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BENEFACTOR

A Christmas Story

By HOWARD FIELDING

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After the coffee cups on a December morning the Rev. Richard Macmillan and Miss Martha, his aunt, discussed a matter of conscience, that same hard which has busied so many heads and pens and is known by the name of "matted money."

There was a certain rich man named Langdale, who had married a young girl a cousin of Macmillan's. The young clergyman had received various small favors from Langdale at Christmas not only to himself, but for Aunt Martha and Miss Amy Branford, to whom Macmillan was engaged. In particular he had had for the last three years, since he had been pastor of the so-called Sandstone church of Southfield, a check which was a contribution to the charity fund of the church.

It was Curtis Langdale's habit to lunch in his office between 12 and 1. As Macmillan approached the door of Langdale's private office he was surprised to meet a physician with whom he had a slight acquaintance, a man of some distinction in the medical profession. Macmillan uttered a hasty word of salutation, but the other passed him without a glance.

Langdale's aversion to doctors was well known, and Macmillan had no thought that the visitor had come upon a professional errand, but at sight of Langdale the incredible became probable. An uncanny change had taken place in the man's aspect. The lines in his strong face were not only deeper, but greatly different in their significance. He looked ill in body, as in mind.

Surprise was instantly succeeded by sympathy in Macmillan's mind, and the conventional "How do you do?" had a real import.

"Oh, I'm all right," answered Langdale. "Never better."

"Well, that's good news," said the clergyman. "It was a bit anxious, having met Dr. Hayward in the hall."

"Dr. Hayward? Who's he?"

"No, sir," responded Langdale; "you'll see no doctors here. I can bunko my own stomach for nothing. Do you own the tall man in the gray suit?"

"Yes."

His enemies are saying such hard things of him? Perhaps you might advise."

"Precisely," said he, laughing in a sort of nervous desperation. "That's just what Aunt Martha said. And I'm sure you both have exactly the same idea. Goodby, dearest. I'm going to New York."

Shortly after 12 o'clock Macmillan arrived at the little office in New York which he had engaged for his convenience as trustee of Amy's tangled inheritance. Macmillan was a man who did not relish defeat or easily succumb. As one of his worst adversaries expressed it, he "had to be killed half a dozen times before he would die."

A letter from the man who had thus described him was waiting for him on this day, and as he read it he muttered, "This kills me for the sixth time."

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He had decided to lay Amy's affairs before Langdale as a simple matter of business, just as if he had been dealing with an officer of a bank, to ask Langdale to consider it and give an answer on the following day and, having thus put off the decision, to lead the conversation to the precise point which Langdale had reached at a bound.

Before the two men could come together upon any common ground the arrival of important visitors broke off the session. Langdale excused himself courteously and gave his hand to Macmillan.

"I'm glad you came to see me," he said. "You've done me a considerable service."

"Well, I really don't see"—

"You have, Richard; you have indeed. And I won't forget it. I always keep you in mind at this time of year. Goodby, goodby."

In a daze of disappointment, perplexity and self-reproach Macmillan departed. He had bungled the interview in all ways. He had accomplished absolutely nothing for Amy, for Langdale, for his own conscience. The account of the occurrence which he gave to Amy had no clearness to his own intelligence, but seemed quite satisfactory to her.

"You must see him again," she said. "You have influenced him. He feels it and is grateful. Of course you can't know just what it was that you said that gave him light, but I am sure that he saw a way to carry out his plans more honestly. That's what he meant when he spoke of your service to him."

"Amy, that is absurd."

"But, my dear Dick, is there any other possible explanation? Try to be reasonable. He said you had served him. How else could you have done it?"

The next day was Thursday and business practically ceased for the week. There was really nothing of importance that Macmillan could do to avert the doom that would fall on Monday, yet he went to town about noon and forced himself to face several discouraging and useless interviews. At 3 o'clock he went to his little office, beaten and disheartened.

There was a letter on the floor, and he recognized Langdale's envelope. It gave him a shock, but no real hope, for he had not even succeeded in telling Langdale what he wanted. He would not have been surprised to find a check for \$50. Under the circumstances a man of Langdale's peculiar notions of humor might have found amusement in such a gift.

