

CHRISTMAS STORY

BY ORDER OF THE PRESIDENT

Of this story Sir William Van Horne is the hero, and I shall endeavour to reproduce the scenes as he so cleverly sketched them to me in his home one winter night, the while we smoked the after-dinner cigar.

Picture then, a Christmas Eve in Toronto, crowds of shoppers abroad in the brilliantly illuminated thoroughfares, and Sir William Van Horne walking down Yonge Street towards the station in a magnificent fur-lined overcoat with a sable collar. Yes, he was proud of the figure he cut in that coat—he admitted it. It was one he had bought within the hour in a Toronto store.

He was going back to Montreal and, as often happened in those days, he travelled with the passengers instead of in a special car. When he got on the train, prior to going to the smoking-room, he took off his new coat and threw it over the back of his seat. There he left it.

There ends Act I. And there began the troubles of the evening.

All alone, the C.P.R. president's overcoat occupied the president's seat. Sir William did not come near it until the train pulled up at Brady Junction, and then he only gave it a passing glance as he rushed through the car, in a hurry to get out and see the station agent. When he returned the overcoat was gone.

Sir William raised a rumpus. He cross-examined the conductor, and called in the trainmen. They could give no explanation of the disappearance. Sir William was inconsolable. His beautiful coat was gone—the handsomest coat he had ever had! The only clue to it that could be discovered was that supplied by a passenger, who said that when the train stopped at Burketon Falls he saw a man passing through the carriage with a coat on his arm.

"Did he get off the train?" asked the president.

"Really, I couldn't say."

"What sort of man was he?"

"I haven't the least idea. I was reading at the time and didn't take much notice of him."

By the president's orders, the train was pulled up at a wayside station, and a wire was sent back to Burketon Falls to put the police on the track of any man seen wearing a black, fur-lined overcoat with a sable collar.

Then Sir William, in his democratic way, strolled forward to the baggage car to hunt out another coat from his baggage. As he passed through the third-class coach, he saw a man sitting there, wearing an overcoat remarkably like the one he had lost. But the collar was turned up and he could not be sure.

He scrutinized the man carefully and passed on to the end of the car. Then he turned back through the car and gazed fixedly into the man's face.

The man turned troubled eyes to the president and quickly averted his gaze from the piercing scrutiny. In that glance the president knew him to be guilty. He leaned over the man and said in a low voice: "Come forward with me to the baggage car."

"What for?" asked the man obstinately.

"Because I say you've got to," replied the president, "unless you want a fuss made before the other passengers?"

The man got up and followed the president without another word. The conductor, at a sign from the president, also followed.

"Now," said the president, sternly,

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when the baggage car was reached, "Where did you get that overcoat?"

The man looked at his questioner sheepishly.

"I don't see that I'm bound to tell you," he answered.

He was evidently a laboring man, and was overshadowed and subdued by the president's manner. His face was bronzed and weather-beaten; it was by no means the face of a criminal. He looked like one of the great army of workers who, by labor with pick and shovel and axe, spend their lives in conquering the wilderness for their fellow-men.

With a quick movement the president slipped his fingers into the breast pocket of the coat and pulled out a silk handkerchief. On one corner of this were his own initials.

"Do you know of whom that belongs?" asked the president, shaking the handkerchief threateningly in the man's face.

"No!"

"That handkerchief belongs to me, and that overcoat you've got on belongs to me. Now, do you know what I'm going to do with you? I'm going to hand you over to the police at the next station."

"Oh, for God's sake, don't do that, sir!" exclaimed the man, almost in tears.

He stripped off the overcoat and held it out.

"Here's your overcoat. I didn't mean to steal it. I saw it lying on the seat, and I thought some passenger had gone out and forgotten it. Really, sir, I never meant to steal it!"

"If you didn't mean to steal it, why didn't you hand it to the conductor?"

"I thought if I didn't take it somebody else would. I looked on it as a stroke of luck, that's all."

