

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



## A Gift from His Employes

Lizzie M. Holmes

1902

Lizzie M. Holmes  
A Gift from His Employes  
1902

Retrieved on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2023 from [www.libertarian-labyrinth.org](http://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org)  
Published in *The Tailor* 12 no. 11 (June 1902): 4–6.

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

The junior member of the firm of Seigel, Berkfield & Co., manufacturers of cloaks and suits, was about to be married. The employees all knew it for some weeks before the event, and that great preparations were going forward for the wedding, that the bride was an heiress, young, stylish and pretty. It was the sensation of the day among them as well as among the other circle who could see the bride and her dresses, and the presents which would be sent in. They could not hope to see so much as a white favor. Nevertheless an under forelady conceived the idea that it would be quite the proper thing for the hands in the shop to make up a subscription and buy a handsome present for the prospective groom. She talked to the head forelady about it and she said immediately, "Yes, indeed that is what we must do, and we must get about it directly."

So at noon they got their heads together and drew up a paper which would pledge each one who signed it to give whatever sum of money they set opposite their names. The forelady herself did not sign it; she would make up whatever was wanting at the close, she said. She went first to the head cutter who made something near decent wages in his department, where she talked, flattered and cajoled until he put down his name for \$5. She smiled tri-

umphantly as she turned away with the paper, but the man scowled and he muttered between his teeth, "Blackmail! If I hadn't signed it, I wouldn't hold my job a week!"

The two women pushed the circulation of the paper with great energy. A few women signed it willingly and with pleased smiles as though they realized the honor of being a participant in presenting a gift to young Berkfield. But over the faces of many of the girls came dark shadows, startled, dismayed looks, and here and there a spasm of fear as at an impending catastrophe.

One young woman sat in the corner with three women of about her own age, by name, Martha West, who was more than usually thoughtful and observant, and who watched proceedings closely. Two or three seats away sat a young girl of sixteen and to her now came one of the solicitors with the paper. The girl read it with her head bowed over it, but presently looked up with a poor, little, pathetic smile on her wistful face and her sad blue eyes full of tears.

"I don't see how I can give anything this week, Miss Jackson," she said tremblingly.

"Oh, you wouldn't wish to be left out when the employees are giving Mr. Berkfield a wedding present, I'm sure," the other said with an ingratiating smile, still holding the paper under the girl's eyes.

"But how can I? My grandmother—you know I live with her—is sick this week and has to have medicine and a little something she can eat. She generally earns a little selling medicinal and aromatic herbs that she raises in the little square of a back yard, herself. I have had everything to do myself since she is sick. I have scarcely enough to last over Sunday, and Monday is pay day."

"To be sure it is, and you can borrow a little and pay it then."

"Oh, I dare not go in debt. My pay is so small, that every cent is needed and laid out before it comes to me. If I give you anything I must go hungry until I get the next pay."

"Oh, I guess it's not as bad as that. Fifty cents won't make or break you."

“I would give it if I could afford it.”

“I wouldn’t be so stingy as to begrudge a miserly fifty cents, any way. Maybe you can’t afford not to give it.”

Nettie started and looked up quickly. A tear rolled over the heavy eyelid and down the thin cheek; but she took the paper and slowly wrote her name with fifty cents opposite it.

The solicitor passed on to the next worker, a silent, stolid German woman who plodded away at her work like a machine. She never stopped, never lost a motion; she did not move as quickly as some of the workers, but her slow, methodical, ceaseless movements produced results that compared very favorably to many of the swifter ones. She did not pause now as the solicitor approached her.

“I gif not one cent,” she said determinedly, as the girl explained her object. A few of the most important arguments were used.

“I gif not one cent,” she repeated still working. “I earn my money. I care not for Berkfield or his wedding. Let me do my work.” and she fed the beginning of a long seam into her machine, and took no more notice of the woman with the subscription.

The solicitor obtained the signature of the next worker for \$1 quite easily, and considerably encouraged, she smilingly approached Martha West.

“What shall I put you down for. Miss West? You understand no doubt that we are getting up a subscription to buy a nice present for Mr. Berkfield on the occasion of his marriage.”

