



The Redemption of Henry F. Potter



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It must have been three AM Christmas morning by the time Uncle Billy stumbled up the steps of his home and plopped onto his bed. He drifted off to sleep, grinning as he played back the night's events like a Saturday matinee newsreel. He saw his nephew George, standing next to Mary by the Christmas tree, holding little Zuzu in his arms as friends, neighbors and family poured into the Bailey house with money gifts for Bedford Fall's favorite son. The reverse playback eventually brought his mind back to a less celebratory moment and feelings of despair and worry that he had hoped he would never experience again. He saw himself sitting in his office chair, barely coherent as his nephew George violently lifted him by his collar, shouting in his face, and then leaving him to sob, completely broken. He saw himself frantically walking through the snow-filled street between the office and the Bedford Falls Trust and Savings Bank as George desperately tried to jog his memory by tracing his every step.

Then, a welcoming feeling of joy and pride returned as Uncle Billy vividly relived his exchange with Mr. Potter after the irascible tycoon's bodyguard wheeled him into the bank and that group of sycophants had momentarily surrounded him with cheerful, yet hollow, greetings. How good it had felt to exasperate Potter with the comment, *not every heel was in Germany or Japan*, before the angry bank owner snatched back his copy of The Bedford Falls Sentinel.

Uncle Billy's heart started to pound and he sat straight up in bed as the memory of exactly what had happened to that white envelope containing the eight thousand dollars became crystal clear.

“Potter!”

* * *

The grand opening of Gower's Drug Store was probably the most important event of 1887 in Bedford Falls. Curiosity even got the best of Ezekiel Potter, one of the few local farmers who had not sold any property to the dozens of factory and mill owners who had been gobbling up acreage in and around town. Potter insisted the manufacturing boom was only temporary and that agriculture was the backbone of the country. He once threatened to skin alive the next real estate speculator who knocked on his door.

“Well, Mr. Potter, how are you?” asked Frederick Gower, Bedford Falls' very first resident pharmacist. “Is this young Henry?”

“Fine. Just fine, Dr. Gower. Yes. This is Henry.”

“Hello, Dr. Gower,” said Henry. “It's my birthday today!” No sooner had the words left the child's mouth when his father smacked him on the side of the head.

“Shake a man's hand and look him in the eye, boy,” he ordered. “And nobody cares that it's your birthday.”

“I'm sorry, Poppa.” Young Henry did as he was told and Dr. Gower enthusiastically extended his hand in return

then gestured toward another young boy, this one behind the counter, and wearing a white apron as he served sodas and ice cream to eager patrons.

“Why don’t you have a seat there and my son, Emil, will fix you an ice cream soda.” Henry’s eyes widened and his face lit up. He then turned to his father who, rather reluctantly, nodded his approval. Henry seemed to mount the counter stool in a single bound and sat with his hands folded, smiling from ear to ear in anticipation of consuming a rare treat.

Other people were filtering into the new store and a few were stopping in the entrance to admire the new cigar lighter.

“Excuse me, Mr. Potter,” said Dr. Gower. “I think I may have to sell a few cigars.” Gower did sell a handful of them but half the people coming in brought their own and were just eager to try out the fancy new countertop lighter. With its shiny brass handle and shellacked wooden base, it was the first thing one saw when entering the shop and it didn’t take but a few minutes before the town was talking about it.

Ezekiel Potter approached the counter and started to reach for the brass handle himself, then, as if resisting an egregious temptation, snatched it back. “Dr. Gower, most of the men who came in here didn’t buy a thing. They used your new-fangled device and then walked right out, contributing nothing to your establishment. It seems like it can’t possibly be worth what you must have paid for this thing.”

Dr. Gower smiled. “Mr. Potter, it’s not always about immediate profit. I want Gower’s Drug Store to be a place for the community as well. It’s a high ideal, I know, but there’s more to life than maximizing wealth.”

Potter snickered disapprovingly. “Well good luck, Dr. Gower. I’m afraid ideals without common sense can ruin a business.” He perused the cigar case for a moment. “Give me two of those Prince Cubans.” After pressing a dime on top of the cigar case he walked over to the counter where young Henry was finishing up his ice cream soda.

“Father, Emil said you don’t have to pay for the soda. It’s a birthday present for me!”

