

## THE GIFT GIVERS

By Jack Stillman

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FOR SEVEN YEARS Dinton and Calder had lived in Feldon's Downs, and they had become best friends. They had other friends, of course, for when you live in a nursing home friends are important.

They were old, both of them; Dinton was going to be ninety-two on his next birthday and Calder would be eighty-nine. They were not the oldest residents in Feldon's Downs. There was Mrs. Flannigan, who was ninety-eight, but she had lived there for only two years. So, by rights, Dinton and Calder considered themselves the oldest residents because they had lived there longer.

The two old men had become friends almost immediately, probably because of their hobby. They both liked to whittle. They had seen six Christmases in Feldon's Downs, and the seventh was coming up. As always, the two friends looked forward to Christmas Eve, when they exchanged gifts.

Actually, the two men exchanged pocket knives, their most valuable possessions. The first time they exchanged gifts had been a spontaneous gesture. Each year thereafter they had traded pocket knives, each wrapped with tissue and ribbon, and they feigned surprise and expressed profound thanks to one another. It had gone on for so long that they had forgotten who owned which knife originally.

As the holiday season wore on, the two friends took part in the festivities planned at the nursing home. But they each looked forward to that special moment once a year when they exchanged gifts.

Now there is a superstition that to give a friend a sharp gift would likely cut the friendship. But Dinton and Calder never gave that tale any credence.

Nevertheless, a crisis developed, for Dinton had either lost or misplaced his knife. At any rate, he couldn't find it. It wasn't a simple question about what to give a friend for Christmas. The knives were traditional, something that each had come to expect.

Dinton fretted about the lost pocket knife. What was he to do? It would have been simple if he had some money, but all of his welfare check went to the nursing home to pay for his keep.

Calder was in a similar predicament. For he also had discovered that his knife was missing. Dinton didn't know this of course, but his friend was under the same stress as he. They were both worried about each other.

It was not difficult for them to hide their loss from each other, because they were not allowed to whittle inside the nursing home. This meant that from the first warm days of May to the cool days of October, the two friends sat side by side on a bench behind the tool shed in the garden where they spent many a happy hour shaving pieces of white pine into little piles of chips.

As autumn approached, and it grew too cold for them outside, they moved inside the nursing home and ceremoniously put away their knives until the warmer days of spring. They found the knives to be missing when they went to get them for wrapping in the gift paper provided by the nursing home.

Now what Dinton and Calder didn't know was that because of a new regulation preventing a patient from owning such cutlery, an attendant had quietly taken the knives from among their possessions. The new regulation had been posted on the bulletin board, but few saw it because many of the nursing home occupants couldn't read because their eyesight had faded. Some were wheelchair patients and the bulletin board was too high for them to see. And some couldn't read to begin with.

As for Dinton and Calder, they never looked at the bulletin board anyway, so they would not have known about the new regulation unless someone told them. They each went on poking about the old sofas and chairs and any place else he figured he might have lost the knife. Time was drawing near. It was the day before Christmas Eve and the two friends sat in a corner of the huge day room looking at the dreary weather through a window. It had started to rain.

“ 'S gonna be a cold 'un this winter,” said Dinton, who usually spoke first, as was their custom. Both men were tall and slim, but Dinton's sharp features, his pointed chin, sharp nose and high cheekbones gave him the appearance of being the taller of the two. Actually, Calder was taller, but his face was chubby and he always slouched a bit, so he looked to be the shorter one.

“You’re right there, Dint. ’S gonna be a cold ’un.”

“ ’S already pretty cold. Reckon it might snow?”

“Nah. Too early for snow. Ain’t never snowed at Christmas, not here, not as far as I know.” There wasn’t much to talk about in the nursing home unless you talked about the weather, so the weather took up a good deal of the conversation.

“Sure would be nice if we had a white Christmas,” said Dinton.

“Sure would,” said Calder.

“You ever see a white Christmas?” asked Dinton.

“Nope. Don’t reckon I ever will,” his friend replied.

After that they parted, each puttering about his meager belongings, trying to find the missing pocket knives or something else that just might make a reasonable substitute for a Christmas present.

Dinton had a thought that just might work. What if he and Calder had an argument. Then he would have an excuse to skip the Christmas present. He could make up later with his friend. Maybe by then he would find that dad-blamed knife.

Calder looked at all his things of value that might do for a present. His wallet was well worn and he didn’t really need it, because he had no money to put in it. He had a collection of old business cards stuffed into one of the compartments. They represented places he used to call on when he was a salesman. But that was a long time ago. He couldn’t even remember the people whose names were on the cards.

He found an old pair of silver cuff links. They were tarnished and only one of them would work properly. That wouldn’t do. Besides, Dinton didn’t have a shirt with the proper cuffs.

Calder swore to himself. Everything would have been all right if he hadn’t lost that dad-blamed pocket knife.

So they both went to bed that night worrying about a Christmas that neither wanted to see.

Calder didn’t want to die, or anything so drastic as that, but he did consider just staying in bed and trying to sleep through the next forty-eight hours. By then Christmas would have come and gone and he might even be able to find his knife.

Dinton lay there in the dark trying to think of some way he could get his friend into an argument. It occurred to him that in all the time of their friendship, they had never had an argument. He finally gave up and went to sleep.

The following day was Christmas Eve. It was dank and the gray clouds lay low over the fields. Some said they were snow clouds and they could feel it in the air. They were certain it was going to snow.

But Dinton and Calder paid little attention to this foolishness. They had more serious problems to consider.

As the day wore on it became more miserable and along about four o'clock in the afternoon a few flakes of snow began to fall. The wind blew them away, but the flakes kept falling. An hour later it had begun to look like real snow.

The excitement of a possible white Christmas spread from one to the other and soon it became contagious, even with Dinton and Calder, who forgot about the missing pocket knives.

There was the traditional dinner the home always served on Christmas Eve, so the staff could have Christmas Day with their families. And then there was caroling and Dinton and Calder were so full of the spirit of Christmas that they forgot about the pocket knives until the director of the nursing home began to pass out the gaily wrapped presents piled beneath the Christmas tree.

The two old friends suddenly descended into a pit of depression. What was to be done? Oh well, it was too late now.

When all the gifts had been distributed and most of the inhabitants of the house had gone to bed, Dinton and Calder stood in a corner of the room, looking out the window at the still, white night, because the snow had continued to fall. The Christmas tree was at their back.

“You know, old friend,” said Dinton, “that old knife was a sorry thing and it wouldn’ a expressed what I’d a-wanted to this Christmas, so I thought just this once I’d give you a white Christmas. I might not ever be able to do it agin.”

“It’s mighty peculiar,” said Calder, ’cause that’s exactly what I was giving you this Christmas. Funny how things works out in pairs for us, ain’t it?”

And the two friends stood with arms about their shoulders, watching the snow. It was the first white Christmas either had ever seen.