***Corona Christmas***

**A short story by Veronica Heley**

‘What is Christmas going to mean to us this year?’

‘The choices seem to me that either we can party and pay for it later, or be sensible and restrict ourselves to meeting up with the people in our bubble. There’s always Zoom, of course. Everyone says Zoom makes up for not meeting in person. It’s all right as far as it goes, but not everyone has got it and it doesn’t go far enough.’

‘Ah, the ghost of Christmases past. Do you remember . . .?’

Two old friends used to meet in the town centre for a coffee on Saturday mornings, but had decided to go to a nearby park instead. It gave them some exercise, they had brought reusable mugs with them and enjoyed a coffee and a hot chocolate as they walked along. There was a promise of sleet in the air, and the leafless trees swayed in the wind.

Bruce – the almost retired accountant – said, ‘Remember the Christmas lunches when our friend Kerry used to invite half the neighbourhood to his big house? Including a piper one year?’

Leo grinned, ‘And the years we provided lunches at church for those who lived alone, and someone always complained about the crackers?’

‘And last year Sally and I were called to look after her rogue of a nephew who’d had an accident and we finished up decorating a church which had almost died and which I hear is now going strong? I know there’s no point in looking back, but I don’t see how we’re to celebrate this year.’

Big Leo was gloomy. ‘We’re hoping to go to our son’s for Christmas Day. Of course we love to be with the family and to catch up on all that’s happening . . . the girls are great and my son likes his new job, but. . .’

He hesitated, and then burst out with, ‘The problem is that we’ll be the guests instead of the hosts. Dora feels that keenly. She says the food will be cold by the time it reaches the table and the grandchildren will only be interested in how much their presents cost. It’s sad. To tell the truth, I think most people have forgotten what Christmas is really all about.’

Bruce grinned. ‘You mean that Christmas nowadays is all about “Me, me, me,” instead of “Him, Him, Him?”

Leo said, ‘Dora’s planning to have a chat with your Sally about it this morning. She says Sally never thinks of herself as a Big Brain, but it seems to me that she thinks more clearly about, well, everything than anyone else does.’

Bruce nodded. ‘She does. For instance, it’s long been arranged that we’ll be having Sally’s sister and her new husband to stay for Christmas. You know what Fiona’s like . . .’ He let that statement hang in the air, ‘But Sally says it’s the right thing to do.’

Leo said, ‘Commiserations,’ and left it at that. Sally’s sister Fiona was a big, busty woman who liked to flash her diamonds around. Being entitled to call herself ‘Lady Fletcher’ had softened her somewhat but she still seemed unable to open her mouth without criticising everybody and everything. Nevertheless, she was touchingly proud of her husband, and he had the insight to look beyond her airs and graces to the warm-hearted woman who really cared about him.

Fred – as he liked to be called – was a chubby, merry little man, with no ‘side’ to him. Bruce thought that in other times his brother-in-law would have liked to dress up as Father Christmas and give extravagant presents to all and sundry.

Leo glanced sideways at his companion. ‘And how is Sally?’

Sally had got Long Covid. She was improving but still got very tired. ‘She’s fine,’ said Bruce. He reminded himself that there was much to praise God for. Which brought him back to the original problem. ‘So, what is Christmas going to mean to us this year?’

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Leo hung up his big coat and called out, ‘I’m back!’

He found his wife in the kitchen, surrounded by all the ingredients to make Christmas puddings. He sniffed with appreciation at the aroma of spices. Then he noticed that Dora was using the biggest bowl and had a pile of plastic bowls at her side.

Dora held out the big spoon to him. ‘Just in time to give the mixture a stir!’

Leo was puzzled. ‘You’re making a mountain of puddings. We can’t eat all those, can we? And our daughter-in-law makes her own.’

‘She buys it from the supermarket, more like. No, these aren’t for us. They’re for the foodbank. I’ve bought a whole lot of new bowls with lids, and Sally’s making up a little bag of presents to go with each one. She says the food bank is feeling the pinch. People aren’t donating as they used to, and there’s a lot more people out of work than in previous years. I reckon I can make six family size puddings and a few singletons as well.’

