A Little Book Of Christmas

By
John Kendrick Bangs

A Little Book Of Christmas

THE CONVERSION OF HETHERINGTON

I

HETHERINGTON wasn't half a bad sort of a fellow, but he had his peculiarities, most of which were the natural defects of a lack of imagination. He didn't believe in ghosts, or Santa Claus, or any of the thousands of other things that he hadn't seen with his own eyes, and as he walked home that rather chilly afternoon just before Christmas and found nearly every corner of the highway decorated with bogus Saints, wearing the shoddy regalia of Kris-Kringle, the sight made him a trifle irritable. He had had a fairly good luncheon that day, one indeed that ought to have mellowed his disposition materially, but which somehow or other had not so resulted. In fact, Hetherington was in a state of raspy petulance that boded ill for his digestion, and when he had reached the corner of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, the constant iteration and reiteration of these shivering figures of the god of the Yule had got on his nerves to such an extent as to make him aggressively quarrelsome. He had controlled the asperities of his soul tolerably well on the way uptown, but the remark of a small child on the highway, made to a hurrying mother, as they passed a stalwart-looking replica of the idol of his Christmas dreams, banging away on a tambourine to attract attention to the

iron pot before him, placed there to catch the pennies of the charitably inclined wayfarer—"Oh, mar, there's Sandy Claus now!"—was too much for him.

"Tush! Nonsense!" ejaculated Hetherington, glowering at the shivering figure in the turkey-red robe. "The idea of filling children's minds up with such balderdash! Santa Claus, indeed! There isn't a genuine Santa Claus in the whole bogus bunch."

The Saint on the corner banged his tambourine just under Hetherington's ear with just enough force to jar loose the accumulated irascibility of the well-fed gentleman.

"This is a fine job for an able-bodied man like you!" said Hetherington with a sneer. "Why don't you go to work instead of helping to perpetuate this annual fake?"

The Saint looked at him for a moment before replying.

"Speakin' to me?" he said.

"Yes. I'm speaking to you," said Hetherington. "Here's the whole country perishing for the lack of labor, and in spite of that fact this town has broken out into a veritable rash of fake Santa Clauses—"

"That'll do for you!" retorted Santa Claus. "It's easy enough for a feller with a stomach full o' victuals and plenty of warm clothes on his back to jump on a hard-workin' feller like me—"

"Hard-working?" echoed Hetherington. "I like that! You don't call loafing on a street corner this way all day long hard work, do you?"

He rather liked the man's spirit, despite his objection to his occupation.

"Suppose you try it once and find out," retorted Santa Claus, blowing on his bluish fingers in an effort to restore their clogged-up circulation. "I guess if you tried a job like this just once, standin' out in the cold from eight in the mornin' to ten at night, with nothin' but a cup o' coffee and a ham-sandwich inside o' you—"

"What's that?" cried Hetherington, aghast. "Is that all you've had to eat to-day?"

"That's all," said the Saint, as he turned to his work with the tambourine. "Try it once, mister, and maybe you won't feel so cock-sure about its not bein' work. If you're half the sport you think you are just take my place for a couple of hours."

An appeal to his sporting instinct was never lost on Hetherington.

"By George!" he cried. "I'll go you. I'll swap coats with you, and while you're filling your stomach up I'll take your place, all right."

"What'll I fill me stomach up with?" demanded the man. "I don't look like a feller with a meal-ticket in his pocket, do I?"

"I'll take care of that," said Hetherington, taking out a roll of bills and peeling off a two-dollar note from the outside. "There—you take that and blow yourself, and I'll take care of the kitty here till you come back."

The exchange of externals was not long in accomplishment. The gathering of the shadows of night made it a comparatively easy matter to arrange behind a conveniently stalled and heavily laden express wagon hard by, and in a few moments the irascible but still "sporty" Hetherington, who from childhood up to the present had never been able to take a dare, found himself banging away on a tambourine and incidentally shivering in the poor red habiliments of a fraudulent Saint. For a half-hour the novelty of his position gave him a certain thrill, and no Santa Claus in town that night fulfilled his duties more vociferously than did Hetherington; but as time passed on, and the chill of a windy corner began to penetrate his bones, to say nothing of the frosty condition of his ears, which his false cotton whiskers but indifferently protected, he began to tire of his bargain.

