“A Good Christmas Deed”

A short story

By T.D. Smith

Charlie was terrified.

He was almost out of money. Without a doubt, he would indeed be penniless before the last day of the month.

This was okay in a sense, because he had a steady, stable income, as did his wife. The funds of their joint bank account would replenish once they were paid on the last day of the month and their respective checks direct-deposited. However, this was the month of December and he had not yet bought his children Christmas presents.

Even though his wife thought that he had.

“What am I going to do?” Charlie vented to his best friend Nick over the phone.

“Relax, bro, I’m sure it will all work out.” Nick assured him.

“Easy for you to say! When Linda finds out they have no Christmas presents, she’s going to kill me!” said Charlie.

“It will be fine,” Nick said, reassuringly. “These things have a way of working themselves out.”

“Seriously? That’s all you have to say? It will work itself out, as if it’s simple and no big deal? As if you even really care anyway, after all, it’s not *your* life! I bet you just want to talk about something else!” Charlie thought to himself, fuming over his friend’s seemingly unhelpful words that were hardly worthy of being called consoling.

“Thanks, buddy. I certainly hope so.” is what actually came out of Charlie’s mouth.

They talked a bit longer about various subjects, including how just a few days prior the roof of Charlie’s house, which was not that old and by all reports and examinations should have been sturdy, had unexpectedly caved in, something the architects examining the wreckage deemed a rare flaw in the structure of the building. Luckily for Charlie and his family, only he was there at the time, having arrived home from work early that afternoon. The kids were still at soccer practice, and their mother at work. The family dog was the only other one at home with Charlie, and he had been outside at the time.

Charlie had been upstairs sitting on the toilet when the cave in had happened, and as the ceramic pot collided against the ground, the fragmenting toilet bowl had burst asunder beneath him, and Charlie received a deep, wide gash in his buttocks that bled profusely. He had needed to call an ambulance, and received sixteen stitches. At the beginning of the year well prior to his accident, his work had changed his insurance provider, again, and he now had rather crappy coverage with a high deductible, so Charlie and his wife had to pay for the entire procedure out of pocket.

Between he and his wife’s two incomes and their emergency fund, they could pay to have the house fixed and for Charlie’s medical bill, but did not have a lot left over after buying groceries and other various things their kids needed to stay alive and continuing comfortably on their current trajectories toward becoming functioning members of society. (How *exactly* was it that public school was so *damned* expensive, anyway?)

Linda refused to let Charlie so much as touch the credit card.

“Emergencies only!” she always said.

“What do you call this situation, then?” Charlie challenged.

“I mean like we’re about to go under, emergency. Like nearly destitute. Jobless. Bankrupt. End of the month will come and we’ll be fine. We’re not there yet.” Linda countered, curtly.

Even without tapping into the auxiliary credit card, Charlie and Linda managed to scrape by and pay all their bills for the month. However, all of these unforeseen life expenses came about without any regard whatsoever for another, more pressing and extraneous variable: Christmas presents. Charlie had assured his worried, overworked wife that he had bought the Christmas presents a month prior and she needn’t let her heart be troubled over getting their children gifts and scrounging to find the means to do so (heaven forbid she ask her mother for help!)

A white lie, he thought, as white and with the purest intentions behind it as the brightest, whitest, crispest Christmas snow, Charlie told himself. It set his beloved’s mind at ease temporarily, got her off his case, whilst simultaneously buying him some time. Which he had squandered, of course, mostly nervously floundering ideas around in his mind, frantically wondering exactly what the hell he was going to do to right his predicament.

“Do you have any money in your emergency fund leftover to buy the Christmas presents?” Nick asked.

“Well yeah, but Linda watches that fund’s balance like a hawk! If anyone touches it, she immediately gets a text message notifying her of a withdrawal, and then she’s going to ask questions! I’d have to fess up! Things have been difficult as it is with my injury, her work schedule, and now the roof caving in. She’ll skin me alive, maybe even leave me! At the very least she’d take the kids and go spend the holidays with her mother and leave me alone here.” Charlie explained.

“Yick!” said Nick.

“I know, alone and away from your family on Christmas, it couldn’t get much worse!” Charlie agreed.

“No, I meant yick, Linda’s mother!” Nick clarified.

Charlie, caught off guard, managed a good, long laugh. It was a sudden, unexpected thing in the state he’d been over the last few days, and much needed.

“Hahahaha,” Charlie laughed heartily with his friend, “oh Nick, you crack me up! Linda’s mom is not that bad.”

