

The Visitor

Xmas Day was always cold. Snow, or wind, or rain. Some had all three. Every Xmas we had a huge dinner. As a child I never knew why it was called dinner when we ate it at lunch time. But in the evening we had no dinner. That was the second mystery. I remember on Xmas day my tummy ached from eating too much dinner at lunch. It was the only day of the year I was pleased that was no dinner. It was a time of many mysteries.

There was no television when I was a child, but we had a large radio as big as a large suitcase. Pictures made with voices came out of it. I remember seeing ships at sea, choirs singing in chapels and armies racing across the desert.

The most boring time at Xmas was the afternoon. Even the radio seemed to lose all its pictures. It talked and talked. But one special event did happen every Xmas. Dad would tell us to make ourselves clean and smart to meet a special visitor who would come at our home at exactly three o'clock.

On Xmas morning, my Dad who was an Army Captain, and who always wore his smart military uniform with the shining buttons that looked like butter cubes, would get dressed in old clothes to help Mum clean the house for the arrival of the visitor. My sister who was five years old and seemingly in possession of the explanation of Dad's behaviour said to me in a serious tone of voice, "Dad is importantly busy." My little sister created another mystery with her confident enigmatic answer.

After Xmas dinner Dad and Mum cleared the table of the dead bird we had just eaten and the army of dirty plates. While Mum worked in the kitchen, Dad called Spotty, our dog to military attention. We helped the dog to reluctantly stand upright, while Dad groomed him with a comb and brush and complimented him on his appearance. This was the only time Dad ever spoke to the dog, unless he was drunk and feeling happy. Then he would tell Spotty stories about India and Kim and the Sudan and Africa and the time when the six elephants took part in the Aida opera at the pyramids in Egypt. Spotty knew more about Dad's past than any of us, but he never talked about it. There was a conspiracy between the two of them, yet another mystery. But Spotty was a good dog. Every Xmas he felt like growling at Dad, but he knew that he too had to look his best for the visitor.

By 2.30 p.m. Dad decided it was time for him to upstairs to put on his best uniform and bring down Sam Brown. Sam was just an army belt and shoulder strap Dad wore over his military jacket. But Sam Brown was always a person to us children, because he had a real name. My sister took all Dad's medals from his blue felt box and polished them with one of her old knickers dipped in sticky cream coloured brasso from the tin bottle.

Then it was our turn. We put on our best clothes, and lined up for the military inspection of ears and hands. My brother and I put hair cream on our hair until we shone like polished glass. Terese put on her new dress and another pair of knickers. We never knew why she kept changing clothes. It was another Xmas mystery.

Mum appeared from upstairs looking like a angel with her black hair and her dress decorated with huge red flowers. She kept looking at the clock while she laid out all the sherry glasses and filled them. A little drop for Terese with water. More for my brother David, even more for me as I was the

oldest. And a full glass for her and Dad. Then we began the practice to toast the visitor. I watched David. He immediately drank the sherry, said sorry, and asked for more. Dad made us rehearse the toast three more times. We did it correctly, except for Terese who spilt a drop of sherry on her dress and rushed upstairs to change into yet another dress, clean knickers, clean sox and her new Xmas shoes. David got his glass damped again with sherry and we waited.

"He'll be here in a moment" murmured Dad in a nervous voice. He quickly looked out of the window, then turned back and smiled at Mum. He gave Sam Brown a twist and put on his military peaked hat. Mum gave him a kiss. His hand shook as he held on to his full sherry glass. It was only at this Xmas time that he was nervous.

Then it happened. I remember the music of the military band playing, my father stood up, gave a salute, his voice hoarse and full on emotion as he lifted the sherry glass and made the toast, "To His Majesty, King George the Sixth, God bless him".

My sister spilt more sherry on her dress. Mum stopped her from going upstairs with a smile both full of charm and ice at the same moment. My father stood to attention with his eyes looking straight ahead into a glorious past, and the long message of our royal guest began. He talked on the radio for fifteen minutes. I don't remember what he said.