

The Best Christmas Present in the World

1

Michael Morpurgo

SUMMARY OF THE LESSON

The author went to a junk shop in Bridport. He noticed a roll-top desk. It was very old and made of oak. It was in a bad condition. It had burn-marks down one side. Since it was cheap, the author decided to buy it and get it repaired. He began working on it on Christmas Eve.

He removed the roll-top and tried hard to pull out the drawer. It had suffered much damage due to fire and water. The drawer was jammed. He hit it hard with his fist and pulled it out. He found a secret drawer underneath. He took out a small black tin box. There was a note on it that said: "Jim's last letter, received January 25, 1915". The letter writer also wished to put it in her grave. Out of curiosity he opened the box. Inside it he found an envelope with the address: "Mrs. Jim Macpherson, 12 Copper Beeches, Bridport, Dorset." The letter was dated Dec. 26, 1914.

The letter had been written by Jim to his wife Connie. He was a soldier, set against the Germans during the First World War. Jim wrote to her that he was very happy because something wonderful had happened. The soldiers on both sides of the no man's land were taking up positions in their trenches. It was Christmas morning, cold and frosty.

Jim saw the German soldiers waving a white flag. They were calling out the English soldiers to say Happy Christmas. It was a big surprise to be greeted like friends by the enemies. But it was true, not a trick. The English soldiers also wished them in return.

The leader said that they wanted to celebrate the festival. Jim was the officer in command. He allowed his men to join the Germans. Grey coats and Khaki coats mingled in the middle. In the time of war, they were making peace. The German soldier who came first was named Hans Wolf. Before joining the army he

used to play the cello in an orchestra. Jim had been a school teacher in Dorset. Hans lied that he knew Dorset well. In fact, he had read about that place in Hardy's novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

The soldiers from the rival camps smoked, laughed, drank and feasted. Hans said that he liked the marzipan, the sweet covering on Jim's bread. Jim wrote in the letter, that he had never seen or imagined a Christmas Party like that. They played football also. Both agreed on one point. The countries should have better resolved their disputes by playing a football or cricket match because no one dies in a match whereas war leaves behind orphans and widows.

The game was finished, so did the drinks and cakes. Jim told Hans that they hoped to see families as soon as the fighting ended by Christmas next year.

The author put the letter back into the envelope and drove into Bridport. He meant to hand over the letter to Connie (Mrs. Macpherson). Connie was now 101 years old. Her house had caught fire, but she was saved. She was in a conservatory.

The author wished her 'Happy Christmas' and gave the letter to her. She recognised the writing of her husband and felt very happy. She mistook the author for Jim who had come home, as promised on Christmas. She kissed the author on the cheek and asked him to read the letter to her. She wanted to listen to the voice of her husband. She said that he (Jim) himself was the best Christmas present to her.

TEXTBOOK QUESTIONS SOLVED

COMPREHENSION CHECK

(Page 10)

1. What did the author find in a junk shop?

Ans. The author found a roll-top desk for sale in a junk shop. It was made of oak wood, but it was in a very bad condition.

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

Ans. In the secret drawer of the desk, the author found a small tin box. It had a letter in it. I think the owner of the roll-top desk might have put it there.

COMPREHENSION CHECK (Page 14)**1. Who had written the letter, to whom, and when?**

Ans. John Macpherson, a captain in the British army, had written that letter, dated Dec. 26, 1914, to his wife Connie.

2. Why was the letter written — what was the wonderful thing that had happened?

Ans. The letter described a wonderful event. The two armies—the British and the German—fighting against each other celebrated Christmas together.

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

Ans. Before joining the army, Hans played the cello in the orchestra and Jim was a teacher.

4. Had Hans Wolf ever been to Dorset? Why did he say he knew it?

Ans. No, Hans had never been to Dorset. He had only read about Dorset in Hardy's novel *'Far from the Madding Crowd'*.

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

Ans. No, Jim Macpherson never came back home from the war. Perhaps therefore his wife Connie had preserved his letters.

COMPREHENSION CHECK (Page 15)**1. Why did the author go to Bridport?**

Ans. The author went to Bridport to meet Mrs Jim Macpherson and deliver to her Jim's letter.

2. How old was Mrs Macpherson now? Where was she?

Ans. Mrs. Macpherson was 101 years old. She was in a nursing home.

COMPREHENSION CHECK (Page 16)**1. Who did Connie Macpherson think her visitor was?**

Ans. Connie thought that the visitor was her own husband, Jim Macpherson.

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

Ans. That sentence is, "you told me you'd come home by Christmas, dearest," she said, "And here you are, the best Christmas present in the world. Come closer, Jim dear, sit down."

WORKING WITH THE TEXT (Page 16)**1. For how long do you think Connie had kept Jim's letter? Give reasons for your answer.**

Ans. Connie had kept Jim's last letter till January 25, 1915. The letter was dated Dec. 26, 1914.

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

Ans. The desk must have been sold when Connie's house had burnt. The table had been damaged by fire as well as water.

