**On Christmas Eve….**

“Doctor, where ARE we?” Victoria asked wearily.

“We’ re lost, aren’t we?” Jamie added. “Doctor, can ye no admit it for once. Ye landed the TARDIS miles from your friend’s house and now it’s dark and cold and we’re… I mean… Victoria is cold.”

The Doctor was wearing a thick fur coat that made him look like a small yeti. The snow settling all around them added to the effect, but they were a long way from Tibet.

They were supposed to be in south Devon, at the country estate of Sir Charles Summer, an old friend of The Doctor who had invited them to spend Christmas as his guests. Victoria was starting to wonder if they were even in Devon, let alone within walking distance of any house with warm fires and hot drinks.

“Not at all,” The Doctor assured them both. “Eastfield House is right around here.”

“We’re lost. There isnae a house of any sort around here… not even a crofter’s cottages. Doctor, we should go back.”

The Doctor said nothing. Jamie and Victoria looked at each other in dismay. They really we lost and The Doctor didn’t even know how to get back to the TARDIS.

“Oh, Jamie!”

“Dinna fret, lass,” Jamie told her with as much reassurance as he could muster. “We’ll be all right.”

“Of course, we will,” The Doctor called out to them. “Look.”

He pointed triumphantly to a gatepost with a brass house name fixed to it. The gate was open on a short drive enclosed by high hedges. The warm yellow light from a window could be seen beyond the greenery.

“It isn’t Sir Charles’s house,” Victoria pointed out. “It says Bellever View House.”

“It’s a house,” Jamie conceded. “Unless they’re very unsociable folk, they’ll surely let us warm up a bit.”

The Doctor obviously agreed. He was already striding up the driveway. His young companions followed hopefully.

The substantial house had the pleasing symmetry of the late Georgian style with an equal number of windows each side of the double door with a half-moon fanlight above. The warm, inviting light spilled from all of the windows reassuringly. The Doctor mounted the steps up to the door and pulled at the bell. It jangled noisily inside and a half minute later they heard footsteps.

The door opened to reveal a man in butler’s uniform.

“So sorry to disturb you, my good man, but my young friends and I have taken a wrong turn in the dark. May we step inside and warm ourselves.”

“Please come in,” the butler replied. “You are most welcome.” He held the door wide as the three travellers stepped into the light and warmth of the hallway with a staircase going up to the bedrooms and a smaller one going down towards the basement kitchen and servant’s rooms. Amongst the hall furnishings was a marble topped half hexagonal table with a telephone resting on it.

“Perhaps we could telephone for a cab?” The Doctor suggested, nodding towards the apparatus.

“There is only one taxi driver in Lower Bellever, sir,” the butler replied. “And he will not want to leave his own fireside on Christmas Eve. But I am sure you will be quite comfortable here. Let me take your outer garments and then come into the drawing room. I will fix drinks for you all.”

“That is quite hospitable,” The Doctor said. They took off their assorted coats which the butler hung carefully before they followed him into the well-furnished drawing room where two couples, a middle aged and younger man both in evening jackets and their wives in dresses that made Victoria feel immediately envious, were sitting on long sofas placed around a roaring fire. The men rose politely at the sight of the new arrivals.

“It’s a foul night outside,” said the older man. “Come and sit down.”

The two women made room for Victoria closest to the fire. Jamie sat opposite. The Doctor remained standing, looking around the room critically. It was decorated for Christmas with a finely trimmed tree and greenery all around the dado rail. A wreath of holly and red berries hung over the fireplace.

It all seemed well on the surface, at least. The Doctor accepted the hot whiskey and lemon ‘toddy’ made by the butler and drank without apparently tasting it as he slowly moved around the room.

“Are you the master of the house?” Jamie asked the older man as the warmth of the fire revived his wits and his mood.

“Not at all, just another lost soul on this cold night,” the man answered before introducing himself as Abram Villiers, owner of the Villiers Confectionary Company. The older lady was his wife, Sylvia, and the younger woman his daughter, Angela. The younger man was her husband, Paul Soames, a lawyer.

“Did you say you were all travellers?” Victoria queried. “Then who is the owner of this house?”

“That’s rather a strange story,” Angela replied. “Oh, but you don’t look at all comfortable in those travel clothes. We all changed upstairs. There are some lovely dresses. Let me take you to find something suitable for dinner.”

Victoria was happy to be taken away with the promise of clothes to change into. Jamie watched her go, then repeated her question.

“That’s just it,” Paul told him. “We don’t know. Our car broke down about a quarter mile down the road. We saw the lights here….”

“Just like us,” Jamie confirmed.

“Indeed. The butler invited us in. He made drinks, showed us where we could change.”