‘And will we give our daughter-in-law one, just to show what a good cook can do?’

She slapped his wrist, and laughed. ‘We mustn’t rub salt into the wound. But Sally says that if we want to keep one for her and Bruce, she wouldn’t object. You know he does all the cooking for them.’

‘How do you think Sally is doing?’

Dora’s hands stilled. ‘She says she’s doing fine.’

Neither looked at one another. Sally did look fine. She also looked transparent. A breath of wind would blow her away. There was an ache in their throats when they thought about Sally.

Leo didn’t say it, but he thought, ‘She’s the weakest and yet the strongest of us all.’

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Bruce carried the shopping in. ‘I’m home!’

‘In here.’ Sally was in Bruce’s study in the front room. She had cleared the table of his papers and was surrounded by boxes, Christmas cards, and curls of bright ribbon. ‘Look!’ she held up a spangled bag. ‘Presents for the foodbank to give out. Do you think I should mark them up as for children or adults? Each contains a Christmas tree decoration, some chocolates in foil, and a tube of sweets. That pile of envelopes over there contains a food voucher for the helpers at the food bank to give out at their discretion.’

Sally had her own income, and Bruce encouraged her to spend it on herself . . . which mostly she didn’t. Sally liked to give. He wondered how much the vouchers would total, and decided it was none of his business to ask.

She guessed what he was thinking. ‘I made a list of all the things I’d like to give you for Christmas. A new car, a new laptop and smartphone. Then I thought you could do with a cashmere overcoat, and a matching hat, scarf and gloves.’

She grinned up at him. ‘You’re not getting any of that. Well, I suppose you might get the scarf. But, there are so many more people needing food this Christmas, I thought I’d spend the money in other directions, and add some tiny gifts to remind people who are hurting that “Love came down at Christmas”.’

He kissed her cheek. ‘The only present I want is you, getting better.’ She’d done too much, as usual, and was looking tired. He sat beside her. ‘Now, how can I help?’

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Fiona’s new husband wanted to discuss what he should buy her for Christmas. Would Sally care to take a phone call on Zoom, so that he could show her what he had in mind?

Bruce brought in the tea for himself and Sally as Fred came on line . . . and then disappeared. Zoom playing up again. Finally, the right connections connected and there was Fred, showing them pictures of the jewellery he’d been thinking about. ‘She loves diamonds, but I thought maybe something with sapphires in, to match her eyes? Or there’s this antique brooch, diamonds in platinum . . . what do you think?’ The picture disappeared again.

Everyone clenched their teeth and waited. Finally, they were all reunited and it was time for Sally to give her verdict. She was generous in her admiration. ‘Dear Fred, they’re all beautiful. I’m sure she’d love any of them.’

‘Or all?’ Fred was anxious to get it right. ‘I’d like to give you something as well, particularly since Fiona says we’d better not risk coming to you this Christmas. She thinks we’d be safer at home and I suppose she’s right. How about a long weekend away at a good hotel in the country, socially distanced and so on? When it’s feasible, of course. What do you think?’ He beamed, delighted to be giving pleasure.

Sally and Bruce exchanged glances. Bruce said, ‘You are very kind to think of it, but—’

Fred clicked his tongue against his teeth. ‘I’ve got it wrong, haven’t I?

I’d forgotten that you go to church and all that. Making space for God in your life, eh? That’s the way my mother used to talk about Christmas before she got ill. My father always used to put on Santa’s beard and red robe and urn up at the factory to give out presents to all and sundry. I used to help him, dress up as an elf. I was always on the small side, looked the part, you know?’

He sighed. ‘It’s different today, isn’t it? Automation means fewer permanent staff, and I don’t even know the names of all the seasonal workers we’ve taken on. They don’t want a party or a tree in the canteen. They want the money instead. Orders are up and we’ve had a good season but it doesn’t feel like a real Christmas to me.’

