

The Angel of Readiness

by Jonathan Dodd

Alice Loughran was an Angel of Readiness. She was never caught out by any circumstance she could imagine, and she had a fierce imagination. If you had a splinter, she had the relevant medicines and ointments, and plasters, and tweezers. She even had one of those illuminated magnifying glasses on a stand. She was that sort of person.

Alice liked watching programmes on the television that showed people who lived in chaos. There never used to be such programmes, and she imagined they had started to be made because people had stopped being prepared and vigilant, and so it had become necessary to warn the rest of us about what could happen if we relaxed our guard. She tingled with anticipation, and sighed with horror, and winced every time a door was opened by the rubber-gloved presenters, to reveal yet another revolting sight.

How she longed to be on one of those programmes!

She kept up a steady stream of letters to the producers, but these were never answered. She had no idea why, but she suspected that there was a very large queue of people who wanted the same job. She decided she should just keep on writing, and that perseverance would eventually pay off.

And so the days passed.

Alice spent these days productively, of course. She checked all her supplies, made sure they were stacked in date order, checked the use-by dates on everything, and cleaned her house thoroughly. But somehow it wasn't enough. There was something missing. She found herself struggling to understand. Everything should be perfect, and ready, for any emergency. And it was. She found herself shedding a tear, and reached out to where she knew there was a box of tissues, as there were in every room in her house. She dabbed her nose delicately, looked at the results, sighed when she could see no signs of a nosebleed, and took the dirty tissue out to the dustbin.

It was cold outside, and getting dark. The winter nights were drawing in. She could see the street lights coming on, one by one. She wondered how they knew when it was time to come on like that. She could see the bright coloured lights inside the windows of her neighbours. She watched them flash on and off, and she wondered what their lives were like, with all those children, and the looks on their faces in the morning as they rushed to get them to school, and then go to work, and she could hear all the noise they made, and she wondered how they could stand it.

She went back inside, where everything was ordered, and safe. Her house felt like a shrine to readiness, and a willingness to serve, and help, and she knew she should be doing this, but she didn't know what it was all for. It was all very frustrating.

The days went by, and then it was Christmas Eve, a day she dreaded almost as much as Christmas Day itself. Alice had done her shopping. She was ready. She checked her supplies again, because there wouldn't be a chance to restock at Christmas. She went to bed early, as usual.

Sometime in the night she was suddenly wide awake. She couldn't tell if it was a noise that had woken her, or a dream. She didn't usually wake up in the middle of the night. But every sinew of her internal readiness system was telling her to get up and be ready for something. This was different. All her life she had just wanted to be ready. Now there was something to be ready for, whatever it was. And she was thrilled.

Outside her bedroom window, the pitch black of the night sky was filling with a clear light. She could see it was only her house that was lit up, and the rest of the street was silent and dark. The light was as bright as a spotlight, but it didn't hurt her eyes at all, and as she watched, a shadow grew on her front lawn, as if something large was dropping down very slowly from the sky. She threw some clothes on and rushed downstairs.

As Alice opened her front door, a large sleigh was settling on her lawn, with several reindeer attached. They were steaming, and breathing hard, as if they had been travelling a long way. But Alice's eyes were drawn to the figures seated behind the reins. Incredibly, there was Santa, just as she had always imagined him, with his red suit and curly white hair, and that great bushy beard. There were several small figures around him, dressed in green, with pointed hats. One was lying with his head in Santa's lap.

"Merry Christmas, Alice!" said Santa. "Sorry to drop in like this, but we've got a bit of a problem, and we need your help." He tied up the reins and gently picked up the injured elf. "Can you look at young Eldrew here? He fell off the sleigh. He's a little too eager sometimes."

Alice was thrilled. "Come in. Through here. Put him down there." She picked up her accident pack, and stood over the elf. "Stand back. I need room." Santa and the rest of the elves squeezed themselves round the walls of the tiny room, and anxiously watched as she set to work.

She knew what to do. She checked his eyes and his temperature, took his pulse, and looked for bleeding. When she was satisfied that Eldrew wasn't in immediate danger, she felt him all over to check for signs of broken

bones, while keeping up a stream of questions. "How far did he fall?" "what did he land on?" "which part of him hit the roof first?"

She was strangely unsurprised by everything, even when they all answered every question quietly and precisely. "If I was injured I couldn't hope to have better people around me," she thought. Then she had a second thought. "Does this thing happen very often?" she asked sternly. Nothing annoyed her more than carelessness.

"Oh no!" said Santa. "Perhaps once every 200 years. At least in these latitudes."

Alice stopped listening here, because she had identified the problem. "Eldrew hasn't broken anything. He does have a nasty bruise and a lot of swelling on his arm, and he bumped his head on the roof. He might have some concussion."

Everyone sighed at this news. Eldrew started to show signs of waking up, so Alice quickly treated the cuts and grazes, and put his injured arm in a sling.

"He should stay quiet and rest for a few days, and you should watch him for excessive sleepiness or if he can't concentrate. Get him checked if you're worried about him."

Alice issued a stern lecture on sleigh health and safety. She watched the elves carefully taking their injured comrade back to the sleigh, and already starting to tease him. She was pleased that Eldrew seemed to be joining in. He'd be all right. She was happier at that moment than she could remember being. Ever.

Santa took her hand, and kissed her cheek, and she blushed a deeper red than his beautiful soft suit. "Thank you so much," he said. "We must get going. All those presents to deliver! I'm sure we'll meet again."

And off they went. The light slowly faded away, and everything returned to normal. Not a trace of their night-time visit was left, apart from the scraps of sticky plaster and gauze on her table, which she cleared away while she cleaned up.

Alice thought she would stay awake all night, but she fell into a deep and peaceful sleep.

When she woke up everything was so normal that she thought she had dreamed it all. She went down for some breakfast, and saw a present under her little Christmas tree. She made herself a cup of tea before opening it, because she feared what might be in there.

When she unwrapped it, there was a beautiful defibrillator. Alice was thrilled. She had always wanted one of those. "Thank you Santa," she whispered, and hugged it to herself. She looked out of her window, at all the people out there, celebrating Christmas, and opening their presents, and being happy, and she found herself loving them, and being happy herself, because she had helped to make sure that it all worked smoothly.

"So this Christmas turned out to be all right after all," she thought.