

Dark Angel at Christmas

by James Lynn Smith

Three weeks before Christmas, Jack Flan was already bored with celebrations and talk about the *joy* of giving. He endured the party he was attending because there was wine available. But alcohol also loosened his tongue and made him more open about his skepticism of the holidays. His wife chose her comments to others carefully so he would not overhear a trigger word that would set off a tirade. He had jerked the rug of social graces from underneath them on several previous occasions.

The host, Mr. Barnes, approached them. “Jack, Mary, I’m glad you guys could be with us this evening. I suppose you’re well into your gift-buying by now.”

“We don’t put much stock into this gifting scam that rolls around each year,” Jack said.

“Oh, Jack, please,” Mary pleaded.

Barnes looked at Jack with raised brows. “How’s that?”

“Christmas is for the merchants. We are supposed to kowtow to the gods of commercial sham. But I’ve had enough. If anyone gives me something, I’ll send it right back. And I’m not dumb enough to waste good money on things they’ll never use, either. This is one of the most economically wasteful times of the year.”

“But this season is about new birth, new hope,” Barnes replied. “Gifts are just symbols that express the Christmas spirit.”

“Don’t need new hope. I’m okay with the way I am. Those ‘symbols’ are inane signs for the Lord of Commerce. Rituals are simply a cover for an empty-your-pockets ploy for suckers.”

Mary glared at her husband. “But think of all the children who expect Christmas toys.”

“Adults let the dreams of kids hold them hostage to this hullabaloo. If we had any kids, they’d get stern lectures on self-sufficiency at Christmas.”

Barnes looked away, glancing about the room. “Well, you two, enjoy what you can. I’m going to greet some other folks who just arrived.”

When their host walked away, Mary said, “Jack, you embarrassed me. This always happens with us. You’re so negative.”

Here we go again. “Yes, I know, but you’re prey for the scams of pundits advocating waste and irrational spending.” When Mary huffed off to join the guests around the punch bowl, he remained fixed near the liquor bottles. *It’s not bad that I’m not a gullible giver.* Jack believed everyone should receive fair compensation for what value they added. But he saw no advantage in supporting the leeches of society. There were always those asking for a handout so they would not have to work. Yes, some were actual victims, but he felt they were relatively few. He wished Mary could understand. Friction between them over this issue had become a strain.

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One evening after the party, Jack came home. Mary was not there and he discovered a note on the table beside his favorite chair.

Dear Jack, I can’t take it anymore. We never seem to see eye-to-eye. You are so cynical and non-giving that I feel guilty about things I want. We make each other miserable. I had help and moved my things out today. I’m leaving you. I hope you find what you need in life.

Jack frowned. *What the hell? I can't believe it.* In a loud voice, he blurted, "She never had it so good. This really hacks me off. Jeez, did I ever marry a loser—big time." He went to the wet bar and indulged, then fumed and paced for a while.

Eventually, he walked out onto the balcony of their high rise condo. He was still brooding, and it was his third scotch and soda. "It would suit me fine if no one ever wanted me to give them anything. If it's not money, it's time and attention. I'd rather just keep what's mine and tell 'em to back off."

At that moment, Jack's shoe toe struck the edge of a tile and he stumbled forward. The glass flew from his hands as they thrust outward in an attempt to break his fall. Barely, before his face smashed onto the floor, something caught him. He felt arms wrapped around him from behind, tugging him to his feet. Upon turning, he saw a darkly draped figure.

Alarmed, he drew back, heart pounding. He could not see the face under the cloak's hood. "Who are you? How'd you get here?"

At first, the figure was quiet and motionless. Then, in a calm manner spoke. "I go by many names. Some call me a messenger."

"Like an angel? I've never heard of one dressed in a black cloak."

"Perhaps it would be convenient to call me Dark Angel. As to how I got here, let's say I came on the wind."

Beginning to relax a little, Jack said, "Congratulations on making no sense at all. By the way, are you...are angels male or female?"

"It is irrelevant to our mission, but most are androgynous in form."

"That poses a dozen queries for any curious mortal. But, the main question for now is why are you here?"

"To grant your wish. Your mental emanations reached our domain, and we are able to grant you the wish that no one would want things from you in the

future. You would be free to accumulate things without concern about others wishing to take them from you.”

Is this dark angel creature for real? “That sounds good, but...” Jack reflected on his past. He had been a CPA, but found that managing his own investments could earn him more than a regular job. Lucky in this respect, he was now a successful day trader. Without other people’s demands on him, even more wealth was possible.

