

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

A Luckless Santa Claus

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

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This short story (1912) is from F. Scott Fitzgerald's (1896–1940) prep school days, published when he was just 16 years old. Like his later mature works (The Great Gatsby, The Last Tycoon), it considers the value of wealth and the right way of getting and spending money. On Christmas Eve, idle aristocrat Harry Talbot is challenged by his fiancée to give away \$25 in one evening, but “real charity” proves comically difficult.

Describe Harry Talbot. Why does Dorothy challenge him to give away his money? Do you agree with her definition of “real charity”? Is charitable giving different from gift-giving to one's family and friends? How serious is her challenge to Harry? Is it merely a “foolish whim”? Describe Harry's various efforts to give away the \$25. Why is he constantly rebuffed? Is there such thing as “bad” charity? What does Harry (and Dorothy) learn from his efforts to be charitable? How should charity be practiced, during the Christmas season and the rest of the year?

Miss Harmon was responsible for the whole thing. If it had not been for her foolish whim, Talbot would not have made a fool of himself, and—but I am getting ahead of my story.

It was Christmas Eve. Salvation Army Santa Clauses with highly colored noses proclaimed it as they beat upon rickety paper chimneys with tin spoons. Package-laden old bachelors forgot to worry about how many slippers and dressing gowns they would have to thank people for next day, and joined in the general air of excitement that pervaded busy Manhattan.

In the parlor of a house situated on a dimly lighted residence street somewhere east of Broadway, sat the lady who, as I have said before, started the whole business. She was holding a conversation half frivolous, half sentimental, with a faultlessly dressed young man who sat with her on the sofa. All of this was quite right and proper, however, for they were engaged to be married in June.

“Harry Talbot,” said Dorothy Harmon, as she rose and stood laughing at the merry young gentleman beside her, “if you aren't the most ridiculous boy I ever met, I'll eat that terrible box of candy you brought me last week!”

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“Dorothy,” reproved the young man, “you should receive gifts in the spirit in which they are given. That box of candy cost me much of my hard-earned money.”

“Your hard-earned money, indeed!” scoffed Dorothy. “You know very well that you never earned a cent in your life. Golf and dancing—that is the sum total of your occupations. Why, you can’t even spend money, much less earn it!”

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“My dear Dorothy, I succeeded in running up some very choice bills last month, as you will find if you consult my father.”

“That’s not spending your money. That’s wasting it. Why, I don’t think you could give away twenty-five dollars in the right way to save your life.”

“But why on earth,” remonstrated Harry, “should I want to give away twenty-five dollars?”

“Because,” explained Dorothy, “that would be real charity. It’s nothing to charge a desk to your father and have it sent to me, but to give money to people you don’t know is something.”

“Why, any old fellow can give away money,” protested Harry.

“Then,” exclaimed Dorothy, “we’ll see if you can. I don’t believe that you could give twenty-five dollars in the course of an evening if you tried.”

“Indeed, I could.”

“Then try it!” And Dorothy, dashing into the hall, took down his coat and hat and placed them in his reluctant hands. “It is now half-past eight. You be here by ten o’clock.”

“But, but,” gasped Harry.

Dorothy was edging him towards the door.

“How much money have you?” she demanded.

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Harry gloomily put his hand in his pocket and counted out a handful of bills.

“Exactly twenty-five dollars and five cents.”

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“Very well! Now listen! These are the conditions. You go out and give this money to anybody you care to whom you have never seen before. Don’t give more than two dollars to any one person. And be back here by ten o’clock with no more than five cents in your pocket.”

“But,” declared Harry, still backing towards the door, “I want my twenty-five dollars.”

“Harry,” said Dorothy sweetly, “I am surprised!” and with that, she slammed the door in his face.

“I insist,” muttered Harry, “that this is a most unusual proceeding.”
He walked down the steps and hesitated.

“Now,” he thought, “Where shall I go?”

He considered a moment and finally started off towards Broadway. He had gone about half a block when he saw a gentleman in a top hat approaching. Harry hesitated. Then he made up his mind, and, stepping towards the man, emitted what he intended for a pleasant laugh but what sounded more like a gurgle, and loudly vociferated, “Merry Christmas, friend!”

“The same to you,” answered he of the top hat, and would have passed on, but Harry was not to be denied.

“My good fellow”—He cleared his throat. “Would you like me to give you a little money?”

“What?” yelled the man.

“You might need some money, don’t you know, to—er—buy the children—a—a rag doll,” he finished brilliantly.

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The next moment his hat went sailing into the gutter, and when he picked it up the man was far away.

“There’s five minutes wasted,” muttered Harry, as, full of wrath towards Dorothy, he strode along his way. He decided to try a different method with the next people he met. He would express himself more politely.

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A couple approached him,—a young lady and her escort. Harry halted directly in their path and, taking off his hat, addressed them.

“As it is Christmas, you know, and everybody gives away—er—articles, why”—

“Give him a dollar, Billy, and let’s go on,” said the young lady.

Billy obediently thrust a dollar into Harry’s hand, and at that moment the girl gave a cry of surprise.

“Why, it’s Harry Talbot,” she exclaimed, “begging!”

But Harry heard no more. When he realized that he knew the girl he turned and sped like an arrow up the street, cursing his foolhardiness in taking up the affair at all.

