

Christmas is for ever



Peter scratched a hole in the frost on the kitchen window. Lights in the neighbouring houses assured him of the company of others like him preparing for another day's work. He pulled on his heavy overcoat and then bent down to turn off the single bar of electric heat.

You can leave that on. The familiar deep-throated rasping followed. Maria flopped into her chair, overcome by another violent fit of coughing. It was always worst in the morning air, though she would say there was little difference now between day and night for her. Peter watched helplessly. He was usually gone before Maria got up. He hesitated at the door.

Go on, she gasped. I'm all right. You'll be late for work. We can't afford for you to lose a quarter.

He fastened his coat before picking up a battered leather satchel. He hesitated again – more deliberate this time – his hand on the door latch. *Happy Christmas.* He spoke it like a child unsure of the response his words would bring. He knew, yet he hoped.

I'd forgotten, Maria spluttered. And the sooner you forget it the better for us too!

It's still Christmas Day for me, and always will be. Peter spoke more firmly, his conviction overcoming his hesitancy just for a moment.

It seemed a long time now since the Government decree banning all religious observances. Christmas as they used to know it was outlawed and the great Mid-winter festival had taken its place. Maria looked up at her husband. She was just forty-three, but anyone looking at her lined face would have been forgiven for adding another ten years. *What sort of Christmas?* She asked. There was a deep bitterness in her voice. *Christmas as I remember it was happiness and peace, gift and parties, friends and and yes, family. It's you and your Christmas ... your stubborn beliefs which keeps us poor. Why don't we have a family Christmas?* Peter winced. He knew what was coming, and how much it would hurt. *Why?* Maria went on. *Why? Because of your beliefs. The government took our children because you would insist on them learning your beliefs. It's you and your religion makes us have to live in this hovel and scrape every last cent together just to live, let alone buy me a bottle of medicine. Don't you wish me a 'happy' Christmas!*

But, Maria! Peter protested. *You shared the Faith. It was OUR faith. You know it's so much more than all that. It IS our faith. I cannot deny Christ. I still believe, and I believe he will help us. What hope have we got for the future without him?*

Future? Maria spluttered. *The only future we have is to slave until we drop. Then there'll be no-one saying prayers or giving thanks when you've gone. With you it's always God in the future. Why doesn't he do something now?* She gave way to another fit of coughing.

Peter was hurt. Not for the first time. Hurt .. not so much by Maria's outburst as by the fact that he had hurt her. He felt so guilty and yet so helpless. Life could be so much easier for them both if He opened the back door. *I'm sorry. I can't give up Christ. There will always be Christmas for me. It hurts me too ... and the children ...but if I give up my faith there's nothing left ... nothing for any of us.* Maria waved him away. *Go on. You're letting the cold in. You'll be late.* Her harsh tone afforded him no comfort.

Peter's days were spent labouring in one of the warehouses at the railway depot. With all his training and experience as an engineer he could have been in a much much better position. Once he had been offered a foreman's post but when his records had been checked and his religious convictions noted, the job was given to another. Over the years, Peter had learned to hold his faith in silence and keep his job, while in his own quiet moments living with the guilt of betrayal.

He worked with a heavy heart today. Gladly he would have exchanged the warmth of the warehouse for the cold kitchen where Maria struggled to wash and sew for that little extra income. He wasn't really a stubborn man. He just could not deny the faith which was so real for him. It was worse than denying his best friend. To live with the knowledge that he had deserted Christ completely would be worse than all the pain of the wound he had re-opened today.

The day passed and Peter's gang finished their quota with a quarter of an hour to spare. He joined the other men standing in the doorway looking out across the railway sidings. A half moon was rising from a bank of low cloud to join a sky full of stars. Moonlight glinted on the frosted roofs. Blue electric flashes spat into the night as a train rattled out on to the main line, past another long train standing just outside the station. Armed guards patrolled the tracks.

That's odd, observed one of the men. *It's one of the rehabilitation trains. They don't usually stop.*

Poor wretches, someone else muttered. *Crowded together like cattle in there.*

These trainloads were part of the State Re-settlement Programme. Whole communities from the south were moved north to work in the mines. At a stroke, villages, towns were being emptied and whole families were becoming slave-workers.

What's the hold-up? Peter asked a railman who had just crossed the tracks.

Nothing much. Just a woman on the train. She's had a baby. There are complications and she needs hospital so they've dropped her off here. As he spoke the train jerked forward, its carriages groaning to one another. Guards sprang up into the compartments. There was no escape or anywhere to escape to.

The woman's over at the station, the informant went on, eager to share the day's news. *It's a fine baby boy, but there's no great future for him where they're going.*

Peter had to walk along the station platform on his way home. He crossed the glistening rails, drawn as by a magnet, towards the waiting room. Peering through a misty window he saw that someone had lit a fire. On one of the benches lay a young woman, covered by a single thin blanket. She held a bundle close to her. Her man hovered anxiously.

