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Dramatic Publishing

THE CHRISTMAS EXPRESS

by
PAT COOK



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(THE CHRISTMAS EXPRESS)

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THE CHRISTMAS EXPRESS

A Play in Two Acts
For 4 Men and 6 Women

CHARACTERS

- HILDA TROWBRIDGE . a rather grumpy woman in her 40s,
manages the Holly Railway Station
- SATCH BRUNSWICK Hilda's assistant,
with a better outlook on life, in his 40s
- MAGGIE CLOONEY a mail carrier in her mid-30s
- LEO TANNENBAUM a pixie-ish man in his 50s.
There is magic about him
- PENELOPE BLAISEDALE in her mid-30s,
editor of the local newspaper, *The Holly Herald*
- MR. FAIRFAX an ominous man in his mid-50s
- MYRNA HOBBSNAGLE . . . in her 40s, secretary at City Hall
- DONNA FAY CUMMINGS . a stubborn newlywed in her 20s
- JERRY CUMMINGS . . . Donna's equally stubborn husband,
a little slow at times
- DEBORAH SMITH . . . a slightly haggard woman in her 30s

TIME: The present (or, for a more
nostalgic piece, can be done in the '50s).

PLACE: The Holly Railway Station.

ACT ONE

AT RISE: *SATCH* is sitting on the couch, reading a newspaper. *HILDA* is behind the counter, as usual, going through some travel folders. A long resigned silence hangs over the room. Finally, *SATCH* lowers the newspaper.

SATCH. What time is it?

HILDA. December.

SATCH. Can you be a little more specific? Narrow it down a little for me, darlin'.

HILDA. It's time for you to get a watch.

SATCH. Got a watch. (*He holds up his wrist.*)

HILDA. Well, what time is it?

SATCH. It's...I asked *you*.

HILDA (*moves to SATCH*). Satch, if you have a watch, why're you asking *me* what time it is?

SATCH. I want to see if my watch is right.

HILDA. You're not going anywhere, you're not coming from anywhere, you're not expecting anybody and you're not clocking any horses. What *difference* does it make if your watch is right?

SATCH. 'Cause it's stopped.

HILDA. Then it's right.

SATCH. It says here that a man on the move always needs to know what time it is.

HILDA. Fine. When I see you move, I'll tell you what time it is.

SATCH. Merry Christmas to you, too.

HILDA (*shows a brochure to SATCH*). Lookee here, Satch.

Australia. The land down under. They got kangaroos in Australia.

SATCH. You want a kangaroo?

HILDA. No...

SATCH. You never said nothing to me about wanting no kangaroo.

HILDA. I was just telling you...

SATCH. I done already got your Christmas present and I didn't get you no kangaroo.

HILDA. Satch!

SATCH. Fact, I don't know I could even *find* you a kangaroo.

HILDA. If you'll let me get a word in...

SATCH. Where do you *get* kangaroos, anyway? Wait! They got kangaroos in Australia! (*He smiles at this deduction.*)

HILDA (*after a pause*). Ever notice our conversation goes in circles?

SATCH. What time is it?

HILDA. Ohhh! (*She crosses back to her counter. SATCH gets off the couch and moves over to the radio.*)

SATCH. You know, maybe we ought to put up some decorations around here.

HILDA. What kind of decorations?

SATCH. Well, let's just think on it some. Today is December twenty-third, tomorrow's Christmas Eve. Now, let's see here. What sort of decorations would you put up...

HILDA (*jumps in*). Shut up! (*SATCH shrugs and begins trying to tune in the old radio.*) And don't go cranking that thing up. You know it ain't worked in a year or more. I don't know why I don't just throw it out. (*A loud buzzing of static is heard from the radio.*)

SATCH. If we had some music around here, then maybe it might cheer up things a bit.

HILDA. What do you mean, cheer things up?

SATCH. You know, a couple of ho ho ho's, some tra la la's, deck a few boughs...*(HILDA moves to the radio and turns it off.)*

HILDA. I'll deck your bough!

SATCH. We don't *know* they're gonna shut down the station.

HILDA. Last week, we had two passengers come in and five leave.

SATCH. Well, we still got lots more people in town. *(HILDA crosses back to the counter.)* At that rate, it'll be at least three years before the town's empty. *(He smiles wickedly.)* Then we'll take over!

(MAGGIE enters through the outside door.)

MAGGIE *(bored)*. Mail. *(She hands the mail to HILDA, who tosses it into a trash can next to the counter without looking at it. MAGGIE stares into the trash can.)*

HILDA *(to SATCH)*. Used to be ten people working this place, well, you remember. Now, it's just me and you. And there ain't enough work for one, let alone two.

MAGGIE. I had to take a civil service test, a lie detector test, swear an oath and fork up a deposit on this uniform.

HILDA. What're you talking about?

MAGGIE. It occurs to me that I went to an awful lot of trouble just to deliver your trash.

SATCH *(moves to MAGGIE)*. She's in a mood.

HILDA. I'm *not* in a mood!

MAGGIE. Where is it today?

SATCH. Australia. She hot for kangaroos.

