

## 35 The Christmas presents

Last Christmas Billy left his Christmas shopping to the very last minute. He had woken up on Christmas Eve and suddenly realised that he hadn't bought any presents at all. So he had a terrible day trying to push his way through the crowds in Driptown High Street. It was a nightmare, and he decided that he would never leave things that late again.

So this year he started his Christmas shopping early. From about June onward he listened very carefully to what everyone said about presents. Then he tried very hard to work out what the best Christmas present might be for them.

One day Billy and Grandpa were watching a TV programme all about birds. (You may remember that Billy's grandpa is a very keen birdwatcher). The narrator on the programme suddenly said, "and you can identify every bird by its droppings." "Well, I'm blowed!" said Grandpa. "I'd love to know how to do that!" The very next day Billy popped into the bookshop to see if the latest Mercury Man mega adventure had arrived. Suddenly, his eye was caught by a little book with the title: 'The Observers Book of Bird Droppings.' "Wow!" said Billy, "That's just the Christmas present for Grandpa," and he bought it straight away.

A week or so later Billy popped over to see Mr. Green. He was hard at work in his shed, sanding some wood to make bookshelves. "Oh dearie me," said Mr. Green. "These sanding disks don't last very long. I'm getting through loads of them!" The next day Billy was in the D.I.Y. shop looking for some glue, when he saw a sign that said, 'Sanding disks half price.' "Wow!" said Billy. "That's just right for Mr. Green's Christmas present!" So he bought two packs straight away.

One evening a week later, Gran was looking after Billy and Amy while Mum had gone out. Gran was reading. "What are you reading?" asked Billy. "Oh one of my Mills and Boons books," said Gran. "You know I just can't read enough of them." The next day Billy was in the newsagents, when his eye was caught by a stand that said: 'All the latest Mills and Boon.' Billy looked through the titles and was intrigued by one that was called 'The Long Lovers Leap.' "That'll be just right for Gran's Christmas present, he thought, and despite the very funny look that the shop assistant gave him, he bought a copy straight away.

Mum and Amy were easy to buy for. One evening, Billy was downstairs watching TV when there was a great commotion upstairs. Mum was shouting at Amy and Amy was shouting at Mum.

"Where's all my bubble bath gone?" Mum was asking. "Have you used it all, Amy?"

"Well you used all my nail varnish!" came the reply. And the arguing went on and on and on. The next day, Billy bought a bottle of Rose Petal Bubble Bath and a bottle of deep red nail varnish. His Christmas shopping was done, and it was still only September!

One Saturday evening, when Amy had gone out and Billy was sure that Mum was very busy down stairs, he got out the presents. He found five boxes roughly the same size. Then he rummaged in the Christmas Box for some of last years wrapping paper, and set to work. An hour later there were five brightly and neatly wrapped presents. He carefully hid them in the bottom of his wardrobe. He felt very pleased with himself very pleased indeed.

Time passed and it came to Christmas Eve. Billy thought that he would keep everyone else in suspense by pretending he hadn't bothered to buy anyone a present this year. But at the last moment, just before he was going to bed, he went upstairs to his room. He dug in the bottom of his wardrobe for the presents. They were still there, still as neatly and as brightly wrapped as they had been in September.

He was about to take them downstairs, when something struck him as odd. He looked at the presents for a while but couldn't think what on earth it could be. In fact, he was just heading down stairs with the presents under his arm when he realised what the problem was. There were no labels on them and, worse still; he had no idea which present was which. He rushed back to his room and spread the presents out and looked at them. He shook them and prodded them but couldn't tell what was in any of them. He was about to tear off the wrapping paper to look inside when Mum called from downstairs, "Hurry up Billy. You have to go to bed now."

Billy didn't know what to do. He didn't want to annoy his Mum on Christmas Eve. It was no good. He would just have to guess which present was which. He wrote five labels. Then saying, "Eeny, meeny, miny, mo," he stuck a label on each present. Then he took them downstairs, and put them under the Christmas tree. He went to bed and tried not to think about what might happen tomorrow.

Everyone was up early on Christmas Day. Santa had left stockings full of chocolate and, after a hurried breakfast, it was present opening time. Billy was so interested in his own presents that he didn't really notice what was going on as the others opened theirs.

Later that morning, Billy looked out of the window and was surprised to see his Mum crawling on the ground outside. He went out to see what the matter was. "Oh Billy I'm glad you came out," said Mum. "Did you know we've had sparrows, blackbirds, thrushes, and an American bald eagle in the garden. And that's just this morning."

Billy gulped when he saw the book in his Mum's hand: 'The Observers Book of Bird Droppings.'

"This is a lovely present, Billy," said Mum. "I don't know how you ever thought of it, but it's really lovely."

Billy went into the house. As he walked past Amy's room he could hear this strange sort of scraping sound. Amy caught sight of him.

"Oh, Billy, thank you for my Christmas present. However did you think of such a thing! These sanding disks are perfect for my nails, look."

Amy held out her hand to show a set of perfectly sanded nails. Billy was speechless!

He wandered down stairs and found Grandpa in the sitting room.

"Grandpa!" said Billy, but there was no response. "Grandpa!" said Billy again, but still there was no response. Then Billy noticed that Grandpa was reading a book. He sneaked a look at the title. It said, 'The Long Lover's Leap.' Grandpa was so engrossed in the book that he didn't say a word all morning. In fact, he didn't say a word until he'd finished every page.

Then, with a large tear dripping off the end of his nose, he said, "Thank you Billy. I don't know how you ever thought of it, but that was the best present I've ever had."

As they sat down for lunch, Billy noticed something quite extraordinary. Gran's fingernails were bright red. But surely not, Gran always frowned on people who wore nail varnish. She never stopped moaning at Amy whenever she wore some. Gran looked at Billy and said: "Billy thank you for my present. I don't know how you ever thought of it, but it has done me the power of good. I feel like a new woman!"

At the end of lunch Gran, who had had two glasses of wine, said:

"Three cheers for, hic, for Billy, and for his, hic, his very thoughtful presents, hic."

Just then there was a knock at the door. It was Mr. Green. Billy was thinking hard, which present was left? Then he realised it was the Rose Petal Bubble Bath.

"Oh no!" said Billy to himself, "not for Mr. Green. What will he think."

He was about to grab the present from under the tree and run out of the room when Mum said: "Oh, Mr. Green, Billy has got a present for you. It's bound to be interesting. He has put a lot of thought into his presents this year."

Mum handed Mr. Green the present and he tore off the wrapping paper. He stared at the Bottle of Bubble Bath.

"Young Billy," he said, "you clever thing. How did you know? Rose Petal, that's just what my aromatherapist says I need to bath in every day. She says it'll do no end of good for my funny turns. Thank you Billy, thank you very much!"

Billy was amazed. He just sat and watched his family and his friend Mr. Green for a while. Amy was sanding her nails. Gran was just rubbing the duster over her nails to give them a really good shine. Grandpa was settling into chapter one of his book again. Mum was telling Mr. Green all about the amazing variety of bird droppings you can find. And Mister Green kept slipping off the top of his bubble bath for a quick sniff.

"Well, I never," whispered Billy to himself, "life's just one big surprise isn't it, one big surprise!"

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