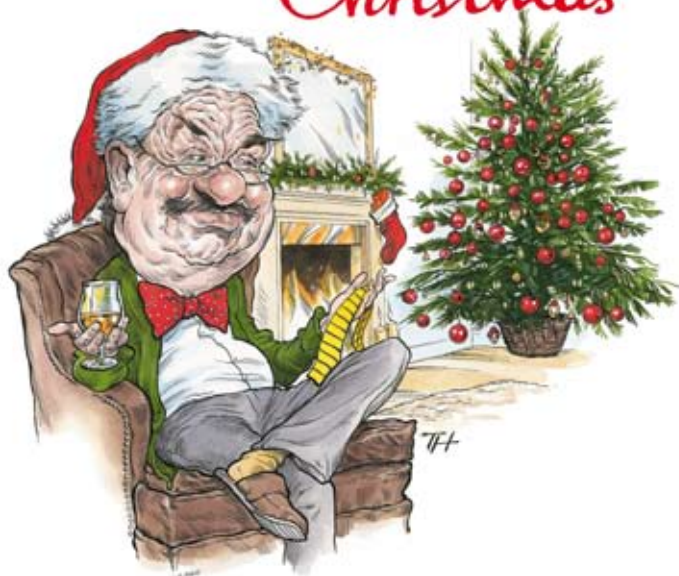


Rumpole at Christmas



JOHN MORTIMER

'Rumpole, like Jeeves and Sherlock Holmes, is immortal'
P. D. JAMES

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Rumpole at Christmas
by
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Rumpole and Father Christmas



Christmas had come again. There was tinsel and a few battered Christmas cards in the screws' room near the cells under the Old Bailey, you couldn't call on a tobacconist's for a packet of small cigars without being treated to a canned rendering of 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen' and, most unusually, our barristers' chambers at 4 Equity Court in the Temple was full of children.

The idea was Claude Erskine-Brown's, the opera-loving barrister whose twins, Tristan and Isolde, were then no more than seven years old. There were another four or five youngish barristers in our chambers at the time, all of whom had produced offspring, and old Uncle Tom, our oldest member, had unexpectedly contributed a couple of grandchildren. Mizz Liz Probert, my one-time pupil, had a niece, and extra children were bussed in from friendly chambers. It all seemed, with the streamers and games and going home presents, designed to arouse in these infants an early interest in lawyers and the law.

After much planning for the event, Claude had announced his final triumph to us at a chambers meeting. 'I've had a bit of luck,' he said. 'I've managed to get Father Christmas for our children's party.'

'Oh, congratulations, Erskine-Brown,' I said. 'What did you do? Travel to reindeer-land and bring him back on the Eurostar?'

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Rumpole. He’s a fellow who advertises in the *Islington Gazette*.’ Here he produced a crumpled copy of the paper in question and read aloud, ‘Add a genuine Ho! Ho! Ho! to your Christmas party! A genuine and convincing Santa Claus is now accepting bookings.’ He added, ‘It gives a phone number in Palmers Green.’

‘Very few reindeer in Palmers Green,’ I suggested, having thought the matter over.

‘Don’t be silly, Rumpole. He hasn’t got any reindeer.’

‘Hasn’t he? You do surprise me.’

‘This is a fellow who has what is apparently a genuine talent for playing the part. And I’ve managed to secure his services.’

Candidates for the party grew fast. Judge Bullingham (aka ‘The Mad Bull’) called me into his room and asked if he could invite a couple of grandchildren. I consented, hoping that my generosity would dispose him towards keeping the Timson I was defending out of prison. Unfortunately, the spirit of peace and goodwill didn’t move The Mad Bull to give my client community service. And so it was that a week or so before the Great Day, David Timson went to prison on a charge of receiving a huge quantity of Christmas puddings, among other things.

My wife, Hilda (known to me as She Who Must Be Obeyed), invited her old school friend Laura Pewsey (who had no fewer than three daughters – all of whom were looking forward to the treat of meeting Claude’s ‘genuine Santa’) down from Yorkshire to stay in our mansion flat.

After a cold, bright day, darkness came early. As the gas lamps were being lit around the Temple, there was a ring at the door of our chambers. Our clerk, Henry, opened it to the

‘Ho! Ho! Ho!’ of a figure who looked so like everyone’s idea of Santa Claus that, perhaps after a glass or three of Château Thames Embankment, I might have believed the legend had come to life. He had exactly the right roundness of nose, his eye was bright and his flowing beard snowy white, and he carried a voluminous bag – no doubt full of presents and other surprises. After another burst of ‘Ho! Ho! Ho!’ he asked Henry if he might borrow our clerk’s room to ‘prepare a few surprises’. At the time it didn’t occur to me to wonder why Santa would know about clerks’ rooms in barristers’ chambers.

