



***FRANCIS
HOPKINSON
SMITH***

***COLONEL
CARTER'S
CHRISTMAS AND
THE ROMANCE
OF AN OLD-
FASHIONED
GENTLEMAN***

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Colonel Carter's Christmas and The Romance of an Old- Fashioned Gentleman

EAN 8596547326762

DigiCat, 2022

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COLONEL CARTER'S CHRISTMAS

I

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“What am I gwine to do wid dese yere barkers, Colonel?” asked Chad, picking up his master’s case of duelling pistols from the mantel. “I ain’t tetched der moufs since I iled ’em up for dat Klutchem man.”

“Take them upstairs, Chad, and put them away,” answered the Colonel with an indignant wave of the hand.

“No chance o’ pickin’ him, I s’pose? Done got away fo’ sho, ain’t he?”

The Colonel nodded his head and kept on looking into the fire. The subject was evidently an unpleasant one.

“Couldn’t Major Yancey an’ de Judge do nuffin?” persisted the old servant, lifting one of the pistols from the case and squinting into its polished barrel.

“Eve’ything that a gentleman could do was done, Chad. You are aware of that, Major?” and he turned his head towards me—the Colonel will insist on calling me “Major.” “But I am not done with him yet, Chad. The next time I meet him I shall lay my cane over his back. Take them upstairs and put them on my dressin’ table. We’ll keep them for some gentleman at home.”

The Colonel arose from his chair, picked up the decanter, poured out a glass for me and one for himself, replenished his long clay pipe from a box of tobacco within reach of his

hand and resumed his seat again. Mention of Mr. Klutchem's name produced a form of restlessness in my host which took all his self-control to overcome.

"—And, Chad." The old darky had now reached the door opening into the narrow hall, the case of pistols in his hand.

"Yes, sah."

"I think you have a right to know, Chad, why I did not meet Mr. Klutchem in the open field."

Chad bent his head in attention. This had really been the one thing of all others about which this invaluable servant had been most disturbed. Before this it had been a word, a blow, and an exchange of shots at daybreak in all the Colonel's affairs—all that Chad had attended—and yet a week or more had now elapsed since this worthy darky had moulded some extra bullets for these same dogs "wid der moufs open," and until to-night the case had never even left its place on the mantel.



“Take them upstairs and put them on my dressin’ table.”

“I was disposed, Chad,” the Colonel continued, “to overlook Mr. Klutchem’s gross insult after a talk I had with Mr. Fitzpatrick, and I went all the way to the scoundrel’s house to tell him so. I found him in his chair suffe’in’ from an attack of gout. I had my caa’ridge outside, and offe’ed in the most co’teous way to conduct him to it and drive him to my office, where a number of his friends and mine were assembled in order that the apology I p’posed might be as impressive as the challenge I sent. He refused, Chad, in the most insolent manner, and I left him with the remark that I

should lay my cane over his shoulders whenever I met him; and I *shall*."

"Well, befo' Gawd, I knowed sumpin' had been gwine on pretty hot, for I never seed you so b'ilin' as when you come home, Colonel," replied the old servant, bowing low at the mark of his master's confidence. "I spec', though, I'd better put a couple o' corks in der moufs so we kin hab 'em ready if anythin' comes out o' dis yere caanin' business. I've seen 'em put away befo' in my time," he added in a louder voice, looking towards me as if to include me in his declaration; "but they allus hab to come for 'em agin, when dey get to caanin' one another." And he patted the box meaningly and left the room.

The Colonel again turned to me.

"I have vehy few secrets from Chad, Major, and none of this kind. By the way, I suppose that yaller dog has gotten over his gout by this time."

"Don't call him names, Colonel. He will write his own for a million if he goes on. I was in Fitz's office this morning, and I hear that Klutchem and his Boston crowd have got about every share of Consolidated Smelting issued, and the boys are climbing for it. Fitz told me it went up fifteen points in an hour. By the by, Fitz is coming up to-night."

