

Steve looked at the clock-5am what a time to be faced with an emergency. 'I'll be there in five minutes' he said jumping out of bed and pulling on his clothes. He took Milly's spare key from the hook just inside the door and hurried in to her. She was lying on the settee in her pyjamas and dressing gown looking white as a sheet and shivering. The heating had not yet come on. The first thing he did was to fetch two blankets and cover her up. Taking her cold hands in his he began to warm them.

'Feel sick' she said.

He got the bucket in place just in time and was horrified to see blood in the vomit. He gave her a flannel to wipe her face, put the heating onto constant and dialled 999.

'Ambulance is on its way auntie.' he said. He phoned Dora and asked her to come and get some things together for Milly to take to hospital. She was already dressed and was there in minutes having first checked that Jeff was still asleep.

'One of us will need to go with her' said Steve.

'It should be you really but I'll go if you want.'

'No-you're right. When you've got everything ready you go back indoors. I'll phone you when I know anything.'

Dora quickly gathered the necessary items, gave Milly's hand a reassuring squeeze, kissed Steve then went indoors just as the ambulance pulled up outside. Tony arrived at 6 o'clock and Dora called him in to bring him up to date.

'Don't worry Dora. I'm sure she'll be fine.'

'I'm going to need to stay here till I hear from Steve so do you think you can go over to the pony centre when you've finished taking care of our horses? I'll phone the farm in a while and tell George and Vi what's happened. They can pass the message onto Ron. You know now I come to think of it Milly hasn't been herself for a couple of days.'

Dora functioned on auto-pilot for the next few hours jumping every time the phone rang which it did quite often. It was early afternoon when Steve phoned to say that Milly had been admitted to the medical ward for tests and he was coming home.

In the evening Vi went to babysit while Steve and Dora went to visit Milly. She looked really poorly and the sister in charge warned them she was very drowsy. Steve arranged to go the following afternoon to find out more news.

'Fancy a drink before we go home?' said Steve. 'I know Vi won't mind.'

They found a pub near the hospital. Neither of them had eaten much so they shared a plate of scampi and chips. The weather forecast had indicated that winter weather was on its way and it was only the first of November almost Steve's birthday. As they walked back to the car the wind was howling and it was biting cold. The gritting lorries were out on the main road but they knew that the roads would not be gritted once they left Tockwith. The estate car was warm and Dora felt safe with Steve behind the wheel.

'It's starting to freeze' he said 'Well will you look at that!' There was a cyclist on the road ahead and though the bike had lights on it could hardly be seen. As they drew closer the headlights picked out the rider who was wearing a policeman's helmet.

'Good heavens-that's surely not Bert out in this weather at this time of night. He'll freeze!'

Steve overtook the cycle and pulled in to the side of the road a few yards ahead. Bert made as if to cycle past.

'Bert- where are you off to?' called Steve out of the window.

'G-got c-called out to a suspected housebreaking. F-false alarm. H-have t- to f file my r-report.'

'Not tonight you don't. Get in and we'll take you home. The bike will just about fit.'

Bert didn't argue. 'T thanks' he said when settled in the back. 'My w-wife will be getting w-worried. I p-phoned just before I l left the scene but that w-was ages ago. My legs were s -so c -cold they wouldn't work properly.'

Dora passed a blanket over from the front.

'Here wrap this round you- best get yourself warm. Why didn't they send a car from Tockwith?'

'Been a bank job in Feckingham- all the available cars have been sent over there. Leeds police are fully stretched tonight because of the road conditions. You mind how you go Steve.'

'Here we are Bert-home safe and sound.' said Steve a few minutes later.

They turned off the main road and now it was becoming misty so Steve slowed right down. ~It was lucky he had because moments later they found a car parked at the roadside.

'Grief- I hope no-one's run out of petrol and is walking' said Steve drawing to a halt yet again.

'Stay in the car' he said as Dora made to get out. Steve peered in at the windows but could see nothing.

Then he heard a thumping noise. He tried all four doors of the car-an estate bu they were all locked. He opened the boot and to his amazement he found a man bound and gagged. Luckily he had a penknife on his key ring and soon had the man freed and sitting in the car with Dora. 'What happened mate?'

'Four armed blokes. Their car was parked and like you I stopped thinking they needed help but they tied me up and stole my car. I reckon this one's stolen too!'

'The robbery!. No-one would think they'd escape this way!' said Steve.

'Jeff and the others' screamed Dora.'

'Relax love - it's only a couple of miles to Follyfoot. They wouldn't want to stop again so soon!'

Nevertheless he started the engine and drove to Coppers Rest approaching with caution. He could hear the television and opened the door glad to see Vi sitting knitting. Dora and Mike Briton followed close behind.

On the way Mike had told them his car only had half a tank of petrol. Steve locked the door and telephoned the police telling them the exacct spot where they had found Mike. Then he phoned Follyfoot, The Pony Centre and Ron and Teri to tell them to lock their doors just in case. What about Tony's parents place?' said Dora. Steve phoned them too.

'You'd better stay here tonight Vi-you too Mike. Hopefully they'll have caught those blokes by the morning.'

Dora put the kettle on while Steve checked on Jeff. They heard a car approaching about 15 minutes later. Steve looked out of the window and recognised one of the polie cars from Tockwith. There was a knock on the door.

'Steve- it's Daniel West. I need to speak to Mr. Briton. I've got Hannah Sullivan with me. Can you let us in?'

Steve opened the door to admit the two officers and immediately locked it again behind them.

'You can use our office' said Dora showing them the way.

Tony had been out with his girlfriend and called in to her house for a coffee. Ellie's parents were still up. Tony's dad had telephoned and told them about the robbers on the run.

'We want you to stay here tonight, Tony.'

'I should be at home with my parents'

'Your dad says not to worry as the dogs will alert them if anyone goes near the place.

At that very moment the dogs on Sunnybank farm began barking loudly. The dogs at the house occupied by Tony's brother and his family half a mile away heard because the night was very still and sound carried. Soon they joined in the chorus and to the men who had been forced to abandon Mike's car it seemed as though every dog in the neighbourhood was ready to pounce. When Steve phoned Tony's dad had disabled his vehicle and his son Rob had done the same. Sukey, who was in the house jumped onto the window seat her sharp eyes picking out a shadowy figure approaching the garage. She growled and went to paw at the front door. Tony's dad immediately got on the phone to the police. Having no

luck with obtaining a vehicle Louis Hayes ran back the way he'd come. The others were nowhere to be found having decided to try their luck elsewhere. A large German shepherd belonging to Roger had been let loose and set off in pursuit of the fleeing Louis. Terrified the man reached in his pocket for his gun but the dog had no fear and leapt at him knocking the weapon out of his hand then sat on him to prevent him getting up growling menacingly when he tried to do so. A siren could be heard and men with other dogs began to arrive scouring the area for the other robbers.

Daniel and Hannah took Vi back to Follyfoot and radioed in to ask if they could drop Mike home too. They were told that the hunt was over and all the miscreants apprehended. Mike's car had been abandoned because it was out of petrol but the police needed to examine it for evidence as the proceeds of the robbery had not been found on the men. It was agreed that Mike should be taken home and his car returned to him when the police had finished with it.

'Well that was an eventful night' said Steve as they got ready for bed.

