

Season's Best

There was still life in the fire. Bob riddled the coals to encourage their warmth. It was almost twelve, the household long abed, but he was in no way ready for upstairs.

No, Bob was waiting.

It was like being a child again, this annual anticipation.

Bob finished his glass, and went to the sideboard where the decanter waited. He drank little throughout the year. For too long he had not been able to afford luxuries, and had so not developed the habit, pleasurable though good sherry was.

But Christmas was different. And besides, the indulgence was all the more special because of its rarity.

From inside the house, nothing but the tickings of clocks and coals. And from outside, now, church bells. Calls to masses at midnight to welcome the Christ child into the world again.

Bob replenished his glass. Then he took another and filled that too. He put the second on the table by Mrs Bob's fireside chair, and then took his own seat opposite.

The clocks were wound for the night, the turkey stuffed in readiness, and there was sufficient brandy to drown the Christmas pudding, not simply light it. Stockings had been filled for each for his children, their spouses, and grandchildren, and of course for Mrs Bob.

The years had been good, and these latter years better than he ever prayed for, even in those dark days before Tim - so tiny and weak a child - recovered to become the proud family man he now was.

Outside, the bells faded away. Inside, the hall clock chimed, as did its smaller sibling - a gift for his retirement - on the mantelpiece.

Bob fixed his eyes upon the chair opposite.

The air shimmered like steam from a fresh-baked ham. And then the haze dissipated; in its stead, that most familiar and welcome of seasonal guests.

“Ebenezer,” said Bob. He raised his glass. “Old friend.”

Bob’s former employer, dead these long years but never one to forget a promise, smiled. He took his glass and lifted it. A single shackle on his wrist - which Ebenezer Scrooge insisted he’d wear in the afterlife as a reminder of his past despite the charity and benevolence exemplified in his latter years - chimed against the crystal.

“Merry Christmas, Bob.”

Ebenezer never drank. Not now. But it always seemed to Bob that he enjoyed the scent of the sherry and the warmth of the fire almost as much as he did their companionship.

They talked as they always did. Of little things long past and of laughter and the pleasures of home. And as the single stroke of one was about to fall, Ebenezer set down his glass, wished Bob again the most merry of Christmases, and faded into the beyond.

Outside, bright conversation sounded from returning stragglers from church. Bob took Ebenezer’s full glass and toasted his friend, wherever and whenever he might go, and wished him the best of the festive season for all the year round.