

A Story for Christmas

What is the perfect Christmas gift? - for some it could be a tablecloth, others it could be a stack of wood, but for one man, it could be something unbelievable...!

All the names, places and jobs in this story, have been factually taken from the 1881 Church Minshull census...all except the Pilgrim family. The story is...well you make your own mind up...!

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In the bleak British winter of 1885, snow fell in every month from October to May ...London recorded 1ft of snow in 7 hours in early December and in the North West, a major blizzard dumped 2ft of snowfall across the Cheshire plain...

Robert Pilgrim, was taking over the tenancy of a 120-acre small holding called Willow Tree Farm from Samuel Charlesworth just outside Nantwich, in the remote hamlet of Church Minshull where he and his son came for a simpler life and to work the land.

Thomas Piggott was out front shovelling the heavy snow from the doorway of his home, Ivy Cottage when he saw two well-worn carts, pulled by two even more tired ponies. coming down the road from Over,

It was a frigid October morning, a time of year when even a single unfamiliar carriage is a strange sight in Church Minshull; almost nobody visits in wintertime, when the 4-mile dirt road to the small village becomes a continuous, treacherous sheet of ice and the sun rises above the Peckforton Hills for only a few hours each day.

But there they were: two overloaded carts, drifting slowly up the snow covered track. As the carts drew closer, Piggott thought, "...who the hell rides in open carts in the freeze of the early Cheshire winter?"... as the ponies pulled to a stop in front of the cottage, one of the hunched figures, a young man shouted out.

"Papa! Papa!" Piggott heard him shout. "This is what I thought home was gonna be like!"

He had called the one driving the first cart Papa. He was older, but his weathered brow made it difficult to tell exactly how old; he seemed tired and world-weary, and had piercing blue eyes, a long white beard, and long white hair spilling from beneath a wide-brimmed hat...to all intents, he looked like Santa Claus himself...!

When Piggott walked down from the cottage to greet the strangers the older man introduced himself as Pilgrim. He said that he and his son had come to Church Minshull looking for a new start.

"Well welcome to Church Minshull", said Piggott, " If I can be of any help, let me know, I can generally get my hands on most stuff".

Piggott was a higgler (or peddler) who visited outlying country homes, selling ribbons, saucepans, patent medicines etc. He would often accept payment in eggs or chickens or other farm produce which he would then sell on to someone else.

"Many thanks for that, I'll bear it in mind" and with that Papa Pilgrim gee'd up the ponies and was on his way to Minshull Lane.

The potential addition of new residents was big news for a small hamlet like Church Minshull, which doesn't often get big news. At one and a half hours walk from it's nearest towns, the village lies smack in the middle of Cheshire's rural area, the kind of place where the local school curriculum still includes farming and bovine teachings.

It was the kind of place where opinions on a subject like religion are shaped by the kind of gratitude toward a creator that one feels after escaping from the jaws of a wild boar on an excursion from Delamere forest.

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In 1860, the young British army officer, Captain Robert Pilgrim was posted to Madras, along with his wife Alice and baby son Tom. The Indian Rebellion of 1857 had not diminished and outbreaks of fighting continued due to the increasing resentment of the rapid expansion of The British East India Company.

During a peace keeping sortie with his men, his undefended barracks came under attack by insurgents and a massacre ensued... men, women and children had been killed, but by some strange quirk of fate, his son Tom had been spared, but Alice was never seen again.

If he was religious before, his faith was now scarred and embittered by the experiences of Imperial conflict and Captain Pilgrim never had much compassion for people who were lazy, or those who squandered their means and never had enough for the necessities. But for those who were genuinely in need, his heart was as big as the Empire itself.

Captain Pilgrim resigned his commission and returned to England with his son. Pilgrim looked old beyond his years, his heart hardened by loss and tragedy.

For many years afterwards, Robert moved from job to job, never settling in any one place, raising his son the best way he could, but always mourning the loss of his beloved wife. He never ever came to terms with her death, always knowing the pain of injury paled into insignificance, when compared to the agony of a broken heart.

"What we need is a new start" he said to his son Tom, "...and I know just the man to help me". So Robert made contact with Henry Brooke...

