

Mr. Biddlecombe

One evening — it was late in November and quite dark — Mr. Biddlecombe locked up his news agent shop in Bondgate Street and walked slowly toward his bus stop outside the King James Grammar School. He was reading the Northern Echo as he walked through the evening gloom, taking little notice of the things happening around him. In the very same moment, a cry from a workman up a ladder, a paintbrush striking his neck and the side of his face, and the impact of a car were upon him. It was an enigmatic trilogy of concurrent incidents that altered his life. In the moments immediately following, and unaware of what exactly had happened to him, Mr. Biddlecombe's life flashed proverbially before his eyes, and he fully expected to be walking down that long tunnel towards a bright light and the welcoming arms of his parents. He touched the side of his face and saw his hand stained bright red ... he moaned. One of his paperboys stood beside his prostrate form and, rather casually it seemed to Mr. Biddlecombe, watched the pantomime in the gutter.

“Are you O.K.?” the boy asked. Before Biddlecombe knew it he found himself helped back to his feet and the many hands of passers-by brushing bits of debris from his normally immaculate sports jacket.

“Oh,” he said. “I'm alive.” The paper-boy cast a quick glance across the road to the Nags Head pub and sniffed the air.

“I'm not drunk,” said Biddlecombe, frowning.

The second he heard the shout and the brush hit him, Mr. Biddlecombe's survival instincts kicked in and he'd stepped sideways into a parked car. It wasn't blood, it was red paint. And he wasn't dead — he had simply made a prat of himself. Nonetheless, in his mind it had been a bona fide near-death experience: some divinely instigated method of warning him that this mortal coil is easily shuffled off.

Then and there he resolved to spend the rest of his life doing good things and making others happier than they would normally be. And he decided to do it on the quiet, because, as he often told his customers, Bishop Auckland already had enough nut cases.

Mr. Biddlecombe waited until December came in, when, he reasoned, it would be easier for people to associate his acts of raging kindness with Christmas instead of thinking he was just off his trolley. He decided that he would give a very large tip to the waitress at Rossi's Cafe where he ate soup-and-a-sandwich each weekday. She had never been particularly pleasant to him, but then neither had she admonished him on the occasions he had been caught peeking down her cleavage as she buffed the table tops. It would be a good place to start, he thought.

"Merry Christmas!" he said to the girl as she handed him the bill. She looked a little puzzled and stared at him. He felt his face redden and became acutely aware that she was not taking the tenner from his hand.

"Pay at the front," she said mechanically. He tried to smile and look nonchalant but failed at both and, through a kind of grimace that was obviously causing some concern with the waitress, he stammered:

"No, this is for you."

"What for?" she asked.

"It's a tip."

"Oh," she said. "Thanks." They were both crimson and the girl hurried off to the counter where she giggled something into the other girl's ear and put the bank note into a glass mug behind the cash register. Then she disappeared through the swing doors into the steamy kitchen.

Biddlecombe was deflated. This had not gone at all the way he had expected. Questions presented themselves: Why had she stuffed the extra-large tip into a communal kitty? What happened to the joy bit?

The following Friday, Mr. Biddlecombe stopped off at the Legion for a beer on his way home. Two tables away, an old soldier nursing half-a-pint of copper-coloured ale was talking to a younger man who wished he were somewhere else.

"It's a disgrace really," the veteran said. "A pension should be enough to live well on, not just get by."

"Aye ..."

“I mean, they didn’t mind taking all that tax and stuff off my wages did they?”

“No ...”

“And now I’m on my own I have to skimp all the time. I fought at Monte Casino, y’ know.”

“Aye, you said. Here marra, get yourself a pint. I have to meet someone.” And the younger man held out five quid.

“Well, thanks a lot,” said the old soldier in a tone half way between gratitude and contempt. It was wasted on the younger man, but Mr. Biddlecombe caught it. When the veteran creaked out of his seat and off to get another glass of beer, Biddlecombe fumbled around in his wallet and dug out a twenty. He folded it in half and half again, then crossed over to the old man’s chair, across the back of which was a grey overcoat. He went through the pockets and found a little leather pouch with a zipper. As he was stuffing the twenty into the purse, he suddenly became aware of someone standing close behind him, and he turned his head just in time to be felled by a right cross.

“Thieving swine!”

Biddlecombe sat on the floor blinking into a fluorescent light and listening to the chirping of small birds flitting through his head.

“You should be ashamed! I should get the pollis to yer! Out! Now!” And before he could explain what he had been up, the steward took the money from Biddlecombe’s hand, bundled him roughly to the door and threw him out into the street.

“Disgraceful!” said a woman walking by, sniffing the air.

