

Brush with a Stranger Part 4 - The Gift of Life

Samuel sighed audibly.

“My, you must be tired,” his mother said. “Perhaps I can get you a cup of tea.”

“No, I’m... don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll be having supper soon.”

He looked around the little parlour, trying to find out why it looked different. Over the mantelpiece hung a sepia coloured glass plate picture using a new fangled idea called photography, which had been taken on his kid brother Tom’s sixteenth birthday. He remembered how they had gone to Francis Frith’s studio to be photographed together. There was something different about the picture. It showed only one figure— Tom’s.

“That your son?” he asked.

His mother’s face clouded. She nodded but said nothing.

“I think I’ve met him,” Samuel said hesitantly. “His name’s Tom, isn’t it?”

His mother turned away, making a strange choking noise in her throat. Her husband put his arm clumsily around her shoulder. His voice, which was always mild and gentle, suddenly became harsh.

“You couldn’t have met him,” he said. “He’s been dead a long while. He was drowned in the River Weaver the day that picture taken.”

Samuel’s mind flew back to the long-ago on a searing hot August afternoon when he and Tom had visited Frith’s studio in Crewe. On their way home they had gone swimming in the Weaver. Tom had been seized with a cramp, he remembered. He had pulled him out of the water just before he went over the weir and had thought nothing of it. But suppose he hadn’t been there...?

“I’m sorry,” he said miserably. “I guess I’d better go. I hope you like the brush. And I wish you both a very Merry Christmas.”

There, he had put his foot in it again, wishing them a Merry Christmas when they were thinking about their dead son. Alfie tugged fiercely at his chain as Samuel went through the front gate and accompanied his departure with a hostile, rolling growl. He wanted desperately now to see Anne. He wasn’t sure he could stand not being recognised by her, but he had to see her.

The oil lamps were lit in St Bartholomew’s church, and the choir was making last-minute preparations for Christmas evening prayer. The organist had been practicing “Holy Night” on the newly installed organ, evening after evening until Samuel had become thoroughly sick of it. But now the music almost tore his heart out. He stumbled blindly up to the gate of Beech house. The front was untidy, and the shrubs he had kept carefully tended were neglected and bedraggled.

Arthur Bankes could hardly be expected to care for such things. When he knocked at the door there was a long silence, followed by the shout of a child. Then Anne came to the door. At the sight of her, Samuel's voice almost failed him.

"Merry Christmas, missus," he managed to say at last.

His hand shook as he tried to open the satchel. When Samuel entered the living room, unhappy as he was, he could not help noticing with a secret grin that the over-priced blue armchairs they often had quarrelled over, was there. Evidently Anne had gone through the same thing with Arthur Bankes and had won the argument with him too. Samuel got his satchel open.

One of the brushes had a bright blue handle and multi-coloured bristles. It was obviously a high class brush and not intended to be given away, but Samuel didn't care. He handed it to Anne.

This would be fine for your chairs," he said.

"My, that's a pretty brush," she exclaimed. "You're giving it away free?"

He nodded solemnly. "Special introductory offer. It's one way for the company to keep excess profits down—share them with its friends."

She stroked a chair gently with the brush, smoothing out the velvety nap. "It is a nice brush. Thank you. I—"

There was a sudden scream from the kitchen, and two small children rushed in.

"Amelia..? Are you OK..?" shouted Anne

A little, homely-faced girl flung herself into her mother's arms, sobbing loudly as a boy of seven came running after her, snapping a toy flintlock pistol at her head.

"Mommy, she won't die," he yelled. "I shot her a hunert times, but she won't die."

He looks just like Arthur Bankes, Samuel thought.... acts like him too. The boy suddenly turned his attention to him.

"Who're you?" he demanded belligerently.

He pointed his pistol at Samuel and pulled the trigger.

"You're dead!" he cried. "You're dead. Why don't you fall down and die?"

There was a heavy step on the porch. The boy looked frightened and backed away. Samuel saw Anne glance apprehensively at the door. Arthur Bankes came in. He stood for a moment in the doorway, clinging to the knob for support. His eyes were glazed, and his face was flushed red with beer.

"Who's this?" he demanded thickly.

“He’s a brush pedlar,” Anne tried to explain. “He gave me this brush.”

“Brush pedlar!” Arthur sneered. “Well, tell him to get outta here. We don’t want no brushes.”

He hiccupped violently and lurched across the room to one of the armchairs, where he sat down suddenly.

“An’ we don’t want no brush pedlars neither.”

Samuel looked despairingly at Anne. Her eyes were full of fear and begging him to go. Arthur had lifted his feet up on to a footrest and was sprawling out on it, muttering unkind things about brush pedlars. Samuel went to the door, followed by Arthur’s son Leonard, who kept snapping the pistol at him and saying:

“You’re dead—dead —dead!”

Perhaps the boy was right, Samuel thought when he reached the porch. Maybe he was dead, or maybe this was all a bad dream from which he might eventually awake. He wanted to find the stranger on the bridge again and try to persuade him to cancel the whole deal.

He hurried down Cross Lane, the fresh snow crunching and compacting with every footstep and broke into a run when he neared Minshull bridge and the river. Samuel was relieved to see the stranger standing on the bridge.

