

Angel on a Doorstep

When Ben delivered milk to my home that morning, he wasn't his usual sunny self. Instead, he was the epitome¹⁾ of gloom as he dropped off his wares from his wire carrier. It took slow, careful questioning to extract the story from him. With some embarrassment, he told me two customers had left town without paying their bills, and he would have to cover the losses. One of the debtors owed only \$ 1 0 , but the other was \$ 7 9 in arrears²⁾ and had left no forwarding address. Ben was distraught³⁾ at his stupidity for allowing this bill to grow so large.

"She was a pretty woman," he said, "with six children and another on the way. She was always saying, 'I'm going to pay you soon when my husband gets a second job. I believed her. What a fool I was. I was doing a good thing, but I've learned my lesson.' " All I could say was, "I'm so sorry. "

The next time I saw him, his anger seemed worse. He bristled as he talked about the messy⁴⁾ young ones who had drunk up all his milk. The charming family had turned into a parcel of brats. I repeated my condolences⁵⁾ and let the matter rest. But when Ben left, I found myself caught up in his problem and longed to help. Worried that this incident would sour a warm person, I mulled over what to do. Then, remembering that Christmas was coming, I thought of what my grandmother used to say: "When someone has taken a thing from you, give it to him, and then you can never be robbed. "

The next time Ben delivered milk, I told him I had a way to make him feel better about the \$ 7 9 . "Nothing will do that," he said, "but tell me anyway. "

"Give the woman the milk. Make it a Christmas present to the kids who needed it. " "Are you kidding?" he replied. "I don't even get my wife a Christmas gift that expensive. "

"You know the Bible says, 'I was a stranger and you took me in.' You just took her in with all her little children. " "Don't you mean she took me in? The trouble with you is, it wasn't your \$ 7 9 . " I let the subject drop, but I still believed in my suggestion.

We'd joke about it when he'd come . "Have you given her the milk yet?" "No," he'd snap back, "but I'm thinking of giving my wife a \$ 7 9 present, unless another pretty mother starts playing on my sympathies. "

Every time I'd ask the question, it seemed he lightened up a bit more. Then, six days before Christmas, it happened. He arrived with a tremendous smile and a glint in his eyes. "I did it. " he said. "I gave her the milk as a Christmas present. It wasn't easy, but what did I have to lose? It was gone, wasn't it? "

"Yes" I said, rejoicing⁶⁾ with him. "But you've got to really mean it in your heart. " "I know. I do. And I really feel better. That's why I have this good feeling about Christmas. Those kids had lots of milk on their cereal⁷⁾ just because of me. "

The holidays came and went. On a sunny January morning two weeks later, Ben almost ran up the walk. "Wait till you hear this," he said, grinning. He explained he had been on a different route, covering for another milkman. He heard his name being called, looked over his shoulder and saw a woman running down the street, waving money. He recognized her immediately— the woman with all the kids, the one who didn't pay her

bill. She was carrying an infant in a tiny blanket, and the woman's long brown hair kept getting in her eyes. "Ben, wait a minute." she shouted. "I've got money for you." Ben stopped the truck and got out.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I really have been meaning to pay you." She explained that her husband had come home one night and announced he'd found a cheaper apartment. He'd also gotten a night job. With all that had happened, she'd forgotten to leave a forwarding address. "But I've been saving," she said. "Here's \$20 toward the bill."

"That's all right," Ben replied. "It's been paid." "Paid." she exclaimed. "What do you mean? Who paid it?" "I did."

She looked at him as if he were Angel Gabriel and started to cry.

"Well," I asked, "what did you do?" "I didn't know what to do, so I put an arm around her. Before I knew what was happening, I started to cry, and I didn't have the foggiest idea what I was crying about. You know what? I was really glad you talked me into this."

"You didn't take the \$20?" "Heck no," he replied indignantly⁸⁾. "I gave her the milk as a Christmas present."