Early next morning the phone rang. Dora hated these early morning calls and hoped that there was nothing amiss with Milly.

'It's your mother, Dora.'

She took the phone and listened while her mother spoke saying very little herself. It was a very long call. 'They've just landed at Heathrow. Daddy's feeling very well but he's got three months leave. It's being suggested that he should retire next summer-basically just go back to South America to tie up some loose ends'

'And how do you feel about having them back in this country for good?'

'Steve- they want to sell the London house and move to Yorkshire-back to their roots they say. '

'Oh well-it'll be nice for Jeff to see something of his grandparents.'

'Mmmn' said Dora with an unreadable expression on her face.

'There's something you're not telling me.'

'They want us to go up to London for a few days before Christmas- and then they want to spend the holiday with us and afterwards do some house hunting-probably go and stay in a hotel somewhere.'

'Ok -is that all?'

'Mmmn. Steve what shall we do for your birthday?'

'Oh I dunno. Milly's is at the end of November. If she's better by then perhaps we could take her somewhere special. I'm happy for us just to go to 'The Wayfarer, for a meal on Saturday after we've visited Milly. Vi will babysit I know. Apart from the evening WI once a month she doesn't go out in the evening.'

So it was all arranged. Milly was improving after receiving treatment for a bleeding ulcer and was expected to be out of hospital after the weekend. Dora's present to Steve was a Polaroid camera and he went off to take some pictures of the lake looking like a Christmas card in the early morning frost.

After breakfast Dora said she might as well go to the monthly Saturday Mum's and toddlers as Jeff was asking after his friends and there were no riding lessons booked. The postman arrived early and she skimmed through the letters before leaving, when they got back she poured herself a coffee and Jeff a glass of milk and sat down for a more leisurely look.

'Can me paint?' asked Jeff'

'Darling you've been painting all morning!'

'Jeff likes painting!'

I know you do but it's getting near lunchtime.'

'After lunch?'

'That's up to daddy-he's looking after you this afternoon while I go down and help auntie Hazel unpack some stock for the shop. We'll have people wanting to buy Christmas presents soon.'

While she got lunch ready Steve showed Jeff the photographs he had taken.

'Can I paint this afternoon?' he pleaded.

'We'll see' replied Steve. 'Let's go wash your hands.' Dora was collecting up her post when they came back.

'Anything interesting?' asked Steve.

'Not really' she said bundling something back into a large envelope and putting it in the magazine rack. 'What's that then?'

'Oh- just a catalogue. Nothing you'd be interested in. There's some cards there for you- none with a Liverpool postmark though!'

'I never thought there would be!' The cards were from Gyp, Anna and Mike and Callie who was away studying. It said she was looking forward to seeing everyone at Christmas. There were more cards and parcels which he'd brought back from Follyfoot and these he opened after lunch with lots of 'help' from Jeff.

'I painted you a picture this morning' he said. The painting had been left to dry on top of the washing machine but Jeff took him to look at it. There were lots of brown and grey four legged creatures.

'I bet they're all the horses!' said Steve.

'Yes!!' exclaimed Jeff.

'Want to paint picture for auntie!' he said.

'Well put like that how can I refuse?' laughed Steve. When Dora had gone out Steve got out the old coffee table Jeff used for painting and put it in the kitchen area covering the tiles with newspaper then sat down to read 'The 39 steps which was one of the classics given to him by Mrs. Oldcastle.

'Finished' called Jeff later and went towards Steve with his latest offering which was still wet and started to drip onto the magazine rack. Steve took all the affected magazines out and laid them to dry. The envelope Dora had received earlier seemed to have fared the worst and he took the contents out. The cover of the magazine was shiny and not really damaged. Steve laid it down and went to clean up. When he sat down again he picked up the magazine only to discover it was not really a magazine at all. He skimmed through it then threw it down on the floor in disgust. Jeff, all cleaned up climbed onto his lap for a cuddle. He soon fell asleep and Steve laid him down in his room. Dora came in and went straight to put the kettle on.

'That was fun!' she said. Steve said nothing. 'Do you want a coffee?' she asked.

'No- I want you to come and explain this!' he said brandishing the glossy prospectus for St, Cuthberts, Leeds preparatory and boarding school. 'Not a magazine is it?'

'My mother asked the school to send it. She and daddy have offered to pay for Jeff to go to prep school when he's old enough.'

'I knew you were keeping something from me! They've been back in the country a matter of days and already they want to meddle. Well I'm telling you straight Dora- no son of mine is going to ponce about in a uniform like that!' he said pointing to the shirt with the Eton collar, the knee breeches and the red cap with a gold tassel. Five year olds looking like that i ask you!'

'He's my son too and the school has a very good reputation.'

Steve took the brochure, ripped it up and threw it in the bin.

'And as for being a boarder at 8 years old.....'

'They don't have to board. There's a bus goes to both schools from Tockwith.'

Steve could feel his temper rising and shouted 'I suppose you want him to talk as if he's got plums in his mouth -not to have a broad Yorkshire accent like his dad. Once and for all he's not going!

Jeff came wandering through from his bedroom rubbing his eyes.

'Why daddy shout?' Dora answered for him.

'Daddy's a bit cross that's all'

'With Jeff?'

'No mate- not with you. D'you want to come and see the donkeys while mummy gets your tea ready?'

'Oh yes!' he said running to put on his wellies.'

'We'll talk more later ' Steve said to Dora. 'We'll be back in half an hour.'

She bit her lip as she began to peel potatoes for chips and wished she'd put the prospectus out of site in her bedroom drawer but the damage had been done. She needed to ring her mother.

While Jeff ate his tea supervised by Steve ,Dora got ready. The table at the Wayfarer was booked for 8.30pm which would mean they could spend an hour with Milly visiting being from 6.30pm-8. She'd picked up People's Friend and Woman's Weekly magazines in the village as Milly was now beginning to get a bit bored and wasn't one to read books or newspapers. When Vi arrived she asked if Steve had enjoyed his birthday and he muttered something unintelligible then thanked her for his card and the thick winter socks she had knitted him.

'Everything alright?' she asked as Dora came out of Jeff's room.

'Mmm he's sound asleep. Had a busy day.'

Steve put his coat on. 'Ready?' She nodded picking up her own suede coat from the chair where she'd put it earlier. Normally Steve helped her into it but tonight he turned towards the door as she put it on and picked up the magazines.

Steve did not like holding a conversation while he was driving and once again the roads were icy. When they got to the hospital he strode on ahead and Dora was glad of her sturdy leather boots. It was becoming slippery underfoot and she picked her way carefully not bothering to try to keep pace with Steve. He was already seated by his aunt's bed when Dora got there.

'Ee whats up wi' you two?' asked Milly.'Nothing for you to worry about auntie!' said Steve.

'How are you feeling now?' asked Dora.

'Better by the hour love eh but I hate to see you two at odds wi' each other and on your birthday too Steve. Won't you let me help'

'Steve's got into a state over nothing that's all!'

'Huh- I'd hardly call sending our son to a boarding school nothing!'

'Dora wouldn't do a thing like that!'

'It's what her parents want!'

'Steve-don't make a scene here. I'm going to visit Mrs Jimwood in the corner over there. She never seems to have any visitors.' Dora went over and sat by the older lady.

'Now listen to me Steve- don't you let this business ruin your meal out-you are still going I hope.'

