**A Perfect Christmas**

Grace Holloway pulled the collar of her thick winter coat up towards the warm hat she was wearing. Both, along with the fur lined boots on her feet were new to her. She was a California girl. She had rarely known the season everyone else called winter.

That was why she had asked the Doctor to take her somebody where they could have a ‘real' Christmas.

‘A ‘real' Christmas?” He smiled in the mildly sardonic way that she recognised so easily in him. “Do you mean a cold night in the Middle East and rather unsanitary conditions for childbirth?”

“No,” Grace answered with an equally wry humour. “I mean Christmas with snow and toboggan riding, turkey and chestnuts and hand made paper chains, Christmas carollers, peace on Earth....”

“That, my dear Grace, would not be a ‘real’ Christmas. It is just about the opposite to ‘real’. It is the ‘ideal’ Christmas that the card makers and festive CD compilations make you think is real. But it probably never was.”

“Oh, I know it never really happened in my time,” Grace admitted. “We’re all too cynical and knowing. But in the past... In more innocent times....”

“Ah, the innocent times. “ The Doctor’s tone became even more sardonic and just a bit teasing. “Assuming you mean some time after the Dickensian Christmas complete with diminutive cripples by the fireplace....”

“A bit later than that, yes.” Grace admitted.

“Well, then, moving into the twentieth century, and leaving out festive downers like the Great War, the flu pandemic of 1919, and the economic hardship of the twenties, the thirties with world wide depression and the rise of fascism in Europe, the Second World War, rationing and food shortages in Britain, the Korean War for America....” He paused, but not long enough for Grace to get a word in. “Then you get into the sixties and teen rebellion, the breakdown of family values, the Vietnam War, and by the end of the seventies Christmas is all just commercialised and fake and all hope for ‘innocent times’ has gone. There really has never been a time when what you mean really happened.”

“You’re probably right,” Grace admitted. “Still.... “

The Doctor smiled again, this time indulgently. If a ‘real: Christmas was what she wanted, a ‘real' Christmas was what he would move the heavens to get her.

And he could.

There was snow – blankets of it across the fields and up the gently rolling hills of that part of east Lancashire where the more rugged Pennines didn’t quite start. The road through the picturesque village of Gisburn was clear of all but the most recent fall of snow. Piles of it were gathered up on the pavement – mostly turned into a legion of snowmen by the local children.

Grace liked the snowmen. The Doctor didn’t mention that there were alien entities that could infuse anthropomorphic figures like them with murderous intent. He wasn’t going to mention anything sinister. Grace wanted a ‘real’ Christmas.

That was why they were in 1955 - before the microwave oven dried out the vegetables but after the invention of mains electricity for cooking a turkey dinner, when the discreet ten inch screen television in the corner cabinet would broadcast the Queen’s Speech in crisp, clear black and white, but before films with unfestive themes such as sinking ships or POW escapes had become a peculiarly British tradition.

It wasn’t a perfect time. The Cold War had begun. Even the little village school had done ‘duck and cover’ exercises. But there was a distant unreality to nuclear war. People could put it out of their minds for the duration of Christmas.

The Christmas Eve carol service in the village church had been exactly what Grace had in mind when she suggested this sort of celebration. She had joined in familiar carols that even California girls knew. The Doctor sang along with her. Where and how a Time Lord from the other side of the galaxy learnt such things she had never asked. Despite all that, he actually seemed to fit into this time and place, as if the random accent of this regeneration created a bit of human reality around him.

When the service was over they lingered along with the locals in the vestibule where mulled wine and mince pies were distributed by the ladies of the Women’s Institute. The Doctor and Grace explained to anyone who asked that they had rented a house for the Christmas time. That much was absolutely true and needed little elaboration. Nobody needed to know that the holiday lease had been arranged from the TARDIS that was currently parked in the cottage garden under a tarpaulin.

Fortified by the refreshments they now walked back to the cottage on the Clitheroe side of the village in good spirits. Pendle Hill, the best known local landmark was under a blanket of snow that made it stand out against the night sky. The frosty air nipped at exposed parts of their faces, but they didn’t care. A warm house awaited them.

The Doctor had lit the fire in the drawing room just after it got dark around tea time. He had earlier brought in a ‘yule log' of local ash that had dried out thoroughly. It had been placed in the centre of the fireplace before they went out to the carol service.

The Doctor wasn’t altogether sure about leaving an open fire burning in an empty house. While Grace was getting her winter coat on he used his sonic screwdriver to create a small force field around the hearth.

“Not at all traditional, but very safe,” he told himself.

He took the force field off again when they returned home.

“We have to prepare that turkey before we settle down for the evening,” the Doctor reminded Grace as she took her coat off and hung it near the fire to dry off the melted snow.

