

A Season of Happiness



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The Puzzling Puzzle

It was winter time and the first snow was starting to fall. In the past, Jimmy Grubb would have been really happy, able to play with the other children, making snowballs and snowmen; but at this very moment the young boy was glum. He had a bad cold and was forced to stay indoors, so the best he could do was sit wrapped in a blanket by the window and look at the snowflakes floating down outside. The one good thing was that snow wasn't rain, and until it melted and turned back into water, at least the roof wouldn't leak. Even so, it made the air chilly, and that tended to blow right through the house because there were gaps where some of the doors had twisted and didn't fit properly. A roaring fire would have helped, only there was nothing to make it with, seeing as there was no wood to burn. Like everything else needed to make life more comfortable, the Grubb family couldn't afford it.

Alf, Jimmy's father, would have dearly loved to change things, and he was trying. "Maybe you could get a better job," his wife, Pamela had suggested that morning, "One that pays more."

"I've asked around," Alf had said, "But there's nothing. I suppose we should be thankful that we have a roof over our heads, even if it does leak. That's another thing I feel bad about. It was a nice house when my Grandparents bought it, but I haven't been able to keep the repairs up and over the years it's become a tumbledown wreck."

"Maybe something will turn up," she said hopefully.

"Yeah, maybe," muttered Alf as he headed for the door. "See you tonight."

"Don't forget it's Jimmy's birthday," she reminded him. "Try not to be late."

Although he said nothing, Pamela's reminder had Alf feeling guilty because he'd forgotten all about this son's birthday. Needless to say, he worried over it all day at work; and to make matters worse he had been meaning to buy Jimmy a birthday present, but it too had slipped his mind. How he was going to put that right, he had no idea. Pay day wasn't until the end of the week and all he had left was three dollars. That wasn't likely to buy much. About to leave for home, one of his fellow workers made matters worse by saying: "Tell young Jimmy happy birthday from me."

Alf trudged the streets, slowing down as he walked past the shops, speeding up again knowing it was a waste of time going into any of them because he didn't have enough money to buy anything. His last hope was a corner store close to home which sold second-hand goods. The little bell rang as he opened the door and stepped in. It rang again as he closed the door behind him. The old man who owned the shop must have heard the tinkle and appeared from a doorway behind the counter. "You've only just caught me," he said, producing a cheery smile. "I was about to shut up shop. What can I do for you?"

“Well,” Alf began hesitantly, “I need a birthday present for my son, but I’m a bit short of cash. To be honest, all I’ve got is three dollars. I don’t suppose...?”

“Hmm,” murmured the old man thoughtfully. “When’s his birthday?”

“Today,” replied Alf sheepishly.

“That soon, eh?” said the shopkeeper. “Um, what sort of thing does he like?”

“Puzzles,” said Alf, “Jigsaws mainly.”

“Ah, well I have a few,” started the old man, “But they cost more than three dollars.” He watched the look on his customer’s face change from hopeful to defeated and felt sorry for him. “Tell you what. I’ve got something that I could let you have really cheap. Hang on a tick.” And he disappeared through the doorway. In less than a minute he returned carrying a cloth sack. “It’s been out the back for years,” he explained. “I’m pretty sure it’s a puzzle of some kind, but it’s a puzzling one - there’s no box or instructions so I didn’t figure I could sell it.” Tipping some of the bag’s contents on the counter, he picked up a couple of the pieces. “I’m guessing they are building blocks and they fit together to make some sort of shape or picture. Would this be any good for your boy?”

Alf pondered for a moment and decided it was the best he was going to get. “Would you be prepared to sell it for three dollars?”

The old man stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Seeing as it’s incomplete, I probably should give it to you for nothing, but you don’t look like someone who would accept charity; so how about you just pay me a dollar? I think that’s fair.”

By the time Alf made it home the snow had stopped and the air had started to warm up, which meant one more thing to worry about. Pamela was in the hallway attending to exactly that, placing a bowl under a drip coming from the ceiling. She looked up and noticed the bag he was carrying. “What’s that you’ve got?”