"I am not surprised, suh,—I am not surprised at anything these Yankees do. A man who could not appreciate a gentleman's feelin's placed as I was would never feel for a creditor, suh. He thinks of nothin' but money and what it buys him, and it buys him nothin' but vulgarity, suh."

The Colonel was in the saddle now; I never interrupt him in one of these moods. He had risen from his chair and was

standing on the mat before the fire in his favorite attitude, thumbs in his armholes, his threadbare, well-brushed coat thrown wide.

“They’ve about ruined our country, suh, these money-grubbers. I saw the workin’ of one of their damnable schemes only a year or so ago, in my own town of Caartersville. Some Nawthern men came down there, suh, and started a Bank. Their plan was to start a haalf dozen mo’ of them over the County, and so they called this one the Fust National. They never started a second, suh. Our people wouldn’t permit it, and befo’ I get through you’ll find out why. They began by hirin’ a buildin’ and movin’ in an iron safe about as big as a hen-coop. Then they sent out a circular addressed to our prominent citizens which was a model of style, and couched in the most co’teous terms, but which, suh, was nothin’ mo’ than a trap. I got one and I can speak by the book. It began by sayin’ that eve’y accommodation would be granted to its customers, and ended by offerin’ money at the lowest rates of interest possible. This occurred, suh, at a time of great financial depression with us, following as it did the close of hostilities, and their offer was gladly accepted. It was the fust indication any of us had seen on the part of any Yankee to bridge over the bloody chasm, and we took them at their word. We put in what money we had, and several members of our oldest families, in order to give chaaracter to the enterprise, had their personal notes discounted and used the money they got for them for various private purposes—signin’ as a gaarantee of their good faith whatever papers the bank people requi’ed of them. Now, suh, what do you

think happened—not to me, for I was not in need of financial assistance at the time, Aunt Nancy havin’ come into possession of some funds of her own in Baltimo’,—but to one of my personal friends, Colonel Powhatan Tabb, a near neighbor of mine and a gentleman of the highest standin’? Because, suh”—here the Colonel spoke with great deliberation—“his notes had not been paid on the vey day and hour—a thing which would have greatly inconvenienced him—Colonel Tabb found a sheriff in charge of his home one mornin’ and a red flag hangin’ from his po’ch. Of co’sse, suh, he demanded an explanation of the outrage, and some words followed of a blasphemous nature which I shall not repeat. I shall never forget my feelin’s, suh, as I stood by and witnessed that outrage. Old family plate that had been in the Tabb family for mo’ than a century was knocked down to anybody who would buy; and befo’ night, suh, my friend was stripped of about eve’ything he owned in the world. Nothin’ escaped, suh, not even the po’traits of his ancestors!”

“What became of the bank, Colonel?” I asked in as serious a tone as I could command.

“What became of it? What *could* become of it, Major? Our people were aroused, suh, and took the law into their own hands, and the last I saw of it, suh, the hen-coop of a safe was standin’ in the midst of a heap of smokin’ ashes. I heard that the Bank people broke it open with a sledge-hammer when it cooled off, put the money they had stolen from our people in a black caarpet-bag, and escaped. Such pi’acies, suh, are not only cruel but vulgaar. Mr. Klutchem’s robries

are quite in line with these men. He takes you by the throat in another way, but he strangles you all the same.”

The Colonel stroked his goatee in a meditative way, reached over my chair, picked up his half-emptied wine-glass, sipped its contents absent-mindedly and said in an apologetic tone:

“Forgive me, Major, for mentionin’ Mr. Klutchem’s name, I have no right to speak of him in this way behind his back. I promise you, suh, that it will not occur again.”

As the Colonel ceased I caught sight of Fitz’s round, good-natured face, ruddy with the cold of the snowy December night, his shoe-button eyes sparkling behind his big-bowed spectacles peering around the edge of the open door. Chad had heard his well-known brisk tread as he mounted the steps and had let him in before he could knock.