“I know,” she replied. “But that’s all right. It’s one of the things I wanted to do. I’ve never prepared a Christmas turkey before. I've really not had very many Christmas dinners at home with somebody special. A lot of years I was at the hospital. There was always a festive menu in the staff canteen, and they had candles and mistletoe on the tables, but it wasn’t quite the same.”

“What about when you lived with... What was his name... The one with the same size feet as me...”

He knew perfectly well what her previous boyfriend was called, but he made a point of forgetting when he came up in conversation.

“I never cooked a Christmas dinner for Brian. He always had the food delivered. Gourmet menus straight to the door. He liked his festive dinner cooked by experts.”

The Doctor considered several remarks about Brian’s idea of Christmas but decided discretion was the better option when discussing the man whose shoes he had literally filled that eventful Millennium Eve.

The turkey had been bought three days ago at the family butchers in the village. The idea of a frozen bird hadn’t yet caught on in this time and Grace had queued with two dozen other women with a ticket in her hand entitling her to one of the plump birds delivered that morning from a local poultry farm. It had been a cheerful queue, with several of the housewives in their winter coats and headscarves tied under their chins sharing memories of far longer queues for far smaller amounts of food during the war and the austere years of rationing.

Grace found herself admiring these women who had gone through so very much hardship and could now laugh and joke about it all. When one of the women spoke to her, she felt almost apologetic about being American.

“It must have been hard for the women left so far behind, all the same,” she was told in a conciliatory tone. She managed to say a few words of agreement before her ticket was called and she paid for and collected the plucked bird along with a packet of ‘giblets’. She put them in her shopping bag warily, thinking they looked just a bit too much like things she had to cut out of people on the operating table.

The Doctor saved her from having to get involved with those. He chopped onions and celery and put them with the innards of the turkey into a stock pot to make a gravy.

“You know, I always thought gravy was made with instant granules,” Grace admitted as the Doctor chopped more onions and she shredded dry bread and fresh sage for stuffing. “And stuffing came in a packet. This sage smells wonderful. What have I missed all these years? I bet, even with rationing, people around here had fresh sage for Christmas... and giblet gravy.”

“And mightily grateful they were, I am sure,” the Doctor said.

“They were, if the stories in the butcher’s queue were anything to go by. But they're even more grateful to have the opportunity to buy a turkey without a ration book, only a ticket for the queue. By the way, thanks for organising that for me, otherwise we'd be having tinned ham for dinner, tomorrow.”

Of course, there had to be a little TARDIS travel to place the order well in advance. That much was acceptable, but Grace was enjoying life without Time Lord technology otherwise and said so as she mixed up the stuffing ready to put into the turkey.

“Most people don’t actually stuff the bird in my time because of bacteria,” she pointed out as she pushed sage and onion into the cavity and tried not to mentally compare it with open heart surgery.

“That’s because of defrosting. This is a fresh turkey. No problem as long as its cooked properly.”

And as long as it got a surreptitious scan with the sonic to kill off any bacteria before it went into the oven….

“Six kilos at thirty-five minutes per kilo,” Grace said as she shut the oven door and turned away, pleased with her effort.

“Time enough to roast some chestnuts and watch the Christmas film on TV.

Grace made liquor coffee and brought a wheel of stilton from the kitchen while he made himself busy roasting chestnuts in the coal scuttle.

“Perfect,” Grace said happily. “I bet you usually do chestnuts with your sonic screwdriver.”

The Doctor smiled and pushed his sonic a little further up under his shirt cuff. He had partially cooked the insides of the chestnuts with it. There was nothing more annoying than partially cooked chestnuts.

When they were ready he peeled them easily and put them into a warmed dish. They ate them with slices of stilton and the hot coffee fortified with brandy. A fresh fall of snow fell softly outside the window and the 1950 film adaptation of Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol began on the TV.

That was his best bit of Time Lord trickery. The scheduled film was rather less festive. The TARDIS was actually overriding the BBC broadcast with the preferred choice.

Grace sighed contentedly at the perfect Christmas Eve. She ate a chestnut and a slice of stilton and watched the familiar story unfold on the black and white television that was such a far cry from the wide screen, high definition, living colour she was used to.

She had seen many versions of the story, of course. Musical, animation, comedy, one where Scrooge was woman, any number of modern day versions of the story set in New York or Los Angeles, and the Muppet one, of course.

This was the first film of the book apart from a couple of silent ones and a pre-war ‘short'. The cast were all big names in their day. A musical score had been specially written for it. Every effort had been made to be faithful to the book.

“What do you suppose was actually wrong with Tiny Tim?” Grace asked as Scrooge witnessed the Cratchett family dinner with the Ghost of Christmas Present.

