

Mabel's Christmas Gift
by Judge Clark

“A merry Christmas, Miss Mabel!”

It was the first time Mabel had heard the words that day. From early dawn she had toiled at her needle.

The bells were chiming eleven and Mabel stood, dripping and shivering, on the threshold of the wretched tenement, one of whose poorest apartments constituted her home. The night was dark and stormy, and she had had a long walk, through the driving rain and sleet, from the fashionable quarter in which her rich employer dwelt, to the humbler one that contained her own miserable abode.

“A merry Christmas, Miss Mabel! And here’s a Christmas gift for you,” said a little dumpy old gentleman, touching her arm as she was about to ascend the steps, and thrusting a crumpled slip of paper into her hand.

What sharp eyes the little old gentleman must have had to recognize her in that dim and shadowy light, for it took the second glance of Mabel’s young and keen as they were, to make out the jolly features of Mr. Wentworth, who had once employed her to copy some papers, for which he had paid her liberally.

Mabel would have said “Thank you” for the gift, whatever it was; but before she had time to do so, the little old gentleman was off.

No wonder Mabel started when she had lit her lamp and inspected her present. Such are seldom made outside of story books. *It was a check to bearer, on one of the city banks, for five hundred dollars!*

What a munificent gift to come from one almost a stranger! And how opportunely it came too! She would be able to pay off the arrearage of rent now, that had given her so much trouble.

Mabel went to sleep with her treasure under her pillow; and while she is dreaming happy dreams, in which a face she had striven hard to banish of late, is constantly coming up, let us tell the reader who she is.

Mabel Gleason’s father—she had lost her mother in early infancy—was a wealthy merchant, whose study it had been to lavish on his daughter, and only child, every possible indulgence, and to adorn her with every attainable accomplishment. It is not too much to say he idolized her; and had her heart been less true, or her head less steady, she must have been totally spoiled.

A financial crisis came, culminating in a crash, among the victims of which was Mabel’s father. Crushed and broken in spirit, his health gave way, and the end of a few months saw Mabel an orphan and penniless, for nothing had been saved from the wreck of her father’s fortune.

Feeling she could better bear her altered condition among strangers, she had left her native city, and sought a home and employment in the metropolis. The result we have already seen.

Mr. Wentworth's check was duly honored—it would have been good for a hundred-fold as much. Mabel, keeping out no more than sufficed for present needs, deposited the balance in a savings bank. She took a tidy room in a respectable street, which she was fortunate enough to secure on moderate terms, and straightway advertised for pupils in French and music.

Fortune seemed to smile on Mabel at last. She rendered so complete satisfaction to the first few pupils that gave her a trial, that she soon had as many as she could take. Her income enabled her to add to, instead of diminishing her deposit in the bank; and she was beginning not to be so rigid in her banishment, during her waking moments, of that face that always *would* come up in her dreams.

But a shocking blow was in store for poor Mabel. She was on her way from the house of a pupil one day when a stranger accosted her.

“I am sorry to trouble you, Miss, but it is necessary that you should go with me. I am a detective, and have a warrant for your arrest. As I am not in uniform, no one need know you are in custody.”

“Will [you please tell me of] what I am accused?” Mabel ventured to ask.

“My instructions are to answer no questions,” said the man doggedly. “You will learn all at the police office; and it's my opinion the sooner we go there the better.”

Seeing no alternative, Mabel acquiesced, and walked in silence at the side of the officer.

When confronted with the judge—a shrewd, but withal pleasant looking gentleman, on a high seat—she was not so much intimidated as might have been expected. She had had time to collect her thoughts by the way, and there is ever a true courage in innocence, that makes the weak strong, and inspires the timid with boldness.

“Will you be good enough to tell me, sir, why I have been brought here?” Mabel asked, in a voice so gentle and musical, and with a flush on her face so far from betokening guilt, that his Honor forgot the prisoner, and remembered only the lady.

“You presented a check some time since, Miss Gleason, for five hundred dollars, purporting to be drawn by Mr. Wentworth on the — Bank, on which you drew the money.”

“I did,” Mabel answered; “it was a Christmas present from Mr. Wentworth himself. He gave it to me with his own hand,” said Mabel, astounded at a charge so unaccountable.

“Mr. Wentworth has been sent for, and will be here presently,” the Judge answered. “Ah! here he comes.”