“Who are you going to kill now?” we heard Fitz ask the old darky.

“Dey was iled up for dat Klutchem man, but he done slid, the Colonel says.”

“Klutchem! Klutchem!—nothing but Klutchem. I don’t seem to get rid of him downtown or up,” Fitz blurted out as he entered the room.

The Colonel had bounded forward at the first sound of Fitz’s voice, and had him now by both hands. In another minute he had slipped off Fitz’s wet overcoat and was forcing him into a chair beside my own, calling to Chad in the meanwhile to run for hot water as quick as his legs could carry him, as Mr. Fitzpatrick was frozen stiff and must have a hot toddy before he could draw another breath.

“Keep still, Fitz, don’t move. I’ll be back in a minute,” the Colonel cried, and off he went to the sideboard for the ingredients—a decanter of whiskey, the sugar-bowl, and a nutmeg-grater, all of which he placed on the mantel over Fitz’s head.

The toddy made with the help of Chad’s hot water, the Colonel moved his chair so that as he talked he could get his hand on Fitz’s knee and said:

“What were you doing out in the cold hall talkin’ to Chad, anyhow, you dear boy, with this fire burnin’ and my hands itchin’ for you?”

“Dodging Chad’s guns. Got that same old arsenal with him, I see,” Fitz answered, edging his chair nearer the fire and stretching out his hands to the blaze. “Pity you didn’t fill Klutchem full of lead when you had the chance, Colonel. It would have saved some of us a lot of trouble. He’s got the Street by the neck and is shaking the life out of it.”

“How was it when you left, Fitz?” I asked in an undertone.

“Looked pretty ugly. I shouldn’t wonder if the stock opened at 60 in the morning.”

“Have you covered your shorts yet?” I continued in a whisper.

“Not yet.” Here Fitz leaned over and said to me behind his hand: “Not a word of all this now to the Colonel. Only worry him, and he can’t do any good.”

“By the by, Colonel”—here Fitz straightened up, and with a tone in his voice as if what he really wanted to talk about was now on the end of his tongue said: “is Aunt Nancy coming for Christmas? Chad thinks she is.”

The Colonel, who had noticed the confidential aside, did not reply for a moment. Then he remarked, with a light trace of impatience in his voice:

“If you have unloaded all the caares of yo’ office, Fitz, I will answer yo’ question, but I cannot soil the dear lady’s name by bringin’ it into any conversation in which that man has a part. There are some subjects no gentleman should discuss; Mr. Klutchem’s affairs is one of them. I have already expressed my opinion of him both to the Major and to Chad and I have promised them both that that scoundrel’s name shall never again pass my lips. Oblige me by never mentionin’ it. Forgive me, Fitz. There’s my hand. You know I love you too well for you to think that I say this in anythin’ but kindness. Let me put a little mo’ whiskey in that toddy, Fitz—it lacks color. So—that’s better. Aunt Nancy did you ask about, my dear Fitz?—of co’sse, she’s comin’. And, Major,—did I tell you”—here the Colonel turned to me—“that she’s going to bring a servant with her this time? The dear woman is gettin’ too old to travel alone, and since Chad has been with me she has felt the need of some one to wait upon her. She has passed some weeks or mo’ in Richmond, she writes, and has greatly enjoyed the change. Make no engagement for Christmas, either one of you. That loveliest of women, suh, will grace our boa’d, and it is her special wish that both of you be present.”

Fitz crushed the sugar in his glass, remarked that there was not the slightest doubt of *his* being present, winked at me appreciatingly over the edge of the tumbler, rubbed his paunch slowly with one hand, and with eyes upcast took another sip of the mixture.