“Angela and I were glad enough of that,” Sylvia Villiers confirmed. “We were all so very wet, absolutely frightful. I feel perfectly civilised now, and we were told that dinner will be ready shortly.”

“Dinner would be welcome,” Jamie remarked.

“We didn’t come here for dinner,” The Doctor reminded him. “Just to warm up and perhaps get directions to Sir Charles’s house.”

“Oh, I think there will be room for you all,” Sylvia told them. “Dunning… the butler…. We asked the same questions, of course. Apparently, the master of the house, Sir Edward Bellever, died some years ago, a widower with no children. In his will he insisted that the cook, maid and butler should stay in the house for as long as they wished to do so, on condition that, every Christmas Eve, dinner was prepared for any traveller who lost his or her way and came upon Bellever House.”

“How generous of the late gentleman,” The Doctor remarked.

“Aye,” Jamie agreed. “Verrae generous.” He was about to make another comment when Angela Soames returned with Victoria looking stunning in a pale blue evening dress. Her hair was towel dried and combed into a soft roll at the nape of her neck and Angela had helped her with some light cosmetics.

The eyes of all the men in the room turned on her and she blushed shyly.

“Come and sit down again, my dear,” Sylvia told her. “Now your gentlemen friends can go and change for dinner, too.”

Jamie was a little surprised to be called a ‘gentleman’. In his usual mismatched trousers and jacket The Doctor didn’t really measure up to the word in the sense the Villiers’ and Soames’ understood it, but under the hobo-ish first impression there was always something about The Doctor that put him a class above the owners of confectionary factories or holders of law degrees. Usually he didn’t need a dinner jacket to express his authority. But he was damp and uncomfortable from their walk, too.

“We were just talking about Sir Edward Bellever’s amazing bequest,” Sylvia prompted Victoria. “Making his home available on Christmas Eve like this.”

“Yes, Angela told me,” Victoria answered. “Such a sad story. Poor man dying with nobody to remember him except his servants and a few passing strangers.” She turned her eyes to the ceiling, thinking of the rooms above where The Doctor and Jamie were changing. “I think that is the reason Jamie and I are with The Doctor. He would have nobody to remember him without those few who travel with him.”

That must have seemed an odd thing to say. Mrs Villiers looked at her curiously. But before she could comment they were surprised to hear the doorbell ring again.

“Perhaps Sir Charles is looking for us?” Victoria suggested. Paul went to the drawing room door as Dunning came from the kitchen stairs to answer the door. He reported that there were two more visitors at the door, being invited in to warm themselves.

The new arrivals were another couple. These were already dressed for dinner under their waterproof coats but accepted their whiskey toddies gratefully all the same and introduced themselves as Andrew Harris and his fiancée, Jean Robertson.

“Well, we fell on our feet, anyway, finding this place,” said Andrew cheerfully. “Though I’d have been happier if the phone wasn’t on the blink.”

“On the blink?” Jamie queried as he and The Doctor, looking quite unlike their usual selves in evening clothes, returned to the drawing room. His travels with The Doctor had widened his vocabulary and he understood the expression, but it puzzled him all the same. “I thought yon gilly said there were no taxis to be had, not that the phone was broken.”

“It might have been working when you arrived, but the snow is coming down heavily now,” Jean said. “The lines might be down.”

“No telephone and no taxis even if it was working,” Angela summed up. “We’re all lucky to be here, not wandering around on the edge of Dartmoor or trying to keep from freezing to death in a broken down car.”

“Lucky, indeed,” The Doctor agreed. He had resumed his examination of the room as if looking for something intrinsically wrong with it.

The Doctor was just getting to the point when his perambulations were beginning to irritate people when Dunning came to announce that dinner was served. He opened the double doors that led into a beautifully prepared dining room. Christmas greenery hung around every picture frame or mirror. An arrangement of holly and ivy was placed in the middle of the sideboard with the cheeseboard and brandy.

The table itself was delightful. Crisp white linen, silverware and gleaming crystal glasses reflected the warm light of tall, tapered candles in long holders. More greenery decorated the centrepiece. At each place setting there was a Christmas cracker made with gold or silver paper that added to the glittering effect.

There were no place names, but there was a seat for everyone almost as if the number of lost souls finding Bellever House had been known in advance.

The men held chairs for the ladies before they sat themselves. Dunning and the maid served a creamy oyster soup with crisp bread rolls. Before they ate it was Jamie who suggested they should say ‘grace’. After all they were all very thankful to be warm and comfortable and about to eat a good meal. When that was done, the erstwhile butler poured wine for everyone. Paul Soames raised his glass and proposed a toast to the late Sir Edward Bellever, the ‘founder of the feast’. Nobody declined such a toast. After that, the traditional toast of any British gathering of well mannered folk was made by Abram Villiers.

