A SECRET GIFT

How One Man's Kindness – and a Trove of Letters – Revealed the Hidden History of the Great Depression

Ted Gup

VINTAGE

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For my mother, Virginia,

Her sister, Dorothy,

And in Memory of Minna and Sam

And the Good People of Canton, to whom so much is owed

I.

A Christmas Carol

The Offer

> [Christmas is] the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.
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> —Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (December 1843)

It was Sunday, December 17, 1933, a cold and drizzly day, when B. Virdot's plan began to take shape. That evening, outside the First Presbyterian Church, beneath its soaring twin battlements, hundreds of families gathered. Parents took their children's hands and climbed the wide sandstone steps to enter the gothic sanctuary. Here, at the center of this beleaguered city, the faithful had come for generations. President William McKinley himself had been married here. But on this night, they assembled to hear a reading of Charles

Dickens's *A Christmas Carol.* It was a tradition of long standing, but during this bleak holiday season, it took on special meaning. Pressed shoulder-to-shoulder in the stiff-backed pews, they were drawn from every corner of the city: church elders, men and women of privilege, jobless millworkers, tradesmen forced to sell their tools, bankrupted shop owners, widows trying to hold on to their children.

At the front of the sanctuary was a crèche with the baby Jesus, and around it, stunted pine trees festooned with tinsel and glistening ornaments. Festive greenery hung from the choir loft above. For many of these children it was all the Christmas they would see. They listened as Dr. Delbert G. Lean, professor of oratory from nearby Wooster College, read of the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge, of the ghosts that tormented him, and of a gift that transformed one poor family's Christmas. Only one who had lived such a life—who had lost his home, seen his father tossed in debtor's prison, and been pressed into factory labor as a child, as Dickens had—could understand what such a tale might mean to these congregants.

Malnourished parishioners must have salivated to hear the words "There never was such a goose . . ." and fought back tears as Tiny Tim proclaimed, "God Bless us, everyone." They too hungered for someone to bless them with a Christmas dinner, to lift them, if only for a moment, out of their misery. Then, one by one, they shuffled past the Reverend James Wilson Bean, steeling themselves against a frigid night and, for many, an empty cupboard.

The pastor too returned to his home, which, like many, had grown accustomed to the soft knock of the hoboes and the homeless, hoping that a walk needed shoveling or a step, mending—in exchange for a sandwich and a cup of coffee. Some members of the church's board would have been glad to be rid of Bean. His outspoken sympathies for the poor were fine, but at that moment the church could ill

afford to think of anything but its own survival. Bean's pay had been cut. The "benevolences," as the fund for the needy was called, had been slashed. Church accounts had been frozen with the failure of the Dime Savings Bank in October 1931, forcing it to make do with the few dollars left in petty cash. Attendance was plummeting. Even among the stalwarts, some were losing faith—in themselves, in one another, and in God.

Christmas was a week away, but for many, it meant just another day to get through. For four years, Canton's 105,000 citizens had been battered by the Great Depression. Around town, parents were using strips of tires to extend the life of worn-out shoes, the union mission was bursting with the homeless, and scrawny children in patched coats were scavenging for coal along the B&O Railroad tracks. Many of those lucky enough to still have homes had sold the furniture, beds and all, and huddled together on bare floors or sat on old orange crates. So it was around the country. And B. Virdot saw it all.

Newspapers, selling for three cents a copy, were shared, family to family, and read by kerosene lamp. For many, electricity was a luxury as remote as a ride on the bus or a visit to the doctor. Children went to school on empty stomachs. Many would not learn the meaning of the word *breakfast* until years later. In back alleys, dogs and cats were left to fend for themselves and could be seen pawing through refuse for scraps. Thousands of Canton's depositors were shocked to discover their banks padlocked, their savings gone. Mothers and fathers did what they could to hide their despair from the children—and from each other. All the while, the asylum, the county poorhouse, the city orphanage, and the reformatory swelled with the casualties of the Hard Times. It was a landscape Dickens would have recognized.

Far off in Washington, a new president had proclaimed earlier in the year that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." In Canton, and across the country, it didn't feel that way. By Christmas 1933, two million Americans were homeless. Tens of thousands rode the rails in search of a job. One in four Americans was out of work. In Ohio, it was worse. There the jobless numbered more than one in three. And in industrial centers like Canton some put the number at 50 percent. There was no purpose in counting. No relief was to be had.