“Do you accept our grant?”

“Yes, I really want that.”

“Your wish is *fully* granted.”

Jack reeled as the earth seemed to shift beneath his feet.

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Abruptly, he opened his eyes, finding himself in bed. It was daylight, and the time was 7:00 a.m. Jack felt strange and thought he must have been dreaming. What happened the night before? He must have been in a drunken stupor—again. Never mind, it was time to get up and face the day. *Where’s Mary? She didn’t come in, at least while I was awake.* Then he remembered her note. She was gone. A pang of alarm briefly stabbed his belly as he picked the note up again. “What’s this? Another page to her note. Where are my glasses?” He found his spectacles and read the addition.

Jack, I don’t want anything of yours so there is no need to contact me. I can manage on my own with the help of my family back in Michigan. Let’s just get a simple divorce through a mutual lawyer and finish up by mail. I’m sorry it didn’t work. Mary.

“So Mary wants a quickie divorce, and she...does *not* want any money?” Jack rubbed his unkempt, black hair and knitted his brows in puzzlement. Then he remembered last night’s dream, and the trace of a smile lifted the side of his mouth. It appeared that his wish that no one would want anything from him had begun to manifest itself. Along with sadness from Mary’s leaving, a wicked thrill also passed through his mind. Things were definitely going to be different. He wondered if dreams could cast magic spells on the wakeful world. Maybe it wasn’t just a dream. It didn’t make sense, but he was happy to go along with it.

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Among the obligations in Jack’s day was to call, once again, about a dispute with a contractor for installing a dehumidifier system. They had installed the wrong one and had to take it out and reinstall. He was being billed for two installations, the company claiming he had changed his mind about what he wanted. Another concerned an expected tax refund but instead came a notice that his filing was questionable; he may need to pay, not receive a refund. Yet another chore was to check on his brokerage accounts and move money, if necessary.

Jack went online and began his work, trying to suppress sentimental thoughts about Mary. Soon after the time for postal delivery passed, he went down to the mail room to pick it up. He had three pieces of mail. Ignoring a brochure, his attention riveted on the other two items. One was a letter from the contractor and the other from the IRS. He tore open both envelopes with shaky hands while on his way back up the stairs. He read that the contractor had resolved *not* to charge him for the extra installation and offered apologies for the misunderstanding. He then saw that the IRS *had approved* his refund claim and enclosed a check.

Jack raised his arms and hammered empty air with closed fists. “Yes,” he whooped. “This calls for a celebration. I’m going to my favorite bistro tonight for one of their tasty fillet mignons.”

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He not only had fillet mignon, but also wine and a sizeable dessert. When he finished, he asked for the bill. Though rare nowadays, this particular establishment received payment on the way out at the cash register. Jack stood, and for a tip, pulled a twenty from his wallet and tossed it on the table with an obvious flourish, hoping the waiter would see his generosity.

His waiter was nearby and did note the act. “Oh no, sir. That is not necessary. Please no tip tonight.”

“Huh? What is this? Something I don’t know about?”

“No, sir, it is just that I do not require your tip.”

“Well, I never heard of this. Take the money. I’m not a celebrity or anything.”

“No sir, I do not want your money. Good night, sir.”

Jack left the bistro confused. On the rare event he felt like giving, it was refused. “I don’t know what’s with the waiter, but... Oh well, there’s more left for me. I think I’ll stop by the produce stand on Market Street.”

On approaching the produce stand he began looking for Braeburn apples but found only one. After asking the vendor if there were more, the man disappeared for nearly three minutes and came back with several additional apples. Jack only wanted two, but the attendant had obviously gone to a lot of trouble, so he offered to pay the price and then some. “Here you go, man. Keep the change.

The vendor appeared confused. “No, sir. I only want payment for the apples. You keep your change.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“No, only the price for the apples plus tax. So here you go. Now move along, sir. I have other customers.”

“You’re too good for my money? Well, just keep your apples. They’re

probably rotten anyhow.” Jack stormed off angry and traipsed down to Cooper’s Bar and Grill.

He entered and took a stool at the bar. Behind the counter, an attractive blonde with a ponytail approached. By the look on her face, she was downtrodden. “So what are you having, sir?”

“Gimme a scotch and soda. Heavy on the Scotch; I’ve got things weighing me down.”