“The King,” he said. “God save him.”

Everyone responded, even Jamie who was, at best, ambivalent towards English monarchs. Victoria was a beat behind them all. She was used to toasting a queen, her own namesake on occasions such as this.

The Doctor responded, though something about the loyal toast made him frown as if it was one of the anomalies he had been concerned about. But he said nothing and ate his soup with the same relish as everyone else.

The main course was a traditional turkey with all the expected trimmings – chestnut stuffing, buttered parsnips, roast potatoes, button mushrooms cooked in white wine, steamed vegetables and a rich, fragrant gravy. Abram Villiers carved the turkey while Dunning and the maid served the accompaniments and replenished the wine. A crowd with their appetite merely dulled a little by the soup fell to the main course cheerfully. They talked a little, but mostly they concentrated on eating.

Then there was a plum pudding the cook had every right to be proud of. The cannonball sized confection was doused with brandy and set alight before it was portioned out with a choice of fresh cream or brandy sauce. Victoria and Jean took only a small portion, finding it just a little heavy after the main course, but everyone else enjoyed their share.

The cheeseboard was hardly needed after such a meal, but sampling the selection encouraged conversation that had been surrendered to the business of eating up until then.

“Have to say, I’ve never heard of the Villiers Confectionary Company,” Andrew Harris admitted as Abram Villiers talked about his business. “Have you been going for long?”

“Best part of thirty years,” Villiers responded. “It was hard going during the war, of course. Luxuries like fancy biscuits were hardly what was called for, but we pulled through. Doing nicely, now. Surprised you haven’t come across us. Most grocers carry our produce.”

“I’m not really a frequented of grocery stores,” Harris admitted. “I tend to see biscuits brought in on a plate by the maid. Never given a lot of thought to where they come from before then.”

“How very snobbish you sound, Andrew, my dear,” Jean told him. “Though I suppose it is true, enough. None of us pay attention to the names of commercial products like that. I dare say every cook and housekeeper below stairs would know the name.”

“Very likely,” Villiers agreed. “Though we do advertise in all the best papers and magazines.”

“Then I’m just an ignorant chump who only reads the front page and the cricket scores,” Harris admitted. “I never pay attention to advertisements.”

“Fortunately, most other people do,” Paul Soames told him. “The business is in very good shape. The export market is especially strong. But perhaps we shouldn’t bore the ladies with all this business talk, especially on Christmas Eve.”

There was a consensus about that. The talk livened as they stretched the cheese course. The Doctor was the first to suggest pulling the crackers, and sharing the jokes inside, trying on the party hats and comparing the trinkets found inside made for several minutes of pure enjoyment without any concern for their somewhat strange situation. It was hard, indeed, to believe that they had been three groups of strangers a short while ago.

It was also The Doctor who suggested that the ladies should retire to the drawing room. Dunning was there to pour sherries and hand out some fine after dinner chocolates before the door was closed on the men with their brandies and cigars.

Jamie passed up the cigars, as did The Doctor. He drank the brandy cautiously, and listened as The Doctor steered the conversation very deliberately. After a while he put the drink down altogether and listened carefully with a clear head.

The Doctor thought something was wrong. Jamie was ready to act if it turned out to be something that could harm Victoria or any of their new friends.

“Abram,” he said when the conversation had come back to business matters. “What year did you start up your biscuit factory?”

“Nineteen-twenty-one,” the gentlemen of industry answered.

“What?” Andrew Harris exclaimed in confusion. “But you said you’d been in business for thirty years. You said you were making biscuits during the war.”

“I was,” Villiers replied. “With rationing and shortage of raw ingredients it was hard work. We only kept going because of a contract with the military. Our oatmeal biscuits helped supplement the army food rations.”

But….” Andrew was still puzzled. The Doctor held up his hand to stop his question. He had another one to ask.

“When you both toasted the King at the start of our excellent dinner, which king did you honour?”

“Well… that’s an odd question,” Abram said. “King George the Sixth, of course. What king do you expect me to toast?”

“Sixth?” Andrew queried. “Who is THAT? George the Fifth is King, and though his health is failing, his heir is Edward, the Prince of Wales. Who on Earth is George?”

“That’s a very complicated matter.” The Doctor reached for the bell that summoned Dunning. The butler came promptly.

“Time for truth, my dear chap,” he said. “What king’s health do YOU drink to?”

Dunning hesitated for a long time before answering.

“King Edward the Seventh, sir,” he said in a low, defeated tone of somebody who knew that a secret had been discovered.

“But….” Again it was Andrew who tried to raise the question. Again, The Doctor stopped him.

“We were heading to a friend’s house for Christmas nineteen-seventy-one. The toast there would not be to a king at all, but a very dignified lady known as Queen Elizabeth the Second.”