He reached Broadway and started slowly down the gaily lighted thoroughfare, intending to give money to the street Arabs he met. All around him was the bustle of preparation. Everywhere swarmed people happy in the pleasant concert of their own generosity. Harry felt strangely out of place as he wandered aimlessly along. He was used to being catered to and bowed before, but here no one spoke to him, and one or two even had the audacity to smile at him and wish him a “Merry Christmas.” He nervously accosted a passing boy.

“I say, little boy, I’m going to give you some money.”

“No you ain’t,” said the boy sturdily. “I don’t want none of your money.”

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Rather abashed, Harry continued down the street. He tried to present fifty cents to an inebriated man, but a policeman tapped him on the shoulder and told him to move on. He drew up beside a ragged individual and quietly whispered, “Do you wish some money?”

“I’m on,” said the tramp, “what’s the job?”

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“Oh! there’s no job!” Harry reassured him.

“Tryin’ to kid me, hey?” growled the tramp resentfully. “Well, get somebody else.” And he slunk off into the crowd.

Next Harry tried to squeeze ten cents into the hand of a passing bellboy, but the youth pulled open his coat and displayed a sign “No Tipping.”

With the air of a thief, Harry approached an Italian bootblack, and cautiously deposited ten cents in his hand. At a safe distance he saw the boy wonderingly pocket the dime, and congratulated himself. He had but twenty-four dollars and ninety cents yet to give away! His last success gave him a plan. He stopped at a newsstand where, in full sight of the vender, he dropped a two-dollar bill and sped away in the crowd. After several minutes’ hard running he came to a walk amidst the curious glances of the bundle-laden passers-by, and was mentally patting himself on the back when he heard quick breathing behind him, and the very newsie he had just left thrust into his hand the two-dollar bill and was off like a flash.

The perspiration streamed from Harry’s forehead and he trudged along despondently. He got rid of twenty-five cents, however, by dropping it into a children’s aid slot. He tried to get fifty cents in, but it was a small slot. His first large sum was two dollars to a Salvation Army Santa Claus, and, after this, he kept a sharp lookout for them, but it was past their closing time, and he saw no more of them on his journey.

He was now crossing Union Square, and, after another half hour’s patient work, he found himself with only fifteen dollars left to give away. A wet snow was falling which turned to slush as it touched the pavements, and the light dancing pumps he wore were drenched, the water oozing out of his shoe with every step he took. He reached Cooper Square and turned into the Bowery. The number of people on the streets was fast thinning and all around him shops were closing up and their occupants going home. Some boys

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jeered at him, but, turning up his collar, he plodded on. In his ears rang the saying, mockingly yet kindly, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

He turned up Third Avenue and counted his remaining money. It amounted to three dollars and seventy cents. Ahead of him he perceived, through the thickening snow, two men standing under a lamppost. Here was his chance. He could divide his three dollars and seventy cents between them. He came up to them and tapped one on the shoulder. The man, a thin, ugly looking fellow, turned suspiciously.

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“Won’t you have some money, you fellow?” he said imperiously, for he was angry at humanity in general and Dorothy in particular. The fellow turned savagely.

“Oh!” he sneered, “you’re one of these stiffs tryin’ the charity gag, and then gettin’ us pulled for beggin’. Come on, Jim, let’s show him what we are.”

And they showed him. They hit him, they mashed him, they got him down and jumped on him, they broke his hat, they tore his coat. And Harry, gasping, striking, panting, went down in the slush. He thought of the people who had that very night wished him a Merry Christmas. He was certainly having it.

Miss Dorothy Harmon closed her book with a snap. It was past eleven and no Harry. What was keeping him? He had probably given up and gone home long ago. With this in mind, she reached up to turn out the light, when suddenly she heard a noise outside as if someone had fallen.

Dorothy rushed to the window and pulled up the blind. There, coming up the steps on his hands and knees was a wretched caricature of a man. He was hatless, coatless, collarless, tieless, and covered with snow. It was Harry. He opened the door and walked into the parlor, leaving a trail of wet snow behind him.

“Well?” he said defiantly.

“Harry,” she gasped, “can it be you?”

“Dorothy,” he said solemnly, “it is me.”

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“What—what has happened?”

“Oh, nothing. I’ve just been giving away that twenty-five dollars.” And Harry sat down on the sofa.

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“But Harry,” she faltered, “your eye is all swollen.”

“Oh, my eye? Let me see. Oh, that was on the twenty-second dollar. I had some difficulty with two gentlemen. However, we afterward struck up quite an acquaintance. I had some luck after that. I dropped two dollars in a blind beggar’s hat.”

“You have been all evening giving away that money?”

“My dear Dorothy, I have decidedly been all evening giving away that money.” He rose and brushed a lump of snow from his shoulder. “I really must be going now. I have two—er—friends outside waiting for me.” He walked towards the door.

“Two friends?”

“Why—a—they are the two gentlemen I had the difficulty with. They are coming home with me to spend Christmas. They are really nice fellows, though they might seem a trifle rough at first.”

Dorothy drew a quick breath. For a minute no one spoke. Then he took her in his arms.

“Dearest,” she whispered, “you did this all for me.”

A minute later he sprang down the steps, and arm in arm with his friends, walked off in the darkness.

“Good night, Dorothy,” he called back, “and a Merry Christmas!”