As a young recruit in the British Army, Lieutenant Pilgrim served under Captain Henry Brooke in the 1st Cheshire Militia. Captain Brooke had been especially kind to Robert and his young wife, Alice. Henry Brooke was universally esteemed for his generosity and philanthropy and being Lord of the Manor of Church Minshull, invited Robert and Alice to look him up, once his army service days were over...

Henry Brooke Esq. was as good as his word and had set Robert up on one of the tenanted farms on the Brooke's Estate, unfortunately Henry had died the year earlier, and Robert never got the chance to thank him again before arriving in Church Minshull...

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Papa Pilgrim and Tom worked hard in the first few months of arriving at Willow Tree Farm, preparing the outbuildings for winter, readying the livestock sheds and working the land in preparation for the next Spring, but the cold and snow were unabating, which meant getting goods and products to market was difficult and money was getting tight.

The weather conditions had also limited getting to know a wider number of neighbours in the community than he had liked, although some were now on a first name basis already ...and Christmas was coming...

Meanwhile, at St Bartholomew's Church in the middle of Church Minshull, Reverend Joseph Richards and his wife were carrying out much needed work and maintenance jobs and had set a goal to have everything done in time to have a service on Christmas Eve.

They worked hard, repairing the box pews, plastering walls, painting, etc. and on December 18th were ahead of schedule and just about finished. The Church was looking very festive bedecked with evergreen plants like mistletoe, holly and ivy. Hung from the pew doors were Christmas stockings for the 'poor' children of the village, each filled with an apple, orange and a few nuts.

In the corner of the church stood the most colourful Christmas Tree festooned with candles, sweets, fruit, homemade decorations and small gifts.

But on December 19th, another terrible snowstorm hit the village and lasted for two days. When Reverend Richards went over to the church, his heart sank when he saw that the roof had leaked, causing a large area of plaster about 10 feet by 8 feet to fall off the front wall of the chancel apse just behind the altar.

The Vicar cleaned up the mess on the floor, and not knowing what else to do but postpone the Christmas Eve service, headed home to The Glebe..

On the way he ran into Thomas Piggott and talked of his disappointment of the massive hole in the wall caused by the plaster collapse. Thomas claimed he may just have a solution which could help with the problem. Reverend Richards was intrigued..."what on earth do you have in mind, Thomas...?"

Piggott explained, that in his travels, he had bartered for a very large tablecloth of exquisite work.

Piggott went back to Ivy Cottage to collect it and handed it to the Vicar at the door of St Bartholmews'. It looked like the tablecloth had come from India, beautifully handmade with vibrant colours, richly decorated with peacocks, traditional henna designs and a Cross embroidered right in the centre. It was just the right size to cover up the hole in the front wall.

By this time it had started to snow again so Piggott decided make his way home again. As he turned left out of the gate, an older woman was walking past the Brooke Arms Inn.

She looked like she needed some shelter from the falling snow, so the Vicar invited her to wait in the warm church for a while. She had a kindly disposition and mentioned that her name was Alice.

After Reverend Richards got her a cup of tea from the vestry, she sat in a pew and paid little attention to the vicar while he got a ladder and hangers to put up the tablecloth as a wall tapestry. The vicar could hardly believe how beautiful it looked and it covered up the entire problem area. Then he noticed the woman walking down the centre aisle. Her face was like a sheet.

"Vicar," she asked, "where did you get that tablecloth?" The vicar explained, then the woman asked him to check the lower right corner to see if the initials 'AP' were embroidered into it there.... they were...!

These were her initials, and she had made this tablecloth 25 years before in India... the woman could hardly believe it as the vicar told how he had literally just gotten the tablecloth.

The woman, now glassy-eyed, explained that before the Indian uprising, she, her husband and son were such a happy young family. Her voice was now breaking, her lips quivered and her hands trembled as she recalled how the insurgents had stormed the army barracks and went on a killing spree.

She went to say how she got separated from her son, was kidnapped and then kept hostage for many months. Half-starved and weak, she managed to escape, but was informed that her husband and son had both been killed in the uprising.