“Elizabeth?” Andrew queried. “You mean the Duke of York’s little daughter, the Princess Elizabeth?”

“Not so little,” Paul Soames pointed out. “She was married to Phillip Mountbatten last year.”

Jamie shrugged. In his time it was another George – the second – who was the enemy of his Scots clan. Edwards and Elizabeth of any regnal number made no difference to him.

“I really don’t understand,” Andrew admitted.

“I think I do,” The Doctor said. “Well, not exactly why, but I know what has happened. This house is timelocked. It has been an Edwardian Christmas ever since Sir Edward Bellever died and left his bequest. You, Dunning - and the cook and maid have been providing succour for lost travellers ever since – travellers who may come across the house on any Christmas Eve. Andrew, you and your fiancée found your way here in the nineteen-thirties, Abram, Paul, you and your wives were travelling in the late nineteen-forties. We, as I already said, were visiting a friend in the early seventies. But we have all met up here in a house outside of time, for the simple reason that we were lost on Christmas Eve.”

“And that’s possible?” Abram, Paul and Andrew looked at each other and frowned. It seemed too fantastic for words. They were all three of them part of a very real world of business and finance. They didn’t read the sort of books where little boys never grew up or girls went through wardrobes to magical worlds. Their imaginations struggled to accept that they were involved in something nearly as fantastic.

It’s possible,” Dunning said quietly. “I don’t understand how, but it has been this way ever since the master died. It was as if time stopped for us. We live here in perpetual Christmas, serving those who need shelter from the terrible weather that comes across the moor.”

“You poor man,” The Doctor said.

“It’s not a bad life,” Dunning insisted. “We are content to serve.”

“Even so….”

“We are content,” Dunning repeated.

“Well, this is a remarkable story,” Paul Soames remarked. “What should we do, now?”

“Listen to that,” Jamie interrupted. From the other room was a sound of clear, sweet singing. “That’s Victoria.”

“Singing a Christmas carol,” The Doctor confirmed. “Listen to me, all of you. What we’re going to do is join the ladies in the drawing room and sing carols together until our voices give out and we’re tired enough to sleep. In the morning we will go on to our real lives. I believe that is how this timelock works.” He looked at Dunning, who nodded. “Then there is nothing to worry about, and we won’t convey any hint of any problem to the ladies. Are we agreed?”

There was agreement. Dunning opened the double doors and the men went to join their ladies at the fireside. Dunning brought a jug of mulled wine to lubricate the singing voices and the impromptu concert continued as the snow fell outside the window.

The clock was striking one as tiredness started to overcome the youngest of the women and the party broke up. Comfortable bedrooms were prepared, of course. A sound night’s sleep was assured.

Victoria woke earliest of the TARDIS crew and went to the bedroom window to look out at a cool blue sky over a world hunkered under a blanket of snow. The silence of the picturesque scene was broken by the arrival of the taxi they had been unable to get in the snowstorm last night. Presently there were voices below and she waved goodbye to Angela and Sylvia as they left with their husbands. She was a little disappointed not to have breakfast with them, but it was good to know that they might all be on their way, soon, with the storm over and Christmas Day dawning brightly.

She dressed and went downstairs in time to see Andrew and Jean ready to leave, too.

“Andrew went out to find the car, earlier,” Jean explained. “Would you believe it is working fit, now. And it is parked next to one of those police boxes. We missed that last night or we might have called for help.”

“I’m so glad, in a way, that you didn’t,” Victoria said. “It was such a nice evening. But goodbye, and good luck. I shall often think of you and this Christmas.”

They kissed on the cheek like old friends and then Jean and Andrew were gone. Victoria went to the dining room and found kedgeree, porridge, bread rolls and fruit on the sideboard. While she was helping herself Jamie and The Doctor came to breakfast, too. Dunning brought a tray of eggs and bacon and toast. They ate a fine breakfast before they, too, were ready to leave.

“Doctor, I can see chimneys, yonder,” Jamie called out from part way down the driver. “Could that be your friend’s wee croft?”

“We were so close?” Victoria queried in surprise.

“Capital,” The Doctor said before turning to Dunning and speaking confidentially to him. “I know about these things - the timelock. I could break it and let you all live a normal life.”

“I’m not sure now how long we’ve been this way. Would we have any life left when time caught up? Besides, it is an honour to serve gentlemen like yourself.”

“Good man,” The Doctor said. “If I am lost in the dark again I will think of you. Merry Christmas, Dunning. The blessings of the season on this good house.”

“And to you, Doctor,” Dunning replied. The Doctor hurried to catch up with his young friends. Dunning closed the front door.

At the gatepost Jamie turned once to see if he could see the house, but the hedges obscured the view. It could have been there, solid and immovable.

Or it might not.