'Yeah but I don't feel much like it.'

'Now don't you go sounding off again without listening to Dora's side.'

'Okay!'

'Promise me Steve.' he nodded. 'You don't want me t'ave a relapse do yer?'

'No of course not!'

'Then let me see you smile- and don't you go stalking off without Dora when you leave. The nurses say it's treacherous underfoot and she doesn't want a broken leg for Christmas!'

Steve managed a bit of a smile. Milly looked across at Dora and waved to the lady in the bed. Dora had removed her coat and was wearing her grey jersey silk dress.

'Ee but she's bonny! You two still make a handsome couple.'

The ward sister walked in. 'All being well Mrs Lane will be able to come home on Tuesday' she said. 'I presume someone will pick her up?'

'Of course!'

'I can get a taxi!'

'You'll do no such thing!' said Dora and Steve together.

Milly looked up at the clock. 'Time you two were off!'

Steve stood up and beckoned to Dora.

'We'll see you tomorrow evening. Some of your church friend are coming in the afternoon' said Steve as

Dora bent to kiss Milly.

'Remember not to go to bed still quarrelling' she said.

'We could be in for a late night!' said Steve sketching a wave and making for the door.

Taking heed of his aunt's words he paused at the main entrance and waited for Dora to catch up then took her arm and led her to the car. As he went to turn on the ignition she laid a hand on his arm. 'Just wait a minute Steve. I wouldn't want Jeff to go to that school either or to boarding school. All his little friends will be going to the local primary school and Jeff will too. I rang my mother and told her in no uncertain terms exactly what I thought of her idea!'

'Why on earth didn't you stop me from going on then?'

'You got me a bit cross going on about 'your son'- he's our son Steve- neither of us can make important decisions about his future on our own and I told mother she's absolutely no right to try and interfere. I don't want to spoil the rest of your birthday Steve. Can we go and enjoy our meal without quarrelling?'

'Of course-and I'm sorry I got on my high horse. It's just that I love Jeff so much-but I know you do too and I should have realised you would only want what's best for him.'

He brushed her lips gently.

'I still hate it when we quarrel-oh and for the record I love your Yorkshire accent and I love you!' They shared a long loving kiss then drove to their favourite restaurant.

Vi had been a bit concerned at how they were acting before they went out and was relieved when they came back in laughing together.

Next evening when they visited Milly she was sitting in the chair by Mrs. Jimwood's bed chatting to her. It didn't escape her notice that Dora and Steve entered the ward hand in hand and smiling.

'Looking forward to coming home auntie?'

'Ee I am that. My plants are going to want seeing to. Reckon the chrysanthus I was bringing on for Christmas will have died.'

'No it's okay- George has been keeping an eye on all your plants.'

'We're having the grand opening of 'The Pony shop on December 5th- Father Christmas will be there. I hope you'll soon feel really fit because the weekend before that we want to go to Pineways holiday camp for your birthday then we start the round of Christmas functions at 'The Follybarn.'

'Nay- I'm too old for that sort of thing-you go and enjoy yourselves.'

'There's something for all ages auntie. We'll show you the brochure when you get home- we won't take no for an answer it's already booked.'

One of the nurses popped in and said that it had started to snow.

'It's a bit early for that' said Dora.

'It were forecast' said Milly. 'Apparently we're in for another bad spell this side of Christmas. Now you two get off home before it gets too bad and if it's bad tomorrow don't come out. After all I'll be home on Tuesday.'

As they passed the nurses station two of them were stood talking. 'You know about horses don't you?' said Lisa Machin. Dora and Steve nodded. 'Apparently there's one loose around here tonight. It was being loaded up after market this afternoon-going to the continent I believe and it bolted.' Dora and Steve looked at each other knowing what going to the continent meant. 'Poor thing out on a night like this.'

Although they kept a lookout for the missing horse on the way home they saw no trace of it but when they went indoors Vi told them George had phoned to say a stray horse had turned up at Follyfoot and he'd put it in the isolation stable as it did not look in a very good condition. 'We'll have to report it in the morning.' said Steve.

'Why-you know what will happen to it!'

'We can't keep it-it'd be theft. '

'It might not be the same horse. We'll take a look in the morning and see how it is.'

Next day with Jeff snugly wrapped up against the cold Dora walked down to Follyfoot with Steve after a good warming breakfast. Dora took Jeff into the farmhouse so he wouldn't see the horse. When they opened the stable door it was eating from a bucket and didn't even raise its head. 'Not very old by the look of him' said Steve. 'I bet he was beautiful once' said Dora. 'Steve' 'Yes?' he said knowing full well what was coming. 'When you let them know we've found him ask if they are willing to sell him.' Steve sighed but knew she had her heart set on rescuing the animal. 'Ok.'

Dora hadn't thought he'd give in so easily and normally he wouldn't have but Steve was conscious of being hasty with her over the school business and this was his way of making it up to her. The police told Steve the contact details for the owner one Trevor Collier who Steve knew by reputation. When Steve eventually got through to him he said 'Well the rest of the consignment are already on their way to France and I can't afford to keep him till next week after the sale. I don't know why you would want him. He cost me £15-you can have him for £25.' 'I'll give you 20 cash if you come and collect the money.'

'Well I suppose it'll have to do. You're at Follyfoot you say? I can be there in 30 minutes.'

He was as good as his word and later Steve went in to look the animal over properly.

'Well fella-welcome to your new home. Best get the vet over to look at you I reckon.'

It was early afternoon before the vet called and suggested a course of treatment for the animal which would be a bit costly.

'I reckon when he's fit you can sell him for a good price-he's still young after all.'

'Can you see Dora agreeing to sell him?' said Steve and Tom, the vet, laughed.

'Well you never know! Anyway I must be off. I drove through a heavy snowstorm on the way and according to the radio there's more on the way.'

Steve found Tony. 'I reckon I'd best drive you home and you can leave Bianca here. I don't want you to get caught in a blizzard- just look at that sky.'

'Ok thanks Steve- I'll get someone to drop me off tomorrow.' Dora and Jeff were over at the pony centre. Ben was home and looking after Jeff while Dora and Hazel tended the ponies. Steve had dropped them off earlier and telephoned to say he'd pick them up on the way back from Tony's. By the time he arrived the snow was falling thick and fast and he was glad that the warmth of Copper's rest was only minutes away and that the conditions were no problem to the trusty landrover. As they went indoors the phone was ringing. It was Milly saying that they must not attempt to visit her as road conditions were very bad round the hospital. They were going to arrange to send her home by ambulance the next day when hopefully conditions would have improved.

Milly arrived the next afternoon. The weather hadn't really improved but there had been a spate of accidents and her bed was needed. Mrs Jimwood had been sent in the same ambulance. 'I don't think she should be coming home at all, poor soul. She's all on her own you know.'

'Want build man!' said Jeff. Dora looked out of the window. 'Just a quick one then Jeff. It's going to freeze soon and we don't want to be out in that!'

'Daddy help!'

'Daddy's got to take Tony home again. Let's hurry up and get your man built so daddy sees it when he gets home.'

'I'll make sure the kettle's on for when you've finished.' said Milly.

When Steve got home Jeff jumped up and down with excitement. 'Daddy-see man, daddy see man!'

