"THE BEST GIFT OF ALL"

BY HOWARD FIELDING

THE JOKE RESULTED IN HAPPINESS

A Charming Tale by One of the Most Delightful Writers in the Country.

AT 4 o'clock in the afternoon of Saturday, Dec. 23, Dr. Donald Lafarge, chemist to the board of health, affixed his signature to an official document and swore with gentle earnestness that he would not do any more work until Tuesday. His assistant, Dr. Hale, who had just entered the office from the laboratory, remarked that everything seemed to be in shape to take care of itself for awhile and forthwith removed a long apron, stained and ragged, which he viewed with stern dissatisfaction as he rolled it up and thrust it into a drawer.

Hale was a dark visaged young man, with a picturesque shock of black hair and eyes as fierce as a pirate's. He had a deep and rumbling voice, a compact and rugged form, and he went about the simplest duties of this life with an air of ruthless determination—as if they were crimes.

"What are all those things?" he asked, indicating a great number of parcels on Lafarge's broad, flat topped desk.

Lafarge, who had been bending over the parcels, straightened his tall figure and pushed back the silky blond hair which would always fall over his forehead when he stooped.

"Christmas presents," said he.

"You've got more friends than I have," said Hale.

"More and better friends than I deserve," was the reply, "and not a great many at that. I'm a lonesome, unamiable brute. There's no reason why anybody should care for me."

"Well, somebody does," growled Hale.

Lafarge became interested.

"Do you think so, old man?" he asked, with an eagerness that was very youthful. "I can't get a line on her myself. But you're mighty shrewd, and you've seen her quite a number of times down here. These little things"—and he swept his hand over the packages—"are intended for the Christmas tree at her house."

"Whose house?"

"Miss Mallory's," answered Lafarge. "Perhaps you didn't mean"—

"Her? No, confound it! I meant myself. Idiotic thing to say, of course, but I was sparring for an opening. You see, I've got a little thing for you here, and I didn't know how to excuse myself for giving it to you. Here; take it," pulling a package out of the drawer beside him. "It's nothing but a box of cigars, and they're pretty rank, I guess. Cheap, anyway. But they'll do for visitors."

He tossed the package upon the desk and stood a moment, his bow legs apart like a sailorman's, and his manner as awkward as a schoolboy's who has forgotten his "piece" and can neither go on with it nor get back to his seat.

Lafarge, also, was considerably embarrassed, for he had neglected to buy anything for Hale, or even to think of him in such a connection.

"Upon my word, old fellow," he began, extending his hand, but at that instant the queer little scene was interrupted by the sudden entrance of District Attorney Blake Wallace.

The district attorney had a package in his hand about the size of an ordinary cigar box, wrapped in brown paper and tied with a red string. He carried it in a peculiar way, with his finger and thumb upon one corner of it and his arm extended in front of him almost grotesquely. He did not say a word until he had put down the package on the desk. Then he backed toward the door, at the same time saying:

"Come out here, Lafarge. I want to talk to you."

"Is it anything so confidential that Dr. Hale can't hear it?" demanded the chemist in surprise.

"No, no!" exclaimed Wallace. "Let him come, too, and the quicker the better."

Wallace seemed to breathe easier and to recover something of his official dignity when he had passed the door. He put a hand upon a shoulder of each of the others, and, with the imperceptible dexterity of the practiced trickster in law, kept them between himself and the office as he said:

"That thing is an infernal machine—at least I believe that it is. You know about Kensley?"

"The Wall street man?" said Lafarge.

"Yes," responded Wallace. "This thing was left at his house scarcely more than half an hour ago. He has been receiving threatening letters for some weeks, and the police have had a good many men out on the case. This is the result of it."

"I'd like to know what you fellows will load off on to me next," grumbled the chemist. "For heaven's sake, haven't I enough to do in my own department without monkeying with your dynamite bombs?"

"If you feel any hesitancy about touching it"— began Wallace. But Lafarge interrupted him.

"I'm not afraid of it, if that's what you mean," said he. "If you think I am, just watch me."

"Thank you," responded Wallace. "I think I'll just run down to my office, and—and you can make your report to me there."