“Tell me about it.” she said, while preparing his drink. “My son’s dad just ran off and left me holding all the bills. Landlord’s dunning me for cash I don’t have, and my kid asked for cantaloupe this morning. I could only give him stale Cheerios...Here’s your drink. And now I’ve got to walk home through that bunch of bikers celebrating something on the next block. They’re going to be there tonight and be back in two weeks. Some of those guys give me the creeps...The drink is seven dollars, including tax.”

Jack pulled out the necessary funds but after the story she told, he felt a sense of obligation to put money in the tip jar. He peeled off two extra bills and started to put them in the jar.

“What are you doing?” she screeched. “Don’t touch my tip jar. You think you can just waltz in here, lend an ear, and then start *giving* me stuff? That’s being way too familiar, bud.”

Jack recoiled in surprise. “Okay keep your voice down, please. I wasn’t trying to start anything...Have it your way. I’m going.” He turned and left the bar, face flushed, ears burning, and exceedingly embarrassed. Surprised at how low this refusal made him feel, he went home depressed and couldn’t sleep well that night.

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For the next two weeks, Jack encountered one event after another in which attempts to give something were refused. Two weeks may not seem like much, but

Jack tended toward moroseness and now the mood became serious. He felt very low and decided to keep to himself as much as possible. He finally realized that being able to give above necessity somehow mattered to his mental health. Jack felt himself sliding into a serious depression. Each hour of gloom seemed more like a day.

Yet, there was one thing Jack had been doing for a long time that he felt was giving, in a way. He wrote a monthly investment column in a periodical called *Downtown Publications*. It paid very little but was a matter of pride for him. One morning he collected his mail, brought it back to his apartment, and plopped into his favorite chair. Included was a letter from the publication. It was in a different envelope than usual. Jack frantically opened it and scanned the germane words.

Mr. Flan: *Downtown Publications* has realigned its adjunct staff and determines that your services for the “Flan’s Column” will no longer be required. In accordance with our contract, we remit a severance of five hundred dollars, check enclosed. Please do not submit further material to our editors, as it cannot be accepted at this time.

Jack moaned and tossed his mail into the air. “I can’t believe this, another slap in the face. Everywhere I turn, I’m rejected, even cursed. This spell cast by the dark angel in my—dream or whatever—is crushing me. I feel isolated, useless to anyone else.” He stood and went to his wet bar for a dose of courage to do something he had grown to feel was his only way out. “Mary’s gone, need for my talents gone, self respect—zero.” The future looked bleak. Jack sloshed more alcohol into his glass, but the melancholy remained.

Eventually he walked out onto his balcony and climbed over the rail.

Standing precariously on the remaining concrete shelf, holding onto the railing behind him, he faced the nearby buildings and the street far below. “This ends it. I can’t go on...I just can’t.”

There was a sudden, loud, whoosh-whoosh sound as the beating of heavy wings. Something grabbed Jack from behind, lifted him up and dropped him behind the railing. When Jack staggered upright and turned, he saw a dark-hooded figure touching down.

“It’s you,” Jack blurted. “Why did you grab me? I want to die.”

A patient voice came from underneath the hood. “So, your life of freedom from solicitation and appeals for giving did not bring the relief you wanted?”

“This spell you cast has destroyed me. I feel like a disgusting, self-indulgent insect no one wants to come near.”

“You want to give of yourself, but a barrier seems to be there. Is this what you mean?”

“Yes, and I must be the loneliest man in the world. I had no idea there could be so much misery in this.”

“But this pain is good if you learn from it and release who you really are.”

“How? I tried, but no one wants anything from me. I’m poison.”

“Jack, deep inside you always wanted to give, but had become blocked by fear of exploitation, of being taken for granted. What I did was arrange an external addition to that blockage. Now you fully know the consequences of never giving.”

“Yes, and you want me to continue suffering. You won’t even let me die.”

“On the contrary, I can free you from the external part of the spell. The inner part was always your own decision.”

“How could you do that? You’re some kind of sprit of darkness, or something. A creature from Hell itself.”

“Jack, we must appear in a form that our mortal client can relate to before

letting us start the process.”

“Process?”

“The healing of spirit. No malevolent source sent me. I am from the *other* side...And now it *is done*.”