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

Ans. Both Jim and Hans were soldiers. Both were warm hearted. They had seen the sufferings of war. So it was natural for them to hate war. They favoured a peaceful solution to settle disputes. Games or sports, they said, were good ways of resolving conflicts. I also quite agree with them.

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.

Ans. All human beings are alike in many ways. They love peace and hate war. They want to live together. Examples from the story: "Then they were calling out to us from a cross no man's land. "Happy Christmas, Tommy! Happy Christmas! "When we had got over the surprise some of us shouted back." Same to you, Fritz ! Same to you!"

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

Ans. The British and the German soldiers belonged to different camps. They were enemies in war time. But after all they were human beings and therefore they had similar feelings. They shared the festive spirit of the Christmas. They got

over hatred and played games, feasted and drank like good friends. Both hated war. Both were anxious to go back to their families at the end of war.

6. What is Connie's Christmas present? Why is it the best Christmas present in the world?

Ans. Connie thought that Jim had come back home from war. She mistook the author for Jim. She had been waiting for her husband Jim. So the coming home of Jim was the best Christmas present in the world for her.

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

Ans. Decidedly the title of the story is most suitable. For the old Connie, no other present could have given her such joy as the coming home of Jim, her husband. Her presumption might be wrong, but she got the greatest happiness of her life.

Since the story revolves around Christmas, the alternate title of the story could be 'War and Peace' or 'Christmas Gift'. But neither can be a match to the present title.

WORKING WITH LANGUAGE

(Page 17)

1. Look at these sentences from the story.

I *spotted* it in a junk shop in Bridport... The man *said* it was made in the early nineteenth century... This one *was* in a bad condition...

The *italicised verbs* are in the past tense. They tell us what happened in the past, before now.

(i) Read the passage below and underline the verb 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.

Ans. 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.

Now look at these sentences.

The veneer *had lifted* almost everywhere. Both fire and water *had taken* their toll on this desk.

Notice the verb forms *had lifted*, *had taken* (their toll).

The author found and bought the desk in the past.

The desk was damaged before the author found it and bought it.

Fire and water had damaged the desk *before* the author found it and bought it.

- We use verb forms like *had damaged* for an event in the 'earlier past'. If there are two events in the past, we used the 'had ...' form for the event that occurred first in the past.
- We also use the past perfect tense to show that something was wished for, or expected before a particular time in the past. For example, *I had always wanted one ...*
- Discuss with your partner the difference in meaning in the sentences below.

When I reached the station, the train left.

When I reached the station, the train had left.

(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.

Ans. My little sister is very naughty. When she came back from school yesterday, she had torn her dress. We asked her how it had happened. She said she had

quarrelled with a boy. She had beaten him in a race and he had tried to push her. She had told the teacher and so he had chased her and she had fallen down and had torn her dress.

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

- (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

Ans.	Past	Earlier Past
	(a) set out, stayed	had seen
	(b) arrived, came back	had left, had gone
	(c) sat, ate	had packed
	(d) returned	had fallen

2. Dictionary Work

By the end of the journey, we had run out of drinking water.

Look at the verb *run out* of in this sentence. It is a phrasal verb: it has two parts, a verb and a preposition or an adverb. Phrasal verbs often have meanings that are different from the meanings of their parts.

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.

- Ans.**
- 'House number 12 turned out to be nothing but a **burned-out** shell: (destroyed by fire).
 - 'That was the moment her eyes **lit up** with recognition, and her face.....: (brightened).
 - 'Hans Wolf and I looked on and cheered, clapping our hand : (considered somebody to be somebody)
 - The time came, and all too soon when the game was finished, the schnapps and the run and the sausage had long since **run out**, and we knew it was all over. (become used up, finished)
 - Hans Wolf and I looked on and cheered clapping our hands and stamping our feet, **to keep out** the cold as much as anything. (to avoid)

3. Noun Phrase

Read the following sentence.

I took out a *small black tin box*.

- The phrase in *italics* is a noun phrase.
- It has the noun—*box*—as the head word, and three adjectives preceding it.
- Notice the order in which the adjectives occur—*size* (small), *colour* (black) and *material* (tin) of which it is made.
- We rarely use more than four adjectives before a noun and there is no rigid order in which they are used, though there is a preferred order of modifiers/adjectives in a noun phrase, as given below.

Determiner	Modifier 1 (opinion, feeling)	Modifier 2 (size, shape, age)	Modifier 3 (colour)	Modifier 4 (material)	Head word
a/an/the	nice/lazy/ beautiful	tall/round/ old/young	red/white/ light/dark	silk/cotton woollen	woman/ man/ table/chair

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!

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

- Ans. 1. elephant—enormous, striped, wild
 2. face—cheerful, round, chubby
 3. building—circular, large, multicoloured
 4. water—blue, cold.

SPEAKING (Page 19)

1. In groups discuss whether wars are a good way to end conflicts between countries. Then present your arguments to the whole class.

Ans. War means bloodshed, hate and destruction. It shows the animalism in man. Even the animals fight for some sound reason. But nations go to war to settle some petty dispute or in the name of religion. War solves no problem. Understanding alone can end differences. All religions condemn greed and bloody quarrels. Let us learn this great lesson from history.