"You may hear my report before you see it," laughed Lafarge. "You know, my friend," he added, more seriously, "that while ninety-nine of these things are as harmless as children's toys, the hundredth one is loaded to the muzzle."

"I'll take care of this one," said Hale, suddenly turning toward the office.

"Not by a jugful," rejoined Lafarge. "I don't turn this sort of thing over to another man. That's not like me at all."

Hale was within the office by this time, and he reached the desk first. Wallace, upon the threshold, saw the two men in a friendly struggle for this extraordinary prize.

"Hold on!" he cried. "Be careful! The thing has clockwork in it. It was ticking when I brought it in. You'll set it off."

At that moment Hale sprang away from the desk, pushing Lafarge back. He ran to the laboratory door, where he stood an instant with the package held close to his ear.

"It has stopped ticking," he said. "I'm not afraid of it."

He dodged into the laboratory as Lafarge advanced and locked the door behind him.

Lafarge begged and threatened, but Hale was obdurate. His heavy tread could be heard as he walked away from the door.

"There's no way to get in there," said Lafarge. "I suppose I might as well attend to these things."

With a hasty hand he wrapped the various small packages into one big bundle, and as he completed this labor the bent form of old Tom McGrath, for many years a "handy man" for the health department, appeared in the doorway.

"What's this I hear about dinnymite bumbs?" said he. "Is that what you'd be wantin' me to carry up town?"

"The 'dinnymite' is all in the laboratory," said Lafarge. "Dr. Hale is playing with it. These things are to go to the address on the paper, and you're to be as careful of them as if they were nitroglycerin, every ounce of them."

The old man took the package with great care, and Lafarge ran across to the door of the laboratory.

"In just a minute," called Hale in answer to his chief's demand for admittance. "I'm getting at the inside of this thing now, and"—

There was a considerable pause.

"It's all right," cried Hale, approaching the door. "There's nothing in it except some sort of machinery; no explosive whatever."

He admitted the two men, Lafarge ahead, and Wallace hanging back a bit, despite Hale's assurance.

On a marble slab beside a sink full of water stood the infernal machine. Hale had given it a thorough soaking and had then wrenched off the bottom of it, for one does well not to open these mysterious packages in the way that would be most natural.

It was a box of a handsome dark wood, and within could be seen many wheels and a great spindle of a curious shape. Lafarge cast a hastly glance at this object. Then he turned it over.

"Jerusalem the golden!" he exclaimed. "This is my Christmas present to Grace Mallory!"

Hale put a hand on Lafarge's shoulder and turned him half round, staring into his face, speechless, and with the look of one who has been stabbed.

"It's a music box," continued Lafarge, with awesome calmness. "I bought it in Germany last summer. You must have got the wrong package off my desk."

"Doctor," said Hale hoarsely, "I'd rather have been blown up."

He was interrupted by the district attorney, who at that moment stepped between the two chemists.

"Doctor," said he, tapping Lafarge on the breast, "where did you send that bundle?"

"Saints of paradise!" yelled Lafarge. "I have sent that infernal machine to the Mallorys!"

Breaking away from the others, he ran into the office. A glance dispelled any possible doubt. Beyond question he had put the bomb with the presents and had delivered it to McGrath.

"We must catch him!" cried Hale, dashing his hand against his dripping forehead. "Oh, isn't this Jim Hale all over? Wasn't I born into the world for it?"

"You did it for me, Jim," said Lafarge. "You were in a hurry because you didn't want me to get hurt. And the mistake was natural. There were half a dozen of those bundles that looked just alike."

He spoke with a consideration and a friendliness that disguised his feeling. In reality he was so nervous that he could not find his hat and overcoat. Wallace handed them to him.

"You didn't tell me where that thing had gone," he said. "You mentioned a name, but"—

"I've sent it to the woman I love," responded Lafarge.

"Never mind," said the district attorney soothingly. "Probably it will go off before it gets to her. Let us hope so—though that's a little rough on old McGrath."

"Have your friends a telephone?" asked Hale.

"No!" groaned Lafarge. "We must depend upon our speed."

"They live in the Clyde apartments, don't they?" said Hale. "Well, I know the druggist on the corner. He has a telephone, and he will send a message."

