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The Stingy Guest — A Christmas Story

By WILLARD BLAKEMAN

"Tomorrow, sir, will be Christmas, and I would be happy to have you dine with us."

The words were spoken by the landlord of Fraunces' tavern, New York city, more than a hundred years ago.

But this is not the beginning of my story. The early part of the nineteenth century was not the early part of the twentieth nor anything like it. Therefore what I am going to tell should be prefaced by an explanation. New York in 1800 did not extend far above city hall. Fraunces' tavern, located a short distance east of the old New Amsterdam fort at the foot of Broadway, was the first hostelry in the city. A newspaper in those days was something of a rarity, and since there were no reading rooms the journal subscribed for by a landlord for the use of his guests was eagerly sought. No sooner was it laid aside by one person than it was snatched up by another, and frequently there were several persons waiting for it.

The gentleman who had been invited to take his Christmas dinner without charge at Fraunces' tavern had appeared there one evening a stranger, gone into the taproom, seated himself at a table and called for a glass of brandy. He sat sipping the beverage, waiting till the person who was at the time reading the newspaper should lay it down, and when he had done so the stranger picked it up. The paper, once folded, was about 12 by 10 inches, with not as much matter printed on it as one would find in a column of a modern journal. The gentleman read the news, principally a summary of what had happened in Europe a couple of months before; then turned to the advertisements. The former in this issue was a statement of the operations of Napoleon I., the latter an announcement of the sailing of a ship, an auction and a reward for a runaway slave. When the reader had exhausted both news and advertisements he paid his reckoning, six and a quarter cents, and withdrew.

That was the beginning of the stranger's appearances at Fraunces' tavern. Rarely did an evening pass without his coming into the inn, calling for his glass of brandy, reading the newspaper and retiring. His object was evidently to "kill two birds with one stone," or, rather, to get his daily dram and the news for one price. His clothes were shabby and seemed to indicate that he could not afford to subscribe for a newspaper and was obliged to sponge for his reading on the tavern. The servants conceived the contempt usual to menials for stingy guests and would have let him know by their manner their opinion of him had it not been for the landlord, who would not countenance any disrespect to a guest, no matter how little money he spent in the house.

Indeed, the landlord conceived something akin to respect for his guest. Though the latter never spent more than the six and a quarter cents, he invariably paid his reckoning before leaving the tavern. He was unobtrusive, never engaged in discussions with other guests of the house, and the landlord used to say that he wished some of the boisterous persons who met in his taproom would learn something from the impecunious guest.

The stranger's first appearance at the tavern occurred at the beginning of the year, and from that time up to Christmas not a servant in the house had ever received a tip from him; consequently when the landlord was overheard by "Boots" to invite him to a free dinner on Christmas day the knight of the blacking brush at once communicated the fact to the maid of the dustpan, who told it to the queen of the skillet, and it thus at once became known to every servant in the house.

"Just to think of it!" snapped the scullion. "'E's been comin' ere a year and not one of us 'as got a cent from 'im."

"It can't be," said a waiter, "that 'e'll accept such an invitation."

"To be sure 'e will; 'e's mean enough to accept anything."

None of these comments came to the ears of the landlord or he would have reproved the person making them. He had been watching his patron ever since he first came to his house and made up his mind that though he might be poor he was certainly honest. There were too many persons who spent money lavishly at the tavern who ceased their visits without paying their bills. In time the landlord, knowing about what hour the gentleman would appear, occasionally took the paper and read it himself till the stingy man came in, in order that he might be able to turn it over with the glass of brandy.

This he did on the Christmas eve he had given the invitation to dinner, or, rather, since he did not read the paper, being too busy making his preparations, but hid it under the bar, and as soon as his guest came in handed it to him. This naturally caused indignation on the part of other guests, but

as the use of the paper was gratuitous to all they could not complain.

A fine dinner was served at Fraunces' tavern, a dinner such as was enjoyed there in those days, and if it could be served there now would cost much more than it did then. The turkey was wild, and the venison was wild, as indeed were all the meats served. There was terrapin, but it was not touched, being considered fit only for the negro slaves. The only invited guest at the dinner did not break his customary silence. Having read the newspaper before the meal was served and having dined, he went to a side room for his overcoat and hat and gloves and walking stick. The landlord stepped forward to help him on with his coat and as he did so slipped a silver dollar into his hand with the words:

"This being Christmas, sir, I trust you will not take offense at my offering you a little gift."

The gentleman looked at the coin as though he did not quite understand what it meant, then at the donor, and muttering the only word that had ever come from him, except to order his brandy, "Thanks," he put the piece in his pocket and left the house.

That was the last time the stingy gentleman, as the servants continued to call him, appeared at Fraunces' tavern. The landlord was puzzled at his not coming again, ignorant whether he had taken his Christmas gift as a reproof for his parsimony or whether something had happened to him. He always expected that his former guest would turn up some evening, call for his glass of brandy and read the newspaper as before. But the next Christmas came and went without his appearance, and the next and many others, and still the stingy gentleman did not come to Fraunces' tavern.

