

A Most Charitable Man

DICK CASSIDY

(Suggested by "The Hired Man," by Robert Frost)

Phillip Kingsley was a banker and looked the part. He was a typical example of the sort of man people expect to be president of a bank. His carefully shined shoes, conservative clothes and distinguished manner were complemented by his slightly greying temples and pale blue eyes. When he spoke, he did so in carefully selected sentences, making use of his wide vocabulary. A popular man, he was noted for his friendliness to the local townspeople and for the fact that he could be seen at any time to discuss a loan for a new silo or an additional building on a farm. If rumor could be believed, Phillip Kingsley would be the next United States senator from Indiana. In short, he was a man of whom the community could be justly proud—a solid citizen.

On this particular afternoon he was having tea at his spacious home with Mrs. Byrne Van Burrell, head of the Centertown Civic Culture League and a prominent figure in local society, in order to discuss plans for the erection of a clinic for needy families in the vicinity. Mrs. Van Burrell was a member of that international society of women who, finding themselves with nothing to do, form societies to aid "our less fortunate brothers" and who then fancy themselves benefactors of humanity.

She was speaking now in her high pitched, pseudo-cultivated voice with deep emotion, leaning forward from time to time to stress a point. She held the miniature cup daintily in her hand at a point halfway to her mouth. It would seem as if she were going to take a sip when a fresh idea would occur, and she would lower the cup. Kingsley was thinking that he could easily be

lulled to sleep by that monotone.

"Mr. Kingsley, I derive deep satisfaction from the knowledge that I have your support in this matter. It warms my heart to know that a man in your position can still remember his duty to those who are less fortunate than himself. When the ladies suggested that we request that you be chairman of this project, I sincerely felt that a better choice could not have been made; we haven't forgotten your part in seeing that the children at the orphanage were remembered with oranges at Christmas."

"I endeavor to do my part, Mrs. Van Burrell, and as I have already asserted, I will do every possible thing within my power to see that clinic erected. Furthermore, I —"

"Begging your pardon, sir, there is a man to see you."

It was Thomas, the butler. He had come in so silently that neither had heard him.

"A man? I didn't hear him ring."

"He came to the back door, sir. He says he is your brother."

"My—my brother?" Although it was a warm afternoon, Phillip felt a distinct chill. It must be Silas. He had warned him the last time he had seen him, years ago, not to come around, and Silas had promised—but now he was here.

"Send him away, Thomas," he said. "Probably some beggar. Besides," he tried to smile, "I have no brother." He tried to appear unconcerned, but he wondered if Mrs. Van Burrell had seen the deep crimson coat which had blanketed his face when Thomas had mentioned his brother.

"I told him to leave, sir, but he insists

upon seeing you.”

Thinking that he couldn't risk the chance that Silas might make a scene, Phillip said in an aggravated tone, “Oh well, then I'll see what the beggar wants and send him packing. Excuse me, please.”

“Certainly,” shrilled Mrs. Van Burrell.

Phillip hurried to the kitchen and there, clutching a broken felt hat in front of him with both hands, was his brother, Silas. The shoes he wore were at least a size too big and the tops were covered with crevices where the leather had dried and cracked. Over the tops of his shoes wrinkled his faded trousers which, in spite of having been rolled up, were too long. A red kerchief was tied loosely around his neck and it stood out in sharp contrast to his blue denim shirt. His face looked tired and drawn. For a moment he just stood there; then he spoke.

“Phillip—Mr. Kingsley. I'm sorry to bother you. I ain't never bothered you before; you know that. But I've been walking all day, and I've got the chills, and I want to know can I sleep in the garage. I wouldn't ask you except I've got thirteen miles to go to get home and it'll be dark soon and I ain't well. I've got the chills. I could do chores in the morning and then I could start for home and I won't never bother you again. Can I sleep in the garage?”

The banker's face was purple with rage as he hissed, “Get out.” Then louder, “Get out.”

Silas cast his eyes to the floor and like a dog that has been whipped for something he did not know was wrong, turned and walked slowly to the door. He grasped the doorknob, opened his mouth as if to speak, closed it again and still wearing the puzzled

expression, opened the door and slowly shuffled out.

Phillip walked to the window and watched until Silas reached the road. After straightening his tie and adjusting the carnation in his lapel, he strode briskly into the parlor.

In answer to his guest's questioning look, he explained, “It was as I thought, just a beggar. Something of a lunatic, I think; he wanted me to give him money; he insisted he was a relative. Utterly absurd, of course.”

“How vulgar,” exclaimed Mrs. Van Burrell. Her face registered her disgust. “A man like that is a threat to the community and should be dealt with by the authorities.”

“You're absolutely right.”

“Oh yes, as I was saying before that awful man interrupted,” Mrs. Van Burrell went on, “the ladies feel as strongly as I that we couldn't have made a better choice for director of the clinic drive.”

Phillip took a deep breath. And in the voice which he usually reserved for addressing the Rotary Club, he replied, “It gives me great pleasure to have a part in this undertaking. No one, Mrs. Van Burrell, realizes his duty to the multitude of unfortunates in our society better than I.”

“Mr. Kingsley,” said Mrs. Van Burrell, her voice trembling with emotion, “you are a most charitable man.”

Not for down the road, Silas drew the kerchief tighter around his neck and tried to walk faster. It was growing dark, and he was over twelve miles from home.

“The first thing I'll do when I get home is ditch the meadow,” he said aloud. “But I'll have to rest some first. I'm awful tired and my head hurts. It must be the chills.”