

Chapter 1: The Best Christmas Present in the World

Comprehension Check

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Question 1: What did the author find in a junk shop?

Answer: The author found a nineteenth century roll-top desk in the junk shop. It was made of oak. It was in a very bad condition. The roll-top was broken into several pieces. One of the legs was clumsily mended and there were scorch marks down one side. The author bought it in order to restore it.

Question 2: What did he find in a secret drawer? Who do you think had put it in there?

Answer: The author found a small black tin box in the secret drawer. There was a paper sello-taped to its top. It said, 'Jim's last letter, received January 25, 1915. To be buried with me when the time comes.' Most likely, it was put there by Mrs. Jim Macpherson, who was Jim's wife. Her name and address were on the envelope inside the box.

Comprehension Check

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Question 1: Who had written the letter, to whom, and when?

Answer: Jim Macpherson had written the letter to his wife Connie Macpherson on December 26, 1914.

Question 2: Why was the letter written--what was the wonderful thing that had happened?

Answer: Jim wrote the letter to tell his wife about a wonderful thing that had happened on Christmas day. The British and the Germans were engaged in a war, yet on this day, both the troops met in no man's land. It was a thing of wonder because right in the middle of a war, the warring soldiers were making peace.

Question 3: What jobs did Hans Wolf and Jim Macpherson have when they were not soldiers?

Answer: Hans Wolf was from Dusseldorf. He played the cello in the orchestra. Jim Macpherson was a school teacher from Dorset.

Question 4: Had Hans Wolf even been to Dorset? Why did he say he knew it?

Answer: No, Hans Wolf had never been to Dorset. He had learned all about England from school and from reading books in English.

Question 5: Do you think Jim Macpherson came back from the war? How do you know this?

Answer: No, it is most likely that Jim Macpherson did not come back from the war. The notepaper sello-taped to the tin box mentioned the letter contained in the box to be the "last letter" from Jim. This was perhaps the last that Connie heard from Jim.

While celebrating Christmas in no man's land, the British and German soldiers played a game of football. Hans told Jim that he hoped the war would also be resolved by a football match. To this Jim replied that he wasn't very good at football, but would be sure of winning if they played cricket. The match was won by the Germans. This perhaps indicates that the Germans might have also won the actual battle between the two troops.

Comprehension Check

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Question 1: Why did the author go to Bridport?

Answer: The author went to Bridport because that was the address where Mrs. Macpherson lived. He wanted to give that letter back to her.

Question 2: How old was Mrs Macpherson now? Where was she?

Answer: Mrs. Macpherson was a hundred and one years old. She was in a nursing home in Burlington House.

Comprehension Check

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Question 1: Who did Connie Macpherson think her visitor was?

Answer: Connie Macpherson thought that her visitor was her husband, Jim.

Question 2: Which sentence in the text shows that the visitor did not try to hide his identity?

Answer: The sentence which shows that the visitor did not try to hide his identity is, 'I explained about the desk, about how I had found it, but I don't think she was listening.'

Working with Text

Question 1: For how long do you think Connie had kept Jim's letter? Give reasons for your answer.

Answer: Connie must have kept Jim's letter for a long time. This is because she told the narrator how she read it quite often every day so that she could feel that Jim was near her.

Question 2: Why do you think the desk had been sold, and when?

Answer: The desk must have been sold when the house in which Connie Macpherson lived had caught fire. She was taken to a nursing home. All the burnt up things must have been sold by the neighbours after that.

Question 3: Why do Jim and Hans think that games or sports are good ways of resolving conflicts? Do you agree?

Answer: Jim and Hans thought that games or sports are good ways of resolving conflicts because nobody dies in matches. No children are orphaned and no wives become widows.

Due to these reasons, games are good ways for resolving conflicts. Wars only lead to death and devastation.

Question 4: Do you think the soldiers of the two armies are like each other, or different from each other? Find evidence from the story to support your answer.

Answer: The soldiers of the two armies were like each other. Both the troops celebrated Christmas with each other. They shared each other's food. All of them were smoking, laughing, talking, drinking and eating. They even talked about the books they liked. They agreed about everything. They also played a game of football for which both Hans and Jim cheered, clapped hands and stamped feet. They also exchanged carols at night. Moreover, they had the same view that wars only brought death and destruction, and they hoped that each would be alive to see his family. All these instances show that the soldiers of the two armies were similar to each other.

Question 5: Mention the various ways in which the British and the German soldiers became friends and find things in common at Christmas.

Answer: The British and the German troops celebrated Christmas with each other. They enjoyed each other's food. All of them were smoking, laughing, talking, drinking and eating. Hans Wolf and Jim Macpherson shared the cake Connie had baked. They talked about Bathsheba, Gabriel Oak, Sergeant Troy and Dorset. They even talked about the books they liked.