Sally was touched. ‘Dear Fred. What did your mother say that Christmas was all about?’

He reddened. ‘Well, it was all that church stuff. I sang in the choir and once I had a solo but I got a sore throat and couldn’t do it. The next year I was one of the sheep in a Nativity play, only my mask fell off and rolled off the stage into the audience. We did learn about Good King Wenceslaus and that lot. I liked that. It made sense, someone actually going out of his way to make life better for others.’

Sally leaned forward. ‘That’s it, Fred. We’d love a small token from you, yes. But if you’re prepared to spend a few hundred why, you could make a big difference to the Christmases of a lot of people who are facing a tough time. There are people who are isolated with no family around, people who might be contacted by phone for a few minutes by relatives or friends living far away, but will spend the rest of the day alone. Worse still, they may have no one left to care about them. Then there’s young families where the breadwinner is out of a job, and older people who expected to work till they were of pension age and are now facing a shortfall. What have they to celebrate this year? Couldn’t you . . . wouldn’t you like to play Good King Wenceslaus to them?’

‘I could give a cheque to—’

‘No, no! That’s not what I mean. Or do I? I’m sorry, Fred. I spoke out of turn. I didn’t mean to criticise.’

‘You think I don’t care about my staff?’

There was a horrid silence. Then the Zoom picture vanished.

Sally put her hands over her head and rocked to and fro. ‘Stupid! Stupid! Why am I so stupid! He’s the kindest and sweetest of men and I’ve just told him he’s rubbish!’

Bruce put his arm around her. ‘You told him the truth. I think he’s man enough to take it.’

‘Should I ring him back and apologise?’

Bruce didn’t answer, but held her tightly. She was so fragile, so dear. He thought, *All I want for Christmas is for her to get well. Not to die. Don’t leave me, Sally.*

Had he spoken aloud?

Sally lifted her head. ‘I’m not going to die yet. I’ve still got so much to do. Now, let’s work out what we can do for our own Christmas. It’s pretty clear we won’t be able to meet up with any of our friends on the day. We may be able to go to church, which would be lovely but I know numbers will be limited. If not, we could celebrate it here, in our own home, just the two of us, thinking of what it meant for God to send his son down to rescue us from all our wrongheadedness.

‘We could light a candle and sit quietly and there’ll be services on the telly and carols on the radio and we could think about the people we love, and then about the people in need, and pray that they be surrounded with love of the truth and the light, that they be comforted in whatever circumstances they find themselves. We could pray that they receive the calm of the Holy Spirit, which helps them to face whatever next life holds for them.’

‘Agreed,’ said Bruce. ‘If we strip away the trimmings, all the commercialisation, then it’s just us looking at Him. Us thinking about what He means in our lives. He said we’re to love Him, and then to love our neighbours. So that’s what we’ll do. Loving our neighbours isn’t going to be that easy as usual this year because we can’t invite them round for a meal. But we’ll do what we can. I think it’s important to keep in touch with people we don’t see very often. We can send cards and small gifts where practical, and money where it is most needed. Perhaps sending tins of biscuits to older people would be a good idea, too?’

Sally said, ‘I could do some of my flower arrangements for people who live locally, each one centred on a candle for them to light on Christmas day. I think I’ll use battery-operated candles, rather than risk setting people’s houses on fire.’

‘That’s it. Something they can keep to remind them that God cares for them and so do we.’

Sally said, ‘And on Christmas day, if we can’t see our friends, then we will have a simple meal, nothing which will tire you out to prepare—’

The phone rang. It was Fiona, and she was in a rage. ‘How dare you talk like that to Frederick, who is the very nicest, kindest, most generous of men! How dare you tell him how to behave at Christmas! There he was, thinking how he could do something to please you and you turn round and slap him in the face!’

Bruce said, ‘Hang on there, Fiona. We did nothing of the—’

‘Oh, I know what it is! You’re jealous of his success. Yes, that’s what it is! How I pity you for—!’

