

The Search for Christmas

Prologue

Young Tom was immersed in Dickens' Christmas Carol; he had seen the TV show the evening before, and had been fascinated by it.

He was so quiet, curled up in a corner of the living-room, that his parents, bringing in the after-dinner coffee, didn't realize he was there.

Tom's father sank into the big armchair and sighed heavily.

"Office trouble?" His wife asked. He was the junior partner in a publishing firm and his father, now over 70, was the senior.

"When is a publishing firm not in trouble?" he asked, and then continued. "The Old Man is impossible these days. He insists every detail be brought to his attention and his judgment."

Tom allowed his interest to his story to wander. He adored his grandfather and anything about him deserved to be listened to.

"It's making him ill and will be the death of him. And the rest of us too. And the end of the firm. If only he'd retire! He's so touchy and irritable!"

"A tactful word?" his wife suggested.

"Tactful! He's still astute enough to see through any tactful words. And the editors are as edgy as can be; there's an explosion building up, I'm afraid. And they all seem to think I should tell him he's redundant."

That was a new word for Tom. He would have to save it for the dictionary. A pity he couldn't ask how it was spelled! But he must have moved for his mother suddenly noticed him and the subject was abruptly changed. Tom returned to the adventures of Mr. Scrooge.

The following Sunday Tom was able to observe Grandfather's behavior. He and his two cousins, Graham and Louise, were Grandfather's guests for dinner. The food was extra-special as usual, but Grandfather was not the delightful host they had anticipated. He was difficult, and finally he blew up.

Actually it was Louise's fault. She had overdone her list of Christmas wishes to such an extent Grandfather had burst out: "Christmas! It's grown tawdry. There's no real Christmas anymore. It's just a golden opportunity for salesmanship. The staff at the firm are run ragged. Everybody's worn out, all because people like you children are shouting for 'More! More! More!'".

Grandfather rose from the table, glared at the three of them, and left the room.

"He hasn't even finished his dessert," Graham remarked.

"Why does he blame me?" demanded Louise. "He'd asked me what I wanted. And the rest of you want things too. Dad said the cost of what you want would make him poor for a year," she accused Graham.

"Grandfather needs to find Christmas again," said Tom.

"Like Mr. Scrooge?" Louise had seen the same show.

"What do you mean? Find Christmas?" Graham snorted.

"I'm not sure," Tom wrinkled his forehead. "I'll have to think."

"Think, then," Louise ordered. "Christmas is very soon."

"We'll each look for something about Christmas to bring to Grandfather. I'll take Christmas Past. You can take Christmas Yet to Come" — to Graham, "and Louise can have Christmas Present."

"I still don't know what we are supposed to do," Graham complained.

Tom wasn't any too sure himself but he looked down his nose at his cousin who was almost a year younger, and a good deal smaller. "It's the least we can do for Grandfather," he said in a tone of finality.

Stave I

Tom haunted the libraries. He tried encyclopaedias, books of legends, art books, anything and everything that spoke of Christmas. But there didn't seem to be anything meaningful for Grandfather. He learned a great deal himself. The mystery and miracle of Christmas deepened, but much was beyond his comprehension. Since he seemed to be making no progress, he returned to hunting for presents for his family and his friends. Tom loved to give and took time and thought over each gift.

He spotted the little wood carving in a gift shop window. It was the Mother and Child whittled rather crudely, but whittled by an artist. Something about it

went out to meet Tom, almost as if the figures spoke to him. They both brought heartache and intense joy at the same moment.

Would they do as much for Grandfather? He walked into the store as if hypnotized. "How much?" His voice shook.

"Forty-five dollars. It's an amazing piece of work. It was found on a junk pile after the demolition of a little French-Canadian

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church. I was fortunate enough to come across it. I'll be sorry to sell it."

Forty-five dollars! That was more than he had meant to spend altogether. But he had forty-five dollars in the bank. Towards a bicycle. He would be getting more money this Christmas.