They agreed about everything. Both the troops played a game of football for which both Hans and Jim cheered, clapped hands and stamped feet. They also exchanged carols at night. In this way, they celebrated Christmas together, finding a lot in common between them.

Question 6: What is Connie's Christmas present? Why is it "the best Christmas present in the world"?

Answer: When the narrator came to see Connie and gave her the box, she mistook him for her husband Jim. She thought that Jim had come home for Christmas. This was Connie's Christmas present. It was the best Christmas present in the world for her because Jim had written in the letter that he would come home on Christmas. She had read that letter several times everyday to feel that he was near her. Now that he was finally there with her, she was extremely happy.

Question 7: Do you think the title of this story is suitable for it? Can you think of any other title(s)?

Answer: Yes, the title of the story is suitable for it. The spirit of Christmas is the theme that prevails throughout the story. It was on a Christmas day, in the middle of a raging war, that two warring troops made peace. The moment of peace that the soldiers shared with each other was the best Christmas present for them.

Again, it was on a Christmas day that the narrator went to see Mrs Macpherson. He went to return her husband's letter to her. The letter was precious to her, but even more precious was her delusion that the narrator was her husband Jim, who she believed had returned as promised on a Christmas day. This was the best Christmas present in the world for her.

Working with Language

Question 1:

(i) Read the passage below and underline the verbs in the past tense.

A man got on the train and sat down. The compartment was empty except for one lady. She took her gloves off. A few hours later the police arrested the man. They held him for 24 hours and then freed him.

(ii) Fill in the blanks using the correct form of the verbs in brackets.

My little sister is very naughty. When she _____ (come) back from school yesterday, she had _____ (tear) her dress. We _____ (ask) her how it had _____ (happen). She _____ (say) she _____ (have, quarrel) with a boy. She _____ (have, beat) him in a race and he _____ (have, try) to push her. She _____ (have, tell) the teacher and so he _____ (have, chase) her, and she _____ (have, fall) down and _____ (have, tear) her dress.

(iii) Underline the verbs and arrange them in two columns, Past and Earlier past.

- My friends set out to see the caves in the next town, but I stayed at home, because I had seen them already.
- When they arrived at the station, their train had left. They came back home, but by that time I had gone out to see a movie!
- So they sat outside and ate the lunch I had packed for them.
- By the time I returned, they had fallen asleep!

Past	Earlier Past

Answer:

(i)

A man got on the train and sat down. The compartment was empty except for one lady. She took her gloves off. A few hours later the police arrested the man. They held him for 24 hours and then freed him.

(ii)

My little sister is very naughty. When she came (come) back from school yesterday, she had torn (tear) her dress. We asked (ask) her how it had happened (happen). She said (say) she had quarrelled (have, quarrel) with a boy. She had beaten (have, beat) him in a race and he had tried (have, try) to push her. She had told (have, tell) the teacher and so he had chased (have, chase) her, and she had fallen (have, fall) down and had torn (have, tear) her dress.

(iii)

- (a) My friends set out to see the caves in the next town, but I stayed at home, because I had seen them already.
- (b) When they arrived at the station, their train had left. They came back home, but by that time I had gone out to see a movie!
- (c) So they sat outside and ate the lunch I had packed for them.
- (d) By the time I returned, they had fallen asleep!

Past	Earlier Past
set out	had seen
stayed	had left
arrived	had gone
came	had packed
sat	had fallen
ate	
returned	

Question 2: Find these phrasal verbs in the story.

burn out

light up

look on

run out

keep out

Write down the sentences in which they occur, consult a dictionary and write down the meaning that you think matches the meaning of the phrasal verb in the sentence.

Answer:

- (i) burn out House number 12 turned out to be nothing but a burned-out shell, the roof gaping, the windows boarded-up.
- (ii) light up That was the moment her eyes lit up with recognition and her face became suffused with a sudden glow of happiness.
- (iii) look on Hans Wolf and I looked on and cheered, clapping our hands and stamping our feet, to keep out the cold as much as anything.
- (iv) run out The time came, and all too soon, when the game was finished, the schnapps and the rum and the sausage had long since run out, and we knew it was all over.
- (v) keep out Hans Wolf and I looked on and cheered, clapping our hands and stamping our feet, to keep out the cold as much as anything.

Question 4: The table below contains a list of nouns and some adjectives. Use as many adjectives as you can to describe each noun. You might come up with some funny descriptions!

Noun	Adjective
elephant	
face	circular, striped, enormous, multicoloured, round, cheerful, wild, blue, red, chubby,
building	large, medium-sized, cold
water	

Answer:

Noun	Adjective
elephant	enormous, cheerful, wild, large, medium-sized,
face	round, cheerful, chubby
building	multi-coloured, blue, red, large, medium-sized
water	blue, cold