“She’s definitely on the naughty list, that’s for sure!” Nick said. “Well, I tell you what, I’m going to grab some milk and cookies, and come over and we can drink some eggnog, I’m buying, don’t worry, and we’ll come up with a plan. Maybe I can loan you some money or something.”

“You’d really do that for me?” Charlie asked, surprised.

“For you, old buddy, anything.” Nick assured his friend. Charlie wasn’t quite certain if he was imagining it, but he thought he had perceived just the slightest jingling in his old pal’s voice just then, something vaguely reminiscent of money rattling in one’s pocket, or some sort of bells.

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Nick came over about forty-five minutes later, milk, cookies, and eggnog in tow. The previously reassured and calm Charlie was now frantically limping about (for his butt was still raw and healing from his stitches, you see) and sweating.

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!” Charlie repeated aloud, compulsively.

“What’s wrong, old chap?” Nick asked.

“I checked my mailbox just after we spoke on the phone, and I got the notice for the property tax today! I forgot it’s due by the end of the month! I’ll overdraw from my account since I pay it automatically, and I’ll have no presents for my darling children, my wife will leave me, the bank will report my overdraft to the credit unions, and I’ll be divorced, out of my children’s lives, broke, have a terrible credit score AND a swollen, raw, hurting ass!” Charlie ranted to his friend, tears now streaming down his red, swollen face.

Nick smiled and placed his hands upon Charlie’s shoulders. “Relax, pal,” he said, “let’s get on the phone and talk to a bank representative and see what they can do to help us.”

“Okay,” said Charlie, reaching for his smartphone, “but I don’t know what good it will do…”

“Listen, Charlie, old friend, it’s always better to call about these things. They’re much more likely to help you over the phone, especially if you politely explain your plight in a friendly way.” Nick explained.

Charlie called the bank and found out that even if he did overdraw from his account by paying the property tax, it would be 45 days before the bank would report this indiscretion to the credit bureau, and if he was able to pay his overdraft balance within those 45 days, (which he would because within that time he and his wife would both get paid and the bank would automatically deduct the negative balance they owned from their account at such time as those funds became available,) it would never be reported to the credit bureau and harm their credit in any way. Charlie was incredibly relieved. He exhaled a gentle sigh and smiled for the first time in what felt like weeks.

“Now,” whispered Nick, an odd twinkle in his eye, “ask him if he can find you some money for the kids’ Christmas gifts!”

Charlie nodded and explained his predicament regarding funding for his children’s Christmas gifts to the bank representative.

“I’m sorry to hear about that sir, I really am, but we can’t just give out money.” the bank rep said.

“Here, let me talk to him.” Nick requested, holding his hand out expectantly for the phone. Charlie nodded and handed the tiny, touch-screened plastic rectangular prism to him. “Hi there, this is Nicholas. I am Charlie’s very best friend. Listen, isn’t there anything you guys can do over there to help my buddy out? All he wants is to be able to buy his children Christmas gifts!”

“No sir, I’m afraid not. You’ll have to ask some friends, or family, or a Church or another sort of charitable organization or something.” the bank rep informed them. “Short of taking out a loan with us I am unable to help you with this particular conundrum, and unfortunately, we do not typically approve loans on the spot, or for that purpose.”

“Aw come on now, it’s *Christmas*!” Nick gently implored, a joyful jingle in his voice.

“Sir, it’s December 1st. That’s not Christmas. Besides, I’m Jewish and I don’t even celebrate Christmas!” the bank rep countered.

“Well, what about uh, Chu-nook-uh? Happy Chu-nook-uh! Can’t you do something for this poor soul in the spirit of Chunookuh?” Nick inquired.

“It’s called Hanukkah, sir, and that doesn’t start until December 22nd this year, and regardless of that fact, I still can’t break the rules… I AM sorry.” the bank rep said, the annoyance obvious in his tone.

“What if I used a little Christmas magic, would that convince you?” Nick asked, and he breathed into the phone. There was a slight, dim but definitely there, rhythmic ringing sound in his breath, almost like that of sleigh bells chiming far off in the distance, that gently tolled when he breathed into the phone. There was a momentary pause on the other end of the line.

“You know what? It *is* Christmas.” the bank rep said, his tone completely changing from a staunch, rule-following monotone to a cheery, enthused, blissful one. Charlie wondered for a split second whether the man had suddenly passed the phone off to altogether different person in his office who loved both their job and life. “Tell you what, we will make a one-time deposit of $2,500 into Charlie’s account, no problem.”

“Great! Merry Christmas and Hanukkah!” Nick said, pleasantly. Charlie looked both shocked and elated. He couldn’t believe it. Nick had done it! His friend smiled, passing the phone back to Charlie, who cried tears of joy and passionately thanked the man on the other end of the line before hanging up.

