it was time for them to leave that evening, he grabbed Sally’s hand and begged her not to go.

‘Don’t laugh. I’m like a child, scared of the dark.’

Sally said, ‘Of course we’ll stay.’

Dora took one look at Peter’s drawn features, and nodded. So all four of them sat with the sick man as the light faded from the sky. He slept a while, then jerked awake, panting, disorientated.

 Sally soothed him. ‘We’re still here.’

He said, ‘It was our lodger . . . after my Dad went off . . . I was seven years old . . . he said I would like it and I did, in a way . . . he ruined me for any other life . . . you can’t understand what it’s like.’

‘I can’t. But God does.’

‘You said you wouldn’t talk about God. Do you really think He’d

understand? I wish things had been otherwise.’ There was a long silence, and then he said, ‘You can get the minister back, if you like.’

 So she did.

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On Easter Sunday morning, the minister opened the service by saying:

‘God loved the world so much that he said to his only son, “I’ve got a difficult job for you. Over the ages I’ve sent messengers to earth warning people to turn away from darkness and live in the light. Some have listened for a while but then returned to their old ways. It is now time, my son, to give them the Good News, to teach them how to save their souls.”

‘Jesus did that. He paid for it with his life but that wasn’t the end. Far from it. It was the beginning for He conquered death and rose triumphant from the tomb. Last night I, with four other brave souls, sat with a dying man who was friendless and afraid. In the early hours he acknowledged his sins and begged for forgiveness. He agonised over the harm he’d done, and accepted Christ into his heart. He died as the sun rose and his soul went on its way trusting in God’s redeeming power.

 ‘So let us now sing of the triumph of good over evil. Let us sing songs of praise to our heavenly King, and never forget why He came and what it means to be a Christian. Let us sing:

‘Amazing Grace!

How sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

 I once was lost, but now am found,

 Was blind, but now I see.’