The Reverend wanted to give her the tablecloth, but she made the vicar keep it for the church. As the snow was now falling even harder, Reverend Richards insisted on accompanying her home, as that was the least he could do, given that he'd just had his carriage converted to a sleigh by the blacksmith, William Keen, at The Smithy.

Alice lived on the other side of Lea Green and was only in Church Minshull for the day after visiting her friend Lottie Wall. She explained that on her return to England, she made her way to Cheshire, in the hope that Henry Brooke would help her out, but her pride would not allow it, instead settling for a job in domestic service at Henry Barnett's farm, without his Lordship ever knowing...

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By the time Christmas Eve had come around, at Willow Tree Farm, Tom's hopes of getting his first rifle this year, were as frozen as the ground outside,. For years he had listened to stories of his Dad's adventures in the Army and his precious Enfield rifle had become something Tom had longed for, but he also knew that money was tight...very tight.

By lunchtime, Papa Pilgrim had done the chores early for some reason and Tom just figured that he wanted a little extra time to prepare the goose, hanging in the pantry, before Christmas day.

After lunch was over Tom took his boots off and stretched out in front of the fireplace and waited for Papa to get down to plucking the goose. Tom was feeling sorry for himself a bit, to be honest, and wasn't in much of a mood for dealing with giblets and feathers. But Papa didn't get the goose, instead he bundled up again and went outside. Tom couldn't figure it out because they had already done all the chores. Soon Papa came back in. It was a cold clear Christmas Eve outside and there was ice in his beard. "Come on, Tom," he said. "Bundle up good, it's cold out today."

"We've already done all the chores", Tom thought, "so why is Papa dragging me out in the cold, and for no earthly reason". Tom couldn't think of anything else that needed doing, especially not on a day like this. But Tom also knew his Papa was not very patient with lazy people dragging their feet when told to do something, so up he got up and put his boots back on, got his cap, coat, and mittens.

Outside, Tom became even more dismayed. There in front of the farmhouse were the ponies, already hitched to a big sled. Papa never hitched up this sled unless he was going to haul a big load. "I think we'll put on the high sideboards," Papa said. "Here, help me Tom."

Papa Pilgrim then went into the woodshed and came out with an armload of wood - the wood that both of them had cut and chopped over the last few months, then split and stacked to ensure that they wouldn't freeze over the coming Winter.

"Papa," Tom asked, "what are you doing?"

"Have you been by widow Jackson's farm lately?" Papa asked. Mary Jackson lived about two miles down the road at Outlanes Farm. Her husband had died a year or so before and left her with three boys, the oldest being eight.

Yeah," said Tom, "Why?"

"I rode by just yesterday," Papa said. "little Edwin was out digging around in their logstore trying to find a few chips. They're out of wood, Tom."

That was all Papa Pilgrim said and then he turned and went back into the woodshed for another armload of wood. They loaded the sled so high that Tom began to wonder if the ponies would be able to pull it.

Finally, Papa went to the pantry and took down the goose. When he returned he was wearing his old red longcoat, a remnant from his army days, when the red tunic was for dress occasions only, but now it was ideal for keeping out the cold. He was also carrying a sack of flour over his right shoulder and a smaller sack of something in his left hand.

"What's in the little sack?" asked Tom. "Shoes, they're out of shoes. little Edwin just had hessian rags wrapped around his feet when he was out in the woodshed yesterday morning, looked like they came from potato sacks or something. I got the children a few sweets too. It just wouldn't be Christmas for them without a few sweets."

They rode the two miles to Mary Jackson's much of it in silence. Tom tried to think through what his Papa was doing. Yes they had spare wood and the goose and flour they could spare them too, but he knew they didn't have any money, so why was his Papa buying them shoes and sweets?

Papa Pilgrim steered the team in from the blind side of Outlands Farm and unloaded the wood as quietly as possible, then they took the goose, flour and shoes to the door and knocked. The door opened a crack and a timid voice said, "Who is it?" "Robert Pilgrim, Ma'am, and my son, Tom, could we come in for a bit?"

Mary Jackson opened the door and let them in. She had a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. The boys were wrapped in another and were sitting in front of the fireplace by a very small fire that hardly gave off any heat at all. Mary fumbled with a match and finally lit the lamp.