HILDA. I'm *not* hot for...I just said they *had* kangaroos in Australia, that's all.

MAGGIE. Well, where else would you put them?

SATCH. We could get you a possum. That's close to a kangaroo.

HILDA. Would you stop?

SATCH. They're both marsupials.

MAGGIE. What is a marsupial, anyway?

SATCH. A supial from Mars, I guess.

HILDA (*shows a brochure to MAGGIE*). Look, Maggie, look at that countryside, isn't that gorgeous? And here. (*She takes out another pamphlet.*) Is that quaint?

MAGGIE. Where's that?

HILDA. Vienna.

MAGGIE. Yeah? (*She looks at the brochure.*)

SATCH. They got great food there.

HILDA. Now, what would you know about the food in Vienna?

SATCH. I've had Vienna sausages.

HILDA. Ahhh! (*She crosses to the double door, opens one and looks out.*)

SATCH. They come eight to a can, unless you get the camp-out size, which has about twenty five. (*He looks at MAGGIE.*) Well, they do.

MAGGIE. She's really got it bad this time.

SATCH. Yeah, I figger it's about time for the standard "the whole town's dying" speech.

MAGGIE. What time is it, anyway? (*HILDA looks back, disgustedly, at MAGGIE.*) Shut the door, will you? It's freezing in here.

HILDA (*shuts the door*). There it is again. The whole town's dying and all you two can ask is what time is it?

SATCH (*memorized*). I remember the old days...

HILDA. I remember the old days. People used to come here, thick as crowds can get, coming to town, going 'places, businessmen, salesmen, ladies with stacks of boxes eight

feet high. It took four porters just to handle one car. It was grander then, more genteel, more civilized.

SATCH. Back when Pop ran this place...

HILDA. Back when Papa ran this place, it was the hub of the city. This waiting room was full of laughter and cigar smoke. I know it may sound ridiculous but I miss that.

MAGGIE. Oh, if that's all you want...*(She takes out a long cigar and starts to light it.)*

HILDA. Will you go outside if you're gonna smoke that thing? *(She moves back to MAGGIE.)* And don't you have some more mail to deliver?

MAGGIE *(dryly)*. Naw, I always save this place for last. *(She puts the cigar back in her pocket.)* I so look forward to this happy time of the day. Why don't you put up some decorations in here? There's this thing called Christmas, a big seller in the East.

SATCH *(going along)*. Is that the one where they decorate a bush?

MAGGIE. A whole tree! They pluck one up and put it in one side of the room. *(She crosses D of the long table.)* Say, over here, and then put all sorts of tinsel and ornaments on it...

HILDA. Keep it up. *(She moves behind the counter.)*

MAGGIE. And then, up at the top of the thing, they put an angel.

(Just then, one of the double doors opens and LEO enters, carrying a satchel. Everyone turns and looks at him.)

HILDA. Where'd you come from?

LEO. Me?

HILDA. Naw, those three wise men who just came looking for a stable. Yeah, you.

LEO. Oh. I just got off the train.

SATCH. Train?

HILDA. *What train? It ain't time for no train to come through yet.*

LEO. What time is it, anyway? *(He checks his pocket watch.)*

HILDA *(moves to LEO)*. Besides, I was just out there and I can tell you for sure I didn't see no...*(Suddenly, a loud train whistle blows outside and the train chugs off loudly. HILDA grows wide-eyed and rushes to the door, followed by MAGGIE and SATCH. They open the door and look out in amazement. LEO crosses to the couch.)*

SATCH. Well, I'll be...

MAGGIE. I didn't hear any train arrive. I would think something that big would make some kinda, you know, noise.

HILDA. Yeah, there is that. There it goes. *(She closes the door. ALL stare at LEO.)*

LEO. Yes?

SATCH. You uh...you just passing through?

LEO. Manner of speaking, I got some business in town. This is Holly, isn't it?

MAGGIE. When last seen.

LEO. Excellent, excellent.

HILDA. You know, that locomotive looked like...well, years ago we used to have one come through about this time of year, looked just like that one. Remember, Satch?

SATCH. Sure, it was called...

LEO *(finishes his sentence)*. The Christmas Express.

HILDA. How'd you know that?

LEO. Oh, I've been here before.

HILDA. You have?

LEO. Lots of times. *(He looks around.)* Ah, the old place hasn't changed a bit. 'Course, that was back when Pop Muncie used to run the place.

HILDA (*nods*). Papa.

LEO. What a gentleman he was. What a congenial, jovial, happy man.

MAGGIE (*looks at HILDA*). And you're his daughter?

HILDA. Shut up.

SATCH (*moves to LEO*). Any particular place in town you need to get to? I can give you directions.

HILDA (*moves to the counter*). Yeah, he just can't tell you what time you'll get there.

SATCH. I done said my watch was stopped. (*LEO reaches down, grabs SATCH's wrist and looks at the watch.*)

LEO. No, it's not. It's running. See? (*He holds SATCH's arm up to his face. He then sits on the couch.*)

SATCH. No, it's not, it's...running!

HILDA (*sarcastically*). Well, what time is it, Satch?