The being threw back the dark cloak, and underneath were the whitest, glowing wings imaginable. With the cowl off the head, a most beautiful smile beamed and melted the remaining hardness in Jack’s heart. The face glowed with a mysterious iridescence. Its features kept changing, in sequence resembling the waiter, the produce vendor, the bartender, and others. Then powerful wings lifted the angelic being into the air. The discarded dark cloak fell from the ascending shape and melted into the shadows below.

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Jack felt vertigo, followed by a sudden jolt. He rolled over on the tiles and saw a broken glass, the smell of Scotch on his balcony. “What?...a dream? What’s happening?” Slowly rising, he noted his bruised hip and elbow, and went for a dustpan. After cleaning up the floor, a compulsion led him to grab his jacket, head for the elevator, and get out on the street.

“Once outside, he felt like a new man. Even if his “healing” were merely a dream, it nevertheless cured his malaise and feeling of severe isolation. He turned into an alley and came out on Market Street. The produce stand beckoned as usual with fruit and vegetables. Jack picked up a cantaloupe and sniffed. “Where does this come from?” he asked the vendor.

“Beats me, pal. Not from around here. Shipped from far off, I’m sure. Two-fifty each.”

“Here’s a ten, keep the change.”

“What? Hey, man. Thanks and a merry Christmas to you, too.

Jack sacked the cantaloupe. As he was passing Cooper’s Bar and Grill, he

stopped. He did not want a drink but went in anyway. The sad-looking young woman was on duty at the bar. He spied an empty stool and sat as she approached.

“What’ll you have, sir?”

“How about a ginger ale on the rocks, please.”

“Well, aren’t you the big spender. Did you get religion or what?”

“No, I just—well, maybe. You once said your son liked cantaloupe. Well I’d like to give you one. I need to lighten my load, anyhow. I’ve got places to go on foot tonight.”

She then appeared to recognize him. “Oh, you’ve been in here before. I can’t be taking things from customers like that.”

“There’s no ‘like that’ about it. Please, he would like it.”

“Okay, but this is not—”

“No expectations. ‘Free gratis,’ as they say.”

“Which means free free. Thanks, man. By the way what’s your name?”

“I’m Jack Flan. Flan spelled like the dessert.”

For the next fifteen minutes, while sipping his ginger ale, he and the bartender swapped comments between her serving duties. He learned that her name was June. He encouraged her concerning her problems and she listened. When he was ready to go, he gave her two twenties.

“Keep the change. Take a cab through that area with the biker celebration you were concerned about.”

“Wow. I appreciate that, and happy holidays to you, Jack.”

As he was leaving, he glanced at her reflection in a mirror. She stared after him as a faint smile came to her lips. He surmised her spirits were lifted and a new hope began to buoy her soul. *Maybe she feels good things can happen, after all.* That night Jack visited a number of markets and shops where he had previously made a bad impression. His tips were generous, but his gift was mostly himself. He

listened, encouraged, and complimented.

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Upon arriving back at his condo, Jack noticed someone had called him. He pushed the phone's playback button and listened.

Mr. Flan, this is Eric Cross at the *Times*. Got a call from someone who said you were finally free from that onerous contract at *Downtown Publications*. If that's true, come by and see me in the morning. I have an idea how we could use your talents.

Jack grinned ear-to-ear. "Man, that's great. I had almost given up on the idea of writing a column again." It was indeed good news, but he was limited on *how good* he could feel. He settled into his big chair and leaned forward, placing elbows on his knees and propping his head in his hands. Then he massaged his brow with his fingers and muttered. "But Mary's still gone...How can I blame her, though? My rashness was too much for too long. Yeah, she wrote she didn't want anything, but I know that won't work—not really. I'll get a lawyer first thing next week and work on a fair settlement."

He took a deep breath and leaned back. He had finally begun to doze when the phone rang. Reaching to the side table, he brought the receiver to him.

It was his wife. "Jack, are you all right?"

"Mary?... Yes, I'm okay, at least right now. Why are you—"

"I've been thinking, maybe I was too hasty in leaving. Can we try to work this out?"

He sprang from his chair. "If you mean that, honey, come on home. I'll leave the light on and welcome you with open arms."

“I’ve been wanting to, yet I was afraid we would fall into the same old pattern. But this evening the *strangest* thing happened. I got a call on my cell phone about you. It said I should contact you; that something had happened. At first I wondered if you had been in an accident.”

“Who called?”

“I don’t know. But there was a definite sound behind the voice: it was a big swoosh-swoosh sound, like wings flapping or something.”

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