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Murder in Midsummer

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A Surprise for Christmas

Cyril Hare

They had had their Christmas dinner in the middle of the day because this year there were children in the house. Turkey and plum pudding and all the drinks that rightfully go with them had reduced Jimmy Blenkiron to a pleasant state of somnolence. Lying back in an armchair in front of the library fire, he could just discern the red glow of the logs through his half-shut eyes. His hands still caressed the glass that had held his liqueur brandy. It was half-past three and he was at peace with the world.

Anne Blenkiron came into the room and dropped thankfully on to a sofa beside her husband's chair.

'Thank goodness, there's the washing-up done at last,' she said.

'Good for you,' said Jimmy approvingly. Always a pattern of consideration where his wife was concerned, he shifted his legs slightly to allow some of the warmth from the fire to reach in her direction.

‘Why didn’t you get the children to help you?’ he asked.

‘Oh, they’re much too busy on their own affairs. They are preparing a surprise for you at tea-time.’

‘Wonderful they’ve got the energy to do anything after what they put away at dinner,’ said Jimmy with a yawn. ‘What sort of a surprise?’

‘That you’re not to know. I’m in the secret, of course. But I think you’ll like it. It’s their own idea entirely.’

‘Nice kids,’ commented Jimmy tolerantly.

‘You’re sure you don’t mind having them?’

‘Not a bit – so long as they don’t bother me, they’re welcome. After all, they’d nowhere else to go, poor little devils. It was rotten luck their mother dying just before Christmas. I felt very sorry for them.’

Jimmy set down his glass and stretched his legs once more to the blaze.

‘Do you know,’ said Anne after a pause, ‘I think that Derek has a great look of his father.’

‘God forbid!’ said Jimmy. Then, seeing the look on his wife’s face, he added, ‘After all, Anne, even if he was your brother, you must admit that Billy was no sort of good.’

Anne was staring into the fire, and her eyes were moist.

‘Poor old Billy,’ she said. ‘Always hard up, always in trouble. The black sheep of the family, even when he was a little boy. I was very fond of him, all the same. And when he died—’

‘Now, Anne, you’re just being maudlin!’

Anne dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said with a gulp. ‘I know it’s silly of me, but I feel in a way we were responsible.’

‘Responsible? For a bomb hitting Eastbury Station? That’s a new one on me. I’d always thought it was Hitler who was responsible.’

‘I know, but it was our fault that Billy was there, waiting for his train. He wanted to spend the night, and if we’d only let him—’

‘Now look here, Anne,’ said Jimmy reasonably, ‘it’s no manner of good getting morbid over what’s past and done with. We were neither of us responsible. You were in bed with ’flu – don’t you remember? I had to go out on Civil Defence duty – why, I was at Eastbury just after the incident and a nice shambles it was. Billy couldn’t have stayed the night, even if I’d have had him – which I wouldn’t.’

‘I know,’ said Anne, miserably, ‘I know ...’

‘Well, let’s just forget it, shall we?’

‘If only you could forget things by just wanting to—’ She pulled herself together. ‘Look at the time! I must go and see about getting tea.’

It was with an agreeable feeling of superiority that Jimmy watched her go before he turned back to the fire again. What bundles of nerves women were! Brooding over things that had happened – ten, was it? – no, by Jove, twelve years ago! And all this nonsense about forgetting – you could forget anything if you gave your mind to it, with enough time, and a good digestion and a sensible outlook on life. Anything.

It was a remarkable thing, Jimmy reflected, that until his wife’s ill-timed reminiscences had brought it back to his mind he had genuinely forgotten that he had killed his brother-in-law on the night of the raid on Eastbury. And

it wasn't just a figure of speech, either. Even with the fellow's son and daughter staying in the house, he had really and truly forgotten what he had done to their father. (Not that it would have made any difference to his treatment of them if he had remembered. It was not their fault, and he bore them no malice.)

He grinned to himself. It *was* pretty extraordinary being able to forget a thing like that. Nobody would believe it if you told them – if you could tell anybody. A pity in a way that you couldn't. It would show some people who always pretended to know everything just how little they knew about human nature. What they didn't understand was that if you had no regrets there was no reason why you should have inconvenient memories. Anne, in her silly fashion, regretted her poor Billy, and that was why she still let her conscience torment her over his death. He had no regrets for that sneaking, blackmailing swine, and consequently no conscience. It was as simple as that.

All the same, thought Jimmy, indulging in the unusual luxury of reminiscence, he had been pretty frightened at the time. But for a marvellous stroke of luck he would never have got away with it. If Jerry hadn't chosen to come over that evening Billy's disappearance would have taken a bit of explaining, and the newly dug patch in the garden looked obvious enough next morning to anyone who cared to make enquiries. But it had all ended happily. Good old Civil Defence! No tiresome inquests in those days. Billy's cigarette case shoved into the pocket of a coat covering a fragment of somebody's carcass had been evidence enough of identity.

As for the other matter, a man could do a lot to a garden in twelve years, with Nature to help him.

In spite of the warmth of the fire, Jimmy found himself shivering. That was what came of remembering things. Now he felt thoroughly upset, all thanks to Anne's stupidity. He picked up his liqueur glass. Empty, of course. Well, there was still time for another drink to set himself up before tea. He made his way to the dining-room.

'Oh, Uncle Jimmy, you oughtn't to have come in!' His niece Tessa looked up at him reproachfully from the floor.

Looking down, Jimmy saw the carpet covered with a mass of shiny objects – silver tinsel, coloured glass balls and miniature wax candles among them.

'What on earth are you up to?' he asked.

'It's your surprise, and now you've spoilt it because it won't be a surprise any more.'

'That's all right,' said Jimmy kindly. 'I'll look the other way, and forget all about it in no time. I'm awfully good at forgetting.'

He turned to the sideboard and filled his glass. The warm spirit made him feel better again at once. He toasted himself in the looking-glass. 'Here's to forgetting!' he murmured.

He put the glass down, and went through into the kitchen. Anne was buttering slices of bread for tea.

'You oughtn't to have gone in there,' she said.

'So Tessa told me. What is it all about?'

'The children wanted to give you a Christmas tree, to thank you for having them to stay. Isn't it sweet of them? Tessa has been getting all the old decorations out of the attic.'

‘Really? That’s jolly decent of them. It shows they appreciate things, doesn’t it? They’ve kept it very dark. Where did they hide the tree? I haven’t seen it anywhere.’

‘I told Derek he could get it out of the garden. You know, that little spruce at the end of the vegetable patch. It’s just the right size. You don’t mind, do you?’

‘D’you mean to say he’s cut down the little spruce—?’ It was all Jimmy could do not to laugh outright. After what he had been thinking of that afternoon the coincidence seemed irresistibly comic.

‘No, dear, not cut down. I knew you wouldn’t like that. I told him to dig it up very carefully by the roots, so that we could plant it again. That was all right, wasn’t it?’

Jimmy turned and walked out of the room. It was a difficult thing to manage, but he walked. Once out of the house door he ran as he had not run for years. But even as he ran, he knew that it was too late. Fifty yards away he could see the top of the little spruce tremble and sink over to one side, and as he arrived breathless at the spot he saw his nephew standing there, staring incredulously down into the hole where its roots had been.