As the little old gentleman bustled his way to the front, and his eyes fell on Mabel, he stared with astonishment.

“You here!” he exclaimed. “What is the meaning of this?”

“That is the person who presented the check,” said the Judge.

“Impossible!” cried the little old gentleman.

“She has admitted it.”

Mr. Wentworth was dumbfounded. The whole affair was involved in mystery. The written part of the check, had he not known the contrary, he would have sworn to be in his own hand. His checkbook, too, was missing, though how it could have been abstracted from the safe in his room, of which he kept exclusive possession of the key, was quite past his comprehension.

“You gave me the check yourself, sir,” said Mabel “on the steps of my lodgings, late on Christmas night; you surely cannot have forgotten it.”

“Late on Christmas night!”—why the old gentleman was sure he hadn’t stirred out of his room after dinner, and that he had gone to bed at nine.

Whatever conclusion the little old gentleman’s mind might have reached in its bewilderment, Mabel’s was fast approaching one at the ludicrousness of which she would have smiled under less serious circumstances, which was, that Mr. Wentworth had celebrated Christmas a little indiscreetly, and had taken a drop too much for his memory, when her reflections were cut short by the appearance of a new face on the scene—a decidedly handsome one, belonging to a young gentleman who had accompanied Mr. Wentworth to the court. It was, moreover, the same face that would keep coming up in Mabel’s dreams—and sometimes when she was awake, too.

“Mabel Gleason!” cried the young man. “What—what absurd blunder is this? Who has dared—”

A deep flush, succeeded by a deathly pallor, overspread Mabel’s countenance, as she tottered and would have fallen, but for the timely support of her youthful companion

“Uncle!” the latter vehemently exclaimed, “I know this lady, and would stake my life upon her innocence!”

“So would I, boy, though I’m puzzled to my wit’s end.”

“See here!” he continued, addressing the judge, “this case must go no further!”

“The charge can only be withdrawn by those who made it,” the judge answered.

“And who are *they*? Confound them!”

“The officers of the bank.”

“The officers of the bank be blowed! I’m one of them myself! I’ll go her bail anyhow, and fix it up with the bank afterwards!”

The proposition was satisfactory.

As Warren Harding conducted Mabel home, he learned, for the first time, her altered circumstances. When last they met, it was in her native city, in the midst of a refined and fashionable circle, of which she was the chief centre of attraction. He had been absent for a year in Europe, and had returned but a few days before. How little had he expected, in accompanying his uncle to the police court, that the meeting to which he had looked forward with most impatience should take place there.

Whatever explanations passed between the two young people, they led to Warren’s passing a sleepless night. It was past midnight, and he had not yet retired, when his uncle, whom he had believed snug in bed, muffled, hatted, coated, and equipped as if for going out, unceremoniously entered his apartment. A strange expression in his eyes arrested the young man’s attention. Taking a key from his pocket, he opened a secret drawer of a secretary in one corner of the room, from which he took what seemed to be a blank book, which he opened, and taking a pen, began to write.

Warren drew nearer. It was a check book his uncle was writing in! Having finished, the old gentleman neatly cut out and folded the part on which he had written, and was about leaving the room when Warren spoke:

“Where are you going, uncle?”

“To make a present to Mabel,” replied the other, without turning his head. “*I made her one on Christmas, and intended making her another on New-Year’s, but somehow forgot it.*”

Warren grasped his uncle’s arm. The latter gave a bound and almost lost his balance

“Why, what’s the matter?” he exclaimed, rubbing his eyes; “where am I?”

“See! See! Uncle,” cried the young man eagerly; “the mystery is explained!”

“What’s this?” said the old gentleman, more and more astonished. “My lost checkbook, as I live! And a check too in my hand, regularly filled up, and dated today! And here—why, here’s a memorandum, in the margin of that confounded check that has caused all the mischief. It’s all plain now! I’ve been at my old pranks again. They used to accuse me of sleepwalking when I was a boy, but I never more than half believed it.

When Mabel called the next day to tender back the five hundred dollars—which her deposit and savings, and some tuition bills she had collected, enabled her to do—the tender was emphatically

rejected. Mr. Wentworth said he had but one regret in the matter, and that was to find he was so much better when he was so much better when *asleep*, than when *awake*.

If our young friends would know what came of it all, they have only to put themselves in Mabel and Warren's place, and think what *they* would have done under similar circumstances.

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