The party assembled in the big room of our Head of Chambers, Sam Ballard, and there Father Christmas put on an excellent show. He conjured presents out of the air, told jokes, and persuaded the children to join him in a little song called ‘Does Santa Claus Sleep With his Whiskers Over or Under the Sheet?’ Finally he invited questions from his juvenile audience.

The questions came thick and fast. Where did he put his reindeer when he came tonight? Did he really climb down chimneys? What did he do when he was young?

It was then that he started a long story about being brought up by gnomes, and as he conjured another present out of the air I noticed that half a finger was missing on his right hand. Suddenly the penny dropped and I saw another face behind the round red nose and the fake beard – a sharper, more eager and altogether greedier face. I put up my hand to ask a question.

‘What do you remember of the Enfield Post Office job? Must be about twenty years ago now.’

‘Post Office?’ Santa said in his Ho-ho-ish voice. ‘I must have stopped there to fill my sleigh with presents.’

‘Yes, of course,’ I said, and couldn’t help adding, ‘I’m sure you did.’

‘I don’t know why you asked him that ridiculous question,’ Hilda said after the party was over. She was going back with Laura to put the children to bed and she told me I’d have to look after myself until later.

Accordingly I went to Pommeroy’s Wine Bar and thought about life with the help of a bottle of the old Château for a while, then went back to chambers. Around ten o’clock, I was surprised to hear a key turn in the front-door lock, followed by footsteps in the passageway. I waited for a minute and then emerged into the darkness and made for the clerk’s room, from which odd noises had started emerging.

The lights were out but a lit torch lay on Henry’s desk. By its light I saw the bulky figure of Santa Claus rummaging in his sack. He then pulled out a wodge of cheques and cash and placed them in the open desk drawer that Henry always kept locked – a precaution which had apparently proved no obstacle to this ingenious Santa.

‘Fred Streeter,’ I said loudly as I switched on the light. ‘What the hell are you doing?’

‘Putting your money back, Mr Rumpole,’ said the man I’d remembered as no more than a boy when he lost a finger breaking into the Enfield Post Office.

‘You stole from us?’

‘That was the idea, Mr Rumpole. You get lots of chances going into places as Father Christmas.’

‘What made you give it all back?’

‘Just I remember you was kind to me, Mr Rumpole. You said I was led astray by my older cousins, who was real professional blaggers. You got me the minimum. When I saw

you today, I remembered how grateful I'd been. So I came to put the cheques and that back.'

'Was that the reason? Just seeing me again after all these years?'

'You weren't like the other briefs I'd dealt with before – those that treated me like a piece of dirt. You seemed really to care about me.'

'Not enough to put you off the thieving.'

'Perhaps not. It was a bit more than seeing you, though.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, all those kids were asking me questions about reindeers and all that . . . I suppose I started to feel a bit mean about what I'd really come for. I had all these red clothes on, and the beard and that, but I also had your clerk's spare keys and all his cheques and petty cash in my bag. It hadn't struck me that way before. But then, well, suddenly it didn't seem right.'

'You mean, the spirit of Christmas overcame you? You went for a little peace and goodwill towards men?'

'Is that what it was?' Father Christmas, otherwise known as Fred Streeter, looked puzzled.

'Most probably.'

'That sort of thing doesn't usually get to me.'

'Well, it seems it has.'

'Mr Rumpole, why don't you put that in your Christmas stocking?' he said, handing me a folded slip of paper.

I looked at what he had given me. It was a cheque made out to me – my fee for some long-since closed Timson case. 'Thank you,' I said. 'And a Happy Christmas to you.'

'Ho! Ho! Ho!' said Fred, back in his role as Santa, as he returned the money and the spare keys to Henry's desk.

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Rumpole at Christmas

'I suppose you were drinking in that awful little wine bar of yours,' Hilda said the next morning.

'Yes,' I had to admit. 'I was in Pommeroy's.'

'Oh, Rumpole!' Hilda said as she chased down one of Laura's children who was storming round our flat. 'When will you get in touch with the spirit of Christmas?'

'Don't talk to me about the spirit of Christmas,' I warned her. 'I've seen it at work, and it's extraordinary!'