"Well, you'll find it a stroke of bad luck for you, my man!" "Get a policeman as soon as we get into Dranoel," he said to the conductor, "I'll look after this man meanwhile."

"My God, sir, don't do it!" pleaded the man.

"I'll drive my poor wife crazy. I haven't been home for six months—been railroading back in the bush. She and the little ones are expecting me for Christmas."

"Where do you live?"

"At Peterborough."

"What's your name?"

"Kennedy."

"I suppose you've got four or five little ones looking forward to your coming home Christmas?" asked the president, sarcastically.

"Yes, sir." Tears came in the man's eyes; a choking sob burst from him.

"Shut up, you snivelling coward!" roared the president. To see the man actually in tears angered him beyond measure.

The brakes were already grinding on the wheels. The man put his hand on the president's arm. "Don't do it, sir," he said. "I don't ask it for myself, but for my wife and youngsters. There's no harm done. You've got your coat!"

The president shook him off roughly.

"You common thieves," he said—and the words cut the laborer like a knife—"You common thieves are always afraid to face the music. You always snivel about your 'wife and family at home' when you're found out. But I've made up my mind to stop your little games on this railroad, and by gum, I'll do it!" "Jump out and get a policeman," he said to the conductor, as the train came to a standstill.

A few minutes afterwards the conductor returned with a policeman, and the man, silent and dejected, was marched off into the dark night in custody.

When the train started off again for Montreal the president rode in the baggage car. He sat on the top of a pile of boxes, quietly smoking a cigar and dangling his feet. His gaze was fixed on a new perambulator, but it was a long time before he really saw it. When the conductor came in, he nodded toward the perambulator, and remarked: "Seasonable present, eh?"

"Yes, sir, a very useful sort of article," replied the conductor.

"But what I want to know," replied the president, "is why anybody should buy a wheeled baby carriage at this time of year. A man bought that, for sure. A woman would have bought one with runners at this time of the year."

"Of course she would," replied the conductor. "But the man must have had a busy time shopping, mustn't he? There's a rocking-horse in the baby carriage; there's a toboggan; there's a turkey, and, oh—dozens of things. It'll be a pretty happy Christmas wherever that baby carriage and its load is going."

"Yes, a carriage for the new baby, and lots of presents for a pretty healthy little family, by the look of it."

The label on the baby-carriage caught the eye of the conductor. He lifted it with his thumb and forefinger, and bent over to look at it. Then he dropped it as though it burned his fingers, and turned to the president with something like consternation in his face.

"What does it say?" asked the president, "Why man, anybody would think 'twas dynamite with a live fuse attached, to look at you. What's on the label, anyway?"

"It says, John Kennedy, Peterborough."

"Holy Caesar!" exclaimed the president, springing to his feet. "Why, that's the man who took my overcoat—the man I had arrested."

"Yes, sir."

The president stood for a long time looking at his cigar. He recalled the pitiful pleading of the man—his pale, agonized face, the unmanly tears.

"I'll drive my poor wife crazy," the man had said. "I haven't been home for six months—been railroading back in the bush. She and the little 'uns have been expecting me for Christmas."

Sir William thought of his own wife and family in his luxurious home in Montreal. They were waiting for him this Christmas Eve, he knew, waiting and counting up the hours before he would return. Yet he had only been away two weeks. As a contrast he pictured some humble little home in Peterborough where a poor woman, who had not seen her husband for six months, was waiting this Christmas Eve for his arrival. She would have scrubbed up the house till it looked as clean as a new pin. She would have a dainty meal ready for her husband and the president's imagination added the domestic touch of a kettle singing on the stove. She would have put clean clothes on the little children, and probably at this moment, was telling them for the hundredth time, "Your father's coming home!" And the little children! Surely they were dancing about the house and saying, "Daddy's coming! Daddy's coming!" He knew what little children were! Lastly came a stinging thought. The baby carriage was probably meant for a new baby that the father had never seen.