“Those of Mr. Berkfield’s friends who wish to make him a present should do so. I am not even an acquaintance of Mr. Berkfield and have no wish to make him a present.”

“Oh. but he is your employer—it is a matter of courtesy you know. He will appreciate a present from his employees, I am sure.”

“As an employee I owe him nothing. He hires me as cheaply as he can. I must ‘pay’ him or he would not keep me. We are not friends—Tie would not recognize me if we were to meet on the streets. I would not be admitted into his house if I were to call there.

Send a present where I would not be received myself? Hardly. Then, on what grounds do you ask me to give him a present?"

"He has furnished you your bread and butter for the last two years or more."

"I have furnished him with a great deal more than bread and butter. We all of us have furnished him with the means of getting rich, while we have received scarcely bread and butter, for butter is a luxury."

"But he gives you a chance to work and earn what you have."

"If he and people like him would get out of our way we would make our own chances. Come now, Miss Jackson, do you think it honorable business to go around here blackmailing these hard-worked, poorly paid girls out of their meagre wages, when already they have sacrificed their health and strength and time to help Berkfield get rich? Look at that poor Mrs. Black over there—three children and a mother to provide"

"Yes, and just think, she gave a dollar!"

"She has forced the food out of her children's mouths to give it to that satiated young fop, who doesn't even know her and wouldn't lift a straw to help her in trouble. You are not the girl I thought you or you wouldn't be in this dirty, blackmailing business for one minute!"

Miss Jackson suddenly picked up her paper and with a curl of her lip, indignantly hurried away to join the forelady and the other solicitors at the head of the room. The women about Miss Martha West had listened to their conversation; some had looked shocked, some frightened and a few smiled and seemed well pleased. One of them now said:

"I believe you're right, Miss West. We work too hard and get too little for it—why should we pinch ourselves still more than we do just to give a present he won't care for?"

"When presents are given it should be between friends who love each other; Berkfield does not even know us by name and would

never be in favor there again and finally determined to go. She walked away, without a word from any of her employers or the companions of two years' working time, to drift about among the jobless ones until another master could be found.

Now, go home, girls. We believe you are all right, but never try anything of this sort again. You can't go creeping around rich people's houses like this without being suspected."

"Oh, will this get into the papers? Will you keep still about it? Oh, please, please! Don't get us into more trouble—we've had enough!"

The officers laughed, then looked serious.

"No, 'pon honor, we won't say a word about it. We don't want to hurt you workin' girls; you have a hard enough life of it," and they went away. The girls the next day did tell that they had seen the presents, but they did not tell the rest until long afterward when they could speak of it without trembling in their shoes with fear and shame.

Miss Martha experienced another sequel, not turning out so fortunately. She found the foreladies all very cool to her after her outspoken refusal to give anything toward the gift. One day she was given three cloaks in one package. They were brown but with a shade of difference in the color that she could not discern. While making them up she sometimes had her doubts that the cloth was all alike; but after staring at them awhile would again conclude they were all right. When she took them up for examination, the head examiner told her she had mixed the goods throughout the cloaks and they must all be ripped and made over again. Made with pockets, lapels and straps, all stitched three times around with silk, this was a momentous job. Martha knew that she would not have been forced to make good this mistake, if it was a mistake, on her own time, if she had stood well with the forelady; the difference in the cloaks could not have been distinguished by the naked eye, unless one were specially looking for something wrong. "I cannot do all that work over again. I will not try."

"Then you can have no more work."

She said nothing and went back to her seat. She thought long whether she could afford best to give up her place or spend three or four more days in remaking the cloaks. But she knew she would

never bother himself to try to learn to know us. Under such circumstances a present is a mockery."

The paper filled up, rather slowly to be sure; but the work did not cease until the full amount required, \$100, was subscribed. As there was then no deficiency to make up the forelady did not trouble to sign her name at all for any sum. One hundred dollars from a little throng of women, girls and a few men and boys, not one of whom but must be deprived, out of an already deprived life, of necessities, in order to do this. The money was collected on Saturday afternoon, and the next Monday was pay day. Many a one emptied their little, lean, worn pocketbooks, and knew they must walk home and go very near dinnerless the next day; but they did not tell one another their straits and took what comfort they could in the consciousness of having helped to give a comparative stranger a gift he did not need and would probably care very little about.