Bruce said, ‘Stop right there, Fiona! You’ve got this all—’

The phone crashed down.

Sally looked as if she were going to cry.

Bruce tried to comfort her. ‘A storm in a teacup. He’s a sensible man. He’ll come round.’

Sally’s chin wobbled, but she said, bravely, ‘Yes, of course he will. Now, about the Christmas tree. Of course it’s a comparatively recent idea to decorate a tree, and there was no such thing when Jesus was born in the stable, but I really like the idea of having a tree. That is, if you don’t think it’s too frivolous?’

Bruce followed her lead. ‘Fiona will calm down. We’ll have the tree as usual, in the hall. Things will work out, just you wait and see.’

But a shadow had been cast across their plans for Christmas.

It was three long days before their brother-in-law rang again, and it wasn’t on Zoom. The voice bellowed down the phone. ‘How did Sally know? Oh, sorry. Fred here. Have you a minute?’

Bruce took the call. ‘Sally’s in the garden. I’ll get her. She’ll be glad to hear from you. The last thing she wanted was to seem ungrateful.’

‘No, it’s you I want to speak to. Sally was right about Christmas though it took me a while to see it. What happened was that I heard my foreman, Gary, was collecting for the family of one of my workmen who was killed in a car crash a couple of weeks ago. He leaves a wife and a couple of sprogs. They’re living in rented accommodation with nothing coming in and they’re not looking forward to Christmas. I was horrified. I wanted to give them some money . . . and then I thought that money wasn’t enough. Maybe I could help in other ways. So I rang the widow and . . . well, she needs help all right, battling with the landlord and Social Services and the lot. I’d no idea how difficult it was for people without a computer to deal with bureaucracy.

‘And then there was a member of the temporary staff I’d taken on for the Christmas rush. He’d dropped out due to his wife getting Covid and going into quarantine but without his wages . . . I’d no idea how easy it was for people to become homeless! And their kids have had no support from the school. The woman who does the wages for me – nice woman, very capable – I relied on her to deal with any staff problems but she didn’t see it as her job to go the extra mile. I hadn’t known these people’s problems existed and I ought to have done. I was prepared to sign a cheque for charity and let that be the end of it. Sally was right; my giving was superficial.’

Bruce said, ‘It’s always worth while listening to what she says.’

‘I was blind, but now I see. And boy, have my eyes been opened!’ His voice trailed away. ‘And now I’ve interfered, everyone is looking to me to sort out all their problems for them. I can’t ignore them. In some ways I wish I could, but I can’t.’

Bruce tried not to smile. ‘I understand. Helping them is going to cost you in blood, sweat and tears.’

A heavy sigh. ‘Fiona, mind; she’s been wonderful. Understood the situation quicker than I did. Said that some people could ignore it, but that I wasn’t like that. She’s thinking she ought to take a hand to help the children who’ve been left behind and aren’t getting any support from their school. She’s considering becoming a school governor and all that. Makes me feel better. Backing me up like that.’

‘Great!’ said Bruce, thinking Fiona might have a heart after all.

‘Now, the thing is,’ said Fred, ‘I know we’re not meeting at Christmas, and I do want to give you two something you’d really appreciate. Not money. It may sound trivial, but Fiona says you’d like it. Just say if you’ve got one already. It must be a good year ago that I showed Fiona the nativity set which my grandfather brought back from the Continent. It’s rather a nice one. I loved it as a child but had put it away thinking I didn’t need such childish things nowadays. But when Fiona saw it, she said I should put it into production and it would be a best seller for us. And it has been. I’ve only one set left. Of course, if you’ve already got one . . .’

‘No, we haven’t. And yes, that would be perfect gift. We’d appreciate it.’

A sigh of relief. ‘I’ll drop it over to you tomorrow. And on the day we’ll be thinking of you and we hope you’ll be thinking of us.’

‘You know something?’ said Bruce. ‘This is going to be a really memorable Christmas.’

And so it was.