

A Sense of Humor

A CHRISTMAS STORY

Arthur Stringer

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A Sense of Humor

A CHRISTMAS STORY
BY
ARTHUR STRINGER



Illustrated by C. W. Jefferys

BENJAMIN SPINDEL had a Good Fairy. He was never quite sure what this Good Fairy should have been called. Sometimes she seemed best described as A-Sense-of-Humor. More often, however, he preferred to know her as Fame.

For fame, to Spindel, was something which came to you overnight, like a cold in the head, or a milk-bottle at the door. You simply woke up and found it there. The mere thought of it, waiting like a gnome on your doorstep, was something to send a tingle of romance through the small hours of the chilliest night, if you only made it a point to remember.

Not that Spindel ever quite forgot. For there were two things about Spindel that always surprised his friends. One was his industry. The other was his optimism.

Unlike so many others whose blood had been fevered by the virus of stage-life, this doggedly industrious disciple of Romance never let the day be sufficient unto itself. Idleness, in fact, was a luxury he could not afford. He was at least a plodder. And he believed, as he used to put it, in taking the bull by the horns.

So his immediate object in life was not so much to discover the fairy on the threshold as to keep the wolf from the door itself. Yet he nursed the entirely romantic delusion that Fame was something on which one might stub one's toe in the dark. Success was a sort of accident, the same as finding a dime on the street curb: you went to bed a plodding juggler of a dozen or two wooden puppets, and you woke up the Greatest Dramatist of the Age.

For Spindel's ambition, even when he came a raw youth from the Middle West, was not merely to be an actor. He nursed, in fact, an abhorrence for grease-paint and call-boards and dressing-rooms and hydrogenated coiffures. He made no secret of the fact that his work on the stage was only a means to an end. Like an illustrious Elizabethan prototype to whom he often referred, he merely played parts that in the end he might learn to write them. For Spindel, like Shakespeare, wanted to be a playwright.

Like his prototype already referred to, Spindel was not essentially a man of letters. He prided himself on being one of the people. This claim was advanced, perhaps, in extenuation of certain oddities of orthography, for to the end, Spindel was always a little weak in his spelling. But he was both adaptive and courageous, and no one could accuse him of not keeping his ears cocked

and his eyes open. He nosed through life like a beagle nosing through bracken, he basked over street quarrels like a parent over a cradle, he blinked at park lovers like a hawk at a young rabbit, always hoping to scare up a new “scene” or a new “situation.” So while the weekly pay envelope of the actor was keeping the pot boiling, his experiences behind the spotlights were initiating him into the tricks of the theatrical trade. He was devouring knowledge as silently and as persistently as an army worm devours herbage.

Yet, after three years of playing small parts, and playing them none too well, he concluded that the back of the curtain had little more to teach him. He wanted to get out and see life “in the raw,” yet nowhere, ironically enough, would he ever see its rawness less veiled than under the mask of the mummer. Here again, however, a sort of blithe practicality on his part kept interposing. He continued to mark time as a play-actor, bending his neck to the yoke for the sake of a small but ever assured weekly envelope.

It could be called nothing more than marking time, for all his ardor, all his energy, was now being poured into his own secret pursuits. He was now giving his time and thought to the writing of plays, magnificently planned dramas which, by some odd mischance, never saw the light of day, laboriously conceived comedies which, unfortunately, no one ever heard of. His vocational hours, in fact, became a sort of somnambulism; he went through them with all the impersonal detachment of a sleep-walker. He was, by this time, living only in his writing. As his parts grew smaller and smaller his pay envelope, in turn, grew thinner and thinner. But despair was unknown to Spindel. He still believed in the Fairy outside the door. He still passed, vaguely elated and optimistic, among his old-time friends of the stage, wearing the veiled smile of an adventurer who has learned the secret of some lost treasure.

“There’s a guy they’ll never grind down!” said Gunderman’s stage manager as he watched Spindel one day pocket his rejected script and trudge smiling undaunted down to Broadway.

“They won’t grind him down—he’ll just wear down!” retorted the apathetic Gunderman, to whom the years had brought wisdom and a weak digestion. And so fixed was Gunderman’s mind as to this fact, that he appropriated without hesitation a page or two of Spindel’s third-act dialogue. It was nothing more, he argued with himself, than taking a plank or two from a passing derelict.