The Virginian to Fitz was a never-ending well of pleasure. The Colonel's generosity, his almost Quixotic sense of honor, his loyalty to his friends, his tenderness over Chad and his reverence and love for that dear Aunt—who had furnished him really with all the ready money he had spent for years, and who was at the moment caring for the old place at Cartersville while the Colonel was in New York endeavoring to float, through Fitz, the bonds of the Cartersville & Warrentown Railroad—excited not only Fitz's admiration and love, but afforded the broker the pleasantest of contrasts to the life he led in the Street, a contrast so delightful that Fitz seldom missed at least an evening's salutation with him. That not a shovel of earth had yet been dug on the line of the Colonel's Railroad, and that the whole enterprise was one of those schemes well nigh impossible to finance, made no difference to Fitz. He never lost an opportunity to work off the securities whenever there was the slightest opening. The bonds, of course, had not been issued; they had never been printed, in fact. These details would come later,—whenever the capitalist or syndicate should begin to look into the enterprise in earnest.

Up to the moment when this whirl had caught the Street—an event which Klutchem acting for his friends had helped—Fitz had never quite given up the hope that somehow, or in some way, or by some hook or crook, some deluded capitalist, with more money than brains, would lose both by purchasing these same "Garden Spots" as the securities of the Colonel's proposed road were familiarly called in the Street. That but one single inquiry had thus far ever been made, and that no one of his or anybody else's customers

had ever given them more than a hasty dismissal, had never discouraged Fitz.

As for the Colonel he was even more sanguine. The dawn of success was already breaking through the darkness and his hopes would soon be realized. Hour after hour he would sit by his fire, building fairy castles in its cheery coals. Almost every night there was a new picture. In each the big bridge over the Tench was already built, bearing his double track road to Warrentown and the sea—he could see every span and pier of it; the town of Fairfax, named after his ancestors, was crowning the plateau; the round-house for his locomotives was almost complete, the wharves and landing docks finished. And in all of these pictures, warm and glowing, there was one which his soul coveted above all others—the return of the proud days of the old Estate: the barns and outbuildings repaired; the fences in order; Carter Hall restored to its former grandeur, and dear Aunt Nancy once more in her high spring coach, with Chad standing by to take her shawl and wraps. These things, and many others as rose colored and inspiring, the Colonel saw night after night in the glow and flash and sparkle of his wood fire.

No wonder then that Fitz kept hoping against hope; deluding him with promises and keeping up his spirits with any fairy tale his conscience would permit his telling or his ingenuity contrive.

To-night, however, Fitz's nerve seemed to have failed him. To the Colonel's direct inquiry regarding the slight nibble of an English syndicate—(that syndicate which some months later made the Colonel's fortune and with which Fitz had buoyed up his hopes) the broker had only an evasive

answer. The Colonel noticed the altered tone and thought he had divined the cause.

“You are tired out, Fitz. Isn’t it so? I don’t wonder when I think of the vast commercial problems you are solvin’ every day. Go upstairs, my dear boy, and get into my bed for the night. I won’t have you go home. It’s too cold for you to go out and the snow is driftin’ badly. I’ll take the sofa here.”

“No, Colonel, I think I’ll toddle along home. I am tired, I guess. I ought to be; I’ve had nothing but hard knocks all day.”

“Then you shan’t leave my house, suh; I won’t permit it. Chad, go upstairs and get Mr. Fitzpatrick’s chamber ready for the night, and Chad——”

Fitz laughed. “And have you sleep on that hair-cloth sofa, Colonel?” and he pointed to the sagging lounge.

“Why not?—I’ve done it befo’. Come, I insist.”

Fitz was on his feet now and with Chad’s assistance was struggling into his overcoat, which that attentive darky had hung over a chairback that it might dry the easier.

“I’m going home, Colonel, and to bed,” Fitz said in a positive tone. “I shouldn’t sleep a wink if I knew you were thrashing around on that shake-down, and you wouldn’t either. Good-night”; and holding out his hand to his host, he gave me a tap on my shoulder as he passed my chair and left the room, followed by the Colonel.