“Jimmy’s birthday present,” replied Alf. “It’s a bit strange. The man in the shop said he thought it was a puzzle of some kind, but there were no instructions, so it’s anyone’s guess. I only hope Jimmy likes it.” He had a thought: “We haven’t got anything to wrap it in, but if you’ve got a strip of ribbon, we could tie a bow around it.”

Pamela gave him her you-can’t-be-serious frown. “He’s a boy, Alf. Bows and ribbons are for girls.”

Tea that evening was a special birthday treat for Jimmy. There was even a cloth spread on the kitchen table, along with a napkin for each of them. As for the meal, for many it wouldn’t have seemed much, but Pamela had done her best with what she had. “Sausage and mash,” said Jimmy with a huge smile. “My favourite.”

“With fried onions!” added Alf in surprise. “How did you manage that?”

“Mrs Benson down the street let me have half an onion,” replied his wife, “And...” she went to a cupboard and brought out something on a plate.

“Oh, wow,” said Jimmy, “A cake! That’s why I wasn’t allowed in the kitchen.”

“I hope it’s alright,” said his mother. “The oven stopped working, so I had to bake it the way your Grandma used to – in the frying pan on the stove top.”

“I’m sure it will be great,” declared her son. “Thanks Mum.” For the boy, his party was really something; and for Jimmy’s sake his parents tried to ignore the sound of water dripping from the ceiling into pans and buckets.

Once the meal was finished, Alf lit the single candle sticking up from the middle of the cake. “Okay, son, blow it out and make a wish.”

“But keep it secret and don’t tell us,” said his mother, “Or it won’t come true.”

Taking a deep breath, Jimmy closed his eyes and made his secret wish. Then he opened them and blinked a few times. Nothing seemed to have changed, so his wish hadn’t been granted. He shrugged. “I never expected...” he began.

Alf cut him short. "There's something else." Reaching under the table, he brought out the cloth bag and handed it to his son. "Happy birthday, Jimmy."

The boy's eyes widened in wonder. "That's really amazing," he said. "My wish came true. I wished for a present and... Oops! Should I have said that?"

His mother smiled. "It doesn't matter now your wish has been granted. Maybe you should see what you've got."

Dipping a hand into the bag, Jimmy brought out some small wooden blocks that looked something like the kind a small child would play with. The difference was in the shapes. Some were almost square while others had a curve on one side. "Funny," said the boy turning one of them over, "They don't have any pictures." He took out a few more and set them on the table. "These are the same, and they're all green on just one side." He frowned. "How am I supposed to put it together?"

"Well," said his father, "I guess that's the puzzling part. You have to work it out."

Jimmy put the pieces back in the bag. "Can I start on it after I help with the washing up?"

"No washing up for you, young man," said his mother, "Not on your birthday."

Back in his bedroom, Jimmy found a spot on the floor that wasn't damp from the drips and emptied the bag. He began in the way he did with jigsaw puzzles, turning the blocks so that the green sides faced up; then putting all of the similar shapes together in groups. Most of them had a curved edge, causing him to wonder if it was a circular puzzle like one jigsaw he had done before; but when he tried fitting them together, the curves didn't match to make a big circle. "This really is a puzzling puzzle," he said to himself, separating the pieces before trying again. He was on his third attempt when his Dad came in.

"I know it's your birthday," said Alf, "But I think it's time you were in bed." He wandered over and gazed down on the puzzle.

Jimmy looked up at him. "This is the best I've got so far," said the boy. "It's peculiar, sort of like four teddy-bear ears, all separate."

"I have an idea - maybe if you pushed them together with the pointed bits to the centre..."

Before he had finished the sentence, Jimmy did exactly as suggested and was surprised. "They fit. You were right, Dad. Now the teddy ears make up what looks like a green flower."

"It's a shamrock," explained Alf, "The leaf of a clover plant; but," he added, "Better than that, it has four leaves instead of just three. A four-leafed clover is very rare and is supposed to bring good luck to whoever finds one. Perhaps you should make another wish...?"