As Spindel climbed the stairs to that Twenty-second street back room which he dignified as his “studio,” his bearing took on an added touch of insouciance. He even whistled, and affected a bit of a swagger.

And he had his reasons for this. For Spindel had been heaven-born optimist enough to bring a wife to New York with him out of the terra incognita of the Middle West. And that wife was young, and perhaps not always appreciative of the humoristic turns of over-ambiguous human destinies. She saw the script under her husband's arm, and she went to the window and looked out.

"My dear, those managers are positively funny!" blithely avowed Spindel, as he put his play in its pigeon-hole with the air of a victor putting his sword in its scabbard. "And all I say is, I'm thankful I can keep my sense of humor and see what a queer lot they are!"

"I wish they'd taken the play," said his wife, with the unimaginative immediacy of her sex, as she went back to her work of turning a last winter's skirt.

"But I'm getting closer to 'em, all the time," chirped the indomitable Spindel. "I'm getting wise to their curves. I'm getting so I can humor 'em!"

And Spindel set to work writing a new play. He had to skimp and economize a good deal, by this time, for he could now get nothing more than an occasional "super" part to keep the pot boiling. But he accepted the dingy back room studio and the meagre meals cooked on a one-hole gas stove as calmly as an exiled prince accepts the exigencies of a banishment recognized as only a matter of time. He became oblivious to them. He went back to his play like an opium-smoker back to his drug. He revised and rearranged and revamped. He closed his eyes, valiantly, and cut away whole act-ends, at one grim stroke, like a surgeon operating on his own flesh and blood. From the older and time-worn scripts he drew off the blood of life that was to sustain the ever-growing new-comer. Upon this newer child of hope he even transplanted a whole organ from some maturer offspring who had not lived up to its expectations. He worked blindly, but he worked determinedly. The secret of dramatic life or death was something beyond him. It was, he claimed, mostly a matter of luck, of accident. And every dog had his day. And some people had Fairies. And Spindel still believed in his Fairy.

So he watched over his new-born play, and nursed it into plethoric robustiousness, and redressed it in epigram, and decorated it with a newer ribbon or two of fancy. Then he carried it off to the agencies and the managers' offices with the blind pride of a mother carrying her first-born to a baby show.



Then he carried it off to the agencies and the managers' offices.

That none of them could see any beauty in it struck him as ridiculous, as laughable. It almost took his breath away. But once more he came to realize, as he had so often tried to explain, that all managers were a queer lot.

"If you can only keep your sense of humor, at this game!" he persisted, with a wag of the head, as he read Gunderman's curt note of refusal.

So Spindel kept his sense of humor. He set to work again, as optimistic as ever. He once more became the prestidigitator; once more he laid out his worn and shoddy children of fancy, like a juggler laying out his "props."

Then he lost himself in his work. He once more ruthlessly disembowelled and rearranged and rearticulated. He once more shifted and sorted and pieced together. The result was something more wonderful, more Gothically embellished, than ever before. He once more buttressed it up and furbished and polished it, looking it over with contented and commendatory shakes of the

head.

“I’m learning the trick, my dear!” he jubilantly declared to his hollow-eyed wife as she stirred the veal-stew on its hot-plate next to the window. “I can see it coming closer, now, every day!”

And again Spindel began the rounds of the agencies and the managers’ offices. And again the script came back to Spindel’s dingy studio, and again it went out, and again it came back. Once more it moved the playwright to a mild and humorous wonder.

“Aren’t they a funny lot—a rum lot?” he demanded. “Can’t you see it, once you get a line on them and their ways?”

“No, it’s not funny,” said his wife, limp and listless in her chair by the window. “It’s not funny any more.”

He laughed as he put a hand on her thin shoulder.

“Just keep your sense of humor, my dear, and you’ll see they are funny! Look how they contradict each other, even in their excuses! Look how one says ‘Cut down! Cut down!’ and the other says ‘Build up! Build up!’ ”

It was Spindel’s blind theory that if you kept at a thing you won out, you simply had to win out, in the end. And such being his theory, he once more set to work. And the following autumn, in vindication of his attitude, he actually went about showing a contract with a Western producing agent who had attached a “phony” curtain to one of Spindel’s earlier first-acts and converted it into a vaudeville sketch for a Chicago comedian.