Until then, Canton had always been a proud city where skilled and unskilled hands alike had found opportunity. Its immigrant-rich labor pool, the centrality of its location, the convergence of railroads, and the richness of its mineral deposits had given rise to major industries, like Hoover, Timken, Diebold, and Republic Steel. The sweepers, roller bearings, safes, and steel they produced could be found worldwide. Now some forges were idle and cold. Many assembly lines were reduced to skeleton crews that went through the motions of maintenance, turning out the lights, and going home.

Like towns and cities across the land, Canton was sinking fast, mired in a systemic failure so pervasive that it bred more resignation than revolution. No institution existed—neither government, church, nor charity—to stem the misery. Bankruptcies mounted. Families were evicted over and over and over again. To some in this city notorious for graft and vice—by one count it had 108 brothels, outnumbering even its churches—it seemed that crime alone flourished. Dubbed "Little Chicago," its corruption-fighting city editor had been gunned down by the mob seven years before. His posthumous Pulitzer couldn't save the dying newspaper.

That Christmas of 1933 was a time when consumption meant TB, not a shopping spree, and the stigma of the dole was as hard to

face as hunger itself. Prohibition had ended two weeks earlier, but who could afford a drink? Nothing was thrown out, and a new product called Scotch tape helped mend the torn and tattered. *The Lone Ranger* premiered on radio, bringing a masked outsider to the rescue of communities unable to save themselves. Even the weather had turned against them. That Friday, two days before the Dickens reading, a freakish storm had pummeled Canton. Its torrential rains set a record, and its lightning and thunder filled the December skies with an anger rarely seen so late in the year.

"Do you think we will get out of this Depression just because we got out of all the others?" asked humorist Will Rogers. "Lots of folks drown that's been in the water before."

No one understood the Hard Times better than Mr. B. Virdot. And so, that same Sunday, December 17, 1933, he arranged to have an ad placed in the Monday morning edition of the *Canton Repository*. It was no bigger than a playing card and appeared on page 3. And there, it might have gotten lost above an ad for Blue Arrow gasoline and next to a story in which scientists touted the prowess of the "tiny gene." But the ad was not lost. A mere 158 words, it would catch the eye of the entire town, be passed from household to household, then spread by word of mouth well beyond, making news as far away as New York. It read in full:

In Consideration Of The White Collar Man!

Suppose if I were confronted with an economic situation where the bread of tomorrow is the problem of today—there is a question in my mind if I would accept charity directly offered by welfare organizations. I know there are hundreds of men that are confronted with economic problems and think, feel and act the same way.

To men or families in such position the maker of this offer, who will remain unknown until the very end, will be glad if he is given an opportunity to help from 50 to 75 such families so they will be able to spend a merry and joyful Christmas.

To such men or families that will request such financial aid, the writer pledges that their identity will never be revealed. Please write:

B. VIRDOT,
GENERAL DELIVERY,
CANTON, OHIO

In writing, please familiarize me with your true circumstances and financial aid will be promptly sent.

Even before the ad appeared, it created such a stir in the newsroom that the editors decided to write a front-page story about the offer, assuring it citywide attention. The headline read: Man Who Felt Depression's Sting to Help 75 Unfortunate Families: Anonymous Giver, Known Only as "B. Virdot," Posts $750 to Spread Christmas Cheer. The story noted that five years earlier—before the crash and the Depression—the benefactor had enjoyed all the comforts of life and "money poured in." Then the Hard Times caught up with him. Two years earlier—1931—he was broke and "headed into bankruptcy.

"But there were friends who believed in him," the story went on, "and creditors who had confidence that he would come back. He hung on, and fought." The story was a Depression-era parable of the Good Samaritan and a plea to others not to give up. There was also an ominous reference to the donor's "remembrance of much darker days." Just how the writer knew this much of the donor is unclear. Perhaps he was privy to the secret, or perhaps some intermediary shared this information with him.

The gift, the paper explained, was meant for those who might otherwise "hesitate to knock at charity's door for aid." Such hesitation went beyond the stigma attached to accepting charity. Canton's streets, like those of other Depression-era towns, teemed with grifters and con artists. An offer like B. Virdot's was sure to draw as much suspicion as hope. Was this stranger who hid behind a false name really on the up-and-up? To the skeptics, the paper offered words of reassurance: "This is a genuine Christmas gift, involving no strings and no embarrassment to the recipients."

"The name, 'B. Virdot,' is of course, fictitious," the paper observed. "Perhaps the name 'Kris Kringle' is fictitious too, but the genuineness of the spirit of giving he represents has never been questioned."