Nick grinned widely. Mission accomplished.

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A few hours later and the kids were home safe and warm inside with Charlie and Nick. Their grandmother (Charlie’s mother-in-law) had picked them up from daycare and soccer practice respectively and dropped them off at their freshly repaired house, although she did so at just the very edge of the front lawn. She floored the accelerator, sending a cascade of earth and lawn spraying into the air out from under her back tire just as soon as each of her grandchildren had exited the vehicle at a safe distance, and peeled off at top speed in order to spare herself from having to talk to Charlie.

The son and daughter of Charlie and his wife Linda now played with their toys in the living room and chomped on cookies and drank milk, while Charlie and Nick stood watching them and talking. Nick and Charlie’s ears hummed with a slightly drunken buzz and their cheeks were flushed ever so slightly red. Nick’s cheeks were redder than Charlie’s. In fact, if Charlie didn’t know better, he’d have said that they were glowing red, almost in a bioluminescent way.

“That’s some doggone good eggnog, my friend!” Charlie told his buddy.

“Thanks! I made it myself special. It’s an old family recipe.” said Nick.

Charlie frowned slightly. Hadn’t Nick said he was *buying* earlier? He quickly shrugged and let the fleeting thought go.

“I still can’t believe you pulled that off! I’m totally in the clear and it’s all thanks to you. Everything is paid for and I was able to order the kids’ gifts from the internet. They will arrive in a couple of days and everything is set to make this a Merry Christmas after all! How can I possibly thank you, my friend?” Charlie asked.

“You’ll never have to, pal. I tell you what. I have one more gift that will complete the Christmas spirit in this house and bring the pinnacle of merriment for your family.” Nick said, pulling out a beautifully wrapped present with gleaming red wrapping paper. It was perfectly folded and creased along the edges, which were sealed with bright, gold tape, and had a glittering green bow containing what appeared to be sparkles that danced and twinkled like the stars themselves sitting nicely atop the box.

Just then Charlie’s wife walked through the door. She looked tired and worn out, dark circles accenting her eyes, but she smiled and kissed old Charlie lovingly and long. As she kissed him endearingly, Charlie felt his troubles melt away entirely. He always overreacted and feared the worst. She’d never leave him over something so trivial as the things he had been worried about earlier. Linda looked over after their kiss and smiled again, happy to see their friend Nick.

“Why hello there, Nick! What brings you here tonight?” Linda asked.

“Oh, I have an early Christmas present for you and Charlie and the kids to enjoy!” Nick explained, handing Linda the shimmering, exquisitely wrapped parcel.

Linda grinned from ear to ear and together with Charlie and the kids commenced to unwrapping the gift together. Pulling the wrapping paper aside, they revealed a tiny, golden-brown loaf of bread.

“Yay! It’s a Christmas loaf!” the children said together in union. “Can we cut it, mommy?”

“Wow, a traditional Christmas loaf! Of course you can, darlings.” Linda said, then she went to the kitchen for a moment and returned with the family Christmas-loaf-cutting-knife, a special, pristine metal blade with a green, ornamented Christmas-tree-shaped handle. The kids took to cutting into the Christmas bread as Linda hovered, making comments like “ooh, careful!” and “watch, now!”

“You have done so much for us, my friend. It’s unbelievable. First with the bills, then money for presents, now you have presented us with a traditional Christmas loaf for our family’s yuletide enjoyment.” Charlie remarked to Nick, shaking his head and grinning.

“Well, that’s not all. Just watch!” Nick replied, nodding his head toward the Christmas loaf.

As the kids cut into the bread with the Christmas knife, there was a rumble and the house shook. Charlie frowned and a growing look of concern crossed his face.

“Oh no, is the roof caving in again? Everybody, run!” Charlie shouted.

Nick put a hand firmly to Charlie’s chest, shaking his head.

“No, no, my friend. That’s not what’s happening here. Look!” Nick insisted. Charlie looked and to he and Linda’s surprise and their children’s delight, gold coins began spewing out of the bread loaf and landing and piling up on the living room floor.

“Woooow!” the kids shouted. The family dog wagged his tail and yipped excitedly.

“Ha ha ha ha! Oh, how wonderful! Ha ha ha! Ho ho ho!” Nick cried.

Nick’s cheeks grew a bit rosier. He seemed to be gaining mass, and his belly shook, in a manner reminiscent of how a vessel containing jelly might behave if shaken. “Ho ho ho!” he cried aloud again, a jingle of wonder and delight in his laugh. His belly, which seemed to be growing suddenly and considerably, now poked out over his trousers and his hair was steadily turning gray. A snowy white beard sprouted from his face and elongated down to his chest. His eyes twinkled like Venus in the evening twilight. His clothes transformed into a red, furry coat with white, fluffy cuffs.