He ran out of the room and along the corridor to an office in which was one of the telephones used by the health department. The others waited a few minutes in the hall, and then Lafarge's impatience overcame him. He had been absentmindedly pushing the button of the elevator, though well aware that the car had stopped running for the day. Suddenly ceasing this useless attempt, he rushed down the stairs, and Wallace clattered after him. The scrubwomen stared at them, and the watchman at the outer door assailed them with questions, but got no reply.

As they were about to board an electric car Hale overtook them. He looked a shade more cheerful than before.

"It's all right," he said, dropping into a seat beside Lafarge. "I've sent a message that on no account must they let McGrath bring those things into the house."

He relapsed into gloomy meditations, from which Lafarge charitably endeavored to arouse him.

"The Mallorys are a fine, old fashioned family," said he. "There's the grandfather—a magnificent, patriarchal old chap—and Mr. and Mrs. Mallory, with their four children—Jack's the oldest; he's eighteen—and Aunt Sarah, who isn't very well just now. I'm sorry to say; and Grace, who's only distantly related to the others, though she's like a daughter to the household—Mrs. Mallory's cousin, you know; so I'm very much at home there. Isn't Grace the sweetest, prettiest"—

Hale writhed in his seat.

The Clyde is an apartment house of a pretentious character. Liveried servants open doors and stand ready to answer questions with glib misinformation. Lafarge and Hale entered, leaving Wallace to search for McGrath on the outside.

"Yes, sir," said an obsequious youth; "the man was here, but we got a message from you, that we mustn't let him bring the bundle into the house."

"I put the package in Aunt Sarah's room," whispered the girl. "It's right by the foot of her bed. Aunt Sarah has 'nerves,'" she added, smiling at Hale. "The children don't dare to rummage around in her room."

Hale and Lafarge exchanged an agonized glance, and the latter stepped hastily toward a passage that ran rearward.

"Donald, what is the matter?" exclaimed Grace, running after him and laying a hand upon his arm.

"That's right," cried Hale. "Hold him, and I'll get the thing."

Lafarge seized him by the shoulder, and the three were for an instant most absurdly posed.

"Grace," said Lafarge, "there has been a fearful mistake. A package sent to my office for examination got mixed up with those presents."

"My goodness! Is it poison?" she gasped. "How dreadful! Yet it really can't do any harm, since the mistake has been discovered. Nobody has touched the things. I'll go and get them."

She slipped away from Lafarge and ran straight against Hale, who, with remarkable agility, placed himself in her path.

"It's an explosive," whispered Lafarge. "Don't scream. You'll scare everybody to death. The children are watching us from the parlor. They think this is a new Christmas game, I guess. The thing was sent to a man who has been threatened, and some detectives captured it in time. Don't—don't be alarmed! It's probably quite harmless, but we can't take any chances."

The girl was trying to speak, but she succeeded in uttering only some unintelligible exclamations, for Lafarge checked her at every attempt by an added impressiveness in his own manner and voice. Meanwhile, however, she had clung to Hale's arm. But at last he succeeded in freeing himself and darted toward the open door.

"Come back!" she cried. "Oh, Donald, she's in there!"

"What? Here, Hale— Why, I thought I saw her in the parlor."

"She's there! And she never saw him. He will scare her into a fit."

While these hurried words were exchanged Hale had reached the door. He glanced through the crack of it, and, seeing no one within, he entered.

Aunt Sarah, a tall and angular person of forty summers—which she had passed in single blessedness—had been standing in such a position that the open door of a wardrobe had hidden her. Hearing Hale's heavy tread, she stepped out.

As has already been intimated, Dr. Hale is a man of exceedingly formidable appearance. The expression of deadly, irresistible purpose which his face wears in its calmest moments was greatly intensified by his natural emotion at this time. Even if Aunt Sarah had not been afflicted with nerves, she might well have given herself up for lost at the sight of this desperate character breaking in upon her.

"Aunt Sarah," cried Grace from the hall, "it's Dr. Hale, and he is after that bundle."

As Aunt Sarah had never heard of Dr. Hale, this remark did not contain the consolation which it was intended to convey. It is not so easy, by the way, to think of just the right thing to say at such a time. Aunt Sarah understood only that the man was after the bundle that had just been put into her room.

