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CHANGES AND CHANCES

A Lindchester Story

'Tis the year's midnight. The Winter Solstice. Back in John Donne's time, the shortest day was December 13th, the Feast of St Lucy. Blame the slippage on the Gregorian calendar, imposed on us in 1752 to bring Britain into line with the rest of Europe. Bloody Gregorians. Coming over here, nicking eleven days off us.

So today, the 21st December 2018, is the year's midnight. Let me take you by the hand, gentle reader, and lead you once more through the streets of Lindfordshire, in the mild hope that I can show you something that will make you change your mind. About what? you ask suspiciously. Well, anything, really. We should never be *too* certain we've got right and wrong nailed, here in the time of this mortal life. Let's not forget our primal blunder—falling for the scam that we could be like God, knowing good from evil, when all along we were nothing but dust.

Before we begin our journey, we pause to acknowledge that there may be those who have never heard of the Diocese of Lindchester. To them I say Google it. You will be directed to a trilogy of such hard core full-frontal Anglicanism as will have you fanning yourself with a pew sheet and needing a little lie down. The lands of this fictional Diocese lie in the very heart of England. They border on Lichfield to the south, and Chester to the north. In our earlier sojourns, I confess we spent rather too much time wafting about in the stratosphere of the Close, and too little with our feet on solid Lindfordshire ground. Our business, by and large, was with the Pound End, not the Penny End of the diocese. This tale seeks in its small way to redress that balance.

And so, beloved in Christ, let it be our care and delight to go even unto Lindford indoor market, and hear again the message of the angels. This is the *new* indoor market. It

was opened only last year by a Royal Personage. Aficionados will already have deduced this from the perishing rubber security seals that still adorn every drain cover in the vicinity. After declaring the new market open, the Royal Personage went on to Lindchester cathedral for a Lindfordshire Regiment service. Security was tight there, too. But happily, the feckless lay clerk who shinned over a high wall into the old palace garden (having been bounced by the police at the gatehouse when he failed to produce any ID) was not gunned down by marksmen as he emerged, black clad, from the shrubbery carrying a sports bag. He was later released without charge, though I'm afraid by then he'd missed the service.

But that's enough about the Close.

Come with me into the new market. I don't know about you, but for me it *just isn't the same* as the old market. In that the old market was leaky, vermin-infested, and miles from the bus station, and the new market is none of those things. Yet somehow, we hold fast to the old market in much the same spirit that we testily resist upgrades to our mobile devices, because *they make things different*.

There ahead of us, as we enter the bright and airy new market, is a priest. Huzzah! It is our old friend Fr Dominic, slightly more silvery, slightly tubbier than when we last saw him, but let those of us who have not aged a jot in the past two years cast the first stone. He is wearing his clericals, because he regards a cassock as overalls, not dress uniform. He is also wearing red fuzzy antlers, which I admit is a liturgical solecism, as it is still Advent. He shouldn't really wear antlers until the midnight mass.

A small brass band is oompahing carols in the entrance. Trombone and euphonium twinkle with tinsel. Up good Christen folk and listen! The air is merry with voices and tradesmen's calls. *Three for a fiver, that's all they are now, girls!* Breathe in the aroma of fried onions, of vinegar, mingling with acetone from Infinity Nails. As you weave your way

through the crowd there comes another scent—stealthy and sweet on the air, like rumours of heaven. Oud, sandalwood, attar of roses, wafting from Osman’s stall, where glowing bottles line the shelves like gifts of the Magi.

There goes Fr Dominic ahead of us, past fruit stall, bakery, haberdashery. He is distributing Christmas service invitations to shoppers, and inadvertently frightening the Bejusus out of lapsed Catholics who can’t tell from looking that his orders are absolutely null and utterly void. He works his way along the crowded market aisles, past Wood’s Family Butchers, where people are queuing for their pre-ordered legendary Wood’s pork pies, without which it would not be a proper Lindford Christmas.

As he walks, Dominic prays. He prays for the shoppers, the traders, the screamers in buggies, the grouches in mobility scooters. He prays for the local council and the market managers with their headache over empty retail units. Lindford FM plays from Lee’s Workwear. A news bulletin. Dominic catches enough to register it’s about Brexit, but not enough to grasp what’s going on—O hideously apt metaphor! He can’t grasp any of it. There are no good alternatives, and he cannot even identify the least worst with any confidence. What, oh what will it be like this time next year—for these small traders, for their customers, for *any* of us? Don’t even *breathe* second referendum. It’s a *gilet jaune* movement waiting to happen. Jesu mercy.

Ah, goody-good—here’s the Lindford Cheese Company. He admires the nativity under the glass case, (Look! baby cheeses in his camembert box manger!) Dominic orders his festive cheese stash. Then on past Dale’s Vac and Electrical Spares, where you can still buy bags for the ghosts of Hoovers past. He draws level with J & L Hot Tubs. A middle-aged woman catches sight of him and leaps up. She dodges through the crowds and taps his arm.

‘Excuse me.’