Meanwhile the city of New York had taken a start and was pushing northward. The Astor house was built, a far more imposing building than the little tavern downtown, and the landlord of the latter found himself out of the fashionable district. He turned over the management to another and opened a house farther uptown. But he was now getting old, and his former patrons were passing off the stage. The travelers who were flocking into the city did not know what a genial host he was, and, even had they known it, they had not the same use for a genial host as when the city was confined to that region bordering on the Bowling Green. Men were getting in too much of a hurry to require much attention from a landlord. Besides, the former keeper of Fraunces' tavern had not the wherewithal to put up a structure suitable for the hotel of the later period. He threw up the sponge and advertised his furniture and fixtures for sale. From this time he sank into poverty.

One Christmas eve he received a note through the post that if he would call at a certain house near St. Mark's church he would receive a gift. There was no name signed to the missive; indeed, it was a scrawl in a very few words. He could not think of anything he wished for Christmas, though his needs were many and there were persons on whom he would have liked to bestow gifts. It is quite possible he might not have paid any attention to the note had it not been from curiosity. He desired to know who his would be donor was.

Christmas morning being bright and crisp, he concluded that he would take a walk and go past the address given in the note. He told his wife that he would not go inside to claim the proffered gift, but a woman takes a different view of such matters from a man, and she urged him to take measures to gratify her curiosity. Indeed, they were in such financial straits that even a small gift of money was needed to buy a Christmas dinner.

The ex-landlord half promised what his wife asked and started out on his walk. When he came to the house in question its size and elegance surprised him and still further stimulated his curiosity. He rang the bell, was admitted by a servant and sent in his name. The servant led him into a library, and a man advanced to meet him.

"Great heavens, he was the stingy stranger!"

"You are surprised, I suppose," said the gentleman, "to see me here. I did not return to your tavern after partaking of the Christmas dinner you so kindly gave me because the next day I departed for the northwest. I was then and am now a fur trader, and much of my time for the past twenty years has been spent in the wilds of Canada. You remember your Christmas gift to me just before we parted? Well, I invested it in my business at a time when I was in great straits for ready money and every dollar was worth thousands to me. I have sent for you not exactly as I expressed it to make you a gift, but to hand you the proceeds of your investment. And yet what I have to offer I intend for a return for your many acts of kindness to me when I could not afford to subscribe for a journal the news in which I refer more especially to the business news—I greatly needed."

Going to a desk, he took out a paper, which he handed to the ex-landlord, who, with his usual delicacy, put it in his pocket without looking at it. Then the donor asked if he would partake of some refreshment, and they sat down to a glass of brandy, the gentleman remarking that it was time he returned favors received in that respect also. Then the ex-landlord returned to his home and gave his wife an account of his visit.

"The paper!" exclaimed the wife. "Let me see the paper he gave you!"

"Oh, I forgot the paper," said her husband, and he produced it.

It contained a settlement upon him of a sufficient income to keep him comfortable for life.

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Economy Hints

A penny saved is a penny earned.— Benjamin Franklin.

How to Economize in the Kitchen.

THE prime idea in the layout of the modern kitchen is the saving of space. Space saving reduces expenses, insures better food and saves servants. Some surprising ingenuities to this end have been devised in recent years. The idea is that all unnecessary steps should be avoided and that all shall be so arranged that everything will be within easy reach of the worker's hands without the necessity for frequent trips across the room or when meals are being served from the kitchen to the dining room. Chief among the space savers is the kitchen cabinet, a glorified pantry or perhaps the kitchen mechanic's work bench and tool chest combined. By the way, the term "kitchen mechanic," originally invented to apply to female menial servants, usually of foreign origin, might well be employed nowadays as a distinguishing term, designating one with sufficient mechanical genius to operate successfully the multitude of mechanical devices designed for kitchen use. To a large extent modern kitchen machinery is offered and used largely for the purpose of dispensing with the kitchen mechanic, old style. But the

old designation might properly remain and apply to the modern culinary operator if its old meaning should totally disappear.

But to return to the kitchen cabinet. It is really a very respectable piece of furniture in appearance, and its versatility is unlimited. Among other things, it has numerous shelves, cupboards, closets, a tilting and removable flour bin, a detachable flour sifter, a sugar bin, a pounding and cutting board, an extension sliding table top, a ventilated cooling cupboard, a rack for the grocer's bills, and so on indefinitely. It is not nearly as expensive as it sounds, and the number of edibles that can be made or prepared for the stove in, on, around, above and below this article would fill several large, closely printed cook books.

The cabinet is of several varieties as regards the materials of which it is made, but wood is always the chief one, of course, while the main differences in the varieties is in the extension table top, which may be of nickel-oid, aluminum or porcelain, while the interior woodwork is either varnished or enameled. It is not intended that the cabinet shall hold a season's supply of all the raw materials that go into pies, cakes and pastry, but it is amply competent to store away liberal quantities of edibles, either already made or yet to be made.

Effective Remedy.

Famous Scientist (excitedly)—Something must be done to stop the spread of the opium habit among women.

Editor (calmly)—Very well, sir; I'll put in a paragraph saying that a tankard for opium is a sign of old age! Exchange.

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