***GIFTS WITH A MESSAGE . . .***

***Two short stories by Veronica Heley***

Christmas started early this year. On December lst, Sally’s almost-retired accountant husband Bruce came home laughing because a client had insisted on giving him a couple of tickets to a pop concert.

‘It’s true I had to spend more time than usual disentangling the mess he’d made of his accounts this year but I didn’t expect him to give me anything for Christmas. He got these tickets because his son knows someone in the band. Apparently they’re like gold dust, and I should be delighted to have them. It was all I could do to keep a smile on my face and thank him for them.’

Sally was amused. ‘Oh dear. I don’t even know who this supposedly famous pop star is. We’re the wrong generation.’

‘We could pass them on to someone’s grandchildren.’

‘No, that’s not why he gave them to you,’ said Sally. ‘He gave them to you because he knows you can sell them and put the money to good use.’

Bruce thought about it, and agreed. ‘I’ll give them to the organizer for our charity, then. It’s not a universally popular one this year, and they could do with every penny they can get.’

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The next problem was what to do about Christmas day lunch. Last year their friends Leo and Dora had spent the day with their family but this year they’d be on their own, so Sally suggested hosting the day instead.

Now Dora was a great cook and had enjoyed holding parties in their big old house but since they’d down-sized to a ground floor flat near the shops, it was not so easy for them to entertain guests.

There was a slight snag to Sally being hostess; she didn’t cook. Well, not if she could help it. She’d spent years doing nothing but cooking and housekeeping for her first husband, who’d liked to keep her in the kitchen. But when he died and she married Bruce, they’d agreed he’d do the shopping and cooking while she concentrated on growing flowers and vegetables, and on making seasonal decorations for good causes.

This division of labour was considered unusual by some people but it worked well for the parties concerned. The situation hadn’t changed when the pandemic arrived, since Sally developed Long Covid and for many months could hardly lay a table, never mind cook a meal.

So when Sally broached the subject of Christmas Day to her friend Dora, there was a certain sub-text in operation. Sally said, ‘We’re so looking forward to having you . . .’

Dora said, ‘We could manage round our sitting-room table . . .’

Sally said, ‘Nonsense. Bruce is looking forward to showing off wheat he can do.’

Dora said, ‘Well, if you really don’t mind. We’ll bring the pudding and some wine, shall we?’

Sally tried not to cringe because she knew a good housewife would have made puddings and cakes months ago. She hadn’t, because she couldn’t stand that long to buy and then prepare the ingredients, but she still felt guilty about it. She said, ‘Oh, but . . .’

Dora said, ‘No bother. I made mine ages ago. I’ll bring the cake, too. Perhaps you can get some brandy to set alight to the pudding?’

‘I’ll do the crackers, then. And the table decorations.’

There was a pause. Dora said, trying not to be sad about the way things used to be, ‘Ah, the good old days. Do you remember when we used to sit down twelve or so on the day? And when we did the Christmas dinner for people at church?’

Sometimes it was hard not to look back and think, ‘What if . . .?’

Sally’s mind was in a whirl. What on earth had made her offer to do the Christmas lunch? Would Bruce help her? Could she even lift the turkey in and out of the oven, and wasn’t there some special way of roasting potatoes which everyone but her would know about?

Dora said, ‘I’ll help. You know I will. You’ve got enough on your plate with all the things you’ve promised to make for the Craft Fair at church.’

. . . which did remind Sally of all she still had to do for that Saturday. She’d been working hard, doing a little every day to make table decorations for sale. She’d also raised some Christmas cactus plants in the greenhouse and hoped to sell them in prettily painted pots, tied with ribbon.

Bruce would transport everything to church for her to lay out on a table, and he would be responsible for taking money for all that they sold. She would have a chair to sit on but as soon as she got tired, Bruce would arrange for a taxi to take her home and rest. Even with all the help he could give, Sally felt she had a mountain to climb.

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The next phone call for Sally came from Fred, the delightful toy maker who had married Sally’s prickly sister Fiona.

Fred wanted to tell Sally – or to warn her? – that a very special present was on its way to her. He said that Fiona had taken a great deal of trouble to find something which would be just right for Sally so it would be appreciated if she’d open it as soon as it arrived, and confirm that it had arrived safely.

Sally put the phone down and asked her husband if he thought Fred was trying to warn her that the gift was breakable?

Bruce did his best to like Fiona, but found it difficult when the woman couldn’t open her mouth without criticising her younger sister. He said, cautiously, ‘You think Fred was trying to warn you the gift might not be to your taste? What do you think she might get you? Expense would be no object now she’s married to Fred. What are we giving them?’

‘Some silk underwear. She’s told me exactly what she wants. She’s very fashion conscious.’ Sally grimaced. ‘She’s always on at me to spruce myself up. She thinks I don’t do you credit because I don’t flash jewellery about or wear high heels.’

Bruce put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a little shake. ‘You look beautiful. You look just right, whatever you do.’

She leaned against him. ‘Perhaps she’ll send me a diamond tiara to wear while we eat fish and chips for Friday night’s supper —?’