“What?” the Doctor was taken aback by the question. He looked at her in the firelight questioningly.

“It always puzzled me,” she continued. “The book doesn’t really explain and nor do any of the films. I read somewhere that it was rickets which COULD kill if not treated. Another theory I heard was that it was consumption.”

“I never really thought about it,” the Doctor admitted.

“I did. Even when I was young. I suppose that was the wannabe doctor in me. And it always seemed to me... if it was consumption, the sad truth is Scrooge couldn’t have saved him no matter how much money he had. Rich and poor alike died of consumption in those days.”

“You really were meant to be a doctor,” the Doctor told her. “Even diagnosing fictional characters.”

“I went through a very absolute phase. I had no time for arbitrary happy endings. I had to be clear about those sort of things.“

“Just a phase? What changed your mind?”

“I met a man with two hearts... A walking miracle... My own happy ending.”

“I still couldn’t save Tiny Tim, either,” the Doctor conceded. “Apart from being fictional, you are quite right. If his disease was something incurable, all the money in Victorian England couldn’t have saved him. He would have died sooner or later.”

“Good job he IS fictional. I don’t have to be sorry about him. My conscience is clear to indulge myself in a peaceful, untroubled Christmas.”

The Doctor smiled warmly at her. It was that compassion for all humankind that he loved about her. This WAS the first Christmas since he had known her that had been an indulgence. In past years, when she wasn’t on call in her own time and place they had pitched in to make Christmas better in a Romanian orphanage, in a Depression era labour camp outside New York, a refugee centre in post war Europe, anywhere and any time Grace had felt she could use her medical skills.

She deserved to relax and do nothing more serious than remembering to take the turkey out of the oven before bedtime.

They basted the turkey and put it back in the oven after the film had finished. Midnight Mass on the radio was just the right time to turn the skin of the bird the golden brown that the best TV chefs urged on their viewers.

“That’ll do nicely,” the Doctor said. “Now let’s get to bed or Father Christmas won’t come.”

Grace laughed. A small pile of beautifully wrapped presents were under the Christmas tree already. But bed was a good idea, anyway. It had been a long day, enjoyable as it was.

Grace fell asleep quickly. Long years on call and snatching sleep when she could had taught her body to waste little time.

The Doctor usually slept soundly, but tonight something kept him awake. Despite the peace of Christmas night something felt wrong.

He rose quietly from the bed, ensuring that Grace slept on. He crept downstairs and out of the cottage by the kitchen door. He slipped under the tarpaulin and opened the TARDIS door.

Even before the lights came on he could hear an insistent beep from the security array. There was something extra-terrestrial in proximity to Earth.

“Oh, for Chaos' sake,” he murmured as he moved around to the communications panel and checked three things. First, he ensured that there was no chatter going on in the USSR about the UFO. Then he checked the Americans and their allies who were just as paranoid and just as likely to start a war on a whim.

Having ensured that all was quiet on Earth, he traced a communication signal from the UFO and sent his own signal back along it.

“Whoever you are, this is not the night to start anything,” he said. “You should leave before you get into real trouble.”

There was a pause filled with white noise, then a voice that was clearly coming through a primitive language translator.

“We do not wish to invoke, initiate, precipitate, inaugurate anything,” the voice said. “We need, require, necessitate a medicinal, practitioner, physician....”

“You mean you need a doctor?”

“Yes, a doctor. We need a doctor.”

“Well, that’s different. I’ll be with you in two ticks.”

“In two...what?”

“Just stand by. Keep whatever cloaking device you have turned on. I'll find you by your meisson resonance.”

The TARDIS could do what neither of the Cold War factions could do. It could read the faint particles of hot space dust displaced by any orbiting craft and home in on it.

The police box materialised on the bridge of the alien craft. When the Doctor stepped out three short green skinned men stared at him curiously but they didn’t raise any weapons.

Of course, wearing a pair of silk pyjamas and bedroom slippers he hardly looked threatening, but he had been ready for just about anything.

“You asked for a doctor? I’m at your service.”

“Come, please,” said one of the men who wore a gold baldric over his dark green uniform and was clearly in charge. He brought the Doctor to a side room where his patient had been made comfortable on a bed and was being attended to by a female of the species who was clearly out of her depth and desperately worried.

“THIS is certainly what this night was made for,” the Doctor said as he rolled up his pyjama sleeves and called for an antiseptic scrub. He bent over the patient and touched her fear and pain wracked face.

“Its all right,” he promised her. “I'm here to look after you. Let me take away some of the pain, first. Then we'll see what needs to be done.”

The psychic block on the pain receptors in her head gave her some respite. She breathed more easily. The Doctor looked around at the woman who had been helping.