There was a check in the envelope, but not for \$50. Five thousand was the sum! A thrill went through Macmillan's vitals, and he unfolded the accompanying letter with trembling hands. It was very brief, as follows:

Dear Richard—Inclosed you will find my note. In the inscrutable ways of Providence even the self-righteous may be brought to repentance and be made the instruments of good. I am very glad you came to see me. Cordially and with Christmas wishes yours,

CURTIS LANGDALE.

The awkward wording of the letter left some doubt as to who was the "self-righteous" and who had been "brought to repentance," but Macmillan was not in a critical or sensitive mood. He was merely glad and grateful. Thrusting the letter into his pocket and holding the check in his hand, he strode out to the bank just in time to cash the check.

Good luck attended him at every step. Though the hour was so late, he found the men of whom he went in search, and by the strength of his new hope he was enabled to accomplish whatever he desired.

Among the millions of the great city, with all their feverish desires and vast

diversity of fortune, there was not a man whose heart sang louder for joy. If he had been able to communicate with Langdale and express his sense of gratitude the day would have been perfect, but Langdale was celebrating Christmas in some secure retreat, no one knew where.

On Saturday morning Macmillan went to the city and spent an hour or more in his office. He was at work there and singing as he toiled when there came a tap at the door. Macmillan admitted a young man, whom he presently recognized as a clerk of Langdale's.

"Mr. Macmillan," said this man, without so much as a bow by way of greeting, "did you receive a letter with a check in it?"

"Yes," answered Macmillan cheerily; "I received it Thursday afternoon."

The visitor moistened his lips. "You haven't cashed it yet?" he asked.

"But I have," was the reply. "I needed the money right away."

The young man sank down in a chair. "I'm knocked out, I guess," he said in a high keyed voice. "I'm done—that's the truth about me."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"I've been speculating—we all do—in Langdale's shop. We get tips, you know—some good, some bad, but they all look good. A fellow who is a sort of an office boy there has made over \$10,000," and he laughed nervously, "but I couldn't make a cent. Oh, it was my own money. There's nothing wrong. But it's knocked me out. I don't know what I'm doing. I drew that check of yours. Here's Mr. Langdale's memorandum, \$50.00. Well, I couldn't see the decimal point, and though I'd heard him say fifty, I drew it for \$5,000, and he signed it."

He passed a crumpled slip of paper to Macmillan, whose hair had begun to stir at the roots. Upon the paper were these words scribbled in pencil: "Draw check to order of Richard Macmillan for \$50.00."

"Most men wouldn't write the last two ciphers at all," said the clerk. "But Mr. Langdale always does. So I might have known what the amount was. I've drawn enough checks for him in the last three years."

Macmillan passed his hand along the top of his head.

"This is very important," he said. "Of course it shall be rectified, but I'm afraid I can't command the money immediately. I will explain, however, to Mr. Langdale on Monday, and," he added, moved by the weariness and misery in the other's countenance, "I will put in a good word for you."

"It's kind of you to say so," responded the clerk. "My name is Tunbridge." He rose and stretched himself like a weary animal, then moved stiffly toward the door. But Macmillan called him back and talked to him for a long time cheerfully, so that he went away in better spirits. This kindness was very ill requited, though not willfully, for poor Tunbridge was wholly unaware that he had added to Macmillan's burden. The fact is, however, that he had made Macmillan see clearly what an egregious blind owl he had been. Surely the feeblest perceptive powers should have sufficed to inform him that the check had been sent in error. The whole tenor of the note which accompanied it was relevant to Langdale's design. He had maliciously renewed his contribution of \$50 to Macmillan's charity fund in order to imply that he believed the clergyman had called upon him for the purpose of reminding him of it.

Macmillan had spent about \$2,500 of the money in such a way that he could never get it back, and Amy would not be benefited one penny unless he should disburse about \$1,500 more on Monday, and this, of course, he could not do. How he was to return the \$2,500 to Langdale within a reasonable time he did not know. He had stolen it, in effect, for the simplest common sense should have kept him from such frantic haste. Monday would have served him quite as well as Thursday for the payments and would have given him opportunity to assure himself of the reality of Langdale's generosity.