The snowman was dressed in a hat and scarf. Steve looked at Milly who smiled.

'Yes love-they're Berts. I told Dora where to find them- Bert wouldn't mind I'm sure.'

The next week brought a thaw which the weathermen assured people was only temporary. Having got used to the idea of a weekend away Milly was really looking forward to it. After breakfast on the day before they were due to leave she went next door and found Dora looking upset.

'Eh love- what's the matter. Aren't you looking forward to tomorrow?'

'Well I was but Steve was in a right mood this morning. He didn't eat much breakfast, left me to do everything for Jeff and didn't even kiss either of us goodbye. At that moment Tony stuck his head in as he normally did when he came to do the horses.

'What's up with Steve today Dora? He's biting everyone's head off. Have you two had a row?'

'No- we were fine last night. He did get up and take a couple of painkillers in the night so maybe he has a headache. '

when it was time for morning tea Dora and Milly took Jeff down to Follyfoot. Milly's birthday was not until Sunday when they would be away so Hazel was coming over with a birthday cake leaving the ponies in charge of the college students. The sponge cake was a joy to behold decorated with a basket of sugar paste flowers. There was also a plaque with 'Happy birthday Milly- 55 on it. Teri and Ron brought Rikki in to join the celebration. Everyone gave her little gifts, Jeff helped her blow out the candles and she cut up the cake. Steve shook his head when offered a piece and went outside. Dora followed.

'Steve- you've not said a word to Milly and you've not given Jeff or me our morning kiss and cuddle. what have we done to upset you?'

'Nothing girl-just leave me alone will you!'

'Are you coming home for lunch?'

'Not today- I need to go into town.'

'Well you won't forget we promised we'd take Milly to the WI family tea party tonight will you? She's so looking forward to it.'

Teri came out with Rikki in her arms. Normally Steve would take the little girl in his arms and hug her but today he just walked away from her leaving her in tears for already she loved her uncle Steve. ' Now look what you've done. You've upset Rikki. ' Steve looked down at the ground. 'Yeah.'

Jeff came running out of the house pursued by Tony.

'Daddy push me on the swing please' he said eagerly but Steve just mumbled something and walked towards Alex's stable.

'Steve!' called Dora. 'Answer Jeff-he's asked you so nicely!'

Tears sprang into Jeff's eyes. 'Mummy cross wiv daddy?' he said.

' Mmm well daddy's feeling grumpy. I think he must have got out of bed the wrong side this morning. Come on mummy will push you on the swing for a little while but it's still too cold to be out here long.' A while later as she was thinking of going home Dora heard Steve shouting at Ron then saw him go over to the land rover and get in. She wasn't standing for this. She picked Jeff up, ran over and leaned in at the open window.

'If you won't kiss me I'll kiss you Steve Ross. I don't know where you're off to but you're not going without Jeff and I give you a kiss.'

Steve looked at the tear stained faces of his wife and son and got out of the car.

'Treat me gently love. I've got a raging toothache and I've managed to get the first appointment after lunch. The painkillers I've taken haven't even dulled the pain and you know the dentist isn't my favourite place. I'm sorry I've given everyone a rotten morning.'

'Steve, darling why didn't you tell me? Let me drive you. I can leave Jeff with Vi.'

'No- just give me a cuddle then I'll go by myself.'

'But I want to come!'

'Please Dora.'

'Okay -if you're sure.'

He picked Jeff up , gave him a hug and kissed his forehead. Then still holding him he kissed Dora too.

'Shall I tell Milly tonight's off?'

'No- if they can't fix me up you can all go without me. You might have to drive us tomorrow though! I'd best be off- don't want to be late' he said caressing her cheek.

'Love you daddy!' said Jeff.

'Me too' echoed Dora.

'Love you both-see you later.' Dora watched as he drove away then went to explain things who all said if they'd known they would have driven him or at least gone with him. Dora and Milly walked with Jeff back to the bungalow for a light lunch and waited anxiously for Steve to return.

When he did he was smiling rather lopsidedly. 'I thought I'd got an abscess but it was an exposed nerve and Mr. Findle managed to save the tooth. I popped into Follyfoot to apologise and Tony was still there. He's going to stay on a bit later and he and George'll do the chores. Ron's gone with Teri to the baby clinic. I didn't get much sleep last night so I'm going to try and have a nap before we go out.'

'Jeff ought to have one too. Can he come with you?'

'Sure-come on mate. Let's you and I go for a sleep.'

Later when Dora went into the bedroom her heart filled with love as she saw the two males in her life curled up together asleep. She decided to take a quick shower and when she got back in the bedroom Jeff was still sleeping but Steve was awake.

'Sorry darling-did the shower wake you up?'

'I dunno but it doesn't matter because I need a shower too. Come here and give me a hug ' he said pulling her down beside him

'Steve- we can't!' She said as he began kissing her neck.

'Sssh- I just want to hold you and make up for being such a grump this morning.'

'Is your mouth okay now?'

'It's fine. Next time one of us goes for a check up we should take Jeff so he gets used to it.

I'm afraid that's another bad memory of the children's home. The older kids always teased us if we had to go to the dentist- he was not a nice man, his name was Hank, came from America and we used to call him Hank Yanker.'

'Well you couldn't meet a nicer man than Mr. Findle. Now be off with you to the shower, I want to get dressed.'

'I can help' he said.

'Thanks but I'll manage' laughed Dora.

As Dora was putting the final touches to her appearance the phone rang. Steve, who was getting Jeff ready, heard distress in her voice as she spoke to the caller.

'What's up love?' he asked.

'That was Joe, He can't open the pony shop for me because he has to go to America on urgent business and he's decided to take the family and stay out there for Christmas.'

'Well you've only got on the poster that it will be opened by a mystery guest. We'll find someone else. If all else fails I'm sure Lady Bridget will do the honours.

(Lady Bridget Maitland, a distant cousin of Lord Carne had bought Carne manor when Martha went into a home for gentlefolk who had fallen on hard times.)

'She wouldn't know one end of a pony from the other. All those beautiful stables being wasted.'

'Come on- it's time to go. Leave it to me, I promise I'll find you someone when we get back from holiday.'

The evening was a great success with party games, quizzes, bingo and a running buffet. As the occasion drew to a close Steve went to chat to Lady Maitland who was an honorary president of the WI. Dora gave a little sigh. Just then Mrs. Bendiger who was the WI president got to her feet to make her speech of thanks. At the end she announced the name of her successor- Millicent Lane. There was a round of applause and Milly blushed as people congratulated her.

'Did you know about this auntie?' asked Steve as he enveloped her in a hug.

'Oh yes. Y'have to be nominated and accept nomination and members have to vote. I was told at the last meeting I'd been elected and that it would be announced tonight. That's why I was so anxious to be out

of hospital in time for us to come. In the excitement Dora forgot to ask if Lady Maitland would be opening the pony centre. Jeff had fallen asleep on Mrs Carmichael's lap.

'Best we get this little chap home' said Steve lifting him up and getting his coat on.

Next day they set off bright and early for Pineways Holiday Centre which was an hour and a half's journey. They arrived in time to settle into their chalets before lunch. They drove past the children's adventure playground. 'Wow-Jeff wants to play!'

'Later if it stays fine' promised Dora.

'If not there's an indoor version near the dining room' said Steve.

