‘It Wasn’t my Fault!’

 *A short story by Veronica Heley*

Bruce, the almost retired accountant, was about to pack up work for the day when he received an unexpected call from his brother-in-law, Fred, the delightful – and successful —Sir Frederick Fletcher, well-known manufacturer of toys.

Fred sounded as if he were short of breath. ‘Bruce, I need advice. Are you at home?’

 Bruce was taken aback. In all the time his sister-in-law Fiona had been married to Fred, he’d never heard his brother-in-law sound so sharp. ‘Yes. Why?’

 A car drew up outside and there was Fred, hopping out and bustling up the path to the front door. Fred had his finger on the bell before Bruce could get to the hall, and started speaking before he was well in the house. ‘He follows me around on his bike . . . Is that him out there at the moment? No, perhaps not. Perhaps I’ve given him the slip. I tell you, I’m getting paranoid whenever I see a cyclist in my rear mirror.’

 ‘Calm down,’ said Bruce. ‘Have a seat and tell me what’s wrong.’

 Fred threw up his hands. He didn’t sit but walked around, gesticulating. ‘What’s legal and what isn’t, that’s the question. Half the work-force are going to lynch the man if I take him back, and the other half are going to go on strike if I don’t. I’ve furloughed him, of course. That doesn’t work for him. He wants his job back. How dare he!’

Bruce guided Fred to a chair and sat him down.

Fred bobbed up again. ‘I’ve just been to see my solicitor. He’s no use. Says it’s a grey area and going to be debated in Parliament soon. That doesn’t help me now, does it? We’ve got orders for toys coming out of our ears and this is holding up production.’

 Bruce guessed, ‘There’s trouble at the factory?’

Fred glared at Bruce. ‘The man’s a murderer and a thief. And a liar, too. Of course I should sack him! Only, he won’t accept it!’

‘Sit down. Start at the beginning.’

Fred couldn’t sit down. He walked about, with jerky movements. ‘I told Fiona and she said I should sack him. She said that even a bleeding heart like me would be right to give him the boot. He lied and he stole and he killed. So what am I supposed to do? Give him a medal?’

‘This man has a name?’

‘Dave, aged forty-two. I prefer to take on older men and women. More reliable. Dave produced a good reference from his last job. Not married but living with a partner for many years, two kids. Stable family background. What’s not to like?’

Bruce nodded. He knew how it was.

‘Most of my workforce have been with me for years. We’ve always observed the usual rules for dealing with Covid; masking up, distancing, sanitising everything in sight. We work in teams, each in charge of someone who is responsible for keeping them safe. When restrictions eased we took a vote to continue with our precautions for the time being. I keep a close eye. I want to know if someone is sick, or getting married, or having a child. My workforce is a diverse lot from many different backgrounds, but I’ve always said that understanding what makes other people tick, makes the world go round.’

‘A good policy.’

‘It pays off,’ said Fred the hard-headed businessman. ‘Of course the pandemic changed things. Shops closed down but trade boomed because of the internet. I haven’t had to make anyone redundant or put them on furlough. So when one of my oldest workmen was due to retire, Reggie – that’s my foreman – advertised the vacancy, and we had a lot of people applying. Reggie asked Dave if he’d had been vaccinated and he said he had. He also asked if Dave had had any of the signs of Covid, and Dave said he hadn’t. He got the job. He lied.’

‘Ah.’ Bruce began to understand that Fred was indeed in trouble.

Fred repeated that. ‘He lied. He hadn’t even had one vaccination, never mind two. He had a sore throat and he was sucking lozenges to stop himself coughing. He knew he had Covid. He knew! And apparently I can’t get rid of him because it isn’t legal to insist on vaccination before giving someone a job.’

Bruce frowned. ‘I know they’re talking about making it law but it’s not there yet. So he got the job under false pretences. What was his excuse?’

‘That he was behind with the rent and needed to feed his family.’ Fred threw himself down into a chair. ‘When I think how many people applied for that job who didn’t have Covid and who’d been properly vaccinated!’

‘Any harm done?’

