Transition

Algernon Blackwood

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John Mudbury was on his way home from the shops, his arms full of Christmas Presents. It was after six o'clock and the streets were very crowded. He was an ordinary man, lived in an ordinary suburban flat, with an ordinary wife and ordinary children. He did not think them ordinary, but everybody else did. He had ordinary presents for each one, a cheap blotter for his wife, a cheap air−gun for the boy, and so forth. He was over fifty, bald, in an office, decent in mind and habits, of uncertain opinions, uncertain politics, and uncertain religion. Yet he considered himself a decided, positive gentleman, quite unaware that the morning newspaper determined his opinions for the day. He just lived—from day to day. Physically, he was fit enough, except for a weak heart (which never troubled him); and his summer holiday was bad golf, while the children bathed and his wife read Garvice on the sands. Like the majority of men, he dreamed idly of the past, muddled away the present, and guessed vaguely—after imaginative reading on occasions—at the future.

'I'd like to survive all right,' he said, 'provided it's better than this,' surveying his wife and children, and thinking of his daily toil. 'Otherwise—!' and he shrugged his shoulders as a brave man should.

He went to church regularly. But nothing in church convinced him that he did survive, just as nothing in church enticed him into hoping that he would. On the other hand, nothing in life persuaded him that he didn't, wouldn't, couldn't. 'I'm an Evolutionist,' he loved to say to thoughtful cronies (over a glass), having never heard that Darwinism had been questioned.

And so he came home gaily, happily, with his bunch of Christmas Presents 'for the wife and little ones,' stroking himself upon their keen enjoyment and excitement. The night before he had taken 'the wife' to see Magic at a select London theatre where the Intellectuals went—and had been extraordinarily stirred. He had gone questioningly, yet expecting something out of the common. 'It's not musical,' he warned her, 'nor farce, nor comedy, so to speak'; and in answer to her question as to what the critics had said, he had wriggled, sighed, and put his gaudy neck−tie straight four times in quick succession. For no Man in the Street, with any claim to self−respect, could be expected to understand what the critics had said, even if he understood the Play. And John had answered truthfully: 'Oh, they just said things. But the theatre's always full—and that's the only test.'

And just now, as he crossed the crowded Circus to catch his 'bus, it chanced that his mind (having glimpsed an advertisement) was full of this particular Play, or rather, of the effect it had produced upon him at the time. For it had thrilled him—inexplicably: with its marvellous speculative hint, its big audacity, its alert and spiritual beauty.... Thought plunged to find something—plunged after this bizarre suggestion of a bigger universe, after this quasi−jocular suggestion that man is not the only—then dashed full−tilt against a sentence that memory thrust beneath his nose: 'Science does not exhaust the Universe'—and at the same time dashed full−tilt against destruction of another kind as well...!

How it happened he never exactly knew. He saw a Monster glaring at him with eyes of blazing fire. It was horrible! It rushed upon him. He dodged.... Another Monster met him round the corner. Both came at him simultaneously. He dodged again—a leap that might have cleared a hurdle easily, but was too late. Between the pair of them—his heart literally in his gullet—he.was mercilessly caught. Bones crunched.... There was a soft sensation, icy cold and hot as fire.

Horns and voices roared. Battering−rams he saw, and a carapace of iron.... Then dazzling light....

'Always face the traffic!' he remembered with a frantic yell—and, by some extraordinary luck, escaped miraculously on to the opposite pavement.

There was no doubt about it. By the skin of his teeth he had dodged a rather ugly death. First… he felt for his Presents—all were safe. And then, instead of congratulating himself and taking breath, he hurried

homewards—on foot, which proved that his mind had lost control a bit!— thinking only how disappointed the wife and children would have been if—well, if anything had happened. Another thing he realised, oddly enough, was that he no longer really loved his wife, but had only great affection for her. What made him think of that, Heaven only knows, but he did think of it. He was an honest man without pretence. This came as a discovery somehow. He turned a moment, and saw the crowd gathered about the entangled taxi−cabs, policemen's helmets gleaming in the lights of the shop windows ... then hurried on again, his thoughts full of the joy his Presents would give... of the scampering children... and of his wife—bless her silly heart!—eyeing the mysterious parcels....

And, though he never could explain how, he presently stood at the door of the jail−like building that contained his flat, having walked the whole three miles. His thoughts had been so busy and absorbed that he had hardly noticed the length of weary trudge. 'Besides,' he reflected, thinking of the narrow escape, 'I've had a nasty shock. It was a d—d near thing, now I come to think of it....' He still felt a bit shaky and bewildered. Yet, at the same time, he felt extraordinarily jolly and lighthearted.

He counted his Christmas parcels.., hugged himself in anticipatory joy ... and let himself in swiftly with his latchkey. 'I'm late,' he realised, 'but when she sees the brown−paper parcels, she'll forget to say a word. God bless the old faithful soul.' And he softly used the key a second time and entered his flat on tiptoe.... In his mind was the master impulse of that afternoon—the pleasure these Christmas Presents would give his wife and children....

He heard a noise. He hung up hat and coat in the poky vestibule (they never called it 'hall')

and moved softly towards the parlour door, holding the packages behind him. Only of them he thought, not of himself—of his family, that is, not of the packages. Pushing the door cunningly ajar, he peeped in slyly. To his amazement the room was full of people. He withdrew quickly, wondering what it meant. A party? And without his knowing about it! Extraordinary!... Keen disappointment came over him. But, as he stepped back, the vestibule, he saw, was full of people too.