And Mrs. Langdale returned from a Christmas visit on Monday morning, and the lady went on alone to their home in Larchmont, whence she telephoned to her husband at his office about 11 o'clock. The chief part of her message was that she had found some very pretty presents that had been sent by Miss Amy Branford and Miss Martha Macmillan. How did her husband account for this? Had he not told her of a quarrel with Mr. Macmillan a year ago? Had he not advised her against sending anything to Miss Branford and Miss Macmillan? Langdale had neglected to tell his wife about Macmillan's call and had willfully concealed his own malign jest in the matter of the fifty dollar check. Now therefore he disclosed the one and still hid the other.

"You'd better hustle around and get them something," said he, "something rather nice, and invent some excuse for the delay."

The incident passed from his mind immediately, for he was called to consider a matter of considerable gravity. This developed in the visit of a Mr. Gridley, one of the very few persons to whom Mr. Langdale told the truth.

"Well, Gridley," said he when that gentleman had drifted noiselessly into the office, "have you looked him up?"

"It's Dr. Hayward, all right," responded Gridley. "I took one of your boys up there to see him, and I've heard from Omaha. The cousin racket is a fake, and I don't suppose there's any doubt that somebody has got Hayward to make a report on your health, though I can't find out who it is."

"It's the Dey street bank gang, of course," responded Langdale. "This

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SAFETY DEPOSIT BOXES FOR RENT.

accounts for the bluff that they're making. They think I'm going to break down. What do you think about it?" he demanded upon a sudden impulse, for he had caught a look in the detective's eye. "What change do you notice in me? Come! You're a keen eyed chap. Tell me!"

Gridley hesitated.

"Well, sir," he said at last, "aside from your general appearance, which isn't what it was, I notice a kind of something in your speech, a sort of hesitation. Now, there was a man I knew who got into a state where if he wanted to say 'dollar' he couldn't think of the word, and sometimes he'd say any old thing, perfectly ridiculous. I believe they call it aphasia."

"Yes," said Langdale, paling, "that's what they call it."

An attendant entered, bringing Macmillan's card.

"Here's the fellow that put us on to Hayward," said Langdale. "I thanked him heartily, but of course he didn't know what I was talking about. Well, he'll have to wait now till Hayward shows up. He's my first duty now. I'll give him a jolt, and then he'll run to his employers, of course, and you'll see where he goes."

Langdale was waiting grimly when Hayward's presence was made known

"I was thinking about a man who is waiting to see me," said Langdale, and, to his own surprise, he now spoke sanely enough. "Would you mind stepping into this other room while I see what he wants? He's a minister and a relative of my wife's, and I don't like to keep him out there with the rabble."

"Certainly," said Hayward and entered the adjoining room.

Langdale sank into his chair and tried to bring the word "doctor" to his lips, but he had not succeeded when Macmillan entered.

"Mr. Langdale," said the clergyman, "I want to speak two words, one for myself and one for an unfortunate young man in your employ, a Mr. Tunbridge. It appears that in drawing a check to my order he mistook the amount. He has had great trouble and is suffering from what I should call nervous prostration. Probably a little rest will bring him round all right, and if I may venture to speak in his behalf I would urge you to grant him a bit of a vacation, with perhaps a friendly word or two to start him on his recovery."

"What did he do?" said Langdale.

"He drew the check for five thousand."

Langdale stopped him with a gesture. The door between the two rooms

tion following a quiet tip of that kind would help him to dispose of the stock which he had acquired. Insiders would then buy greedily, thinking that they were acting upon stolen information.

All this passed through Langdale's powerful mind in a moment.

"For five thousand?" he said, echoing Macmillan's words. "Well, why not?"

"But you told him fifty?" gasped Macmillan.

Langdale laughed softly.