This sketch seemed to bring new life to Spindel. He not only appeared an expostulatory landlord and a long-threatening gas company, but he also indulged in the extravagance of two Hartz Mountain canaries, “to liven up the studio a bit,” as he blithely explained to his wife, and planned out intricate and extended shopping expeditions before the cold weather set in.

But the vaudeville sketch, after a run of three weeks, came to an abrupt and untimely end. Just why this was, the dazed author could never quite understand. And it saddened him a little to think that it had lived and died without once having come under the eye of its creator. Yet these one-act things, he cheerily added, were never worth worrying over. In fact, there was something humorous about it all, he still maintained. He thanked his lucky stars he could still see the funny side of it.

He refused to give it much thought, however, for already he had a new play to work on. This new play, like the others, became a sort of pot au feu into

which went every fragment that could be shaved from the bones of his past efforts, every shred of an idea that could be caught up from the passing moment. He wrote on and on, still believing in the Fairy outside the door. He sent out his script, still nursing the delusion that he was going to find Fame hanging by one hand to his mail-box down in the dingy front hall. And as he shuffled down in his tattered slippers, ten times a day, he thanked Heaven that he could still see the humor of it all, and went up to chirrup and whistle somewhat pensively into the swinging canary cage and then turn once more back to his writing.

It was one rainy morning when even the canaries refused to sing that the Ultimate Idea came to him. Times, he had to confess, were getting a bit tight. Things were no longer as rosy as they ought to be. It was too late for shilly-shallying; conditions seemed to call for a coup de main. And here he was with seven fine plays all about him, seven plays of his own. None of them could be all bad; even those human sheep known as managers confessed that one had a good scene here, and another had a good curtain there, and a third had a good idea somewhere else. But none had quite floated him out to the sea of prosperity. Then, demanded Spindel of himself, why not lash the lot together? Why not tie them up in one raft, cut away what was not needed, and let that one final venture swing out to sink or swim?

This amalgamative idea became first an intoxication and then an obsession. The work-worn playwright threw himself into the task with a fury that disturbed even his wife, who absented herself more and more from that unkempt and paper-littered back room where Spindel strode up and down in his tattered slippers enacting the roles he was reorganizing. She even upbraided him for scandalizing their neighbors with his enigmatically passionate utterances, with his frenzied self-altercations, with his climacteric shouts of scorn and triumph. He even forgot his wife and her existence. He uttered no protest as she took her departure for the day. He merely looked at her in his vacant and unseeing way when she somewhat defiantly told him that she was off to look for work of her own. He only nodded diffident assent when she somewhat challengingly informed him that her cousin, Jim Ecklin, was taking her to the Hippodrome.

For Spindel, in truth, was engaged in one of the most extraordinary juggling feats of all his feverish-fingered juggler's career. Into that one and final play he was crushing and crowding everything that was worth carrying off from everything he had ever written, much like a shipwrecked traveller packing into one portmanteau the cream of all his belongings. He was moulding his whole life into one forlorn amalgam. He was making that last

play a sort of headcheese of all his lost hopes, an Irish stew of all his dead issues. He scraped the bones of each desiccating skeleton for its last enriching tatter of meat. He journeyed back through each abandoned structure for some last sustaining beam of action. He crawled over each devastated scene for some chance sparkle of epigram embedded in its ruins.

He made it a sort of mausoleum of the perished labors of youth. Then he once more polished it and furbished it, and so pretentious and flashing did that new facade stand to him that for the first time in his life he indited a peremptory letter in which he put forth certain peremptory demands, and sent both letter and play-script off to Gunderman, knowing only too well that this time it was all or nothing.

In the meantime winter had advanced and the cold had set its teeth in the flank of the attenuated Spindel abode. The rigors of mid-December reminded the playwright that both the body and its habitation were in keener need of fuel. So Spindel took advantage of the holiday season and earned a few dollars as an extra ticket-taker in a Fourteenth street moving picture house. The pay was not lordly. But his gas bills and his arrears of rent he could for the time ignore. Those more exigent claims which rose from the pit of the human stomach, however, could not be ignored. He also remembered that he had his wife and his two canaries to feed. He hated moving pictures; they were the darkest enemy of the dramatic artist. But he could live it down, once he had got started, once he had made his hit. And as he trudged homeward with his half-pound of Hamburger steak he looked once more anxiously into the mailbox. But it always seemed to be empty.