"Gosh!" he muttered to himself, as it began to snow, and certain passing truckmen hurled the same kind of guying comments at him as had been more or less in his mind whenever he had passed a fellow-Santa-Claus on his way up-town, "if General Sherman were here he'd find a twin-brother to War! I wish that cuss would come back."

He gazed eagerly up and down the street in the hope that the departed original would heave in sight, but in vain. A two-dollar meal evidently possessed attractions that he wished to linger over.

"Can't stand this much longer!" he muttered to himself, and then his eye caught sight of a group that filled his soul with dismay: two policemen and the struggling figure of one who appeared to have looked not wisely but too well upon the cup that cheers, the latter wearing Hetherington's overcoat and Hetherington's hat, but whose knees worked upon hinges of their own, double-back-action hinges that made his legs of no use whatsoever, either to himself or to anybody else.

"Hi there!" Hetherington cried out, as the group passed up the street on the way to the station-house. "That fellow's got my overcoat—"

But the only reply Hetherington got was a sturdy poke in the ribs from the night-stick of the passing officer.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" growled Hetherington.

II

Ten minutes later a passing taxi was hailed by a shivering gentleman carrying an iron pot full of pennies and nickels and an occasional quarter in one hand, and a turkey-red coat, trimmed with white cotton cloth, thrown over his arm. Strange to say, considering the inclemency of the night, he wore neither a hat nor an overcoat.

"Where to, sir?" queried the chauffeur.

"The police-station," said Hetherington. "I don't know where it is, but the one in this precinct is the one I want."

"Ye'll have to pay by the hour to-night, sir," said the chauffeur. "The station ain't a half-mile away, sir, but Heaven knows how long it'll take us to get there."

"Charge what you please," retorted Hetherington. "I'll buy your darned old machine if it's necessary, only get a move on."

The chauffeur, with some misgivings as to the mental integrity of his fare, started on their perilous journey, and three-quarters of an hour later drew up in front of the police-station, where Hetherington, having been compelled in self-defense to resume the habiliments of Santa Claus under penalty of freezing, alighted.

"Just wait, will you?" he said, as he alighted from the cab.

"I'll go in with you," said the chauffeur, acting with due caution. He had begun to fear that there was a fair chance of his having trouble getting his fare out of a very evident lunatic.

Utterly forgetful of his appearance in his festal array, Hetherington bustled into the station, and shortly found himself standing before the sergeant behind the desk.

"Well, Santa Claus," said the official, with an amused glance at the intruder, "what can I do for you to-night? There ain't many rooms with a bath left."

Hetherington flushed. He had intended to greet the sergeant with his most imposing manner, but this turkey-red abomination on his back had thrust dignity out in the cold.

"I have come, officer," he said, as impressively as he could under the circumstances, "to make some inquiries concerning a man who was brought here about an hour ago—I fear in a state of intoxication."

"We have known such things to happen here, Santa," said the officer, suavely. "In fact, this blotter here seems to indicate that one George W. Hetherington, of 561 Fifth Avenue—"

"Who?" roared Hetherington.

"George W. Hetherington is the name on the blotter," said the sergeant; "entered first as a D. D., but on investigation found to be suffering from—"

"But that's my name!" cried Hetherington. "You don't mean to tell me he claimed to be George W. Hetherington?"

"No," said the sergeant. "The poor devil didn't make any claims for himself at all. We found that name on a card in his hat, and a letter addressed to the same name in his overcoat pocket. Puttin' the two together we thought it was a good enough identification."

"Well, I'll have you to understand, sergeant—" bristled Hetherington, cockily.

"None o' that, Santa Claus—none o' that!" growled the sergeant, leaning over the desk and eying him coldly. "I don't know what gameyou're up to, but just one more peep in that tone and there'll be two George W. Hetheringtons in the cooler this night."