"Poor fellow!" he said. "Poor fellow! This is really my fault. I've noticed that Tunbridge was breaking down. He's done quite a number of queer things around the shop. I ought to have given him a vacation long ago. Now I'll stake him to a good one, so don't worry about him, and, as for his tale, it's mere moonshine. I told him to draw the check for \$5,000, and I signed it with great good will. I understood that you needed the money to pull Miss Branford's property out of the fire, and, heaven knows, I'd like to see you do it. And, besides," he continued, with the expansive freedom of a man who finds that he is lying exceptionally well, "besides, I owe you something for yourself. Yes, sir; I've never had the law laid down to me as you laid it down. It made me see that business in the right light, and what with that and all this talk in the papers and my wife's conscience (which she generously shares with me) I've decided to let the whole thing go. Those fellows have made me a decent proposition, and I'm going to accept it, and then I'm going to take my wife to Europe for six months and have a nice, quiet time. She's been begging me to go, and now I'm going to do it as a sort of belated Christmas present. Mind you, this is all confidential."

"But, my dear Langdale, all this money—"

"My dear Richard, it's a Christmas present to you and Amy, so say no more about it."

As to any expressions of gratitude which he may have had the grace to utter Macmillan retained only a vague memory. He was so completely unmanned that he thought best to go to his office and be quiet for a few minutes before transacting the business which was now so easy.

He had barely had time to address a few appropriate remarks to Amy's picture and indite one brief letter when a knock at the door announced Dr. Hayward. The distinguished physician had come to make a little explanation. Doubtless Mr. Macmillan had remarked some change in Mr. Langdale of late. Doubtless he knew of Mr. Langdale's prejudice against doctors. Mrs. Langdale, however, was a very sensible woman and had been reasonably anxious about her husband, so she had prevailed upon Dr. Hayward to depart from the usual routine of professional life and call upon a patient in need.

"I'm afraid I gave Mr. Langdale a hint," said Macmillan. "I deeply regret it."

"Oh, that's all right," replied the doctor. "It makes no difference now. You've done more for him than I could. If he stops this confounded scandal and goes away to Europe he'll be all right. How you ever persuaded him to do it I don't know."

"I cannot understand it any more than you can," responded Macmillan.

A WESTERN WONDER.

There's a Hill at Bowie, Tex., that's as big as last year.

This wonder is W. L. Hill, who from a weight of 180 pounds has grown to over 180. He says: "I suffered with a terrible cough, and doctors gave me up to die of Consumption. I was reduced to 90 pounds, when I began taking Dr. King's New Discovery for Consumption, Coughs and Colds. Now, after taking 12 bottles, I have more than doubled in weight and am completely cured." Only sure Cough and Cold cure. Guaranteed by W. A. Leslie and Burke Drug Co., Druggists. 50c and \$1.00. Trial bottle free.



HE FOUND AMY ENGAGED IN A SNOWBALL BATTLE.



THE DOOR BETWEEN THE TWO ROOMS WAS OPEN, AND HE DARED NOT CLOSE IT NOW.

to him. He had prepared a greeting consisting of the single word "doctor," which he knew would startle Hayward more than any other utterable sound. The door opened. Hayward entered. Langdale drew breath to speak, but what was that word? The word, the word! He knew the meaning as well as ever in his life, but not the word. His brain, but of them all he could catch only a phrase that Gridley had used, and it was that which he uttered: "Perfectly ridiculous."

"I beg your pardon," said Hayward. "Time-time was what Langdale needed-time in which to triumph over his enemy in his own brain, whose state must be concealed from this man at all costs."

was open, and he dared not close it now, and doubly he dared not have Hayward hear this story. Rich lunatics throw away their money. That is why they are locked up by anxious relatives. If Hayward should report this to the Dey street crowd they would withdraw even the proposition which they had made.

And with that proposition Langdale was now content. He had seen the handwriting on the wall. A man who can't say "doctor" when he tries is in no state for a long and bitter warfare of wits with clever enemies. His one idea now was to keep his condition from Hayward's knowledge. But his decision to accept the proposition of the Dey street people he desired Hayward to know and report, for the rea-