Such being her view, it was especially creditable that she should have had the courage to attempt to thwart him. The bundle lay between them, and in some mysterious manner Aunt Sarah got by him and darted into the hall, with the precious bundle in her arms. She ran straight into Lafarge.

"Here! Take it!" she gasped, and the next moment she fainted in Grace's arms.

Lafarge cast one hasty glance around. It seemed to him that he could hear the mysterious clockwork ticking along toward the final catastrophe for the execution of which it was designed.

"Rip it open!" exclaimed Hale, who had followed close upon Aunt Sarah's heels.

But Lafarge had a sudden idea.

"Not here!" he cried, and, dodging Hale, he darted toward the rear of the house.

"Jack's room!" he called over his shoulder to Grace.

He ran to the end of the hall and applied a hasty hand to the knob of a door.

"Let me in! Let me in!" he called, and presently the door was opened, and a head, with hair parted in the middle and very neatly brushed down, was thrust cautiously out.

"What's the row, doctor?" inquired a gentle and somewhat effeminate voice. "I was just getting ready for dinner."

Lafarge burst into the room without stopping to answer any questions. The door closed behind him and was locked, as Hale discovered half a minute later. He had paused long enough to see Grace resign the care of Aunt Sarah to a maid and various members of the family to whom the occasion seemed unfavorable for him to be presented.

He shook the door and called upon Lafarge to let him in. There was no response, but he could hear a murmur of voices.

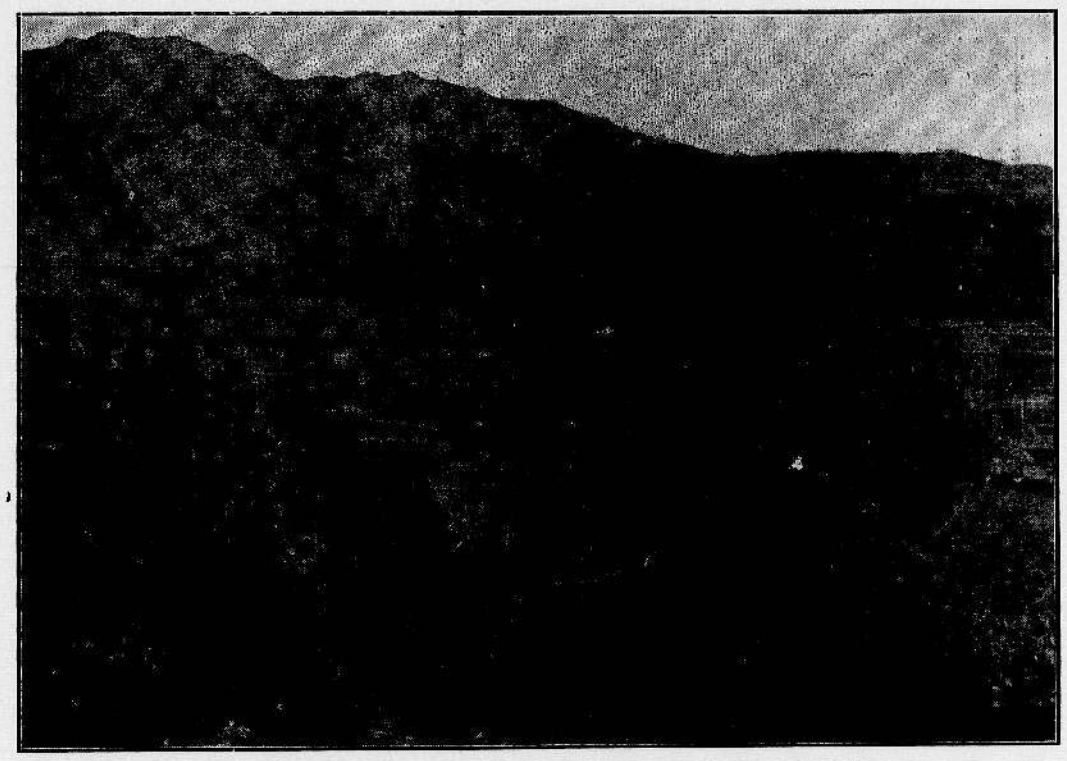
Suddenly the door was flung open, and a tall youth—the same whose head had been visible before—dashed out so hastily that he almost overturned Hale. He was clothed in a long overcoat that reached almost to his heels and was liberally supplied with trimmings of fine fur; but there were indications that he had not very much on beneath it.