Not surprisingly, within two days, the post office was deluged with letters addressed to "Mr. B. Virdot, General Delivery, Canton, Ohio." And though the offer was specifically addressed to the "White Collar Man," it ignited a wave of appeals from men and women alike, from the elderly and from children. There was Harry Stanley, a blacksmith out of work for two years, who hoped his five small children might have something for Christmas; there were James Burson, a cook whose last job was in July 1931, and Dan Jordan, a Timken Company policeman whose pay and hours had been slashed and who fretted about his four children, two of whom were deaf; there was Joe Rogers, an unemployed janitor, and Charles Minor, a jobless steeplejack living on bread and coffee; there was Ervin Neiss, a pipe fitter swamped by hospital bills and locked out from his own life savings by the American Exchange Bank, and Ethel Dickerhoff, a mother of nine whose husband was a plumber with no work in sight.

The letters came from every walk of life—from a roofer, a car dealer, a locksmith, a millworker, a carpenter, a stonecutter, a musician, a grocer, a farmer, an ex-con, a butcher, a bell captain, a roofer, a railroad man, a cobbler, a bricklayer, a bookie, a pastor's assistant, and an array of fallen executives that read like a Who's Who of city notables. In a postscript, former bookkeeper Richard E. Anderson wrote, "I am an office man." But by then he'd been reduced to years of odd jobs. And there were children who secretly took up their pens and pencils and asked on behalf of parents too proud to seek help themselves, children like twelve-year-old Mary Uebing, whose widowed mother was trying to feed six.

How many letters came in—whether it was hundreds or thousands—no one knows. And true to his word, within days, the shadowy B. Virdot sent out the promised checks, all of them arriving before Christmas. Initially he had intended to send ten dollars to some seventy-five families, but he found himself unable to turn away

so many worthy appeals, so he doubled the recipients and halved the amount to five dollars. Today, five dollars doesn't sound like much, but back then, it would have been worth closer to one hundred dollars. For many, it was more than they had seen in a long time. In 1933, you could get a loaf of bread for seven cents, a pound of ground beef for eleven cents, a dozen eggs for twenty-nine cents. Eighteen cents bought a gallon of gas. The newly passed minimum wage was thirty-three cents, but many counted themselves lucky to make a dollar a day.

B. Virdot never imagined his modest checks would reverse the course of the Great Depression, but they did allow for many a child to go to bed with a full stomach, for presents to miraculously appear, for enough coal to heat the house that week and into the next, and some token payment for the family doctor who'd looked after a son's polio, a daughter's jaundice, or a father's tuberculosis. Given that many families had six, seven, or eight children, the 150 checks cumulatively reached a wide swath of Canton's neediest.

But B. Virdot's gift was more than just a long shot at a lottery. It raised the spirits of thousands with the knowledge that someone—one of their own—cared. He had invited them to share with him their years of pent-up grief, disillusionment, and feelings of worthlessness, burdens that could not be shared with loved ones without the risk of breaking their spirits. That Christmas, even those B. Virdot did not choose received more than a glancing blessing from his gift.

But who was this B. Virdot? There must have been rampant speculation. Perhaps the donor was one of Canton's millionaires, a Hoover, a Timken, or some other highborn son of privilege able to ride out the Depression in style. But they had not known any such "darker days," as hinted at in the *Repository.* Perhaps, then, he was a man of the people, someone more like themselves who had also suffered. Had he perhaps been sitting there amid the congregants of

the First Presbyterian Church, himself moved by Dickens's tale of redemption? Perhaps he belonged to St. John's, the nearby Catholic church. The deed itself shed little light on the man. But it was so Christian an act, this gift, with its wish that its recipients have a "merry and joyful Christmas." Whoever he was, he must surely be a person of faith to shore up the faith of so many. And what had he endured—again, that reference to "darker days"—that he could understand so well what so many in government and charities did not—that those without were not without pride?

For seventy-five years, B. Virdot's identity remained a secret. The letters seemingly vanished and B. Virdot went quietly to his grave, joined in time by all who had written to him. But the mystery surrounding his gift lingered: Who among so many needy had been chosen for such a gift? Did it make any difference in their lives? Who was B. Virdot and why all the secrecy? Finally, what in his own life had so moved him to make such a gift?

In the decades that followed, Canton once again enjoyed the blessings of prosperity. The factories boomed once more, the forges glowed, and the vacant storefronts came back to life. For many, Christmas became a time of overindulgence, when presents were piled high and food and drink were in abundance. Memories of the Hard Times grew mercifully dim, but so too did its lessons. Three generations later, it was as if none of it had happened—the Great Depression and B. Virdot's gift both seemed beyond remote, mere figments of that collective imagination called "history."

And there, this tale might well have ended, but it did not.