He turns with a kindly smile.

I can tell you that Dominic does not know her from Adam. He, however, can't be 100% sure of that, because he might have encountered her under who knows what pastoral circumstances. He deploys one of those omni-functional lines that wise clergy keep in the tool kit:

'Hello! How are things?' (Where 'things' might range from 'your exciting new business venture' through to 'the hideous protracted death of your beloved'.)

'Oh! Fine, thanks. Listen, sorry to bother you, but have you got a moment?'

Dominic does not have a moment. No clergy person in the run-up to Christmas has a moment. And yet he has all the time in the world. 'Of course.'

We will leave Fr Dominic to have his pastoral conversation, and skip to his destination in the middle of the market. This is where the café area is, with its mismatched chairs, ash tables, and silk flowers in empty IPA bottles (the first signs of hipster trickle-down). The central space is surrounded by stalls. See that giant logo #FollowTheStar? It rests over the unit that has been let, rent-free, to the parish church of Lindford for the month of December. (The market is in Dominic's parish, after all.) The ox and the ass are already standing by, but otherwise, it is empty of its nativity cast. At noon there will be a short carol service, with a tableau of figures. The participants are on their way.

The stable occupies the back half of the unit. At the front there's a table of leaflets, and Christingle marmalade (made by an entrepreneur who gathered up the discarded oranges once the dolly mixtures had been scoffed). Plates of mince pies are being set out. On the opposite side there is a big bright red sofa, ex-showroom. A freebie, blagged by Fr Dominic's clergy colleague, Virginia. You may sit on it beside whoever is on the rota (currently it's Pauline, one of the church wardens), pour out your heart and get yourself

prayed for, under the banner 'Free Prayers & Christmas Blessings'. If that's a bit touchy-feely, you can write on one of the prayer stars, and hang it on the tree instead.

A Christmas CD is playing. Oh dear. It sounds to me like the Dorian Singers' latest offering. I expect Virginia will swap it for something more godly when she arrives. The album contains all your favourites, from Slade to Santa Baby, and is by far and away the campest thing you'll enjoy in holiday period—unless you happen to be reading this in your Gammarelli biretta, with a unicorn mimosa in one hand and a mauve Sobranie in the other.*

And now look next door, please. You will find something here to rejoice your heart. It's a pop-up barbershop, offering free shaves and haircuts to homeless people, to the poor and helpless, the cold, the hungry, and the oppressed. It is staffed by rotas of volunteers from the barbers and salons of Lindford. The idea was the brainchild of Kaz. I wish I had time to tell you about Kaz. In fact, I wish I could tell the story of every soul in the Diocese of Lindchester, but even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written, let alone an edition of *The Church Times*. We must choose, and I have chosen someone you have never met before.

Star is 17. She looks younger. She looks about 12, such a little slip of a pixie, with hair like turquoise candyfloss and almost translucent skin. She's shampooing an ex-serviceman, Jack, who fell through the gaps when his last tour of duty ended. Star was the first to volunteer from Hair Works, and so surprised was the rest of the staff, that they had no option but to volunteer too. She began her training in September, and can cut under supervision, but mostly it's washing and scalp-massaging, and sweeping up the fallen hair. But somehow she makes drudgery divine, as Herbert paternalistically put it—did he ever wield a broom in his life, I wonder?

Star doesn't say much. 'Temperature all right for you? Got any plans for this evening?' There are those (the wife of the bishop of Barcup, to name but one) who infer from the soft Lindford drawl that the speaker is not the sharpest pair of scissors in the salon. I concede that Star did not shine at school, although she worked hard. But now she's doing what she'd always wanted to do, from a little girl. Maybe this is why she glows. That, and the fact that she knows she's loved. Loved for what she is, not what she achieves. Was there ever a little scrap loved with such fierce and tender love?

Over on the other side of the market, in J&L Tubs, Lynne is finishing her tale to Fr Dominic. 'By rights, she shouldn't even be here. Came on Christmas eve—twelve weeks early! She's our Christmas miracle, isn't she, Jez?'

Jez nods. 'That's why we called her that.'

Lynne blows her nose. She shows her pendant to Dominic again. 'So what do you think?'

'Yes, that's Our Lady, with baby Jesus.'

'A woman at work gave it me. For a safe labour, she said. I thought it was just a lucky charm. But then that night...'

Although Fr Dominic has all the time in the world, it is now nearly midday. He gently heads off a repetition of the story about the mysterious nurse, Maria, who came at night and sat by Lynne's hospital bed and told her the baby would be fine, when it turned out there was no such nurse in the whole of Lindford General hospital.

'Yes, that does sound like Mary. Shall I bless this for you?'

'Oh, if you would.'

He improvises a prayer, gives them an invitation, and a #FollowTheStar booklet. Then he scuttles off, with shouted promises of a good deal on hot tub hire following after.

He arrives, panting, to find it's all kicking off in the stable. The Blessed Virgin Mary is stuck in traffic on the ring road. Dominic's mum offers to go and find a stand-in, but Dominic does not want mum wandering off. Lord, he needs a 'Find my Mum' app on his phone as it is.