Potter furiously slapped a nickel down and grabbed his son by the shoulders. “We don’t accept charity, Henry,” he scolded. “Charity does nothing but create a discontented lazy rabble instead of a thrifty working class. Never forget that.”

Henry Potter owned the largest house in Bedford Falls. Six bedrooms with only one ever used and each of the remaining five covered in dust, the result of him saving a couple of dollars a month on the maid’s salary. He sat in his study impatiently dialing the town magistrate’s home number. Eventually, even though it was still only 7:00 AM on Christmas morning, he answered.

Without preamble, Potter bellowed, “Why isn’t George Bailey in jail?”

* * *

Christmas Dinner at Ma Bailey's house was extra joyful this year. Having experienced what the family would always call the Christmas Eve miracle of love and friendship made this yearly tradition particularly special as the family held hands around the living room table. It was at this very table that George Bailey spoke the last words he ever said to his father, *"Pop, you want a shock? I think you're a great guy."*

Looking across the table at his uncle, George asked, "Uncle Billy, why don't you say grace?"

Uncle Billy cleared his throat. "Thank-you-Lord-for-this-food-amen," he blurted, barely taking a breath.

George and Mary exchanged concerned looks then Mary invited everyone to dig in. Zuzu pointed at Tommy, laughing aloud. "Tommy!" Mary said. "Take that Santa mask off and eat your food." He immediately complied and the entire family dug in for another of Ma Bailey's wonderful turkey dinners.

"Uncle Billy," said George. "You must be hungry. I think that was the fastest prayer I've ever heard."

Uncle Billy didn't answer. He just ate slowly, staring at his plate.

"Uncle Billy!" said George a little louder. Uncle Billy abruptly looked up.

“What? Oh, fine George. I’m just enjoying dinner.” But Uncle Billy wasn’t fine. He had set out for George’s house a half dozen times earlier in the day and had turned back each time, nervous about how and when to tell George. So he decided he’d come to Christmas dinner at his sister-in-law’s house and then figure out what to do. Perhaps he would say nothing. After all, the Savings and Loan’s shortfall was more than covered. Sam Wainwright’s advance was going to allow Bailey Park to build another twenty homes. Why make trouble?

“Because Potter should not get away with it,” Uncle Billy mumbled, not realizing he was speaking aloud.

“What was that, Uncle Billy?” asked George.

“George, can I speak to you in private for a moment?”

The two men walked into the study. Uncle Billy wasted no time and told George about what had happened in the bank and how it had to have been Potter who took the money.

George started to pace nervously. “That scurvy little spider. To think I almost k...” George stopped himself midsentence. “To think I almost went to jail because of him.” George thought about that moment in Potter’s office when he desperately pleaded for help because of a misplaced eight thousand dollars. He then remembered Potter asking specifically, *you* misplaced eight thousand dollars? Of course he knew it wasn’t George. He knew because he took the money.

“I know, George. What a pickle he put us in. He can’t get away with that.”

George stopped pacing and turned to Uncle Billy. “Call Eustace. Tell him we’ll be in the office late tomorrow. We’re going to see Bert first thing.”

The rest of the evening was as pleasant as could be. Harry and his wife Ruth joined them for dessert. They sang Christmas Carols, toasted the dear departed Peter Bailey several times, and even enjoyed a little piano tune from Janie, George and Mary’s oldest daughter. It felt a little sweeter at times for George and Uncle Billy as they shot each other knowing looks, understanding that tomorrow was going to be the beginning of the end for Henry Potter.

* * *

Haywood Johnson had been working for Henry Potter for years. When he first came to New York, his sullied reputation preceded him. As a security man for a New Orleans’ river boat company, he had to bust a few heads of drunks and gambling cheats along the way. The reason he came to Bedford Falls (some would say fled to), was he barely escaped prosecution for the death of a gambler whom Johnson claimed came at him with a knife. He wanted to place that life far behind him, although he hated working for Henry Potter. To be at his beck and call for fifty dollars a week was sometimes almost too much to bear. But Potter hired him no questions asked and even though the money wasn’t great, it did pay the rent and kept his sickly wife, Mariannina, medicated and comfortable.

This morning, the day after Christmas, Potter wanted to be in his office early.

“Hurry up,” ordered Potter as Johnson wheeled his boss through the bank doors and into his office. The custom-made chair doubled as his office seat and as soon as Johnson pushed Potter into position the intercom rang. “What?” Potter grumbled.