Fred said, ‘I don’t blame Reggie. How was he to know the man lied? Lying is a sin, isn’t it? I’m not up to date with the ten commandments, but I’m sure there’s something in the Bible about not lying. Apparently I can’t throw him out on the grounds that he lied. He lied and he stole that job from someone else who needed it. I tried to sack him and he’s got the union man coaching him to say that we infringed his human rights by trying to force him to be vaccinated against his will.’

Bruce was silent. He had a feeling this was going to be very, very tricky. Parliament hadn’t yet passed a law to make having a vaccination obligatory in order to work in care homes and the NHS, had they? And what about everyone else? The principle hadn’t been tested in the courts.

Fred said, very quietly. ‘He endangered all our lives. Suppose my wife or I had got Covid from him? She doesn’t go into the factory much, but he could have handled something she touched, breathed into the air as she passed by. And if I’d caught it from him and died then who would take over the factory? It would have to be sold, and the new buyer would probably sack the existing workforce.’

‘So how was Dave found out?’

‘Three people in his team fell sick, so I had everyone tested. That was when we found out it was him. He’d only had a very mild case and quickly recovered as did one of the women, but one man now has Long Covid and can’t work while the other . . . he died. I banned Dave from work and now he’s weeping and wailing and threatening me with all sorts. I don’t know when I’ve felt so . . .!’

‘Murderous?’

Fred barked out a laugh. ‘Yes. I thought I was being fair when I furloughed the man but he complained about that, too, saying the reduced pay isn’t enough to support his family. I’m at my wits end what to do.’

Fred’s phone rang, and he took a message which made him frown. He said, ‘I have to go. Another problem. A hold-up of components coming in from Germany.’ He got up, wearily. ‘Bruce, I really could do with your advice on this one. That man is morally guilty but apparently not guilty in law. How can I get rid of him?’

Bruce said, ‘It’s a grey area. Let me think about it.’

Fred was already on his way out of the door. ‘. . . and don’t tell me I have to be a Christian and forgive him for what he’s done . . .!’

The front door slammed after him. Bruce went to the window to watch Fred get into his car and drive off . . . only to be followed by a man on a bike; wearing a windcheater over jeans. And no helmet.

Was that Dave the liar, the thief and murderer?

Bruce went to find his wife, who was in the garden.

Sally had Long Covid but was making progress back to health. Slowly. As had become his custom, Bruce picked up a collapsible stool and took it out to her. ‘Sally, stop work for a minute. Sit down. I need you to think about something other than dead-heading roses.’ He took the secateurs out of her hand.

Sally laughed and subsided onto the stool. She didn’t think of herself as a great brain, but she had the knack of clear-thinking which had often helped him decide what to do in difficult cases.

Bruce explained what Fred had told him.

 Sally listened, and sighed. ‘Dave said he needed the job because they were behind with the rent and he needed to feed his children?’

 Bruce spread his hands. ‘There are resources available for people in that situation. He ought to have applied for assistance for himself and his family in the usual way, and surely he’d have got it. As for being behind with the rent, evictions are not allowed for the time being.’

Sally looked worried. ‘Yes, but was he savvy enough to cope with all the forms? What sort of education has he had? I know that ignorance is no defence in law. I also know that in some situations that is not fair. Some people still leave school without being able to read and write properly. Why did he not get vaccinated? Was he fed some fake news, thinking the inoculation would harm instead of keeping him safe?’

Bruce grimaced. ‘Those people are bearing false witness, aren’t they? Fred has proved Dave to be a liar. Lying can be considered to be grounds for dismissal but I believe Fred would have had to give him three warnings before sacking him.’

Sally nodded. ‘It’s not an easy one, is it? If the workforce is as disturbed about this as Fred says, then giving him his job back is not going to be possible. Poor man. He probably didn’t think any of this through. Is he a Christian, do you know?’

Bruce shrugged. ‘Fred said that Dave was a liar, a thief and a murderer. He doesn’t sound like a Christian, does he? I think the best way for Fred to get rid of him is to pay him off, but I can just see his reaction if that’s what I suggest.’