‘Or a handbag which costs a month’s wages —’

They both laughed.

Bruce would have been happy to give her diamonds if she’d wanted them, but she didn’t. Sally had her own money and could have sparkled from head to foot with diamonds and worn designer gear from morning to night, but had never thought such things important. For a start, what if she’d lost a diamond ring when gardening?

The expected gift arrived in a box, wrapped in gold paper tastefully finished with gold ribbon and a bow. Bruce was out so Sally opened it by herself.

It was a voucher for twelve weeks of lessons at a top cookery establishment.

Sally recoiled.

She understood exactly what Fiona meant by this gift.

This was her older sister pointing out that Sally was not doing her duty by Bruce, that she was a bad wife who didn’t look after him properly, that she indulged herself by fiddling about in the garden when she should be out and about doing the shopping and preparing meals for him. Fiona meant Sally to understand that she ought to go back to school and learn the basics. For twelve weeks. At some incredible cost.

Sally broke down and wept.

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When Bruce came home he found Sally in quite a state but trying to pretend she wasn’t. She even managed a smile as she showed Bruce the voucher Fiona had sent her.

Bruce was not fooled. He gave a short laugh and said, ‘Fiona should have sent it to me, not you. It’s clear she doesn’t think much of me as a cook, and believes I ought to go on one of these courses to improve my skills.’

Sally blew her nose. ‘No, you know it was meant for me, to show me up for being such a dreadful wife. I didn’t look after you as I should even before I got Long Covid and now I’m doing even less. I don’t understand how you can be so patient with me when—’

‘Stop that.’ He put his arms around her and held her fast. ’Take no notice of Fiona. You know what she’s like.’

‘But she’s the clever one. She’s a famous writer and she’s married a man who’s got a title, whereas I’ve never earned my own living or done anything but get married and—’

‘And she’s jealous of you. Always has been. Sally, You’re a class act. You made your first husband a very happy man and we won’t talk about the way he expected you even to put toothpaste on his toothbrush . . . No, no. I know he probably didn’t do that, but he didn’t value you as he should have done.’

Sally shook her head. ‘He was brought up that way, and I was brought up to look after him. I didn’t realise there was any other way to act till I married you. But Fiona’s right, and I should try to do more—’

‘Not at the expense of your health and not when I’m enjoying our routine. I like deciding what we eat every day, and I enjoy exercising my new skills in the kitchen. But me no “buts.” Sally, you are not here just to look after me. You are the one we all turn to in times of need. You spread kindness and joy and truth around you. Whoever comes into contact with you feels the better for it. You go doing the thinking and the praying, and I’ll act as your messenger boy.’

Sally giggled. ‘Don’t be daft.’

‘As for this voucher; you say that Fred seemed uneasy about it? I’ll bet he is. He loves Fiona but he’s no illusions about her, or about either of us. He knows the gift is unsuitable. I suspect he’ll get round to thinking up an alternative. And by the way, we’re not having a turkey this Christmas. Maybe guinea fowl, or a duck? And I’ve always wanted to set the Christmas pudding on fire. Shall we risk doing that this year?’

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Fred rang the next day. ‘Sally, did you receive . . .?’

‘Dear Fred, yes. A princely gift. Our present to you is in the post.’

‘Good of you. But, I’ve been thinking. You’re not really up to taking that cookery course, are you? I was talking to Fiona about it last night, and she admits she’s let her enthusiasm run away with her. How about a hamper from Harrods instead?’

‘Oh, no. That’s too much.’

‘All right, then. A Nutcracker prince figure in wood, and a cheque for whatever your Christmas charity is this year. As for that voucher, can you pass it on to someone who could make use of it?’

Sally thought, *That’s it! That’s the right answer!*

She said, ‘We decided this year to raise money for the resettlement of refugees. I can ask the organiser to give the voucher to a person who needs this type of training before getting a job here.’

‘Excellent. Why didn’t I think of that? Fiona sends her love. We’re off on a cruise over Christmas itself. Seems a bit of a strange thing to do in some ways but we’ve had such a busy season that it would be good to get away from the factory for a few days. We can celebrate Christmas anywhere.’

‘Dear Fred, so you can. Thank you.’

Sally put the phone down and wondered what the carpenter, Joseph, had thought of the extravagant presents the wise men had given them . . .

*Gifts with a message*

Joseph, the carpenter, couldn’t sleep. He looked up at the night sky and yes, the new star was still there, shining down on Bethlehem. Some people said it was an omen of disaster, and certainly these were difficult times.

It wasn’t easy living under an army of occupation. The Roman soldiers kept some sort of peace in the land, although the occasional hothead cropped up now and again to scream rebellion . . . and die for it.

True, the authorities had put a Jew on the throne, but even though Herod was a puppet king, he had powers of life and death over the population. And, an uncertain temper.

All Joseph wanted was to live quietly with his wife and the Child and to find enough work to feed and house them all. What had he or his family to do with the affairs of kings? It was best to keep out of politics.