'No. Virginia's looking. You stay and guard the mince pies.' He burrows his way into his stripy Joseph robe.

'I'd offer to do it myself, but I'm a bit old.'

'Never mind Mary—you're a bit old for St Anne!' he tells her.

'Sarah was ninety when she had Isaac, I'll have you know. And your tea towel's on crooked.'

The crowds are gathering in the central area. A pop-up barbershop quartet—they popped up from the cathedral—are in next door, already signing 'O Holy Night.' The musical among you will be aware that when a group harmonise perfectly, a strange phenomenon occurs: it is as if an eerie fifth voice joins in, singing a high note. Listen! There it is. On this occasion it's Alfie, the golden doodle, who likes to join in when his masters are singing. Dude! Go Alfie!

Virginia reappears in a flap. Nobody's willing, and she can't volunteer, as she's leading the act of worship. Dominic scans the crowds. Sticks his head into the unit next door—aha!

There's a last minute scramble, and the day is saved.

It's nearly over now, this saved day, this shortest of days. The traders have packed up. Shutters have rattled down. All across the town of Lindford people are heading home. Schools have finished. We make our way towards the town hall, past the library, the former

banks. Such stout Lindcastrian civic pride. It is still visible, if you look up, past the Primark trappings of this generic rundown high street. The town hall carillon is just finishing its Christmas medley. *Sweet Chiming Bells*. Look, you can buy bratwurst and glühwein on the Christmas market to cheer you on your heavenly way. These traders have come from Germany—judging by the giant reindeer head, fixed like a trophy to a chalet front. It flutters its eyelashes and croons ‘Chingle Belse’ with Bavarian bonhomie. Aufwiedersehn. Adieu. Will we see you again next year?

We just don’t know. Eleven days. Eleven days, and we will be in 2019. You, dear reader, have already recycled 2018 and hung up the new calendar. But do you or I have a clue what lies in wait? Brexit/no Brexit. Deal/No Deal. Referendum? General Election? We are suspended in mid-air like a cartoon character who has run off a cliff edge, peddling furiously, not daring to look down.

Walk with me towards the station, where trains rumble by at roof height, and people bed down under the viaduct. The derelict station hotel is still For Sale. The wind hisses through the ash keys as if through clenched teeth. Old leaves and litter blow along the gutter. Everyone is going home. Everything is closing.

Dominic and his mum bicker gently as they drive to Sainsbury’s for their Big Christmas Food Shop.

‘What on earth is War Use? Are they bringing back rationing?’

Dominic glances at the giant fiery letters. ‘*Warehouse*, mother. Some of the letters have gone out.’

‘Oh, I see! I thought it was a slogan.’

‘You’re right!’ cries Dominic. ‘The E for Europe has gone! And the Ho! The festive Ho Ho Ho. Prepare for War Use. Goodbye, Cool Britannia. We’re all doomed.’

‘Well aren’t you the cheery one,’ she says. ‘People are stockpiling, mind you.’

‘Don’t say it. I *know* what you’re going to say. No. La la la.’

But she says it anyway. He should never have chucked them out, those tins of hers.

‘Mother, that corned beef was 16 years old! You’d die of botulism.’

‘Pish and tosh. Don’t come running to me in a food shortage.’

‘I’ll *always* come running to you. You’re my mum.’

She pats his knee. ‘Well, fingers crossed, this will turn out to be another storm in a teapot. Like the millennium dome.’

‘Bug.’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘No you didn’t. You said dome.’

‘Well, same difference.’

People look east. The night sky is ribbed like a beach at low tide. Above the trading estate, the moon glows in its sepia halo. Tomorrow it will be full. The Cold Moon, the Long Nights Moon, with the Ursids flashing across the sky. Flecks of dust, smaller than a grain of sand—but how brightly they shine.

Star is walking home. Her back aches. It’s better than TV, walking past people’s windows. More like Instagram. Like they’re all posting selfies #crimble #yay You get to see into their life. There’s an old lady in her kitchen. There’s a boy in his bedroom with a guitar. All the trees! Every house. Aw, it’s magic.

She turns down her street. First thing she’s going to do is get into the tub. Even if mum’s got tea ready. She can see herself already. She’s going to lift the cover. See the steam rush out. 40 degrees. Breathe in the chlorine smell. Then she’s climbing in—ah!

That's *the best*, that moment. Cold air on her shoulders, then sliding under. She'll turn off the jets, and it will go quiet. And after a moment, the security light will go off, and the backyard will be totally dark. She'll feel all the aches melting away. Maybe she will be thinking about kneeling in the straw like that, and that Cabbage Patch Kid, the exact same one she had when she was little. And the people singing.

She hums as she walks down her parents' path. *I love thee, Lord Jesus. I ask thee to stay.*

And maybe there'll be shooting stars?

*And if you are, please send a selfie to the Church Times to claim your mystery prize.