

The Present

The small dining room at The Feathers was to Julian's mind, more tastefully decorated than the rest of the hotel. A lot less overloaded with tinsel, baubles and ridiculous reindeer it even had a Nativity Crib and a few Christmas angels suspended from the beams. Carols played softly but inaudible against raucous music of partying on all floors. Julian dined here most weeks where the small room had only three well-spaced tables.

He sat at his usual low lit corner table expecting to wait some time to be served. He was in no hurry tonight. Julian would decline the Christmas meal. One a year was enough. That would be at The Aragon - the large guest house where he always spent his Christmas more or less alone. He would enter sociably into the Christmas events with other guests but having no family, except for Alan, a second cousin once removed, Christmas was mostly a non-event - at least in regard to festivities. It had been this way for years now and it suited him. On Christmas Eve he would go to the midnight service at the Parish Church a few streets from the guesthouse.

Christmas had always centred around that. As an only child and his mother having died when he was just into his teens, he spent most of his time with his father and that included time spent in church. Father had been Church Warden for as long as anyone remembered. Julian had a faith, but perhaps more a faith in the church than in God and in time took over some of his father's duties at St Stephen's. It was not only Church life with which he was involved. Julian was a successful businessman, again following in his father's footsteps, and had become a very active and highly respected member of the Town Council. Of course, as with most in those offices there were issues, housing for instance, which made him unpopular with some. An honest and fair man in business there were those who wondered about him - *could he really be that squeaky clean?* Many more though were grateful for his kind helpfulness, often given unseen and generously.

Julian had taken over Markham's, the store which he and his father has made into the largest commercial concern in town. Holding a wide range of produce from grocery to high class furniture and fashion, Markham's was a popular shopping centre for other towns and villages in the area. The only produce you could not buy there was greengrocery. Julian had always rejected that. Second Cousin once removed, Alan, was the local greengrocer and Julian preferred not to enter into competition with him.

He and Alan had been good friends in their younger days but Alan had grown resentful of Julian's better way of life and his esteemed position in the town. He had worked with his father from when he finished school and the image and profitability of greengrocery fell further and further below the high-flown commercial interests of Markham's store. Julian believed Alan became intensely jealous after he inherited the Store and now their association was reduced to a polite greeting on the rare occasions their paths crossed.

Jim, the landlord of The Feathers appeared looking very hot and flustered. *Sorry for the delay, he began. What can I get for you? I can recommend the Duck with Orange Sauce. It's the best item on the menu....* he grinned. *Because there won't be too long a wait for it. Christmas dinners are being prepared in the second kitchen. I was lucky to get a third chef tonight.*

It certainly sounds a lively night, Julian nodded towards the raucous laughter from the main bar reverberating across the low oak beams.

Office Parties! explained Jim. *You'll have them I suppose?*

Oh, yes. Well the staff have them. I get invited but I usually decline. I can't go to them all and I wouldn't want to give the impression of favouring any one department.

Jim scribbled on his pad and hurried off to the kitchens leaving Julian to reflect on his Director's role. He could not bring himself to be on very easy terms with all the staff as modern directors seemed to. Authority, respect, discipline may be the way of a past generation but he been brought up with those principles and still believed them to be the necessary for the smooth running of a business. Susan, his P A for many years was probably the only exception he thought as he began his meal. They had both started at Markham's at about the same time and there was a sort of long-service friendship between them. Not that early hints of romance had matured. Susan was happily married now and the mother of three strapping lads. Their pictures took pride of place on her desk. Romance had only really come Julian's way once or twice but there was still a deep hope whenever he met Rebecca. Rebecca came periodically as their itinerant window-dresser. She had made the running in overtures towards a relationship with Julian but his natural reticence stood in the way. Rebecca married a builder from away in the South somewhere. The marriage was short-lived. Rebecca returned to live and work locally again including Markhams in her itinerary. They enjoyed each other's company and occasionally shared a meal together, but nothing really sparked between them

Would you like a dessert Sir? Jim cleared the table.

Yes please. I think I'll sample the other kitchen and have the Christmas pudding. And a filter coffee please! He looked up at Jim with a smile. *I suppose you'll be working late? Yes. Not too late I hope. I promised my Julie I'd do my share of wrapping the kids' presents. I like to do that. It's easier than choosing and buying them!* He walked away to clear the table opposite.

Present! Julian remembered. He reached under the table for his briefcase. Perching it on his knee, he pulled from it a very small colourfully wrapped Christmas parcel. Its label said simply, *Julian*. He had no idea who it was from or how it had come to him. Susan had brought it into the office with his mid-morning coffee.

It was left on the window sill in the corridor outside, she explained. Susan made enquiries of other staff who were about but no-one seemed to know anything about the present. Julian was embarrassed by presents at any time. He received very few outside business gifts and had no-one special to give presents to. Of course he made sure all his staff had generous bonuses at Christmas plus a personally signed Greeting card.

He pushed the parcel away from him as Jim served the *Pudding*. '*Julian*' the label said. It seemed personal almost familiar. He puzzled over who had left it and tried to think back over the day, wondering if anybody he knew had called in today.

Someone given you a present? Jim observed. *You'll need a magnifying glass to read the message.*

Julian took the packet in his hand. He had not noticed the tiny writing at the back of the label. Putting on his reading glasses he held the label close. *To the man who has everything,* it read. He was even more puzzled now and a little piqued. Who could have written that. It suggested an intimate knowledge of him. Who would be so audacious as to presume to comment on his circumstances. Was it a joke? Was it serious? Could it be from Alan expressing his resentment of Julian's success. But they hadn't been in touch lately. He had often thought of a reply to Alan if he ever expressed his supposed thoughts, not conscious that it spoke of his own resentment. *Yes, I may seem to have everything but you have a family. You had a mother to love you and weep over you.*

He had lost interest in the pudding now. He turned the small holly and berries patterned parcel round and round in his hands, reading the label over and again. He was strangely reluctant to open it. At last he pulled the label and with one pluck at it the paper tore apart. The lid of the little box inside was firmly sellotaped and now Julian was desperate to see its contents. There were four flaps to pull back. A momentary memory of childhood excitement crossed his mind. He looked puzzled. The box was empty! Closer inspection revealed another line at the bottom. It was in that same small printing he had found on the label. He had to pull the box apart to read it. *It's Christmas every day!*

Coffee helped to clear his mind. What did it mean? Who had sent it? Why? Were the words connected - *To the man who has everything Christmas is every day!* ? Or should they be read with the emptiness in mind? - the empty box? *The man who has everything has nothing. For the man who has nothing everyday is Christmas day?*

It was late - several more coffees and glasses of wine later - when Julian gathered the remnants of the parcel into his briefcase and went home to bed. He would have an early, fresh start in the morning. However, a restless night of mental and emotional searching led to a fresh start in other ways too. Today he would send a family Christmas hamper to Alan. He should have done it years ago but was afraid it would be rejected. Then he would find a gift for Rebecca. Susan may have to help him with that.....

Two years later Julian would be back at this table at The Feathers for another Christmas meal Not alone now. A larger table in the middle of the room with Alan and his family around him. and Rebecca at his side. Julian never did discover who sent the Christmas present. He was always afraid to ask!

Who do you think?