"Well, upon my word!" he exclaimed. "I think Donald has a good nerve. He says he wants to soak an infernal machine in my bathtub, and I was just going to get into it myself! I say, we'd better not stay here."

Meanwhile Hale had tried the door, expecting to find it locked, for he had heard Lafarge turn the key behind Jack. The bolt of the lock had not caught. Hale entered the room, and Grace got in after him, despite his efforts to keep her out. Once in, she closed the door and locked it securely.

"Keep the children away!" she called to Jack through the door. "But don't tell what has happened."

It was a large and elegantly appointed chamber, with windows opening on a broad court at the rear of the building. In an alcove to the left stood a great porcelain tub, half full of water, and beside it stood Lafarge, with a parcel done up in brown paper in his hand.



THE GRANITE CONCENTRATOR WHILE UNDER CONSTRUCTION.
Capacity of Plant, 500 Tons of Ore Daily.

"What did you do?" demanded Lafarge.

"We sent word up stairs," responded the liveried youth, "and Miss Mallory came down and brought the bundle in. She said she understood what you meant."

"Lafarge, this is fate!" said Hale, striding toward the elevator, with a scowl upon his face that made the colored man in charge of the car turn white.

A neat maid opened the door of the Mallory apartments.

"The things you sent have come, Dr. Lafarge," she said.

The chemist responded with a groan, as he leaned for a moment against the wall.

"Why, what's the matter, Donald?" asked a most agreeable voice, adding immediately: "How do you do, Dr. Hale? I'm so glad Donald brought you along."

"Grace," gasped Lafarge, "what did you do with that bundle?"

The girl seemed bewildered by the strange behavior of the man, but she could have no notion that anything really serious had happened. All this must be a part of the agreeable mysteries of the Christmas season. Perhaps Donald was afraid that the people for whom the gifts were intended had seen them prematurely.

A boy of ten stood beside her, his arm around her waist. She disengaged herself from the child, and, turning him around till his back was toward her, gave him a gentle tap between the shoulders.

"Run along, Bert," said she. "This is confidential."

"She's hidden all the presents, Uncle Donald," said the boy. "But I'll bet I know where they are."

"Hurry, Grace!" said Donald, approaching her.

On the floor was the big bundle, open.

"I hope you've got the right one this time," said Hale.

"No doubt of that," replied Lafarge. "It's the one with no name on it. Grace, will you please go away?"

As he spoke he stooped down to immerse the box in the tub.

"Wait—wait, Lafarge, till I can get her out of here!" exclaimed Hale. "If that's one of those sulphuric acid machines, it may go off when it touches the water."

His words came too late. The box was already under the surface. Lafarge, somewhat pale, looked around at them, while he gently moved the box back and forth in the water.

"I guess it's all right," he said at last, withdrawing it and taking off the wrapper. "It's a cigar box. That's what they commonly use. I don't see any trick about the cover"— putting a knife under it gingerly. "There! It's open. Why, upon my soul! What's this? The confounded thing is full of cigars!"

He lifted some of them, soaked and sodden. Hale stepped quickly forward.

"The very Old Nick himself is in this thing!" he cried. "We haven't got it yet. That is my box of cigars—my Christmas present to you."

He turned and pounced upon the pile of packages that lay beside him. This time there was no mistake. His hand was upon the one that Wallace had brought. Kneeling beside it, he waved Lafarge back.

"In the midst of all these absurdities," he said, "we must not forget the real danger, Donald. I believe in my heart—something seems to tell me—that there is death in this little box. Let me face it alone. Please, Donald, I beg of you!"

"I can't," said Lafarge. "My soul won't let me. Grace"—

He pointed to the door, but the girl would not obey. She stood wringing her hands. Her face was perfectly white, but its expression was resolute and in strange contrast with her attitude of abject terror.

"I will not go while you stay here," she said, looking at Donald. "I—I want to be with you, whatever happens."

Hale looked at her steadily as he kneeled beside the package. His face was haggard and drawn.