When they collected their key they had been given details of meal times and a map to help them get around.

After they'd unpacked they made their way to the main centre where they studied the events programme before entering the dining room and joining the queue for food.

'Eee it's like a work's canteen' said Milly who had experienced these in the war. Secretly Steve thought it a bit like reform school but kept his thoughts to himself. There was a menu on the wall giving several choices. 'Look' said Dora. 'Beef stew and dumplings!'

'Obviously chef trained at the same school as Slugger!'

Milly opted for the stew and the aroma was so unlike that which came from Slugger's offering that Steve just had to have a taste even though he had chosen mixed grill. Jeff had fish fingers and Dora predictably fish and chips. Clean plates told their own story. Milly did not want a dessert, Jeff had ice cream and Steve and Dora shared a portion of spotted dick and custard. 'I don't think we'll get black forest gâteau or blackcurrant cheesecake here'

he said. After lunch Dora supervised Jeff at the indoor play area while Steve walked Milly back to the 3 bed roomed chalet so she could have a nap.

'Will you come and wake me in time for the old tyme dancing please?'

'Sure. There's punch and Judy for the kids at the same time'

They enjoyed a fun weekend sampling the delights of the swimming pool, the funfair, the children's shows and races. Milly was happy to babysit Jeff in the evenings to allow Dora and Steve to visit the cinema and the cabarets. Once they looked in on the late night disco but didn't stay very long because the music was rather loud and neither of them were much good at dancing. On Sunday evening after the vocalist had finished, the weekend came to a close with some party dances then some smoochy music which finally made them take to the dance floor. 'It's been a good weekend' said Dora happily dancing held close to Steve his gentle kisses promising much for later. '

As they walked back to the chalet for the last time Steve said

'Jeff seemed to like the water. We should go to the pool regularly. You're a right little mermaid and I'm sure you can soon teach him to swim. Maybe if we go regularly I'll get better too.' Steve was conscious of not being a very good swimmer.

'Perhaps we could even have a pool somewhere-we've enough space now.' said Dora.

'I don't think finances will allow it-yet. Maybe when the pony centre takes off.'

Dora groaned. 'Oh there's still the matter of who's going to open it-you said you didn't ask Lady Maitland-you were talking to her for a long time.'

'Mmmn- not about that. I've promised to find you someone and I will!'

Back home everyone was excited about the coming weekend. George had been recruited to play Father Christmas, Vi was busy wrapping gifts for him to hand out, Annabelle took care of contacting the local press and radio stations, Tony and Ron made a sleigh on an old trailer which could be pulled by two horses, then they painted it red and rigged up some lights and music so that George could arrive in style. Milly made an elf costume for Jeff and a tiny fairy outfit for Rikki, she also made sure there were plenty of her plants ready for sale and later in the week helped Hazel to bake and decorate fairy cakes. Teri looked after Jeff during the afternoons when Rikki had her nap. She loved having him and hoped that

one day she would have a son of her own. Her mother had already been dropping hints that it was good to have your family close together. Steve tried to carry on with the normal work of Follyfoot assisted by George and the others when they had time. Dora spent a lot of time at the centre checking prices and supervising the two students who were looking after the ponies. The weather had improved and several children came out for lessons spending time afterwards peering in at the shop window. As well as equipment there was a good range of toys 'My Little Pony', Sindy and Barbie horses and sets of riding clothes for the dolls, hobby horses which were made locally, board games, books, jigsaws and an assortment of items for adults too. She had not started out with the idea of selling these but Ben had persuaded her that it made good sense to diversify and so encourage more people to visit.

On Thursday afternoon she collected Jeff from Teri and found that Steve had gone home already. Millie was in the bungalow kitchen making toffee apples and keeping watch over the pork chops braising in the oven. Dora was bursting with excitement as they had spent the afternoon decorating the shop with lights, paper chains and a Christmas tree. It was too early to decorate the home yet but she had really enjoyed her afternoon. As she took off Jeff's outdoor clothes she asked where Steve was.

'In the office' said Milly. She went off to find him. Milly told Jeff to play well away from the stove as boiling sugar could give a nasty burn and she needed to concentrate on what she was doing.

'Steve! The centre looks amazing. You'll have to come and see tomorrow!' Steve was on the phone and hastily put it down when Dora entered.

'Who was that?' she asked.

'Oh just someone making enquiries.'

'What about?'

'Er- a function in the spring.'

'Who was it?'

'Didn't give a name. May call back. They're having a ring around.'

'Did they seem okay with the price?'

'What- oh er yeah I think so.'

Later that evening the phone rang while Dora was in the bedroom changing and Steve rushed to take the call in the office before she could pick it up. She looked at the extension and had her hand on the receiver but didn't pick it up- after all she trusted Steve didn't she?

The forecast for the next day was for gale force winds and snow was said to be on its way arriving some time over the weekend. Dora fretted that the opening would be ruined. She was still worrying about who was going to perform the opening ceremony although Steve promised her faithfully that he had things sorted though he refused to tell her who was coming. She couldn't sleep on Friday things whirled round in her mind. Would they have enough food? Would the presents from Santa be popular with the children? Would anyone actually come? Would the roads be slippery and would the person Steve got for the opening actually turn up and would people recognise them. She tossed and turned and finally got up pulled on her warm dressing gown and slippers and went to make a cup of tea. She looked out into the garden, the wind had died down and as yet there was no sign of any frost. Cradling her mug she sat on the sofa and for the umpteenth time went over the plans for the next day. At last, exhausted she began to doze and it was then that the dream came again. She had not had it for several weeks.

Again she could not remember the details when she woke up but she cried out in distress. Steve had woken up to find she was not in bed and was coming to investigate when he heard her.

'What are you doing out here?'

'Couldn't sleep then when I finally dropped off I had that horrible dream again.' She shivered. 'Come on- back to bed. Big day ahead and you need your rest.'

When she was safely enfolded in his warm embrace he said 'Don't worry girl. Everything's going to be okay and I promise you that you won't be disappointed by our mystery guest.'

When they got up a weak sun was trying valiantly to break through the clouds which looked as if they

held snow. They hurried through breakfast and made sure the horses were all fed and settled before going over to the pony centre. The students usually went home for the weekend but had stayed on to help. Ben had been blowing up red balloons. Dora and Hazel sported red sweatshirts with a specially designed logo in blue on the pocket. There was an hour to go before the official opening at 10 o'clock. Santa was arriving at 10.30. Dora was nervous and kept looking at her watch. Cars began arriving and families emerged. Ray and Dan, the two students showed people where to park and Tony, borrowed from his other duties for the day, began giving rides on the ponies. Ron walked the donkeys over from Follyfoot and Jeff had to be persuaded that other children could ride them too. Dora was soon surrounded by a group of children wanting to know when they could go into the shop and didn't notice a smart car pull up. Steve made his way to her and said 'Come and say hello to your special guests!' 'Rachel! Seth- how lovely of you to come.'

We were glad to be able to after the help you gave us with 'Brigand' We've brought Ruby and Roger. We thought you might like them to give a demonstration of riding. They're both used to riding different ponies.'

'That would be wonderful-good for Jeff to see Roger riding. Would you like a cup of tea and a sandwich?' 'No-we'll wait till after the opening like everyone else.'