When the money was all in, the forelady and two of her assistants prepared to go out and make the purchase. One of the hands said entreatingly, "Oh, please bring it here so we can all have a look at our present before you take it home."

"I think not," said the forelady, haughtily; "do you imagine that we will carry a great load of silver about the streets merely to gratify you women's idle curiosity? We will buy a solid silver water service very probably, and you can go around by the silver merchant's store and look at those in the window to your heart's content."

"•Will there be an inscription on it?"

"Oh, yes! You will get glory enough: "Herman Berkfield. April 26<sup>th</sup>, from his grateful employees." He shall know where it came from."

"If we can't even see it, I wish I had my money back!" cried out one of the girls. "So do I!" "So do I!" exclaimed several others.

"Well, you'll not get it back," the lady said and hastened away. Perhaps she thought it not wise to linger there with the hundred dollars she had extracted from the needy crowd.

The wedding was to occur on Wednesday of the next week. On Tuesday some of the girls thinking so much of the presents and of their own in particular, became wild to get a glimpse of them, of the one they had given, at least. Some of them knew where the bride lived and proposed that a party go there and boldly ask to enter and see the presents. Several agreed to go, but when the start was made but three remained firm. They brushed their dusty clothes as clean as they could, washed unusually well—for a four by five wash room—and four basins in the dark, are very poor accommodations for 125 women to make their toilets in, and many just gave their faces a good rub with a handkerchief and went home without washing. They were but poor, shabby sewing girls when they did the best they could.

They proceeded to the place, and with quaking limbs, rang the doorbell. A servant opened the door, who stared at them coolly and asked them who they wanted to see.

“We—we want to see Miss Farnsworth—no, we only want to see the presents; we gave one you know; the girls from the shop, you know”

*Mrs. Farnsworth and her daughter are not at home, misses.”*

“Well, can’t we come in and see the presents, any way?”

“I am not at liberty to admit strangers in their absence,” he said coldly, but bowing very politely.

The girls could but retreat as gracefully as circumstances would permit, and the man shut the door. But seeing they had gone this far they felt daring end would not go home without another attempt. The dwelling stood on a corner and they walked around on the other streets and looked into the windows. It was not yet dark and the curtains were up. They could see a glimmer of silver on a table not far from the window, and they became bolder. They found entrance at a side gate, went through and crept up close to the house. They saw the table plainly now with its burden of brilliant, beautiful things, jewelry, silken and lace articles, silverware and gold, and amidst them all a big shining pitcher swinging on its

arch, two heavy goblets resting in their sockets, and the inscription, “To Herman Berkfield, a gift from his employees,” luckily turned toward the window. They forgot their sorrows, heaved great sighs of pride and delight, and felt that blissful proprietary sense in something grand which swells in the breasts of the poor so infrequently. Then a woman came toward the window and terrible screams issued forth from her throat. “Police! Police! Help! help!” someone cried from within, and for a wonder two policemen were round the corner within hearing. The girls were trying to get out of the gate when the policemen met and held them. The man and the maid-servant came out of the house. “What’s the matter, here?” asked the officer with a tight grip on two young arms.

The man servant spoke:

“These women are prowling around here to find where the presents are kept. I suppose they has their pals waitin’ to hear their report.”

“I guess you’ll have to come along,” the police said pulling the girls along. But they were nearly paralyzed and could scarcely sustain their own weight, much less walk.

“Do ye want us to get the wagon?”

“The leading spirit finally recovered her voice sufficiently to make a plea. “Oh, sir!” she half-sobbed, “it isn’t true. We work for Mr. Berkfield, and we wanted to make him a wedding present, and it was bought and sent here; we only wanted to see what we had bought with our own money,” and then she broke down and began to cry.

Policemen must be hardened, coarse, and unfeeling or they wouldn’t be policemen, but after all they are human and have hearts beating away in some remote part of their corporeal systems, and something pathetic in these hard-working, shabby, but innocent young girls trying so hard to see the one fine article they had ever had a hand in purchasing, touched them. They could tell very easily the girls were really what they represented themselves. They led them into the street.