

CHRISTMAS CLASSICS



FRANCIS HOPKINSON SMITH

**COLONEL
CARTER'S
CHRISTMAS**

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Francis Hopkinson Smith

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Colonel Carter's Christmas

I

"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 Jedge 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.

"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'se, 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