It was only when the Colonel had found Fitz’s rubbers himself and had turned up the collar of his coat and had made it snug around his throat to keep out the snow, and had patted him three times on the shoulder—he only showed that sort of affection to Fitz—and had held the door

open until both Fitz and Chad were lost in the gloom of the tunnel, the wind having extinguished the lantern, that the Colonel again resumed his seat by the fire.

“I must say I’m worried about Fitz, Major. He don’t look right and he don’t act right”—he sighed as he picked up his pipe and sank into his arm-chair until his head rested on its back. “I’m going to have him see a doctor. That’s what I’m going to do, and at once. Do you know of a good doctor, Major?”

“Medicine won’t help him, Colonel,” I answered. I knew the dear old fellow would not sleep a wink even in his own bed if the idea got into his head that Fitz was ill.

“What will?”

“Money.”

The Colonel looked at me in astonishment.

“What kind of money?”

“Any kind that’s worth a hundred cents on the dollar.”

“Why, what nonsense, Major, I’d take Fitz’s check for a million.”

“Klutchem won’t.”

“What’s the scoundrel got to do with it?”

“Everything, unfortunately. Fitz is short of 10,000 shares of Consolidated Smelting, and Klutchem and his crowd have got about every share of it locked up in their safes. Some of Fitz’s customers have gone back on him, and he’s got to make the fight alone. If smelting goes up another fifteen points to-morrow Fitz goes with it. It’s not a doctor he wants, it’s a banker. Cash, not pills, is what will pull Fitz through.”

Had a bomb been exploded on the hearth at his feet the Colonel could not have been more astonished. He sat

staring into my eyes as I unfolded the story, his face changing with every disclosure; horror at the situation, anger at the man who had caused it, and finally—and this dominated all the others—profound sympathy for the friend he loved. He knew something of the tightening of the grasp of a man like Klutchem and he did not underestimate the gravity of the situation. What Consolidated Smelting represented, or what place it held in the market were unknown quantities to the Colonel. What he really saw was the red flag of the auctioneer floating over the front porch of that friend in Virginia whom the Bank had ruined, and the family silver and old portraits lying in the carts that were to take them away forever. It was part of the damnable system of Northern finance and now Fitzpatrick was to suffer a similar injustice.

“Fitz in Klutchem’s power! My God, suh!” he burst out at last, “you don’t tell me so! And Fitz never told me a word about it. My po’ Fitz! My po’ Fitz!” he added slowly with quivering lips. “Are you quite sure, Major, that the situation is as serious as you state it?”

“Quite sure. He told me so himself. He wanted me to keep still about it, but I didn’t want you to think he was ill.”

“You did right, Major. I should never have forgiven you if you had robbed me of the opportunity of helpin’ him. It’s horrible; it’s damnable. Such men as Klutchem, suh, ought to be drawn and quartered.”

For an instant the Colonel leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and looked steadily into the fire; then he said slowly with a voice full of sympathy, and in a tone as if he had at last made up his mind:

“No, I won’t disturb the dear fellow to-night. He needs all the sleep he can get.”

The Colonel was still in his chair gazing into the fire when I left. His pipe was out; his glass untasted; his chin buried in his collar.

“My po’ Fitz!” was all he said as he lifted his hand and pressed my own. “Good-night, Major.”

When I had reached the hall door he roused himself, called me back and said slowly and with the deepest emotion:

“Major, I shall help Fitz through this in the mornin’ if it takes eve’y dollar I’ve got in the world. Stop for me as you go downtown and we will call at his office together.”



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Fitz had not yet arrived when the Colonel in his eagerness stepped in front of me, and peered through the hole in the glass partition which divided Fitz’s inner and outer offices.

“Come inside, Colonel, and wait—expect him after a while,” was the reply from one of the clerks,—the first arrival.

But the Colonel was too restless to sit down, and too absorbed even to thank the young man for his courtesy or to accept his invitation. He continued pacing up and down the outer office, stopping now and then to note the heap of