Spindel saw Christmas week approach and wondered if even a sense of humor could not lose its elasticity in time. So the next morning he took the bull by the horns, as it were. He made his toilet, such as it was, with the minutest care, and invaded Broadway and the Gunderman stronghold.

Gunderman, he was told, had been called to Chicago. He had either taken the script with him or mislaid it. But no word had come to the office as to its fate. And during Christmas week nothing was likely to be done.

Spindel, that night, spent a long time over his task of feeding the canaries. His own hunger he appeased in a much briefer period. It was after nine o'clock when his wife came home, silent and self-contained. She told him, casually, that she had already eaten supper. But later in the evening, as she stood peering into the canary cage, she broke into tears, for no appreciable reason. It was the next day that Spindel began pawning things surreptitiously taken from that dingy back room.



His wife came home silent and self-contained.

For two days he wandered about the city, looking for work, as destitute of direction as a lost child looking for home. Late in the afternoon of the fourth day he trudged back to his "studio," a little dizzy in the head and a little weak in the knees. But he wanted to make sure the canaries were fed.

He found it hard to climb the steps. In the mail-box, at the side of the shabby old hall, he found two letters waiting for him. He climbed the stairs, step by step, and as he let himself into his room he saw a square of paper tacked on his door. He swung back the door and peered up at it.

He realized as he studied it, that it was a dispossess notice. He slowly pulled it from the soiled panel, stepped into the room, and closed the door after him.

“Allie!” he called, for the light was not strong.

He looked about and saw with a deep breath of relief that his wife was not there. Then he slowly crossed the room and sat down by the window, under the canary cage. Then he put the letters on the ledge in front of him. He was very leisurely about it, yet he could feel his heart in his throat, pounding like an automatic riveter.

The first letter was in his wife’s handwriting. He opened the envelope and slowly unfolded the single sheet it held. On it he read:

“I’ve tried hard to stay with you, Benny. But a woman’s got to have clothes and things. And I couldn’t stand the sort of Christmas to-morrow would have to be. I’ve thought it all over. I’m going to New Orleans with Jim this afternoon. Jim says he’ll see I never want for anything. It’s the only thing left for me. I hate to go this way, but I can’t help it, and I can’t stand it any longer.

ALLIE.”

Spindel read the penciled sheet for the second time. Then he slowly folded it up and put it on the window-ledge in front of him. He sat there for several minutes, without moving. Then he turned the second letter over in his hand.

He found it hard to open, for his eyes were not clear. A yellow mist, like street fog, seemed to float between him and the paper. The first thing that struck him was the blue tint of the oblong enclosure. He looked at it, vacantly, for several seconds. Then he held it up to the light and saw it was a cheque. Then he slowly unfolded the letter and read it.