"We brought you a few things, Ma'am," Papa said and set down the sack of flour. Tom put the goose on the table. Then Papa handed her the sack that had the shoes in it. She opened it hesitantly and took the shoes out one pair at a time. There was a pair for her and one for each of the children - sturdy shoes, good shoes that would last.

She bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling and then tears filled her eyes and started running down her cheeks. She looked up at Papa like she wanted to say something, but words wouldn't come out.

"We brought a load of wood too, Ma'am," Papa said. He turned Tom and said, "Go and bring in enough to last awhile. Let's get that fire up to size and heat this place up."

Tom went back out to bring in the wood, he had a big lump in his throat and as much as he'd hate to admit it, there were tears in his eyes too. Seeing those three kids huddled around the fireplace and their mother standing there with tears running down her cheeks with so much gratitude in her heart that she couldn't speak, made him think how lucky he was.

Tom's heart swelled with a joy that he'd never known before, he could see they were literally saving the lives of these people.

They soon had the fire blazing and everyone's spirits soared. The kids started giggling when Papa Pilgrim handed them each a sweet, thinking he looked just like Father Christmas, dressed in red, with a long white beard and Mary looked on with a smile that probably hadn't crossed her face for a long time. She finally turned to both of them. "God bless you," she said. "I know the Lord has sent you."

Papa Pilgrim gave a wry smile and said, "The Lord lost my address a long time ago, I'm afraid, Ma'am, so I haven't got a prayer"

"Yes you do", said Mary Jackson, "You've got a prayer in St Bartholomews"

A lump came into Tom's throat and tears welled up in eyes again. he'd never thought of his Papa in those exact terms before, but after Mary mentioned it, he started remembering all the times he had gone out of his way for him, and many other people in need.

Tears were running down Mary Jackson's face again when they stood up to leave. Papa took each of the boys in his big arms and gave them a hug. They clung to him and didn't want him to go. Tom could see that they missed their Dad, and Tom was glad that he still had his although he would have dearly loved to have his mother to hug too.

At the door, Mary said, "Will I see you at the Christmas Eve service in St Bartholomew's evening, Robert?"

Pilgrim hesitated before saying, "I'm not much of a churchgoer these days, Ma'am".

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"Out on the sled home, Papa turned to Tom and said, "I want you to know something Son. Before he died Henry Brooke, had spoken to the military on my behalf, to try and get my Army pension early. Then yesterday a letter came to say that £5 pounds had come through. I started into town this morning to get you that Enfield rifle you've been wanting, but on the way I saw little Edwin out scratting in the logstore with his feet wrapped in those rags and I knew what I had to do... Son, I spent that money for shoes and a few sweets for those children. I hope you understand."

Of course Tom understood, he understood very well and was so glad what his Papa had done, his eyes became wet with tears again ...the Enfield seemed very low on his list of priorities. His Papa had given him a lot more, he had given him the best Christmas gift of his young life.

"One request though Papa", said Tom, "Can we attend the Christmas Eve service tonight...?"

"Can't see what harm it can do Son", said Papa with a smile...

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What a wonderful service they had on Christmas Eve. Despite the snow and cold, St Bartholomews was almost full. The music and the spirit were great. At the end of the service, Reverend Joseph Richards and his wife thanked everyone at the door for their attendance and many said that they would return.

One older man, whom the vicar sort of recognised as a newcomer to the village, continued to sit in one of the box pews staring frontwards, and the reverend wondered why he wasn't leaving. It was Robert Papa Pilgrim.

Robert asked the vicar where he got the tablecloth on the front wall because it was identical to one that his wife had made years ago when they lived in India and was curious how could there be two tablecloths so much alike?

He told the Reverend Richards how he believed his wife had been killed in an insurgent attack, some 25 years before, but his wife's body was never found. The vicar asked him if he would allow him to take him for a little ride.

Papa, asked Tom to meet him at home, whilst he and Reverend Richards drove up to Lea Green and to the same house where the vicar had taken the woman three days earlier.

By now, the snow clouds had cleared and the sky was filled with a wonderment of sparkling stars, befitting any Christmas Eve, as Robert Pilgrim tentatively knocked on the door...