“Magistrate Reynolds is here to see you, sir.”

Potter tilted his head, signaling Johnson to get lost. “Send him in.”

Johnson slipped into a back room, always ready for the sound of his master’s buzzer; Potter had installed the button under his desk in case he ever needed his bodyguard’s imposing figure to make an appearance. It would certainly not be necessary today as the diminutive and skittish magistrate obeyed Potter’s summons.

“Good morning, Mr. Potter. May I sit?”

Potter just smirked and Reynolds sank into the visitor chair which the mogul purposefully had designed to be four inches lower than a standard seat so he would tower above anyone sitting on the other side of the desk.

“I want George Bailey arrested today,” Potter demanded.

“Sir, as I told you on the phone yesterday, we can only charge Mr. Bailey if the bank examiner processes your complaint...again...and requests a warrant...again.”

Reynolds gulped and took a deep breath. “The sheriff ripped up the warrant two days ago and told me personally that nothing could be done.”

If looks could kill is a phrase that was invented for moments like this. Reynolds was glad he wasn’t standing because he feared his knees, at that moment, might have been too weak to support him.

“Get out of my office!” Potter ordered.

At that same moment, just two blocks down Main Street, George and Uncle Billy also sat across a desk, meeting with the man everyone knew simply as Bert the Cop.

“So, Billy. After you handed the newspaper to Potter, he went immediately into his office, right?”

“Yes, Bert. Only Potter and that goon who’s always pushing him here and there.”

Bert clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair, looking up at the ceiling. He hummed for a second or two then sat up and turned to the neighboring desk where another cop was just hanging up from a phone call.

“Al, call over to City Hall and get me the address for a Haywood Johnson. He’s Potter’s man. Have them check the file for chauffeurs’ licenses.”

“Bert,” said Al. “I saw Potter’s man pushing him into the bank not twenty minutes ago.”

“Great,” said Bert. “Go pick him up. We’re going to have a little talk.” Turning back to George and Uncle Billy, Bert said, “One step at a time.”

Twenty minutes later George, Uncle Billy, and Bert were in a private room with Haywood Johnson, Potter’s mysterious driver. Officer Al said he came without a problem but Potter had looked like he was about to pop a vein in his neck, he was so furious. He could still be heard shouting from his office even as the two men left The Bank.

“I want a lawyer,” Johnson demanded.

“You’ll get one,” Bert assured him. “As soon as you’re arrested.”

“On what charge?”

“Stealing eight thousand dollars!” shouted Uncle Billy.

“Please, Billy. I’m conducting this interview,” said Bert. “Stealing eight thousand dollars. “

“I didn’t steal nothing.”

“Billy, is this the man who was with Henry Potter when you handed him the newspaper?”

“He is.”

“What does that prove?” asked Johnson.

Bert stood up, walked around the table, and leaned into Johnson, nose to nose. “Nothing at the moment but as soon as we have Potter in that same chair, do you think he’s going to protect you? He’s gonna blame you, that’s what he’s gonna do. I did a little calling around while Officer Al was picking you up. How do you think Mariannina is going to fare without you?”

Johnson wasn’t intimidated by Bert the cop. He’d been in many a hot seat before. He dealt with hardened gangsters every day in New Orleans so this local yokel wasn’t going to rattle him. Heck, half the cops by the river were gangsters. But something deep in the recesses of his brain had been woken with the mention of his beloved Mariannina. His wife saw him as someone much different than who he really was. If she survived long enough and perhaps even got better, maybe he could actually be that person, starting with this very opportunity to do the right thing and tell the truth.

Bert returned to his chair and the room fell silent. Johnson spoke first.

“Yeah. Potter took the money,” he admitted.

“I told you. Oh, boy, I told you. He did it, George. He certainly did it,” said Uncle Billy.

Johnson continued. “As soon as I wheeled him behind his desk he opened the newspaper, still grumbling about Baileys or something. That’s when he found the envelope inside and ordered me to take him back to the

office door. He opened it slightly and we could see you, Mr. Bailey, frantically searching around the bank and then running outside. Then I took him back. He thought for a moment before sticking the envelope in his desk drawer. I imagine it's still there."

"Even after you were brought in here?" asked George.

"The cop didn't say nothing about any money. Just that I needed to come in for questioning. I'm sure Potter thought it had to do with my years in Orleans."