Dora introduced everyone. Tony's girlfriend Ellie had come to help out in addition to everyone from Follyfoot. Little Rikki looked lovely in her red and white snowsuit. They had hired a P. A. system for the day-much more efficient than that they'd used for the Follyfoot races several years ago. 'Steve-will you do the introductions please?' asked Dora as the opening time approached. He stood at the microphone and cleared his throat.

'If I could have everyone gathered round please, thank you. Ladies, gentleman, boys and girls it gives me great pleasure to introduce our special guests- former 3 day event world champion Rachel Farley and her husband olympic team member Seth Drake.'

There was a round of applause as they stepped forward waving and smiling. Steve lifted Jeff up and Dora came to stand beside them linking her arm with Steve and smiling up at him.

'Thank you darling. It was a lovely surprise. I suppose that was what those secret phone calls were about.' Steve grinned. There was a blue ribbon across the entrance to the shop and after a short speech from Seth about how he hoped the pony centre would be a stepping stone for many children which would lead them to a love of ponies and horses and maybe to a career in eventing, racing or showjumping Rachel cut the ribbon and the shop and the centre were officially declared open. The door of one stable was opened to reveal a padded armchair beside which stood a large cotton wool snowman. Ron shouted 'Make way for Santa Claus' and the horse drawn sleigh driven by Santa George came into sight. The horses looked magnificent their manes plaited and bells jingling from the reins.

'Ho Ho Ho Merry Christmas' called George as he dismounted carrying his sack. Two very large decorated tubs were brought out from behind his chair which contained parcels wrapped in different coloured paper for different age groups as well as showing suitability for boys or girls. The kitchen and shop doors were now wide open and people milled around going from one place to another eating hot sausage rolls and mince pies and drinking mulled wine or a non-alcoholic fruit punch. Santa did a roaring trade selling his presents. Cameras flashed as children were photographed on his knee.

'Why's uncle George dressed funny?' asked Jeff as he stood in line waiting to receive his gift with Teri and Rikki.

'Ssshhh-' said Teri. 'Santa has a cold and couldn't come so uncle George is helping out!'

Ellie was helping Hazel and Vi with the refreshments. Ben and Annabelle were now staffing the shop and Milly was selling her plants. Steve brought Looby Loo and Solly for Ruby and Roger to mount and announced over the microphone that there would now be a short riding demonstration for all those who were interested. Quite a few people, some with refreshments still in their hands gathered to watch. Jeff had received a toy car from Santa and stood holding Ron's

hand.

'What do you reckon mate- would you like to ride like that?'

Steve held his breath. They knew Jeff loved riding the donkeys and being with the horses and ponies but he realised they had never actually asked if he wanted to learn to ride properly.

'Oh yes-my pony Dynamite's here already. ' Steve let his breath out and ruffled his son's hair.

'Come and say hello to Roger JR- he'll tell you all about learning to ride.'

As the sun went down people began to leave and the temperature dropped. Ben counted the days takings and locked the money safely in the safe after the shop closed at 4.30pm. Dora was very satisfied with the day and had signed up several more children for riding lessons starting in the New Year. The shop would not be open again until Monday and then only in the mornings except for Saturday. They had agreed to take on a young girl from the village to train as a shop assistant under the supervision of Annabelle. There was quite a bit of food left over and so everyone had tea together. By the time they left snow was falling fast. Dora sighed- 'No riding lessons tomorrow-the roads will probably be blocked and anyway it's too cold for the children.'

They woke to a white winter wonderland. Tony didn't work Sundays so Steve saw to their horses then trudged down to Follyfoot. While he was gone Dora received a phone call from her father and on Steve's return she said

'Steve mum and dad want us to go down to London for a few days. If we wait till Sherry has settled into the shop and go down on 17th we need only stay a few days and be back for the last Saturday shop opening.'

'Okay- but if the weather stays like this I'm not driving- we'll go on the train.

'I haven't been on a train for years. I think Jeff will love it! Let's do it!' said Dora.

So it was that the family and their luggage were driven to Leeds station by George warmly dressed as they didn't know how efficient the train heating would be or if there would be any delays. It hadn't snowed for a couple of days but in the countryside the fields were still white. As they expected Jeff loved the journey looking out of the window and watching the snowy white world go by. Occasionally there were animals in the fields. Birds vied for scraps of food thrown by the passengers from the train windows. They had their own sandwiches as British rail food did not have a good reputation. When they got to the station Dora phoned home and Arthur came to pick them up. Jeff hid behind Steve as Arthur shook hands with him and hugged Dora.

'Say hello to grandpa, Jeff.' said Dora.

'Lo granpa' he said obediently and Arthur ruffled his hair and said

'Hello young man. You're growing into a big boy now.'

'I'm 2'

'Yes I know. Now let's get you all home for some tea eh?'

The front door of the Maddocks London house was opened by an elderly lady with apple dumpling cheeks and smily blue eyes. 'Effie' cried Dora in delight throwing her arms round the older woman who was retained by Arthur and Pru to keep an eye on their property while they were away.

'Oh my Miss Dora. You always were a pretty girl but now you're beautiful. And this must be Steve. I can see you take good care of her. Now who's this handsome young man.'

'Jeff Ross' he said proudly.

'Come and say hello to your mother Dora' said Arthur who had tried to be patient. Dora, Steve and Jeff followed him. Jeff looked at the staircase as they passed. 'Wow!' he said.

'I'll bring high tea in shortly' said Effie.

'High tea!' repeated Jeff looking up the stairs. 'How high?'

'I'll explain later' said Steve although he wasn't really sure himself where the name came from-he'd have to ask Dora. She had gone forward to kiss her mother on the cheek.

Steve had made great efforts with Prudence before the wedding and now went over and lifted her to

her feet to envelop her in a hug. 'Nonna- you're looking very elegant. Come say hello to grandmama Jeff.'

'Jeff hungry' he said waving a hand at Prudence.

'Let's go wash our hands mate so we're ready to eat. Will you show us dad?'

'Ooo- I fought granpa was mummy's dad.'

'Yes he is Jeff but as I haven't got a dad any more I'm sharing mummy's.'

'Nice mummy to share'

Arthur showed them to a downstairs bathroom and on the way Steve asked him how he was.

'I'm doing well thankyou- but I must admit I shall be glad to retire and stay in the country.'

Meanwhile Dora had perched on the edge of an armchair.

'Oh do sit properly Dora.'

'I'm going to have a wash too in a minute.'

'Why does Steve call Jeff mate?'

'Because they are mates as well as being father and son. You wouldn't understand mummy. We were never mates.'

'I should think not indeed.'

Arthur arranged for Effie's husband Harold to take the luggage up to the bedrooms.

'Daddy what's that?' asked Jeff pointing to the bidet.

Steve explained.

'Why we not got one?'

'We're not important enough'

'Is granpa important?'

'Yes he is rather- so remember to be a good boy.' Jeff nodded solemnly.

'Phew this is girly soap' he said as he sniffed the bar of Camay .

'Come on Jeff-you're hungry remember.

The day proceeded with Jeff asking questions all the time much to Arthur's amusement and Prudence's annoyance. Arthur didn't fail to notice how they always tried to answer him as honestly as possible and he resolved not to make the same mistake with Jeff as he'd done with Dora. He told Prudence later that they should make a big effort to get to know Jeff and he had thought of a good way to do it.