Well, yes; there had been that strange dream he’d had about it being the right thing to do to marry Mary before the Child was born, and it’s true she had been told by various people that the boy would grow up to do great things, but mothers often thought their child was something special, didn’t they? To call him the future Messiah . . . well, that was all nonsense, wasn’t it?

Only, the wind was changing. Rumours rippled out of Jerusalem every day and Joseph found the latest one difficult to ignore.

It seems a group of foreign scholars had arrived in Jerusalem to visit Herod. They said they’d studied the skies all their lives and, when a bright new star was discovered, they’d debated long and hard what this might mean for the world. Leaning that it foretold the birth of a special Child who would grow up to be King of Kings, they decided to see Him for themselves. They lived in lands far to the east and it had taken them many weary months to reach Jerusalem but once there, they’d hastened to the palace to find and worship this special child.

There had been some sniggering about that at Herod’s expense at first, but the sniggers quickly changed to fear because the king was incandescent with rage to think that a child had recently been born who might one day lay claim to his throne.

Herod summoned his own scholars and demanded to know what they could tell him about the matter. Could there possibly be any truth in the tale that a child destined to be King, had recently been born in his territory?

Herod’s advisors searched the records and came back saying said that yes, there was indeed a prophecy saying the King of Kings would be born in Bethlehem about that time.

Herod seethed with rage and fear. But he dissembled. He told the foreigners that indeed, one such child might recently have been born in Bethlehem. He asked how long ago the star had appeared. When he learned that it had appeared two years ago, he told the visitors that they should indeed go on and find the child, but that when they had done so, they should return and share the news with Herod, so that he might go and worship the baby, too.

Joseph heard this tale and didn’t know what to think of it. Surely the visitors weren’t talking about the child, Jesus? No, no! Of course not. But if by some outside chance Herod did get it into his head to pursue the matter, would he really come to worship the baby . . . or o kill him?

Before Joseph could work out what this might mean for him and his family, the foreign scholars arrived in Bethlehem. They checked their calculations with the bright star, and located the house in which Joseph, Mary and the child were living.

They found more even than they had hoped for.

They knelt and adored the Child.

They prophesied that He would bring us His gifts of love and forgiveness, and that He would deliver us from all our sins.

The strangers gave Mary and Joseph valuable gifts and departed, rejoicing that they had seen the King of Kings.

The gifts were of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They were gifts for a king who lived in a palace, for a man who was worshipped by all and who would be embalmed with spices after death.

Joseph considered the gifts the men had brought, and feared they were out of all proportion to a carpenter’s circumstances.

He knew that Mary had long believed the Child was destined to be the One sent from God to deliver us from all our sins, but Joseph himself had wavered between doubt and disbelief. Yes, he remembered the dream he’d had which told him that it was right for him to marry Mary and accept the special child she was carrying. But the Boy was a boy like any other . . . wasn’t he? True, he was a golden Child, who radiated love . . . but could he really be the King of Kings?

The foreigners had said he was, and Mary believed them.

Joseph recalled the visitors saying that Herod had made the visitors promise to report back to him when they’d found the special child. Herod had said that if they found him, he himself would come and worship the child, too.

Joseph couldn’t believe that. Herod come to worship an infant who was destined to topple Herod off his throne? That didn’t sound like Herod, did it?

Joseph didn’t what to think.

Joseph couldn’t sleep, though the night was still. Suddenly, a brilliant light shone around and a voice told him to rise, to take Mary and the Child and flee Bethlehem because Herod was sending soldiers to look for the Boy.

He roused Mary and the Child. He harnessed their donkey, placing his tools in one pannier and the wise men’s gifts in the other. A change of clothes, some food for the journey and they abandoned everything else they owned.

They set out in the dead of night.

Where to go? The safest thing to do was to join one of the traders’ caravans which left from Jerusalem for parts unknown, but that meant first going towards and not away from Herod. Joseph decided to take the risk as it was the quickest route out of danger.

Half the time Joseph told himself he was making his family homeless for no good reason but in the dawn he heard the unmistakeable tramp, tramp, tramp of a detachment of Roman soldiers coming down the road from Jerusalem. Herod had sent soldiers to search out and slaughter the babes of Bethlehem. Joseph led the donkey off to the side and the little family hid till the soldiers had passed by.

Joseph grieved for the children whom he’d seen born and play with the Child. He saw now that the wise men’s presents were both a practical help and a foreshadowing of the future. The gold would pay for passage in a caravan of merchants on a trade route to a foreign land and the myrrh and frankincense would be a constant reminder that the boy was destined to be the King of Kings.

It was a bitter thing to do to leave your own country and go to a land where you knew no-one and didn’t speak the language, but it was the only way to escape persecution and death.

Joseph took the child from Mary and carried him on his shoulders. He foresaw that the future was starred with glory and death as foretold by the gifts of frankincense and myrrh. There would be suffering but also love such as the world had not known before. Joseph had saved the Child, and us.

At home or away, in different time zones, in palaces or in hostels

for those displaced by greed, war and famine, we celebrate the birth of

our Lord.

3400 words

Veronica Heley’s latest book is FALSE FACE, from Severn House.