



Whether Common or Not

By WILL M. MAUPIN.

A Newspaper Man's Christmas

A number of years ago, while I was doing specialty work on a daily newspaper in a western metropolis, I seized a hint thrown out by my managing editor, which hint resulted in one of the most unique Christmas celebrations I ever experienced.

The managing editor—who, by the way, happens also to be my managing editor at this time—called me in for the purpose of outlining some special Christmas story, and we fell into a desultory conversation about the peculiarities of people in general. "I hold to the opinion," said the M. E., "that the reason why there is so much individual suffering among the poor—the reason why there are suffering poor—is because so many well-to-do people cannot feel the call of individuals; that they know humanity only in the aggregate and therefore do not feel called upon to lend a hand."

This struck me as being an unfounded assumption, for I then held to the opinion that the average well-to-do man was rather selfish, and excused his lack of charity on the ground that because he couldn't do enough to make even a faint impression on poverty, therefore it was not worth while for him to do anything.

"You're wrong," said the M. E., positively. "A general plea for all the poor meets with little response, for the reason that those able to give know nothing of the people in need. If specific cases are brought to their attention, average men, rich or poor, are willing to help—the rich to give liberally, and the poor to divide with those less fortunate than themselves."

I combatted this assertion, holding firmly to my opinion that the average man of wealth would turn the cold shoulder to any unfortunate who struck him for help.

"Well, let's test the matter," said the M. E.

"How?" asked I.

"This way," replied the M. E. "You dress up like a down-and-out, frame up a hard luck story, and on Christmas day make the rounds of a dozen or so homes of the city's best known men and ask them for help. Then write up your experiences for the Sunday paper."

That was the hint thrown out to me, which hint gave me an experience that will always be a pleasant memory, but which changed my mind about some things.

With the aid of an actor friend of mine who attended to the "make-up" part of the game, I was able to start out shortly after noon of Christmas day, looking like a man who had never a friend, was as hungry as a fellow could be, and the victim of the toughest luck imaginable. I had a hard luck story calculated to touch the stoniest heart, and I had practiced on it till I could reel it off like a book agent telling his story of the "Life of Napoleon" in fifty-seven installments, a-dollar-down-and-a-dollar-a-week-until-paid-for.

The first home I struck was that of a lawyer who had a reputation for being cold blooded, aristocratic and selfish. I knocked at the side door and inquired for the gentleman of the house, and managed to persuade a rather supercilious servant that I really had to see him. When Mr. W— appeared he had evidently just arisen from a bountifully laden table. He invited me inside, and then I

sprung my hard luck tale. Before I was well started M. W— asked:

"Have you had any dinner?"

"No, sir," I replied. "But I didn't come to ask for a dinner. I want work."

"Well, you come in and we'll see if we can't find a bite or two to eat, and while you are eating we'll talk your case over."

Truly, friends, Mr. W— took me into the dining room and had the servant bring me turkey and cranberry sauce, and all the "Christmas fixin's" that a wealthy man usually has, and between urgings to have more, Mr. W— got the rest of my story.

"Well, you are in pretty hard luck," he said, when I had finished. I haven't anything for you to do right now, but I think I can fix that in a day or two. You come to my office tomorrow morning at 10:30 and I'll send you to a place where I think you can catch on. Of course you'll have to eat between now and then, and also have a place to sleep, so here's a dollar. Now you be sure and come up tomorrow."

I next worked my little game on "Uncle Bill" P—, and one of the hardest things I ever tackled was the job of acting like a hungry man when "Uncle Bill" had his servant girl load up a lot of dishes with edibles and place them before me. He not only fed me, but he gave me 50 cents for a bed and breakfast, and a little note to the boss in a wholesale house he was interested in—owning, I think, about three-thirds of it—telling him to put me to work in the shipping department right away.

From "Uncle Bill's" I went to the home of General M—, and despite the fact I usually met him three or four times a week, he didn't recognize me in my poverty-stricken attire. He had a servant take me and feed me, and although I was even then containing two big Christmas dinners I had to choke down some more and act like a hungry man while doing it. I didn't want that watchful girl slipping out and tipping it off to the General that I was a suspicious character and likely to swipe the spoons. At the end of my third dinner for the day I was sent to the General's study, and we had a heart-to-heart talk. I told him I was sure I could get work at Minden, a town a couple of hundred miles west, and proved that I knew the town by mentioning several people well known to my host.

As a result of that conference I went away richer by one dinner, one dollar, and a note to the manager of a big railway corporation requesting that I be given transportation to Minden.

I might have continued the experiment longer, but I balked at trying to eat the fourth Christmas dinner in one day. But I had learned a lot. I had learned that the world's great heart is warm, and that men need only to have their attention called to human suffering to do their part in relieving it. The trouble is, men are so busy that they have no time to hunt up specific cases of distress, and humanity in the aggregate is rather beyond their range of vision.

The next day after my experiment I called on my three unwitting hosts and surprised them by a rather intimate knowledge of what had transpired between them and a certain ragged guest each had entertained so handsomely the day before. Mr.

W— and General M— seemed to rather enjoy my little joke, and admitted that they had profited by the experience. But "Uncle Bill" P— after removing his beloved cob pipe from his mouth and looking at me intently for a moment, said:

"I'm goin' t' watch you, young man. A fellow that can play as slick a confidence game as you played on me is apt to get it into his head that it's a mighty easy way of makin' a good livin'."

But the twinkle in "Uncle Bill's" kindly gray eyes rather belied the sternness of his remark.

A few years later, when the awful panic of the early 90's brought so much of misery and woe to the poor, the paper which printed my Christmas day experience opened a relief bureau in that city. It was my good fortune to be active in its management, and during those three months of human suffering I learned that the three men mentioned above were among the most charitable of all the men in that big city. We had a standing order from Mr. W— for all the fresh meat we needed; General M— could be depended upon to come across when the coal supply ran short, and "Uncle Bill" dropped in every morning, and after gently swearing around awhile would tell us to go to such and such a place and get five hundred or a thousand loaves of bread—anyhow, as much as we needed.

Yes, there is much of human suffering today—and always will be, perhaps. But the great heart of humanity is easily touched if one but knows how to reach the tender spot.

O, yes! I returned the money to Mr. W— and "Uncle Bill," and I still have the order for that transportation to Minden. It is useless now, save as a memento, for the anti-pass laws of Nebraska make it a crime to ask for, give or accept free transportation.

Warning

"Reginald, I saw the dearest pony coat at Jimplecute & Squimley's today, and it was marked down from—"

"I know my dear, and if I can raise the money I'll certainly—"

"That's all right, Reggie; but that coat will not be there long and I want your answer without any weasel words."

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(In commemoration of a recent opening.)

Half an inch, half an inch,

Half an inch onward—

Into the bargain rush,

Shoved the nine hundred.

"Punch up the Willow Plume"—

"Say—can't you make more room?"

"We want to get inside,"

Cried the nine hundred.

Ten cents the most they paid,

Was there a one dismayed?

Not though they saw and knew

Several had fainted.

Theirs not to stop the quest—

Theirs not to mind arrest—

Theirs but to hunt with zest,

Bargains, fright painted.

Hatpins to right of them—

Hatpins to left of them—

Stiff quills in front of them.

Jabbed, poked, and mangled—

Yelled at by mad police,

Still, do you think they'd cease?

Not though torn piece by piece,

Bruised, maimed, and strangled.

Oh, wondrous bargain raid!

Oh, the wild dash they made!

For pans and glory—

'Ray for the fight they made,

Five and ten cent brigade!

Victors, though gory.

—Minneapolis Tribune.



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