Jimmy's eyes grew wide, only for a moment, though; then he closed them tightly, presumably to make his wish. They stayed closed for quite a few seconds, mainly because he was trying to think of a good wish. Eventually, he opened his eyes and said: "I can't tell you what I wished for because it may not come true just yet..." He gasped. "Something's happening to the puzzle!"

Alf stared down and now *his* eyes widened in surprise. The shamrock puzzle was starting to glow; and something else – it was making a humming sound and seemed to be growing in size. Unsure what was happening, Alf grabbed hold of his son's arm and pulled the boy clear of the puzzle. "Move back," he said, unnecessary really seeing as both of them were already doing that.

The pair stumbled backwards, continuing to stare at the puzzle. It was growing faster by the second, humming louder, and in moments was taking up the entire centre of the room. They made it to the door and were in the hallway, still staring in

both wonder and fear at the strange happening when Pamela appeared. "What's that noise?" she asked, "That humming sound...?" Looking past her husband and son she noticed the glowing object which by then was so big it almost filled the room.

Sucking in a huge breath, Alf shot a hand out, grabbed the knob and slammed the door shut. "Get back!" he ordered; then they waited and stared at the wall of Jimmy's bedroom. They could still hear the humming, but nothing else seemed to happen; not until cracks began to appear in the plaster. As the cracks widened, bright green light from the glowing puzzle speared into the hallway. "It's not stopping," declared Alf. "We have to get out!" Clutching Jimmy's arm with one hand, he used the other to usher Pamela towards the front door. "Quickly!" he rasped.

In seconds they were in the street, staring open-mouthed at the house. The green light inside was glowing through the two windows; faintly at first, getting brighter by the second. Alf was fully expecting to see the walls starting to crack as they had with Jimmy's bedroom. They didn't, though; simply bulged a bit before settling back. The only thing affecting the outside of the house was a green light appearing in the centre of the door, just a pinpoint at first, then gradually growing bigger. "I'm sorry, Dad," said Jimmy in a sobbing whisper. "It's all my fault."

"No, it's mine," said Alf as he continued to stare at the light from the front door. "I'm the one who gave you the puzzle. I wish I hadn't, now."

"That's the point," said his son. "The wish, *my* wish. I wished we could live in a better house; but I never wanted this one destroyed."

By then, the light in the centre of the door had stopped growing. It was now merely a bright green shape. "I'm thinking it might not be," said Alf. "Look at the front door. If I'm not mistaken, the puzzle has burned a shamrock into the wood, and..." What happened at that instant took his breath away. With a small pop, the glow from inside the house went out, and at the same time the humming ceased. It was a peculiar moment – no light, no sound: the three of them might have imagined they'd gone deaf all of a sudden. Alf was the first to speak: "You two stay here. I'm going to chance a look in the house." He felt Pamela's hand grip his arm in an attempt to stop him, but he shrugged it off and walked to the front door.

The first thing he noticed was the shamrock. No longer glowing, not even a hole in the woodwork; it was now a slightly-raised, green copy of the shamrock puzzle, but much smaller. With baited breath, Alf caught hold of the knob and prepared to give the door a kick as usual; only it wasn't necessary: the door swung open quietly and smoothly. About to enter the house, he took only one step; then stood motionless in the doorway, unable to believe his eyes.

Pamela and her son saw Alf's hesitation and were dreading to know what he'd seen; and they would find out soon enough. Alf turned and beckoned them. "Seems like another of your wishes has come true, Jimmy," he called out with a big smile. Stepping to one side, he extended an arm to guide them through the door. "Welcome to your *better* house."

And as impossible it might seem, although the outside looked pretty much the same, the inside of the Grubb's old house had been transformed. The rooms were brightly painted, and the bowls and buckets on the floor had gone because there were no more leaks. And the only glow remaining was an orange one from a log fire blazing in the hearth. As for the puzzle, it had disappeared completely. Puzzling, maybe, but that's what puzzles are.