“How long has she been in labour, so far?”

“More than ten thousand parsecs,” she answered.

The Doctor did a quick mental conversion. It was getting on for fifteen Earth hours, which was a long time to be in pain.

“How long SHOULD it take for your species?” he added as he gently touched the lady's stomach and mentally examined the unborn child.

“About half that long,” he was told.

“I thought as much. The child's heart is erratic. I think we need drastic measures. Is the father of the child here?”

“He is dead,” said the man with the baldric. “King Argon of Derrian V fell from a horse two lunar cycles ago and broke his neck.”

“So this Lady is....”

“She is L'iassa, his late Majesty’s widow and queen mother-to-be. The child, when born, will succeed his late father as our undoubted King.”

“Very few babies are born as Kings,” the Doctor noted. “The last time it happened on the planet below was a long time ago and caused quite a stir. But if I don’t act now this king won’t be born at all. I'm talking about a surgical operation. The humans call it a caesarean, but I don’t imagine that word means anything to you.”

“Whatever you must do,” the captain told him. “Derrian must have its king... And the king must have his mother. Do what you must do for them both.”

The Doctor had no intention of doing anything else. He had no time for ideas like ‘saving the child but losing the mother’. He instructed both the out of her depth midwife and the captain in how to assist him then he turned to the queen. He gently explained what he meant to do and assured her that it would be quick and safe and would end her suffering as well as saving her baby.

“I am scared,” she answered. “But I trust you.”

“Glad to hear it, your Majesty. Most people do, of course. How come you are in this part of the galaxy, anyway? Derrian is at least a hundred light years from here.”

He was talking to take everyone's mind off what he was doing, especially the Queen who was bearing it all with fortitude, and perhaps also to stop himself thinking of preparing a turkey for the oven as he worked.

“We were in hyperspace when we encountered an erratic wormhole,” the captain answered. “We emerged on the edge of this solar system. Our only hope was signs of intelligent life on the third planet.”

“Some people would argue about the intelligent life,” the Doctor quipped dryly. “The scissors, please.”

Everyone was startled to see him actually holding the baby. He had made the incision quickly using his sonic screwdriver as a scalpel and just as quickly brought the child from his mother's womb. Now he cut and tied the umbilicus and let the midwife wrap the newborn in a cloth. She turned, holding the baby and the captain bowed to his newborn king before the exalted baby was placed in the arms of his tired but elated mother.

The Doctor’s job was still messy but it was quickly done with the sonic now in reverse mode, repairing tissues and leaving no sign of a scar. That done he could assure everyone that the king and the queen mother were both perfectly well.

“I can sort out your navigation back to hyperspace,” the Doctor told the captain. “Then I’ll be on my way.”

“You have the thanks of the whole Derrian people,” the captain told him. “May the blessings of our new born King be with you.”

The Doctor smiled. That was certainly what this night was about.

Setting the Derrians on their way home was simple enough. Then he wished them all well and returned to his TARDIS. Minutes later he was back in bed. Grace didn’t even stir as he settled beside her.

A few hours later they both woke with that warm, happy realisation that it was Christmas morning. Coffee and toast made a hurried breakfast before the pleasure of opening gifts they had bought each other a week ago in Clitheroe market. Among the trinkets and keepsakes, Grace joyfully received a toy ‘doctor' set including a plastic stethoscope, syringe and thermometer. The Doctor, in return, received his very own model of a space rocket as envisaged by the toy makers of the mid-1950s when the first Apollo missions were still in the future.

After presents there was just time to prepare vegetables to accompany the turkey already cooked last night, then they got ready to go out to the Christmas morning service at the church.

“This has been a wonderful Christmas,” Grace said as they walked home again after a joyful hour of carols and familiar pronouncements of glad tidings and great joy. “Not only has it been everything I hoped, peaceful, perfect, but it has also been wonderfully orduvary.”

“Wonderfully ordinary?” the Doctor queried. “Isn’t that an oxymoron?”

“I mean, we’ve been living one day after another, doing what everyone else does, without the TARDIS or any Time Lord tricks, or even your sonic screwdriver. It has been a nice, refreshing change from that crazy life.”

“Yes,” the Doctor agreed with absolutely no guilt about the small deceptions he had contrived, or that bigger one in the night. He thought about the Nativity scene in the corner of the church where the village children had brought a doll to place in the manger during the service and he thought about the Derrian king and his mother, now safely on their way home, now.

He wondered if he ought to confess his night-time adventure. Grace would probably be proud of his effort. She would almost certainly agree it was a job well suited to Christmas night.

But then again.....

“Come on,” he said, taking her gloved hand in his. “Let’s get home. Those sprouts won’t cook themselves and there's a pudding to steam, yet.”