Suddenly he seized Donald's wrist and dragged him down, so that, still kneeling, he could whisper in the other's ear.

"I love her!" he said. "I always have, ever since I first saw her. And she loves you. Now, is there any doubt which one of us can best afford to take this chance? She won't go without you, and she mustn't stay. Listen! This infernal thing is ticking again. The clockwork that was somehow interrupted in the office has begun to go, and you know what that means. Get away! Get away, and take her with you."

Lafarge straightened up.

"Grace," said he, "Dr. Hale has just told me something which makes it absolutely necessary that you should leave this room and that I should stay."

He stepped up to her and took her hand.

"If you love me," he said, "go."

"I do, I do," she sobbed, clinging to him. "That's why I can't leave you. I want to run—I'm frightened to death—but I'd rather stay with you. Oh, can't you throw this terrible thing out of the window?"

"Listen!" said Lafarge.

There was a moment of silence, in which the sound of children's voices rose from the court beneath the window. The voices ceased, and the ticking of the infernal mechanism seemed as loud as a drum.

Suddenly the measured clicking became a whir. Hale crouched down, placing his body directly over the box—between it and his friends. Lafarge pushed the almost fainting girl toward the door, shielding her behind himself.

And then a strange sound rose from the box—a queer, cracked melody, familiar and trivial.

"Oh, I don't know; you're not so warm!" it sang in a weird, uncanny key.

Hale faced about, his dark visage singularly pallid, yet for some strange reason looking almost handsome. His eye met Lafarge's in a single glance. Then he wrenched the wrapper off the box, which the next instant he burst open with a blow of his clinched fist.

Wheels and springs flew out and scattered over the floor. In the midst of them was a large white card. Hale picked it up and glanced at the writing which it bore.

"Our friend, the district attorney, always was a practical joker," said he, "but I don't believe he ever succeeded quite so well before. He wishes you a merry Christmas, Lafarge!"

"If I had him here!" said the chemist between his teeth.

The next moment Grace was laughing and crying in his arms, while Hale, upon one knee, in the attitude of one who has been almost felled by a blow, looked up at them. He seemed to experience a difficulty in getting to his feet, but once erect he stood sturdily.

"On second thought, Lafarge," said he, "would you really do him any harm? His agreeable jest has shown you what you wished to see. When he and those other humorists that consort with him were fixing up this 10 cent music box and its clockwork attachments, they had no idea what strange measures we should tread to the tune of it. I fancy that this is your best Christmas present and more than a fair exchange for the pretty instrument I smashed in the laboratory."

"I'll tell you what this absurd joke has done," said Lafarge earnestly. "It has revealed you to me as a brave and splendid fellow, Jim."

"Oh, wasn't he brave!" exclaimed the girl. "Why, he thought only of us! He positively smiled in that last second before the horrid box began to play a tune—in that second when he must have expected to be blown up in the very next one. Why, he hugged the thing to his heart!"

"There are worse things than dynamite for a man's heart," said Hale, "and he may smile at them if he possesses the necessary resolution."

He advanced toward them, extending a hand to each, and there was a smile upon his strong and rugged face.

DON'T TOBACCO SPIT and SMOKE Your Lifeaway!
You can be cured of any form of tobacco using easily, be made well, strong, magnetic, full of new life and vigor by taking NO-TO-BAC, that makes weak men strong. Many gain ten pounds in ten days. Over 500,000 cured. All druggists. Cure guaranteed. Booklet and advice FREE. Address STERLING REMEDY CO., Chicago or New York. 437

BEST FOR THE BOWELS
If you haven't a regular, healthy movement of the bowels every day, you're ill or will be. Keep your bowels open, and be well. Force, in the shape of violent physic or pill poison, is dangerous. The smoothest, easiest, most perfect way of keeping the bowels clear and clean is to take
CANDY CATHARTIC Cascarets
THEY WORK WHILE YOU SLEEP
EAT 'EM LIKE CANDY
Pleasant, Palatable, Potent, Taste Good. Do Good, Never Sicken, Weaken, or Gripe, 10, 25, and 50 cents per box. Write for free sample, and booklet on health. Address 433
STERLING REMEDY COMPANY, CHICAGO or NEW YORK.
KEEP YOUR BLOOD CLEAN