“HO HO HO!” Nick called out. Nick, Charlie’s longtime friend, had transformed into Santa Claus before Charlie and his family’s eyes.

“SANTA!!!” Charlie’s children proclaimed.

“Ho, ho, ho! That’s right kids! Your father’s old pal Nick was actually Santa all these years! Ho, ho, ho!” The gold coins continued spewing forth from the Christmas loaf. It showed no signs of stopping. Saint Nick began glowing all silvery white and levitated into the air.

“Merry Christmas!!!” the jolly old elf declared. “I must be going now, children. Always be good and listen to your parents!”

And with that, Santa stretched forth his hands, which he had balled into fists inside his green mittens, and flew forward with great speed. He crashed straight through their front door, sending it flying off its hinges, over their picket fence, and crashing into the neighbor's’ yard. He flew upward into the night sky, accelerating faster and faster and getting smaller and smaller as Charlie and his family looked on through the rectangular hole where their front door had once stood.

“MERRY CHRISTMAS, SORRY ABOUT YOUR FRONT DOOOOOR! HO HO HO HO HO!!!!!” called Santa one last time before disappearing into the dark.

“It’s okay,” remarked Charlie, “we’ve wanted a new one anyway...I’m sure we can more than afford it now, what with all these gold coins!”

“Speaking of which…” Linda said, pointing to the now massive heap of coins in their living room. The coins had piled around them and they were now up to their knees in gold. The coin spillage continued, the spout from the loaf growing quicker and quicker, until finally it the pile of gold reached critical mass and spilled out into the front yard, carrying Linda, Charlie, the family dog, and their two kids outside with it like an ocean wave. The family sprawled out onto the lawn together. They laughed and sang and made golden-coin-and-snow angels in the newly fallen snow on their lawn together. The dog rolled around, trying to rub the scent of the golden coins, which smelled vaguely reminiscent of honey and holly, onto his fur.

The drifting snow-clouds above parted. Smiling and looking up at the stars, Charlie remarked, “you know, we probably have enough money to not only live comfortably the rest of our lives, but to help other people, too.”

“You’re right!” said Linda. And they did, later, build a giant orphanage and give to the poor, and help a lot of other people out monetarily in a multitude of ways. Years later, the two lovers would eventually retire to a tropical paradise, early. But then at that moment on that cold December 1st night, the family laid out together with their beloved dog, and when the snow ceased and the clouds parted, they laid out under the stars, which they gazed upward at in wonder and awe and love, enjoying each other’s company and the glory of the Christmas miracle that had befallen them.

Charlie’s heart was full. He was so happy his insides practically tickled.

That Christmas ended up being the greatest Christmas any of them could remember. Except for Linda’s mother, that is, who received a mysterious, finely wrapped lump of coal and bag of dog poo in her stocking that had a note attached to it that read simply, “<3 Santa.” She seemed incapable, possibly *magically* so, of complaining about this “gift,” a lump coming up in her throat each time her son-in-law feared she would burst. Linda’s mother held off talking about it until the day after Christmas, when she phoned and complained to Linda for about two hours straight. But none of this happened on Christmas Day. Not one single, negative comment exited her mouth.

On Christmas Day, quite the opposite was the case and everyone was a big, happy family. Charlie and Linda did *not* end up having to spend any of their new gold on a front door, for that Christmas morning they found a long, wooden rectangular prism in beautifully ornamented wrapping paper under their tree. Once unwrapped, it revealed itself to be exactly the kind, quality, and style of door they’d been dreaming of, only better. After the children had unwrapped their various treasures and were zooming about the house playing with glee, Charlie fetched his toolkit and began fixing the door to the front of the house.

Charlie smiled to himself as he worked, already reminiscing about the gift wrapping of that Christmas morning. When Linda’s mother had discovered the surprise from Santa, Charlie had smiled a great, big, wide smile and laughed a laugh of pure joy. Presently, hands gripped on his screwdriver, he began laughing again at the thoughts that came to him. He laughed so long and hard that his insides quivered and his body shook. Charlie’s family came back into the front room and watched him, puzzled. He laughed profusely and rigorously until finally, he farted. At that, his wife and kids began laughing loudly, too, and for a long time after his sudden, thunderous, duck-like expulsion of gas occurred. Eventually even Linda’s mother joined in the laughter. They all laughed in unison as one, happy family, enjoying the joy of Christmas, together.

THE END