Bert placed a piece of blank paper and a pen in front of Johnson. "Write that out. What you just told us and sign it. Then you are free to go. Go home. Don't go back to Potter today."

Johnson did what Bert asked and left the station house.

"What's next, Bert?" George asked.

Bert sat back in his chair. "Billy, you can swear out a complaint since we have Johnson's statement. Then I guess the two of you can go to work. I'll contact you tonight once we've served the warrant on Potter. We'll time it just right so the courts are closed and his lawyer will have to wait until the morning to bail him out of jail."

"After what he put us through," said Uncle Billy. "It's all too good for that skunk."

Neither George nor Uncle Billy said anything to cousins Eustace or Tilly when they arrived at The Savings and Loan. After exchanging pleasantries they settled into work and George began drawing up plans for the expansion of Bailey Park. Uncle Billy worked with Eustace most of the day to create a ledger book where they carefully recorded the Christmas Eve gift amounts. About 5:45 PM, a most convivial Bert knocked on the door of George's office.

"I believe you are the proper owner of this envelope, Mr. Bailey," said Bert, slapping the item on the desk.

George picked it up and thumbed through the bills. "I never would have dreamed."

"It was right there in the center drawer, just like Johnson told us. You should have seen Potter's face, George, when I walked into his office with the warrant. I thought he was going to pop a gasket when he couldn't reach his lawyers before I took him in."

George looked up. "Where is he now?"

"Cooling his heels in a cell at the station. We'll give him his call in the morning then I'm sure he'll be out. I charged him with grand theft but in the end we'll probably have to settle for failure to return found money. I think tonight is the only night he'll ever spend in jail."

George buzzed Tilly on the intercom and asked her to have Uncle Billy come into his office. "Well, Bert. I'm happy just knowing Potter is sitting where he is right now."

Uncle Billy came in and George handed him the envelope. “Here it is, Uncle Billy. It’s all there.”

Excitedly, Uncle Billy took the cash and kissed the envelope. “As my mother used to say, saints be praised.”

George waved his hand toward his office door. “Now go and put the money in the safe, Uncle Billy. Tomorrow you can work with Eustace to settle accounts with the folks.” George smiled. The Christmas Eve miracle was still paying dividends. “What say the three of us jump over to Martini’s for a drink to celebrate?”

Uncle Billy happily accepted but Bert declined. “I think I’ll take a rain check,” he said. “I want to go back to the station for a couple of hours, just in case Potter’s lawyer catches wind of this and happens to slither in.”

* * *

George and Uncle Billy stopped for a moment to say hello to Ernie who was parked just outside of Martini’s, waiting, as he often did when things were slow downtown, for fares that might have had one too many. He was particularly fond of those because he’d have the business again the following day from most when he drove them back to get their cars.

It was still pretty early so Martini’s wasn’t too busy. They easily found two stools at the bar and had Nick pour them a couple of beers. George caught a bit of a shiver as he remembered a version of the now affable bartender that

wasn't quite so welcoming, spraying a derelict Mr. Gowen in the face from a seltzer bottle.

"To Clarence," George offered as he and Uncle Billy clinked their beer mugs.

"To Clarence," agreed Uncle Billy before taking a healthy gulp of his brew. "Who's Clarence?"

George laughed. "Just a dear friend you haven't met, Uncle Billy."

Uncle and Nephew had a second round and talked again about the remarkable Christmas Eve experience, each offering the other descriptions of that night's many wonderful moments, including cousin Eustace joyfully pulling the handle on his adding machine and Mr. Partridge offering Zuzu his pocket watch.

"Maybe one more round, Uncle Billy," said George. From the corner of his eye he noticed the man on the stool next to him abruptly get up and leave. On the empty bar stool was a book. George grabbed it and was about to try to return it when he stopped short. He could hardly believe it as he read the title, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, an identical copy to the one Clarence gave him save the inscription inside. Instead of reading, *Dear George, remember, no man is a failure who has friends. Thanks for the wings, Love Clarence*, there was another inscription which read, *what does it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose his soul.*

“Uncle Billy,” George said as he placed a few bills on the table. “Pay the bar tab and have Ernie drive you home. There’s something I have to do.” Before Uncle Billy could collect his thoughts enough to even ask a question, George had left the bar.