SATCH (*starts to answer but changes his mind*). Ain't no fun if I can tell you.

HILDA. That's what I thought.

SATCH (*sits next to LEO*). Business, huh? What sort of business?

HILDA (*back to her brochures*). Leave him alone, Satch.

SATCH. I was just being jovial and congenial. You know, like your daddy was?

LEO (*almost laughs*). Really, I'm retired.

SATCH. But you said...

LEO. Oh, I used to be involved in...(*He looks around to see MAGGIE and HILDA leaning in to listen.*)...speculation.

MAGGIE. Oh, like land speculation?

LEO. Exactly.

HILDA. Around here? Land speculation? There ain't nothing around here but dust, a bunch of empty stores, an old lake and a lot of people trying to scratch out a living.

SATCH (*moves to the radio*). And people trying to find other places to go to. People who spend all their time reading brochures of far-off lands.

HILDA. Ain't nothing wrong with that? (*Before SATCH can turn on the radio.*) And don't try turning on that old radio again, I told you it broke.

LEO (*moves to HILDA*). Ah, you have to look at things differently. You'd be surprised what a little imagination can do. And a little hope can do wonders.

HILDA. Hope? You picked the most hopeless place in the world to visit, Mister.

LEO (*hands her a card*). Tannenbaum. Leo Tannenbaum.

MAGGIE. Tannen...

LEO. Spelled just like the song.

HILDA. We all lost hope years ago. Ain't fashionable these days.

LEO. Wait, everyone has hope.

HILDA. Yeah, I hope someday to get outta here.

LEO. No, I'm talking about right here, right now. You have hope. (*To SATCH.*) And so do you. (*To MAGGIE.*) And you, too.

HILDA. I do?

LEO. Sure. (*He crosses to the radio.*) You said yourself this thing's broken, right? But you still keep it around. Why? I'll tell you why. You *hope* it'll start working. (*He moves to MAGGIE.*) You see people everyday when you give them their mail. And you're always on the lookout, waiting to see if you brought them good news. You *hope* to brighten their lives.

MAGGIE. That's right. How'd you know...?

LEO. Just judging your demeanor.

SATCH. But how about me?

LEO. Same thing with your watch. You *hoped* it wasn't really out of commission. That's why you wear it.

SATCH. I never thought about it like that.

HILDA (*moves to LEO*). I wasn't talking about a little hope, day-to-day piddling wishes, I was talking about dreams. Real dreams. Real aspirations.

LEO (*moves back to the radio*). All of which start out small in the beginning. All grand plans, all great visions, all began...with a little hope. (*He reaches over and turns on the radio. A Christmas song comes on very clearly—"Joy To The World"—followed by other Christmas songs. He turns to see the others staring at him. He moves away as the others move to the radio.*)

SATCH (*after a pause*). He's good.

HILDA. You're a salesman, ain't you?

LEO (*again, almost laughs*). Comes with the territory.

MAGGIE. How'd he do that?

SATCH. I don't know but there's something stranger about this stranger than most strangers we get in here.

HILDA. Will you two stop? That thing obviously has a short in it. If you turn it just right, if you jostle it a little, that's all it takes. (*She looks back at LEO.*) Right?

LEO (*wiggles his eyebrows*). You hope. (*He sits on the couch and opens his satchel.*)

(*PENELOPE enters through the outside door.*)

PENELOPE. Hilda.

HILDA (*still dazed*). Hah?

PENELOPE. I have to print something about the depot here. Is it shutting down or not? (*This breaks the mood. SATCH shrugs and picks up a push broom leaning against the table. He begins sweeping as HILDA moves back to the*

counter with MAGGIE. MAGGIE retrieves a brochure and looks at it. LEO takes out a ledger of some sort and begins to make notes.)

HILDA. Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you? Anything for a story in that rag of yours.

PENELOPE. I don't want them to close it down.

HILDA. Yeah, sure.

PENELOPE. But the people have a right to know.

HILDA. Well, you can tell the people they know as much as we do.

PENELOPE (*looks around*). Brother, this place is bleak. You ever think of decorating it? (*She sees LEO.*) Saaay, wait just one minute. You've done something different with the place, all right. You installed a customer.

HILDA. Yeah, go bother him.

PENELOPE. Say, an interview might not be a bad idea.

MAGGIE (*to HILDA*). This ought to be good.

PENELOPE. A fresh slant, just the thing. (*She crosses to LEO.*) Excuse me?

LEO (*looks up*). Yes?

PENELOPE. I hope I'm not bothering you. I'm Penelope Blaisedale, I run the newspaper, the...

LEO (*finishes her sentence*). *The Holly Herald*, yes, I know. (*He rises and removes his hat.*) Please.

PENELOPE (*taken aback*). Uhm...why, thank you. (*She sits, very lady-like, as the others watch disgustedly.*)

HILDA (*to MAGGIE*). Innocent as a new laid egg.

LEO (*sits*). I've so enjoyed your paper. Your writing style is excellent. Particularly your article on the refurbishing of the dump ground.

HILDA. You write what you know about. (*PENELOPE shoots HILDA a look and then turns back to LEO.*)