Later Steve asked Dora about 'high tea'. 'Actually 'she said 'I think Effie's been watching too many American films. What we had was actually low tea. High tea so called because it is eaten from high tables and is meat based. We'd probably call it supper. Low tea is scones and cream, cake, maybe salmon or cucumber sandwiches-very much like we had but eaten informally from lower tables.'

'Right' said Steve still bemused at how the other half lived.

The next morning Dora was persuaded to accompany her mother shopping. Arthur went to his club and Steve and Jeff walked through Hyde park and did some shopping in Knightsbridge. In the afternoon Arthur and Prudence took Jeff to Hamleys to view all the wonderful toys and visit Santa in his grotto while Dora and Steve explored Madame Tussauds and nearby shops. They all met up in the late afternoon for tea in a Pancake house, something neither Arthur or Prudence had experienced before. After they had ordered Arthur slipped out on a secret mission. When he came back he announced that they would like to take Jeff on a taxi ride where he could see all the lights and then take him home and supervise his bedtime. From his wallet he took two tickets to the showjumping at Olympia which he gave to Dora. 'Here darling-you and Steve go and enjoy this.'

Dora was an old hand at negotiating the tube and Steve just followed in her wake. All the famous names were competing and they got several autographs on the programme. As well as straight showjumping there was a 'Gamblers Stakes', and a fancy dress relay. The evening ended with Santa Claus riding into the arena on his horse driven sleigh while the favourite carol 'Hark the Herald Angels' was sung. As they left Dora and Steve watched some of the horses being stabled for the night.

'What magnificent animals' breathed Steve. Dora agreed .

'Yes they are beautiful- but I wouldn't swap what we've got for this kind of life.'

'No you're right!' he said taking her hand and making for the tube station.

How's Jeff been' they asked as they sat drinking hot chocolate in the comfort of the Maddock's lounge.

'He and I have had a great time' said Arthur. We found a pack of 'Snap' cards and he beat me every time.He's so sharp.

'It's one of his favourite games' said Dora. 'Did you play mummy?'

No dear- I was a bit tired so I read my magazine.'

Next morning. After lunch they visited horseguards parade and strolled down the Mall to Buckingham Palace. Steve carried Jeff for most of the way , later they took the tube and met Arthur and Prudence at the Apollo Theatre where they saw a matinee performance of the pantomime Dick Whittington. As Prudence did not want to use the tube they took a taxi back to the house where Effie provided lamb casserole for their evening meal. They were all going to Yorkshire the next day and the original plan was that Arthur was driving them but Jeff begged to go on the train again. It worked out quite well as all the luggage including some of Dora's things which had been left at the house when she first went to stay with her uncle travelled in the car. As they travelled back the snow began to fall once again. George met them in the land rover and told them Prudence and Arthur had arrived. They were going to be staying with Milly.

'The forecast is for the snow to continue right through Christmas. ' said George.Dora was worried about the shop but he said that trade had been brisk while they were away and at the moment the roads were still passable. The children had now broken up from school and were having fun in the snow. That night there was a hard frost and when Steve slithered his way down to Follyfoot he found that George had taken Vi to hospital as she had slipped on the ice taking rubbish out to the dustbin. Tony's father had driven him to work in the farm land rover as he needed to go into Leeds so dropped him off on the way. Steve called in on Ron and Teri to see what their plans were for Christmas. They had decided to stay at home so that Rikki's routine would not be altered so he arranged to visit them on Christmas afternoon. The O'Sullivan's had come for the opening of the pony centre and stayed a couple of nights in 'The Stable Nook'. They had really wanted Teri, Ron and Rikki to go to Liverpool for Christmas but they had refused firmly. Dora phoned Hazel to see if they could manage as Steve had forbidden her to try and drive over in the estate car. Ben had finished his studies for the term and Hazel assured Dora everything was fine. When George brought Vi home her left arm was in plaster. 'Lucky I'm right handed' she joked but was obviously in a lot of pain. So it was agreed that Milly would cook for Steve and Dora and the Maddock's and George would take Vi to Hazel and Ben's. On the day before Christmas Eve a large van drew up outside Copper's Rest just after breakfast. Arthur said 'That'll be for me and he and Prudence went outside. Dora was amazed to see an enormous package and many smaller ones being taken into Milly's annexe. There were also carrier bags with 'Harrod's' emblazoned on them. Arthur then appeared wheeling an extremely large hamper. 'There we are darling-our contribution to the Christmas food. I'll bring the wine in later!' He then went back into Milly's. ~Jeff had taken a fancy to the large wicker basket the food had been packed in and was longing for it to be emptied. Milly came in to sort out lunch. 'Your parents are busy sorting out their presents. They're all beautifully gift wrapped already. Dora was staring into the hamper. 'My goodness- whatever have you got there?'

'Every Christmas luxury you can think of and then some.'

Milly picked up a large tin of salmon. 'These things will make my chicken casserole seem rather dull!'

'Rubbish- your chicken casserole is something to be proud of and very wholesome and nourishing too.

I'd better get this lot stowed away. If the roads are safe we want to take Jeff to the crib service this afternoon.'

When the huge basket was finally empty Dora gave a sigh of relief. Jeff climbed in and began to play Jack in the box. Once he pulled the lid shut but became frightened and panicked because he couldn't think

how to open it from the inside. He began to cry and Steve came in just at the right moment to rescue him. He held him close and said 'All you had to do was push mate- do you want to try?' but Jeff flatly refused to go back 'into prison'. Steve was amazed to see the array of fruit, nuts chocolate, biscuits and cakes which covered the sideboard. 'Presents from my parents' explained Dora opening the cupboards and fridge to display even more goodies begging him not to say anything except 'Thankyou.' As they were about to call her parents for lunch Arthur appeared with a case of wine. 'Could you help Prudence with the rest please Steve?'

'Rest?' asked Dora.

'Yes- beer, spirits, soft drinks and mixers.'

'You really didn't need to bring all this dad.' said Dora.

'Nonsense- we wanted this to be your best Christmas ever. There's plenty for you and your friends too!' Arthur tried to dispense wine with lunch but they refused as they would be spending the afternoon in church. Arthur said they were going to call on some friends and take them some Christmas cheer. 'Good idea' said Steve. 'Shall I help you load the car' he said thinking of being rid of some of the vast array of bottles which had taken over the office.

'It's already in the car thanks'

Milly said she would love to accompany them to the church. On the way Dora said 'I don't know how we're going to eat and drink our way through that lot.'

'We'll have to give some of it away. I expect Rev. Carmichael knows of some deserving families.'

The service was delightful with even the tiniest children dressed in nativity costumes. Milly had been a seamstress and had made Jeff a shepherd's outfit. All the children had been asked to take a gift which would be given to needy children. Some of the church ladies would spend the rest of the day sorting and wrapping and on Christmas Eve the verger, dressed as Santa Claus would deliver them. The W. I. had already assembled and wrapped presents for teenagers and adults. Towards the end of the service Jeff followed the other children to place his gift under the huge Christmas tree and came back to his seat clutching a candy cane which had a card attached explaining its meaning. When they got home Steve read it to him. Held one way up it represented a shepherd's crook- Jesus being the good shepherd and the other way up it was J for Jesus..