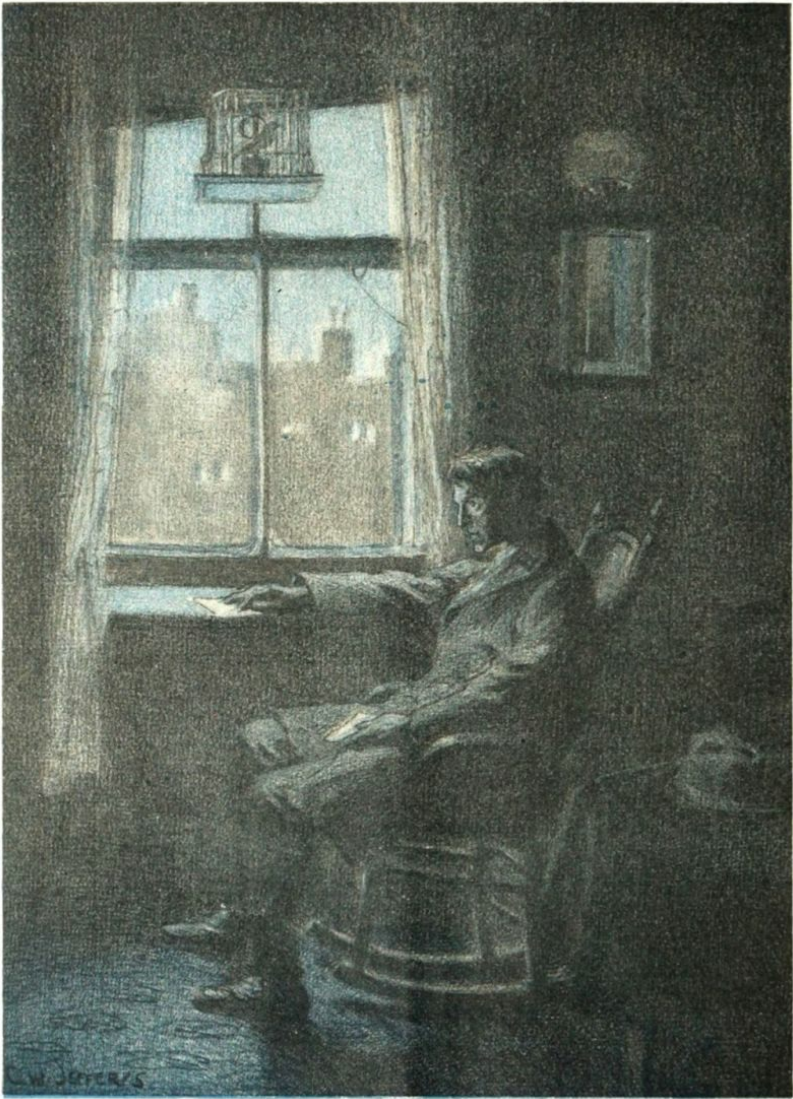
It neither startled nor elated him. He dimly remembered that it was from Gunderman’s office. He was vaguely conscious that Gunderman himself was writing and saying that the four-act play entitled “Fool’s Gold,” by Benjamin Spindel, would be put in rehearsal the following Monday, for a New York production. It also, as far as he could make out, requested a receipt for the one thousand dollars in advance royalties duly enclosed, the additional five

hundred to cover advance on the London production, on the definite understanding that the author surrender to the said Gunderman all English rights and—— But Spindel was no longer interested.

He slowly unfolded the first letter and slowly read it through.

“I’m going to New Orleans with Jim this afternoon.”

He read it aloud, as though the words were written in a foreign tongue, as though it were a text he could not comprehend. Then he looked at the blue oblong of the cheque. He looked at it for several minutes, without moving. Then he laughed, quietly, softly, without mirth and without emotion. He had lost his belief in the Fairy just outside the door.



He sat in deep thought for several moments.

He sat in deep thought, for several moments. Then he pinned the two letters together, and taking a clean sheet of paper, wrote on it nine short words. Then he laughed again, quietly, but still without emotion. The words he wrote were:

“This is too much for my sense of humor!”

He looked meditatively about and finally put the three slips of paper on the table in the centre of the room. Then he carefully lifted the canary cage from

its hook and placed it on the floor of the dusky hallway, outside his door. He locked the door, as he stepped inside, and again looked meditatively about the twilight room. Then he took a number of newspapers and slowly tore them into strips. With these he carefully battened the cracks about the door, and the joints of the loose window sashes. He did not even overlook the keyhole. Then, as he crossed the room, he read aloud the words he had written:

“This is too much for my sense of humor!”

He calmly drew the blinds. Then he groped his way back to where the green tubing connecting the hot-plate with the gas pipe ran along the wall. He padded about until he found the stop-cock. Then he turned it on, full.

He re-crossed the room to the sagging spring-couch, remembering to cover himself with the worn comforter as he lay down on the soiled bedding. He closed his eyes. He only knew that he was tired, very tired, and that to-morrow should have been Christmas. Then he fell asleep.

Spindel, who so often dreamed that Fame was going to be left at his door, like a bottle of milk, woke up to find his wife there at midnight, crying like a frightened child.

“Oh, I couldn’t do it, Benny; I couldn’t do it!” she wailed, bathed in her tears of contrition, as he stumbled to the door and swung it open. She clutched at his dazed and silent figure. She clung to him in a self-immuring ecstasy of despair.

“Oh, Benny, what’ll we do? What’ll we do?” she wailed.

“Do? How?” asked the still dazed Spindel.

“They’ve ordered us out!” she wept. “And we’ve no money. And they came and turned the gas off on us this morning!”

And Spindel, groping for her shaking body in the darkness, locked his arms about her and laughed.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *A Sense of Humor, A Christmas Story* by Arthur Stringer]