门阶上的天使

那天早上，本给我家送来牛奶时，不像往常那样乐呵呵的。他满脸愁云地从电动车上取下送给我家的牛奶。经过慢慢的、小心翼翼的探问，我才得知究竟。带着几分尴尬，他告诉我有两个客户没付账就搬走了。他得赔偿所有的损失。其中一个人只欠他10美元，可另一个欠79美元，而且没有留下新地址。本痛恨自己的愚蠢，竟然让账单积累到这么大的数额。

"她是个漂亮的女人，"他说，"有6个孩子，下一个也马上要出生了。她总是说，'等我丈夫找到第二份工作，我就马上把钱付给你。'我信了她。我多傻。我只是想做件好事，却换来这么个教训。"我只能说："我替你难过。"

第二次见到他时，他似乎更愤怒了。谈到那些把他的牛奶都喝光了的脏乎乎的小家伙时，他怒火中烧。那个可爱的家庭一下子变成了一窝臭小子。我又安慰了他一下，便不再理会。但等本走后，我发觉自己已经卷进了他的苦恼中，而且希望能帮帮他。我担心这件事会使本这么个热心人对生活失望，所以寻思着该怎么办。突然，我记起圣诞节快到了，并想起祖母常说的一句话："当有人从你这儿拿走一样东西时，主动给他，这样你就永远不会遭劫。"

等本再次来送奶时，我告诉他我有办法让他对这失去的79美元感觉好一些。"不可能，"他说，"但不妨说来听听。"

"把牛奶送给那个女人。把它作为一份圣诞礼物送给需要它的孩子们。" "你在开玩笑吧？"他回答。"我给我妻子都买不起那么贵的礼物。"

"你知道《圣经》上所说的，'我是个陌路人，你却关照了我。'你就关照一下她和她的孩子们吧。" "难道你不认为她欺骗了我？问题是这79美元又不是你的。"我不再多说，却相信我的建议会管用。

他再来时，我常常与他打趣："你把牛奶送给她没有？" "没有，"他厉声回应，"但我在考虑给我的妻子送一件79美元的礼物，除非再有一位漂亮妈妈骗取我的同情心。"

每次我问起这个问题，他的情绪似乎都比上一次要好一点。之后在离圣诞节还差6天时，事态终于转变了。他满脸笑容，眼中放着异彩。"我做到了，"他说。"我把牛奶作为圣诞"

礼物送给她了。这不是件容易的事，可对我有什么损失呢？反正没有了，是不是？”

“对，”我说，心中同他一样兴奋。“但你必须心里真的这么想才行。”“我知道。我确是这么想的。而且我真的感觉好多了。这就是我为什么对圣诞节感觉这么好的原因。就是因为有了我，那些孩子们吃麦片时才可以加上很多牛奶。”

圣诞节假期来了又去了。两个星期后，在元月一个阳光明媚的早晨，本几乎是一路跑上人行道。“等等，听我说，”他笑着说道。他告诉我，他去替另一个牛奶工送奶，去了另一条街。他听到有人叫他的名字，回头看见一个妇女从街上跑来，手里挥着钱。他立刻就认出她来了——正是那个有一群孩子、没有付账的女人，抱着一个用小毯子裹着的婴儿，长长的棕色头发不时盖住她的眼睛。“本，等一下。”她喊道。“我要给你钱。”本停住车并下了车。

“太抱歉了，”她说，“我真的一直想把钱给你。”她说一天晚上她丈夫回家后，说他找到了一个更便宜的住处，还找到了一份上夜班的活儿。这一切来得太快，以致她忘了留下新地址。“但我一直在攒钱，”她说。“这是付账的20美元。”

“没关系，”本回答说。“已经付完了。”“付完了？”她惊喊道。“你说什么？谁付的？”“我付的。”

她看着他好像是加百列天使，然后哭了起来。

“噢，”我问他，“那你又怎样呢？”“我不知如何是好，所以就用一只胳膊搂着她。我自己还没明白过来，就跟着哭了起来。至于为什么哭，我真的不知道。你知道吗，我很高兴是你劝我这么做的。”

“你没有拿那20块钱？”“当然没有，”他愤然答道。“我把牛奶当做圣诞礼物送给她了。”

NOTE 注释：

epitome [i'pɪtəmi] n. 体现

arrears [ə'riəz] n. 到期未付款，欠帐

distraught [di'strɔ:t] adj. 心情烦乱的，发狂的

messy ['mesi] adj. 肮脏的，凌乱的，杂乱

condolence [kən'dəʊləns] n. 安慰

rejoicing [ri'dʒɔ:siŋ] n. 欣喜，高兴

cereal ['siəriəl] n. (加工过的) 谷类食物 (指早餐吃的麦片粥等)

indignantly [in'dignəntli] adv. 愤怒地