Sally sighed. ‘He’ll say “Over my dead body.” Right?’

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The next day Bruce met up with his old friend Leo at the café in the town centre. The waitress brought their drinks out to them, wearing a mask as usual.

 Bruce asked Leo, ‘How does a good Christian behave nowadays?’

 Leo knew Bruce well enough not to brush the question aside. ‘I suppose by following Christ’s injunction to love God and love one another.’

 ‘And forget about the ten commandments? That’s what we tend to do nowadays, isn’t it? We excuse wrongdoing. We say the aggressor in a fight was provoked, or was abused to the point where he struck his tormentor. We say there’s no harm in stealing from bank accounts because the bank will repay any losses. We argue we can scam people over the phone because they’re so stupid they’re asking to be taken to the cleaners.’

 Leo joined in. ‘They break their marriage vows because they think their own needs are more important than other people’s. They take the name of God in vain because they don’t think it means anything. In other words, they try to make out there is no sin, nowadays. You can justify doing whatever you like because you’re a poor, hard-done by creature whose human rights have been infringed by someone giving you a funny look.’ He sat back in his chair. ‘What’s brought this on?’

 Bruce explained.

 Leo said, ‘I think you’re right. It sticks in my craw to say it, but paying Dave off is the best way out of this situation.’

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Someone rang the doorbell. Sally answered it because Bruce was out.

 A fortyish man with a bicycle stood there. ‘I was just passing,’ he said. ‘My boss said your husband would put in a good word for me. I wanted to make sure he’s done it.’

 Sally said, ‘You’re Dave and you’re in trouble.’

 The man grimaced. ‘I ask you, what else could I have done? I couldn’t let my kids go hungry and I couldn’t get any other job. You must see that.’

 Sally felt herself sag. She had overdone things that morning and needed to rest. She said, ‘Sorry. I need to sit down . . . rather quickly, in fact.’ She could feel herself losing balance, and put out a hand to steady herself.

 The man propped his bike against the wall and leapt to her side. He took her round the waist and half walked and half carried her down the hall and into the kitchen, where he helped her sink down into her big chair. She closed her eyes, tried to smile and said, ‘Thank you. I’ll be all right in a minute.’

Dave stood over her, flapping his hands. ‘What’s the matter with you? Do you need the doctor?’

 Sally managed to shake her head. ‘It’s Long Covid. I get tired.’

 He froze. And repeated, ‘Long Covid? Is this what it’s like? I didn’t know.’

 ‘It varies. Me, I just get tired.’

 He didn’t know what to do. ‘Where’s your husband? He should be looking after you.’

Sally knew Bruce would be out all morning but didn’t want to admit she would be alone for some time. ‘He’ll be back soon. I’ll be all right in a minute.’

He peered at her, not convinced. He looked around for inspiration. He’d been brought up to think a cuppa solved most family problems, so he said, ‘You could do with a cuppa, right? I know how to make it.’ He switched the kettle on, located tea bags and mugs, found the milk in the fridge, and managed to put a decent mug of tea on the table beside her.

He was curious. ‘How long have you been like this? Does this Long Covid last long?’

 ‘It’s been some months. I am getting better.’

 He’d made himself a cuppa, too. He sat down nearby, watching her. He sipped at the hot liquid, cautiously. He said, ‘Months, you say? My mate at the factory, he’s got that Long Covid, too. Can’t work, they say. I dunno how bad it is. Maybe not as bad as you.’

 ‘Haven’t you been to see him?’

 ‘Me? What? No. I couldn’t.’

 ‘Why not? Ah, it makes you feel guilty?’

 He reddened and pushed his mug around on the table top. ‘Why should I feel guilty? Anyone can get Covid. You can pick it up in the street, in the shops, anywhere. They can’t tell where he got it.’

 ‘But *you* know where he got it. It must give you a bad feeling, knowing that you caused your mates to become ill.’

 He wriggled. ‘No, of course not.’ Silence. ‘Well, yes. In a way. But it’s no good thinking about it.’