'Well I didn't know that before' said Steve and Dora said she hadn't heard it either. Jeff went to sleep on the settee clutching the sweet so Dora went out to look after their horses and Steve went to Follyfoot. Milly opened a tin of ham from the hamper and made sandwiches. There were sausage rolls Hazel had made and tinned fruit and cream also from the hamper.

Christmas Eve was Dora's favourite part of Christmas. This year there was to be Carol singing round the tree on the village green at 3pm followed by a children's party in the church hall Ron and Teri were going to take Rikki. Steve and Ron had been recruited to help with the games and Dora and Milly were helping with serving food. Before they left for the carol singing they had a vegetable peeling session. 'EE it's like being in the WRVS all over again' said Milly. Jeff was down at the farm 'helping' and he and Steve coming in for their soup and rolls cheeks glowing and eyes sparkling with mischief and laughter as Steve deposited a handful of snow on Dora's hair. 'It's just started snowing again. I dunno whether it will be okay for the Carol singing.' he said as she laughingly shook her head depositing snow on the kitchen floor.

'Well the choir will all be wearing several layers under their robes' said Milly. 'You should do the same then you can take some off for the party.'

All the villagers looked as if they were several stones overweight as they gathered round the tree. Rev. Carmichael passed out carol sheets. Then four men appeared carrying braziers which they proceeded to light. Warmth filled the cold air and the snow around the tree began to melt slowly. The villagers sang lustily. The children ran around playing in the snow which was far enough away not to melt. Then the church bells began to ring. 'Time to go inside' said Rev. Carmichael. Collectors rattled their tins as the

villagers without children made their way home. 'Don't forget the service at half past eleven tonight' said the vicar. Some smiled and nodded but several men muttered under their breath- 'Not likely. When the pubs close it's home for cold meat and pickles.'

The party was over by 7pm to allow the younger children to be in bed at a respectable hour. While they were sharing Jeff's bedtime routine Dora and Steve heard the front door open and close several times. Dora looked out of the bedroom to see her parents carrying parcels in and placing them under the tree.

'Milly wants to go to the service tonight- I'll take her' said Dora.

'No girl-the roads are likely to be quite bad I'll go.'

While they were gone Dora put some parcels under the tree. Earlier they had noticed a huge gift wrapped box with Jeff's name on it and wondered what it could be. She waited for Steve so they could fill Jeff's stocking together.

'Did you get a stocking Dora?'

'No- just a lot of expensive presents what about you at the home?'

'Not even an orange!' We got one cheap present each and a tin of sweets to share between twenty of us and the staff! Still your parents have made sure we won't be short of goodies this year.'

'I hope they haven't spent much on presents, after all they paid for all the treats in London as well as the hamper.' replied Dora. They tiptoed into Jeff's room and left the stocking on the end of his bed. Last year he had been too young to take much notice of Christmas and they were looking forward to sharing this one with him.

In the morning the content of the big parcel was revealed to be a beautiful very realistic looking rocking horse. Jeff had been excited by the small gifts in his stocking but when he saw the horse he was enthralled and did not seem interested in opening anything else. The adults were going to open their presents after lunch and Prudence and Arthur were happy to supervise Jeff on his horse while Dora and Steve saw to the essential needs of the horses. They saw to their own then went to help Ron at Follyfoot. When they went back indoors Milly had the turkey in the oven and the table set for a late breakfast. Jeff had decided to call his horse 'Star' as he had a star on his head. Steve picked up a present from under the tree. 'Here Jeff-open this.'

'Wow, fanks' said Jeff as he plonked the new riding hat on his head and asking for yet another ride on Star. 'Next spring you'll start to learn to ride your real pony.' said Dora.

After breakfast they paid a visit to Teri and Ron to exchange gifts for the children having decided not to but each other presents. Jeff enjoyed winding up the Fisher Price radio that had been Rikki's gift but he also liked his toy xylophone.

'Gonna be a noisy Christmas mate' said Ron raising his glass of lager.

'Cheers!' replied Steve. They took the landrover to visit Ben and Hazel and Jeff went to visit his pony. 'I didn't know about the horse Steve-honestly.' said Dora.

'I know- it's ok sweetheart. Your parents are making up for missing last Christmas.'

The turkey was delicious. Arthur surprised everyone by helping with the washing up. Jeff had decided Star's box would make a good stable but laid on it's side it also made an ideal 'let's pretend' toy for him becoming a car, a boat and a house in the space of half an hour.

When the lunch dishes were all cleared away more presents were opened. Dora was amazed to find a diamond bracelet with matching earrings in her parcel. Steve received a leather briefcase and wallet and long lined leather gloves. The charm Dora received from Steve was a cinderella coach with four tiny horses.

'You'll have to come outside to see yours Steve.'

In the stable she had hidden a beautiful new saddle for Alex. Steve was delighted. They thanked each other with kisses and a loving cuddle.

'So you got your diamond bracelet after all!'

'I don't know when I'm going to wear it!'

'I'll take you somewhere swish for Valentine's day.'

'Dooooorrraaa' came her mother's voice from the bungalow.

When they went back inside Prudence and Arthur announced they were going out. Milly made sandwiches for tea and soon afterwards went back to the annexe having given the Maddocks a key to get in. Jeff was getting grizzly and went to sleep almost immediately after his story finished. Steve and Dora curled up together in an armchair eating expensive chocolates and watching a film on television. This was what Dora enjoyed most after a tiring day sharing quality time with the man she loved.

'Steve'

'Ye-es' he replied knowing she was about to ask him something.

'I've nearly finished my last pack of pills. Can we try for another baby. I don't want to leave it too long before Jeff has a brother or sister.'

'You've been listening to Elizabeth 'Sullivan! How will you manage with the pony centre only just opened.'

'Well if I do fall it'll still be months before it arrives. We should be able to afford more staff by then.'

'Okay-if that's what you really want.'

She kissed him hungrily and breathed 'Thankyou.'

When they went to bed Steve opened his wardrobe.' Have a look in here Dora-there's something that doesn't belong.

Amongst his clothes she found an M&S dress she'd seen and liked in Harrogate when she and Steve went shopping- but they did not have her size. It was a long sleeved brown corduroy shirtwaister .

'Oh Steve-it's lovely. ' she said holding it against herself.

'We saw it in London. You know I like to give you a special surprise.'

'By the way you're going to look really official with your leather gloves and briefcase. With your leather coat and boots you'll be my knight in leather armour- just don't do anymore jousting!' At the memory of his fight with Ron Steve doubled up with laughter.

'No fear- even if tomorrow is Boxing day-we've both won our fair ladies.

On new years day the thaw began. The Maddocks had only a few weeks leave left and had put the London house up for sale. Most of their possessions went into storage and the rest of Dora's things were transported to Yorkshire. Effie and her husband gladly accepted a generous golden handshake. One day as January was coming to an end Arthur announced

'We've done it- we've found a house and it's only an hours drive away. We'll be able to see you more often when I retire. '

Dora had very mixed feelings. Her parents had not liked it when she told them that private education was not an option for Jeff and although she was pleased that he would grow up knowing one set of grandparents she hoped that they would not interfere and drive a wedge between her and Steve. She breathed a sigh of relief when they went to stay with friends in York. Winter was loosening it's grip on the land and she looked forward to the Promise of Springtime. (Next episode title)