He was uncommonly surprised, yet somehow not surprised at all. People were congratulating him. There was a perfect mob of them. Moreover, he knew them all—vaguely remembered them, at least. And they all knew him.

'Isn't it a game?' laughed someone, patting him on the back. 'They haven't the least idea...!'

And the speaker—it was old John Palmer, the book−keeper at the office—emphasised the 'they'.

'Not the least idea,' he answered with a smile, saying something he didn't understand, yet knew was right.

His face, apparently, showed the utter bewilderment he felt. The shock of the collision had been greater than he realised evidently. His mind was wandering. ... Possibly! Only the odd thing was—he had never felt so clear−headed in his life. Ten thousand things grew simple suddenly.

But, how thickly these people pressed about him, and how—familiarly!

'My parcels,' he said, joyously pushing his way across the throng. 'These are Christmas.Presents I've bought for them.' He nodded toward the room. 'I've saved for weeks—stopped cigars and billiards and—and several other good things—to buy them.'

'Good man!' said Palmer with a happy laugh. 'It's the heart that counts.'

Mudbury looked at him. Palmer had said an amazing truth, only—people would hardly understand and believe him.... Would they?

'Eh?' he asked, feeling stuffed and stupid, muddied somewhere between two meanings, one of which was gorgeous and the other stupid beyond belief.

'If you please, Mr. Mudbury, step inside. They are expecting you,' said a kindly, pompous voice. And, turning sharply, he met the gentle, foolish eyes of Sir James Epiphany, a director of the Bank where he worked.

The effect of the voice was instantaneous from long habit. 'They are,' he smiled from his heart, and advanced as from the custom of many years. Oh, how happy and gay he felt! His affection for his wife was real. Romance, indeed, had gone, but he needed her—and she needed him. And the children— Milly, Bill, and Jean—he deeply loved them. Life was worth living indeed!

In the room was a crowd, but—an astounding silence. John Mudbury looked round him. He advanced towards his wife, who sat in the corner arm−chair with Milly on her knee. A lot people talked and moved about. Momentarily the crowd increased. He stood in front of them—in front of Milly and his wife. And he spoke—holding out his packages. 'It's Christmas Eve,' he whispered shyly, 'and I've—brought you something—something for everybody. Look!' He held the packages before their eyes.

'Of course, of course,' said a voice behind him, 'but you may hold them out like that for a century. They'll never see them!'

'Of course they won't. But I love to do the old, sweet thing,' replied John Mudbury—then wondered with a gasp of stark amazement why he said it.

'I think' whispered Milly, staring round her.

'Well, what do you think?' her mother asked sharply. 'You're always thinking something queer.'

'I think,' the girl continued dreamily, 'that Daddy's already here.' She paused, then added with a child's impossible conviction, 'I'm sure he is. I feel him.'

There was an extraordinary laugh. Sir James Epiphany laughed. The others—the whole crowd of them—also turned their heads and smiled. But the mother, thrusting the child away from her, rose up suddenly with a violent start. Her face had turned to chalk. She stretched her arms out— into the air before her. She gasped and shivered. There was anguish in her eyes.

'Look' repeated John, 'these are the Presents that I brought.'

But his voice apparently was soundless. And, with a spasm of icy pain, he remembered that Palmer and Sir James—some years ago—had died.

'It's magic,' he cried, 'but—I love you, Jinny—I love you— and—and I have always been true to you—as true as steel. We need each other—oh, can't you see—we go on together— you and I—for ever and ever—'

'Think,' interrupted an exquisitely tender voice, 'don't shout! They can't hear you—now.'

And, turning, John Mudbury met the eyes of Everard Minturn, their President of the year before.

Minturn had gone down with the Titanic.

He dropped his parcels then. His heart gave an enormous leap of joy.

He saw her face—the face of his wife—look through him.

But the child gazed straight into his eyes. She saw him..The next thing he knew was that he heard something tinkling ... far, far away. It sounded miles below him—inside him—he was sounding himself—all utterly bewildering—like a bell. It was a bell.

Milly stooped down and picked the parcels up. Her face shone with happiness and laughter....

But a man came in soon after, a man with a ridiculous, solemn face, a pencil, and a notebook.

He wore a dark blue helmet. Behind him came a string of other men. They carried something ...

something ... he could not see exactly what it was. But, when he pressed forward through the laughing throng to gaze upon it, he dimly made out two eyes, a nose, a chin, a deep red smear, and a pair of folded hands upon and overcoat. A woman's form fell down upon them then, and he heard soft sounds of children weeping strangely ... and other sounds ... as of familiar voices laughing ... laughing gaily.

'They'll join us presently. It goes like a flash....'

And, turning with great happiness in his heart, he saw that Sir James had said it, holding Palmer by the arm as with some natural yet unexpected love of sympathetic friendship.

'Come on,' said Palmer, smiling like a man who accepts a gift in universal fellowship, 'let's help 'em. They'll never understand.... Still, we can always try.'

The entire throng moved up with laughter and amusement. It was a moment of hearty, genuine life at last. Delight and Joy and Peace were everywhere.

Then John Mudbury realised the truth—that he was dead.