The guard at the door was talking with one of the station workers and had his back to Peter, so he slipped into the room just to look. The guard turned to him but for some reason did not seem to notice him. It was as though he looked straight through him. The only other occupant in the room was an old lady. She was asleep. Peter nodded to the young man who looked back at him and quickly looked

down, protective of the young girl on the bench. Indeed she was just a girl ..and her man no older than Peter's eldest would be now. The girl looked up at him. Her penetrating smile stirred a great torrent of love inside him. He wished Maria could be here. Instinctively, he pulled his cap from his head. *May I see him?*

She held back the thin grey blanket. Peter looked hard at the wrinkled face, topped with a thicket of jet black hair. With a glance at the young father who was watching his every move, Peter stooped and whispered, *Just like the first Christmas.* He was startled for a moment by the hand on his shoulder. He looked up, expecting to see the guard, but instead, met the eyes of the young father.

You are a believer?

Yes. I have faith. And you? Peter looked from the young man to the mother and child. *Yes. I can see you believe.* He fumbled in his empty pocket. *I wish I had some gift!*

The love which brought you. That's gift enough. The young man spoke gently. *Your faith to encourage ours. That is more to us than any other gift in the world at the moment.*

Peter grasped the young man's hand in silence, while he fixed his eyes on the child. They both knew they were praying .. each for the other. A train flickered past and every lighted window made a succession of shadow crosses over the makeshift bed and the child in the girl's arms. She shivered. Immediately, Peter slipped off his coat and laid it over her. The same moment the guard returned.

The ambulance is here. Come on now. It was then he noticed Peter. *What are you doing here?* Lifting his weapon he prodded Peter from the room.

Peter hurried through the night. Maria would be anxious. He pulled up his jacket collar against the biting east wind. His faith, newly strengthened, put a spring in his steps. It seemed that the stars had never shone so bright. He was so full of his thoughts he hardly noticed how cold he was. But if the frosty night failed to remind him of his missing coat, Maria did not!

Where's your coat? She stared incredulously at him.

I lent it to a young woman at the station. He felt stupid as he added.

It'll come back.

Not before you've died with the cold and don't need it any more! I suppose it'll grow legs and walk back on its own? Her sarcasm was lost on Peter as he blurted out his story. Each little incident was punctuated first by her scolding, then by a coughing fit. *You're a selfish fool!* She finally exploded. *What happens to me when you catch your death of cold? You'll look after a stranger before you care about your own!*

It'll come back. It has my name and address inside it. They'll send it from the hospital. Even as he spoke he realised how unlikely that was. I'll call at the hospital later.

Send it back! You fool! What are you going to wear for work tomorrow? I've got an old coat at work.

That's rags and filthy. Why don't you wake up. It's a real world we're living in. By now Maria was gasping for breath and unable to hold back her tears. When will you learn? Honesty's as much a thing of the past as Christmas. Stop star-gazing and come down to earth. For my sake. For your own sake. She stopped, exhausted.

An uncomfortable silence followed while Maria recovered and began to put some supper together. Peter sat at the kitchen table, staring at the blank damp-stained wall. Maria was right. Perhaps it was time for him to change. He tried to capture again the joy he had felt with the young family at the station. What would become of them. Would they be forced to give up their faith?

Peter remained in his silence - grief fighting joy, till quite a while after their wordless supper. He hardly noticed the rap at the kitchen door. Maria was close to it and opened it on the chain.

Peter Evans live here? Enquired the caller.

Yes. What do you want with him?

A young chap at the hospital asked me to drop this off.

Maria lifted the chain and opened the door. She took hold of Peter's coat. She was dazed - as though she had received a blow in the face. *Thanks* she mumbled and closed the door against the cold. She could not look at Peter. Instead she turned away to hang his coat on the back of the door.

You're a lucky man! She brushed the coat down with her hand. *What's this you've got in your pocket?* Bringing the coat to the table, Maria plunged her hand into the deep inner pocket. Peter stared, bewildered, as she drew out three items and placed them on the table in front of him; a thin gold bangle, a small jar of perfumed hand cream and a bottle of cough linctus.

Where did all this come from? Maria demanded.

I've no idea. His head spinning, Peter grasped at words. The young couple perhaps .. the hospital... He looked straight at Maria. An amazing glow on his face silenced her. *Maria. It doesn't matter where they came from. Don't you see? Surely, it's a sign! They are the gifts of the wise men, Maria. Don't you believe now? It's a sign!*

Maria did not answer. She slipped the bangle over her wrist and stood looking at it. Peter rose and gripped her shoulders. *Maria, we've got to go on believing. Christmas is our hope, our only hope. God is with us. His promises will come true.* She pulled away from him and through softer tears asked, *And our children?*