 Sally was too tired to comment. She had definitely overdone it in the garden that morning and now . . . this. She let the silence grow. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. *Dear Lord Almighty . . . am I supposed to do something about Dave? Surely not!*

 Dave made excuses for himself. ‘The one who died, he had underlying issues. His immune system was down. He should have taken more precautions. Stopped work, maybe. Isolated himself. Then he’d have been perfectly all right.’

 Sally heard herself say, in a dreamy voice that didn’t seem to belong to her, ‘You feel that you needn’t do anything to help his family?’

 Another wriggle. ‘How can I? I’m strapped for cash. Kelly lost her job when the launderette closed down, and the kids need new shoes. I got someone to go with me to get the rent sorted out, and something’s coming in to put food on the table, but I need a job to make ends meet.’

 ‘You’ve been vaccinated yet?’

‘Of course.’

She opened her eyes and gave him a long, enquiring look.

He reared his head back. ‘Honest! I have. I went down and got it down as soon as I heard . . . well, the day after. Second jab next week. I’m ready and willing to go back to work tomorrow.’ An aggrieved note in his voice. ‘It wasn’t my fault that he died.’

Sally couldn’t cope. She prayed, *I am weak, but You are strong. Lord, I reach up to you for help. Praise the Lord.*

He interrupted, rudely. ‘Cat got your tongue?’

Sally revived a little. She was surprised to hear how strong her voice sounded as she said, ‘You thought only of yourself. You didn’t care what harm you did others. I believe that you know this in your heart and are sorry—’

‘Of course I’m sorry. Look where it’s landed me.’

‘You lied. Your actions left one man unable to work and another in his grave. What of their families and friends?’

Angrily. ‘I said, didn’t I? I’m sorry about that. I didn’t mean any of it to happen.’

‘You need to talk to God and say how much you regret—’

‘Now you’re talking like my old mum. All that rubbish, that’s what she used to spout at me when I was a kid. No one believes in that nowadays.’

‘I think you do,’ said Sally, very gently. With one part of her mind she waw aware of a deep fatigue but with another she felt she was being led to speak, although she wondered where the words were coming from. ‘I think that deep down you do know but you’re afraid to say so. Don’t you remember how much He loves you and grieves for you? You know He’s only waiting for you to turn to Him and admit that you did the wrong thing.’

‘I’m not listening to this!’ He shot upright. His chair went over backwards and his mug crashed to the floor and smashed. He ran from the house, slamming the front door to behind him.

Sally didn’t weep. She closed her eyes again and rested, saying, over and over again, ‘God forgive him!’

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That evening Bruce was shutting up the house, ready to follow Sally up to bed when the doorbell rang.

 Dave was on the doorstep, looking wild-eyed. ‘Your missus . . . What she said this morning . . . She had no right! None! She upset me!’

 Bruce knew what had happened that morning. Sally had told him. He’d been furious at the time but now his anger disappeared. ‘Will you come in for a moment?’

 Dave took a step back. ‘Nah. I only came to say . . .’ He gestured widely. There was a shimmer of tears on his cheeks. ‘She was kind, really. I suppose. And she was right, too. I shouldn’t have. I knew I shouldn’t, really. But . . . you can lose sight of what’s right.’

 Bruce nodded.

 Dave continued. ‘I got to thinking. Tell her . . . Tell her I won’t bother them at the factory again, and I’m going round to see the two families, the ones that got ill and stuff. Maybe I could help in some way.’ He looked down, reddening. ‘Tell her I’m thinking about applying for a job at the hospital as a porter. I can do that. My girls say I’m going soft in my old age.’ He tried to make a joke of it, and coughed.

 Bruce said, ‘When our Lord found himself on the cross between two thieves, one jeered at Him, but the other repented what he’d done and acknowledged Jesus as King. Jesus told him, ‘Tonight you will be with me in Paradise.’

 A nervous laugh. ‘I don’t believe in all that. Never did. I mean, there’s no place for Jesus in this world of today, is there?’

 He turned, got on his bike and rode off. Still without a helmet. Still without any lights on his bike.

 Bruce watched Dave out of sight, thinking the man was on the right path now.