* * *

“Now, George, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Bert insisted. “You, well, your uncle more specifically, has accused him of a crime.”

“I know, Bert. I know. But you have to let me speak to him. I can’t explain but it’s important to me... really important. Please.”

Bert shook his head. “It’s against my better judgment, George, but go ahead. Downstairs. Third cell.”

Potter was sleeping when George approached. The meanest man in town was snoring loudly, still sitting in his ornately carved wooden wheelchair, probably having refused Bert’s help to get onto the cot and instead insisting that he sit and wait for his lawyer to get his messages and come rescue him from confinement.

“Mr. Potter. Mr. Potter,” said George.

Potter woke with a start and leered at George. “What do you want? Come to gloat? Well enjoy it while you can because you and that idiot uncle of yours have gone too far.”

“No, Mr. Potter. I’m not here to gloat.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I want to give you something.” George handed him the book, opened to the inscription, which Potter quickly read then tossed the book aside.

“So I’ve gained the whole world yet lost my soul?” Potter laughed contemptuously.

“No, Mr. Potter. I did. Well, I almost did. When I found out you were responsible for the most despairing moment of my life, I wanted nothing more in the world than to see you suffer. I’m just not going to do it, Mr. Potter, I’m not going to do it. This might mean nothing to you at all but I forgive you. I’m going to tell Bert to drop the charge and take you home. Goodbye, Mr. Potter.”

George left and did what he had promised. An exasperated Bert drove Potter home in the police van.

* * *

Haywood Johnson turned out the bedroom light after his darling Mariannina fell asleep. He wasn’t ready to tell her that he was out of a job and they would probably, even if he found something soon, have to move out of the Potter-owned apartment.

He poured himself a whiskey and sat at the kitchen table, staring at nothing, when a knock at the door startled him. He walked to the door and placed his ear close.

“What?”

“Mr. Potter is outside. He wants to talk to you.” It was Franklin, Potter’s other driver.

“What about?”

“I don’t know. He called me in and told me to drive him here and bring you down.”

Johnson considered his options. If Franklin was here to kill him, putting up a fight would endanger Mariannina. He’d have a better chance on the street than being cornered in the tiny apartment. He grabbed his coat, and the .38 revolver from the side table drawer. Placing the firearm in his pocket, he opened the door. “Let’s go.”

The street was cold and deserted as Johnson approached Potter’s customized, luxury van. Potter had a ramp installed to accommodate his wheelchair so wherever he went, it went also. Johnson had driven him in that very van to and from his estate six days a week for nearly a decade. He approached the vehicle as Potter lowered the window, his hand on his hidden gun, while Franklin walked around and got into the driver’s seat.

“Hello, Haywood.”

Something was different. Johnson couldn't quite put it together but one thing was certain. Potter had never called him by his first name before.

“Mr. Potter.”

“Haywood, I've been a hard man for almost as long as I can remember. My father was a hard man too. I don't remember too much about my mother except that she was kind and, unlike father, a church person.” Potter looked away from Johnson for a moment and rubbed his temples, as if he was struggling to remember something. “She was particularly fond of reading to me the parables in the New Testament. I've not been able to stop thinking of the one about the ungrateful servant who, after having been forgiven a large debt, choked his fellow servant who owed him mere pennies...”

“Mr. Potter, I'm sorry,” Johnson interrupted. “I didn't want...”

Potter raised his hand. “Don't misunderstand, Haywood. I'm the ungrateful servant. Not you. Something happened to me today...tonight...which I can't quite explain. I'm feeling things that I have not felt since I was a boy. ” Potter reached out and he and Haywood Johnson shook hands. “Pick me up at eight thirty tomorrow.”

The van pulled away as Johnson stood, stunned to the point that he no longer felt the cold, watching as the vehicle disappeared down the avenue.

* * *

Sunday morning George joined Mary and their children at church for the first time in a long while. He had confessed to his darling wife the night before that he had never been much of a praying man. That had all changed on Christmas Eve and he would no longer stay home as his family attended services. While the congregation waited for the pastor to enter the sanctuary, the normal low rumble of measured small talk and greetings came to an abrupt halt as all eyes turned around toward the church's narthex.

Entering the church, pushed along in his wheelchair, was none other than Henry Potter. And much to the astonishment of every person present, they bore witness to something they had never seen on that man's face before.

A smile.