The president began to repent. After all, what had the man done? Probably he really though the overcoat was lost, and had picked it up just the same as a man might pick up a ten-dollar bill on the floor of a hotel, feeling he might as well have it as anybody else.

When the train got to the next station, Sir William jumped out and walked into the little station house.

"Give me that key," he said to the astonished operator. The president had been an operator in his early days, and he at once sat down, at the telegraph instrument and gave the call for Dranoel. When he got through to that place he sent a message that considerably surprised the operator at the other end.

"Get Kennedy, the man arrested this evening, released immediately. His arrest a regrettable mistake. Get out an engine and one car and immediately run a special through to Peterborough. Kennedy must get there tonight."

"By whose orders?" asked the operator at the other end.

"By order of the president, William Van Horne," was the reply.

At Peterborough station that night a woman named Kennedy, with a baby in her arms, and three or four little ones flocking around her, was considerably astonished to hear an important looking gentleman, who stepped from the train on which she had expected her husband, inquiring for her by name.

"Is Mrs. Kennedy here?" roared Sir William.

"Yes, sir," said the woman, timidly, "I'm Mrs. Kennedy."

"Your husband is coming along on the next train," said Sir William. "Hell be here in a couple of hours. Here, let me shake your hand and wish you a Merry Christmas. God bless you, ma'am! God bless you!"

He jumped on the train and was gone.

And in the hand that the president had shaken Mrs. Kennedy found a Christmas present. It was a twenty-dollar bill!

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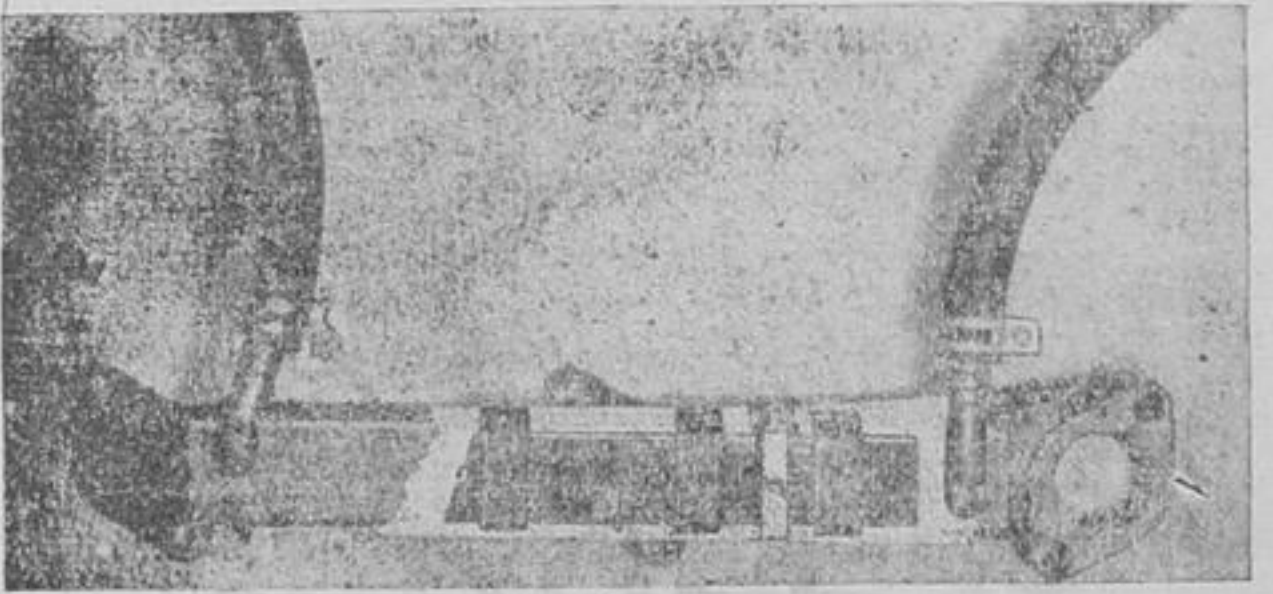
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