“I’m not drunk,” said Biddlecombe.

On Christmas Eve, Biddlecombe opened the news agency and sorted the thick Holiday editions into route-piles. He didn’t much like having to send out the paper-kids with heavy bags, but they were always glad to get the bonus that came with the task. Sometimes, if it was raining or the weather was otherwise inclement, he would call back Janice, the only girl, on the pretext of having forgotten a magazine or something of the like, then he would wink and remove half the load, which he then delivered himself. It always astounded the boys who could never seem finish their round as quickly as she could. After the papers went out, Biddlecombe did the books, tidied

up and locked away the petty cash that he kept in the same tin box his father had handed over with the shop twenty years earlier. There was an angelic child and the words 'Pear's Soap' emblazoned on the lid; it gave him enormous satisfaction to lock the box on Christmas Eve; there was communion between himself and his past.

"Doing just fine, Da," he whispered as he rubbed the worn edges of the box. And he added his father's expression to seal the lid. "Plenty for my bairns!" Tap, tap! He put the box inside another box and put that one under the counter.

On top of the counter were the final trappings of decorations for the trimming of the hearth at home: holly with berries, bits of greenery and, most important, mistletoe. As he dropped them carefully into a carrier bag, the little bell above the door jangled and a man wearing a dull red overcoat walked in.

"I thought it was Santa!" laughed Biddlecombe.

"Lad-alive, I've only heard that one four hundred times," the man replied.

"What can I get for you, I was just about to close up."

The man didn't reply, but looked around, fingered a few postcards in a revolving rack, and took a copy of the Economist from the wall display.

"How much is this?" he asked.

"Four-seventy-five," said Biddlecombe. The man put it back. Biddlecombe looked at his watch and back at the man. He noticed that under the long coat the man was wearing light blue track pants, the kind that look scruffy no matter how new they are. His running shoes, likewise, were of the non-name-brand variety and had obviously trodden several seasons.

"Are you looking for something in particular?" asked Biddlecombe, anxious to get locked up an on his way home. The man spun around and pointed a gun.

"Stick 'em up!" he barked.

"Stick 'em up?" echoed Biddlecombe. And he started to laugh.

"Hey, it's not funny. I'm robbing you!"

Biddlecombe stopped laughing but couldn't quite erase the smile.

"What do you want?"

The robber looked shiftily around the shelves. "I want that lady's watch in the display cabinet — the gold one with the black face. I also want two of those stuffed animals and that big dinosaur thing ... and make sure it has batteries, right?" He paused and stared at Biddlecombe. Then he

went clumsily into his right-hand pocket with his left hand — the gun was in his right hand and it waggled a good deal — and brought out a piece of paper. He scanned it and went on.

“Four Mars bars, four boxes of Smarties, four bags of mixed nuts and four, no, eight — eight other chocolate things that are all different.” And he stuffed the piece of paper back into his pocket and pointed the gun right into Biddlecombe’s face.

The newsagent held his hands out clear of his body so the robber could see them. He took an empty box that was lying on the floor and began to place the articles in it.

“You’ll need wrapping paper and Sellotape,” he said.

“What?”

“You’ll have to wrap their gifts or they’ll be suspicious where you got them.”

The robber and Biddlecombe looked straight at one another — each wondering what was going through the other’s mind. The robber threw a quick glance at the door and licked his lips.

“Just fill the bag,” he said. But as he did, his eyes filled and a tear rolled down across his cheek.

“It’s not even a proper gun is it?” There was a pause, then the gun was lowered.

“No,” said the robber. “I’m sorry to bother you.” And he pushed the toy pistol into his pocket and turned to go. At the door he turned and said,

“How did you know?”

Biddlecombe sucked in air.

“I don’t think a proper villain would use a gun and risk going to jail for four Mars bars, man.” He reached under the counter and man immediately raised his arms above his head, but it was just the soap tin.

“Stick ’em up,” Biddlecombe said. “That was a bit of a give-away too. Stick ’em up ... I’ve not heard that expression since Tom Mix was around!”

He took the money from the tin and dropped it into the box along with the watch and toys and the Mars bars and the Smarties and the other bits and bobs that Biddlecombe knew for sure were going to make someone’s Christmas the best ever.

“Here,” he said pushing the parcel toward the edge of the counter. “You should give up robbery, you’re no good at it. Merry Christmas.”

The man collected up the box, and Biddlecombe dropped a package of bright red wrap and a roll of Sellotape into it.

“You’re not going to report me?”

“No.”

“Thanks.”

“No,” said Biddlecombe. “Thank you.”



Peace. No Matter What Your Persuasion.