

Lord Bartleby-Finch

It was the day before Christmas Eve. John was looking forward to this Christmas. He had no siblings and had never married; since his parents had died, he had spent Christmas alone. But that year he had got back in touch with an old schoolfriend he had lost contact with some thirty or so years ago.

He was looking forward to meeting Pete again. He had been best man when Pete married Julie. Why had he lost touch with him?

He had learnt that year that Pete and Julie had had three children: a girl and two boys. They were all grown up now and married. Pete and Julie were now grandparents. How many grandchildren did they have? Seven, he thought. They would all be there tomorrow.

John was looking forward to being with a family at Christmas. He had left earlier that day than he had originally intended. He had decided to take the train to Westringham and walk to the village of Abbots Longbury, where Pete and Julie lived. It should not take him much more than an hour, he thought, and the road was straightforward.

It was a fine afternoon and John was enjoying his walk over the moor. He reckoned he was now just about halfway when suddenly the sky turned very dark, the wind whipped up and he found himself in a howling blizzard. He noticed a large house, about 100 metres off to the right and saw there was light in one of the downstairs windows. He made for the house, hoping to find shelter there.

He reached the house and the door was opened to him almost as soon as he had knocked. An old man appeared.

"Come in! Come in!" he said. "This is no weather to be out on the moor."

John thanked him and followed him into a very cozy room with a log fire blazing in the hearth.

The old man introduced himself as Lord Bartleby-Finch. John was invited to take off his back-pack and his wet clothes, to dry them, and to settle himself down beside the fire where, he was told, he would find punch and mince pies.

John thanked his lordship who told him not to be so formal and to call him Percy.

"You,' he added, "must John Bellingham on your way to spend Christmas with Pete and Julie Stevenson. A first class couple - and their children have turned out so well."

John was a bit surprised that Lord Bartleby-Finch should know about his visiting Pete and Julie. He supposed one of them must have mentioned it to him.

"Yes, Percy, that's right," said John. "I've been looking forward to seeing Pete and Julie again. It's some thirty years since I've seen them."

They got talking; Lord Bartleby-Finch was a great raconteur and kept John entertained with stories from the time he was in the far East, and what he had done to keep the house going when he returned after his father's death. Occasionally, he lamented that he was the last of his line. There would be no more Lord Bartleby-Finches when he died. But he soon changed the subject as the punch flowed and the mince pies got fewer and fewer.

"You must stay the night, John," his lordship eventually said.

John felt uneasy about that, though he could not explain why. As he looked around, his unease grew. Something, he felt sure, was not right; but he could not say exactly what.

He peered through the curtains and looked out. The blizzard had long gone; it had left but the merest coating of snow on the road. The sky was clear

and the stars shone brightly; it was a full moon and the road was splendidly lit up in its glow.

"Thank you, Percy," said John. "But there's no sign of the blizzard. It's a bright moonlit night and it's only just coming up to seven. Pete and Julie will be worried about me; I'd best be getting on. I should be there soon after half-past."

He put on his outdoor clothes again; they were beautifully warm and dry. He put his back-pack on his back once more and thanked his lordship for his hospitality.

"Think nothing of it, John," his lordship replied. "Glad of the company. Sorry you're not staying the night. Off you go. I'll probably see you after the Christmas Eve midnight service at the church."

As he started along the road again, John called Pete on his mobile to let him know that he was on his way. Pete and Julie, of course, were very relieved to hear that he was not only on his way but also very close. Pete offered to drive out and pick him up in his car; but John told him not to bother.

"It's a fine, crisp evening," he added. "The walk will do me good after all those mince pies and it'll help clear my head a bit after all that punch."

Pete was a bit mystified by the talk of mince pies and punch.

John duly arrived not long after half-past seven. They made him very welcome, showed him his room and left him to unpack, wash and so forth.

When he came down, Pete and Julie explained they were waiting for their eldest son, Henry, to arrive with his family; then they would be sitting down to dinner. In the meantime, after offering John a drink, they all sat down together, chatting over nibbles.

They asked John about his journey and wondered if he had got caught in the sudden freak blizzard that afternoon. John told them about his walk over and how he had been able to shelter with Lord Bartleby-Finch

"Old Bartleby-Finch!" exclaimed Pete. "He was a rum one, and no mistake. But he's been dead for the past five years."

"Yes," said Julie, "he died just before Christmas five years back. He had no family and, it transpired after his death, there was not much in the family coffers either. The house was cleared out the following Spring and the stuff auctioned off to clear debts."

"Yes," added Pete. "I remember that auction. There was quite a crowd as there were some valuable pieces to be sold off. It caused quite a stir at the time."

"Oh," said John, looking puzzled, "then - er - what ..."

"Don't worry," laughed Pete. "It was obviously some local joker! I wonder what house it was you actually went in."

"There aren't many along that road," said Julie. "There's those two cottages about ten minutes out from Westringham. There's an old couple in one and a widower, Mr Ecclestone, in the other."

"I can just imagine old Ecclestone doing that," said Pete. "just the sort of prank that would appeal to him."

"Um," said Julie, "maybe. But if that's where John phoned you from there's no way he could have got here so soon. He'd probably still be walking now."

"That's true," agreed Pete. "But then there's nothing until old Bartleby-Finch's place about half way along and that's been empty ever since the auction."

"Empty?" queried John. "No one bought it? No one moved in?"

"Well," said Pete, "they've tried to auction it off at least twice, I think, but it seems no one is interested in living in it."

"I'm not surprised," added Julie. "That one time I did go into it, it gave me

the creeps. I wouldn't want to live there!"

"You and your creeps!" laughed Pete. "Anyway," he added, "it has been bought now. They say it's going to be demolished in the Spring and a shopping complex built there."

John was just going to say something, when there was a knock at the door. Pete and Julie's son, Henry, had arrived with his wife and two children. There were introductions and Henry and his family went to find their rooms and unpack; there was general excitement all round. Lord Bartleby-Finch was forgotten about.

The next day was Christmas Eve. Pete and Julie's daughter, Liz, was arriving that day with her family. Fortunately, Pete and Julie's other son, Robert, lived in the same village; he would be putting up Liz and family. It was a day of visits, and some hectic last minute shopping and preparations.

But things quietened down by the evening and John joined Pete, Julie and some of the others as they went to the midnight service at the village church.

After the service, people were wishing one another "Merry Christmas!" John's attention, however, was distracted by a grave over in one corner of the churchyard; it was almost as though the moon was lighting it up especially.

"What's that grave over there?" he asked.

Julie looked.

"That's old Bartleby-Finch's," she said with a slightly worried look.

"Oh," said John. "I think I'll just go over and take a look."

Julie was just about to say something, when some other neighbors approached and wished her and Pete "Merry Christmas," and they all began chatting together.

John arrived at the grave-side. Sure enough, there was the headstone with Lord Bartleby-Finch's name on it. Yes, he had died on 23rd December, five years ago. As John stood there reading the headstone, he felt someone tap him on the shoulder. He turned and saw Lord Bartleby-Finch smiling at him.

"Merry Christmas, John," said his lordship. "I said I would see you after the service."

"But ..." began John, looking at the headstone.

"Yes," said his lordship. "They did me proud. Well, I must go. Have a very merry Christmas with that family. But you must spend next Christmas with me."

So saying, his lordship disappeared into the shadows, rather like Alice's Cheshire cat, with his smile remaining to the last.