2. What kind of presents do you like and why? What are the things you keep in mind when you buy presents for others? Discuss with your partner. (For example, you might buy a book because it can be read and re-read over a period of time.)

Ans. Personally I am against the practice of exchanging expensive gifts. A rose or a token of affection suits every person and every pocket. This is why some guests offer bouquets or greeting cards alone. In case the gift is essential, it should satisfy some need and have utility. When I go to buy a present, I first take into account the liking of my classmate, relative or girl/boy friend.

WRITING (Page 20)

1. Imagine that you are Jim. You have returned to your town after the war. In your diary record how you feel about the changes you see and the events that occur in your town. You could begin like this

25 December, 1919

It's Christmas today, but the town looks.....

Or

Suppose you are the visitor. You are in a dilemma. You don't know whether to disclose your identity and disappoint the old lady or let her believe that her dear Jim has come back. Write a letter to a friend highlighting your anxiety, fears and feelings.

Ans. 25 December, 1919

It's Christmas today, but the town looks very much different from what I had imagined. It has been ravaged by war. Buildings are in ruins and there is graveyard silence. My own house burnt when it was hit by a bombardment. The events of war have taken a toll of civilians as well as soldiers. I hate the fighting instinct in us and curse the war makers (monger). Can't we live in peace like brothers?

Or

12-A, Block 4,

Dorset

August 10, 2009

Dear Smith,

I am in a dilemma. It seems to be insolvable. I, therefore, seek your help in making a decision.

You know I had purchased an old desk. Inside it I got a box containing an old letter. It was written by Jim, a British soldier, to his wife. I decided to deliver that letter to Mrs. Jim at Briport.

I reached her house. She was 101 years old. When I gave her the letter, her eyes lit up. She thought I was her long

lost husband Jim, who had come home to keep his promise. She was excited and she kissed me. She didn't listen to what I tried to tell her about my identity.

I don't know whether or not I should tell who I am. I only walked away from her quickly.

2. Given below is the outline of a story. Construct the story using the outline.

A young, newly married doctor _____ freedom fighter _____ exited to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands by the British _____ infamous cellular Jail _____ prisoners tortured _____ revolt by inmates _____ doctor hanged _____ wife waits for his return _____ becomes old _____ continues to wait with hope and faith.

Ans. It was the year 1930. India was a British colony. But English education enlightened a section of people. They started fighting for freedom. A young, newly-married doctor was implicated in a conspiracy case. He was sent to Black Waters (*Kalapani*) It was a group of Islands in the Bay of Bengal. Many freedom fighters and revolutionaries were sent there for life. They were put in cellular Jail for a few years. They were subjected to torture. The doctor was hanged. But his wife kept waiting for the return of her husband. She grew old. However, her hope and faith did not fade.

□□□

★ The Ant and the Cricket

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

The silly young cricket was fun loving. He loved merry-making. He used to sing all through the pleasant sunny months of summer and spring. He was short-sighted. He didn't bother to store food for the rainy season and cold winter.

When the earth was covered with ice and snow, he found that he had nothing to eat. There were no flowers and no leaves on the trees. He grew nervous. Starvation could be seen over his face.

Wet with the rain and shivering with cold, the hungry cricket went to an ant to get shelter and food. He made it clear that he would return the borrowed grain the next day. The miserly ant said humbly that he was the servant and friend of the cricket. But as a matter of principle, the ants neither borrow nor lend. He asked why he never bothered to store something for the rainy day.

The cricket admitted that he had been careless and foolish. He enjoyed the beauties of summer and sang merrily. The ant then told him bluntly to go and dance all winter. He turned the poor cricket out.

TEXTBOOK QUESTIONS SOLVED

WORKING WITH THE POEM

(Page 23)

1. The cricket says, "Oh! What will become of me?" When does he say it, and why?

Ans. The cricket speaks these words when in his home he finds no food to eat in winter.

2. (i) Find in the poem the lines that mean the same as "Neither a borrower nor a lender be" (*Shakespeare*).

(ii) What is your opinion of the ant's principles?

Ans. (i) The line is: But we ants never borrow; we ants never lend.

(ii) The ant's principle is not bad. It teaches a lesson to everybody to plan for the rainy day.

3. The ant tells the cricket to "dance the winter away." **Do you think the word 'dance' is appropriate here? If so, why?**

Ans. The word 'dance' here means 'merry making and wasting time.' It is appropriate here. The irresponsible cricket does not deserve any sympathy.

4. (i) Which lines in the poem express the poet's comment? Read them aloud.

(ii) Write the comment in your own words.

Ans. (i) The poet's comment is expressed in the last two lines.

"Folks call this a fable, I'll warrant it true."

(ii) People say that this story of the cricket and the ant is imaginary or a fable with a moral. But I think that the story is true and educative. Some people live only in the present. They spend what they earn, and make merry. But they regret this habit later on.

5. If you know a fable in your own language narrate it to your classmates.

Ans. Do yourself.