“I’ve had enough,” he gasped. “Get me out of this—you got me into it.”

The stranger raised his eyebrows.

“I got you into it! I like that! You were granted your wish. You got everything you asked for. You’re the freest man on earth now. You have no ties. You can go anywhere—do anything. What more can you possibly want?”

“Take me back,” Samuel pleaded. “Take me back— please... not just for my sake but for others too. You don’t know what a mess this town is in. You don’t understand. I’ve got to get back. They need me here.”

“Oh, I understand right enough,” the stranger said slowly. “I just wanted to make sure you did. You had the greatest gift of all conferred upon you—the gift of life, of being a part of this community and taking a part in it. Yet you denied that gift.”

As the stranger spoke, St Bartholomew’s church bells began to peel out, calling the townspeople to Christmas prayers.

“I’ve got to get back,” Samuel said desperately. “You can’t cut me off like this. Why, it’s murder!”

“Suicide rather, wouldn’t you say?” the stranger murmured. “You brought it on yourself... however, since it’s Christmas Eve —well, anyway... close your eyes

and keep listening to the bells.” His voice sank lower. “Keep listening to the bells...”

Samuel did as he was told. He felt a cold, wet snowdrop touch his cheek—and then another and another. When he opened his eyes, the snow was once again falling very heavy, so heavy that it obscured everything around him. The stranger could not be seen, but then neither could anything else.

The snow was so thick that Samuel had to grope for the bridge walls. As he started toward the village, he thought he heard someone saying “Merry Christmas,” but the bells were drowning out all rival sounds, so he could not be sure. When he reached The Vicarage he stopped and walked out into the roadway, peering down anxiously at the base of the big Copper Beech tree.

The scar was there, thank heaven! He touched the tree affectionately. He’d have to do something about the wound—get a gardener or something. Anyway, he’d evidently been taken back. He was himself again. Maybe it was all a dream, or perhaps he had been hypnotised by the smooth-flowing black water of the River Weaver. He had heard of such things.

At the corner of Cross Lane and Over Road he almost collided with a hurrying figure. It was Job Hesketh, the village blacksmith.

“Hello, Samuel,” Job said cheerfully. “Late tonight, ain’t you? I should think you’d want to be home early on Christmas Eve.”

Samuel drew a long breath. “I just wanted to see if the Post Office is all right. I’ve got to make sure the oil lamp is lit.”

“Sure it’s lit. I saw it as I went past.”

“Let’s look, huh?” Samuel said, pulling at Job’s sleeve. He wanted the assurance of a witness. He dragged the surprised blacksmith around to the front of the Post Office where the light was gleaming through the falling snow.

“I told you it was on,” Hesketh said with some irritation.

“I had to make sure,” Samuel mumbled. “Thanks—and Merry Christmas!”

Then he was off like a streak, running up Cross Lane. He was in a hurry to get home, but not in such a hurry that he couldn’t stop for a moment at Church Farm, his parents’ house, where he wrestled with Alfie until the friendly black cross-breed wagged all over with delight.

He grasped his startled brother Tom’s hand and wrung it frantically, wishing him an almost hysterical Merry Christmas. Then he frantically dashed across the parlour to examine a certain photograph. He kissed his mother, joked with his father, and was out of the house a few seconds later...

Stumbling and slipping on the newly fallen snow, he waved to Mr Tite, the landlord of the Brooke Arms and as he ran on up the lane he came across an old

bearded chap limping with a cane, “Mr Fisher..!”, he cried, “ How are you, you old
crochet...Merry Christmas to you..!”

St Barts was bright with light, and the choir and the organ were going full tilt. But
on he ran, past Lottie Wall’s cottage, past Muslin Row, past John Joseph Astbury’s
Home Farm and onto Beech House.

Samuel flung the door to his home open and called out at the top of his voice:

“Anne! Where are you? Anne! Kids!”

His wife came toward him, still dressed from going to church, and making
gestures to silence him.

“Shh, my darling...where have you been...I’ve just put the children to bed,” she
protested. “Now they’ll—”

But not another word could she get out of her mouth, for he smothered it with
kisses, and then dragged her up to the children’s room, where he violated every
tenet of parental Christmas Eve behaviour, by waking up his daughter Amelia
and his son Leonard and embracing them thoroughly. It took a while before Anne
could get him downstairs, before he began to be coherent.

“Oh, my darling wife, I thought I’d lost you. Oh, Anne, I thought I’d lost you!”

“What on earth is the matter, darling?” she asked in bewilderment. He pulled her
down on to one of the blue armchairs and kissed her again. And then, just as he
was about to tell her about his fantastical dream, his fingers came in contact
with something lying on the seat cushion. His voice froze. He did not even have
to pick the thing up, for he knew what it was.

And he knew that it would have a blue handle and multi-coloured bristles...a gift
of Christmas.

*Author’s note: This story was derived from the film ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’, as
result of examining these two identical postcards. Check out the young man
wearing ‘a moth-eaten old cloth cap, a white muffler around his neck and dark
jacket’ in the middle of the road on the first postcard...who mysteriously
disappears in the second postcard....?*