The particular make of bicycle had already been decided. He had thought he'd be able to buy it very soon. But Grandfather — He loved his Grandfather, and he was so sure, so very sure, that the figures would speak to Grandfather as they had spoken to him.

"Could you keep it for me? I have to get the money from the bank."

"Have you got that much? The storekeeper was not used to young boys being patrons of art."

"Yes, oh yes. Please keep it, please."

The man looked doubtful; then he gave in to Tom's pleading. "I'll keep it until tomorrow," he promised.

Tom went without lunch in order to do his business at the bank. After school he ran all the way to the store.

He carried the package home with infinite care, and showed the carving to his mother whose casual glance turned quickly into one of musing reverence.

Finally she said: "This is a lovely thing, Tom; it must have cost you a good deal of money."

He nodded. "I'll have to put off buying the bicycle a little longer. I don't mind walking, honest I don't."

"And I cannot understand" — his mother was recounting the episode to his father who had arrived after Tom was in bed.

"His grandfather has so much. Of course this is a work of art; you'll see it for yourself in the morning. But the sacrifice Tom has made! He did so want that bicycle. And your father doesn't deserve a wonderful present these days, he's so cranky and irrational!"

"Perhaps that is why. Young Tom is a very noticing boy. I only pray it works."

Stave II

Graham, in spite of himself — he had no faith in Tom's idea — followed Tom's example by looking for something about "Christmas Yet to Come".

He began by visiting the Science Centre. But he gave that up almost immediately.

If you don't know what you are looking for, what is the use of looking? He went home and sat on his bed and thought very hard, turning the idea over, this way and that, and getting nowhere. So he gave that up too and went back to his own business.

At the moment his con-

suming interest was crystals. He had a sort of lab in the cellar, and he went down there to carry out the next experiment on his list. He was painstaking and as particular about cleaning up afterwards. So he was tired when he wandered upstairs and sat down on a window seat.

The snow was drifting this way and that, just a few large flakes, crystals of varied shape and size. They caught his eye and held his attention. He stared at them concentrating.

Then something happened to him, something so strange he was swept off his bearings. He was absorbed in their beauty and wonder; he felt queer, different, amazed. He turned his thoughts inward, and words came, words from the psalms. (Graham had not done much thinking about God, but suddenly God had entered his life. God the Creator, the Mind and Energy behind the universe! The Power and the Glory! Who had been before time and would outlast time.)

Almost in a dream he put the words down which came to him.

In the beginning God. The beginning was for us, But not for Him. Nor ending either.

In the beginning God, Creator of works, Fire and snow fulfilling His word.

The birds, the beasts, the fish Fulfilling His word.

And people living in space Yesterday, today, tomorrow.

World without end.

Graham could go no further. He was tired, exhausted. He curled up on the window seat and went to sleep.

Next day he read his poem over. It didn't make much sense, but he was very pleased with himself; it seemed to him that it was good.

He went to the nearest stationary store and bought an expensive and flamboyant Christmas card. With great care he copied the words onto it, and addressed it to Grandfather. He had completed his Christmas task.

Stave III

Louise stood on one foot and then the other. She was in the shelter of the doorway of a large department store. But the big snowflakes whirled round her and beat on her face; she was growing colder, wetter, and more tired with every minute.

She had gone down town with Mrs. Jackson, their neighbor, to try to find something for Grandfather, to do with Christmas Present; she might better have stayed at home.

What did Tom mean about Christmas Present anyway! And she was so miserable. Mrs. Jackson had gone to pick up the car and had promised to come right back. She hadn't taken Louise with her because of the wet snow. But that was a long time ago and Louise had a sickening feeling that perhaps she had been forgotten.

Mother had said to find a policeman if ever she got lost. There just didn't seem to be a policeman in sight. The hurrying, passing crowd, rushing along in both directions, frightened her. Now her teeth were chattering.

(continued on page 19)



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