Hetherington almost tore the Santa Claus garb from his shoulders, and revealed himself as a personage of fine raiment underneath, whatever he might have appeared at a superficial glance. As he did so a crumpled piece of paper fell to the floor from the pocket of the turkey-red coat.

"I don't mean to do anything but what is right, sergeant," he said, controlling his wrath, "but what I do want is to impress it upon your mind that I am George W. Hetherington, and that having my name spread on the blotter of a police court isn't going to do me any good. I loaned that fellow my hat and coat to get a square meal, while I took his place—"

The officer grinned broadly, but with no assurance in his smile that he believed.

"Oh, you may not believe it," said Hetherington, "but it's true, and if this thing gets into the papers to-morrow morning—"

"Say, Larry," said the sergeant, addressing an officer off duty, "did the reporters copy that letter we found in Hetherington's pocket?"

"Reporters?" gasped Hetherington. "Good Lord, man—yuh-you don't mum-mean to say yuh-you let the reporters—"

"No, chief," replied Larry. "They ain't been in yet—I t'ink ye shoved it inter yer desk."

"So I did, so I did," grinned the sergeant. Here he opened the drawer in front of him and extracted a pretty little blue envelope which Hetherington immediately recognized as a particularly private and confidential communication from—well, somebody. This is not acherchez la femme story, so we will leave the lady's name out of it altogether. It must be noted,

however, that a sight of that dainty missive in the great red fist of the sergeant gave Hetherington a heart action that fifty packages of cigarettes a day could hardly inflict upon a less healthy man.

"That's the proof—" cried Hetherington, excitedly. "If that don't prove it's my overcoat nothing will."

"Right you are, Santa Claus," said the sergeant, opening the envelope and taking out the delicately scented sheet of paper within. "I'll give you two guesses at the name signed to this, and if you get it right once I'll give you the coat, and Mr. Hetherington Number One in our evening's consignment of Hetheringtons gets re-christened."

"'Anita'!" growled Hetherington.

"You win!" said the sergeant, handing over the letter.

Hetherington drew a long sigh of relief.

"I guess this is worth cigars for the house, sergeant," he said. "I'll send 'em round to-morrow—meanwhile, how about—how about the other?"

"He's gone to the hospital," said the sergeant, grimly. "The doctor says he wasn't drunk—just another case of freezing starvation."

"Starvation? And I guyed him! Great God!" muttered Hetherington to himself.

III

"Narrow escape, Mr. Hetherington," said the sergeant. "Ought to be a lesson to you sports. What was your game, anyhow?"

"Oh, it wasn't any game—" began Hetherington.

"Huh! Just a case of too much lunch, eh?" said the officer. "You'd had as much too much as the other feller'd had too little—that it?"

"No," said Hetherington. "Just a general lack of confidence in my fellow-men, plus a cussed habit of butting into matters that aren't any of my business; but I'm glad I butted in, just the same, if I can be of any earthly use to that poor devil of a Santa Claus. Do you suppose there's any way to find out who he is?"

"Well, we've made a good start, anyhow," said the sergeant. "We've found out who he isn't. When he comes to in the mornin', if he does, maybe he'll be able to help us identify him."

"To-morrow!" murmured Hetherington. "And who knows but he's got a family waiting for him somewhere right now, and as badly off as he is."

"Ye dropped this, sir," said Larry, the officer off duty. "It come out of the red

coat—mebbe it'll help—"

He handed Hetherington the crumpled piece of paper that had fallen to the floor when he tore Santa Claus's cloak from his back. It was sadly dirty, but on one side of it was a childish scrawl in pencil. Hetherington ran over it rapidly, and gulped.

"Read that, sergeant!" he said, huskily.

The sergeant read the following:

""DEAR SANDY CLORS:—my Popper says hell hand you this here leter when he sees you to ast you not to fergit me and jimmy like you did last yeer. you aint been to see me an jimmy since popper lost his Jobb and he says its becoz you lost our adres so ime ritin to tell you weve moved since you come the lass time and am now livin now on the Topp flor of fore 69 varrick streete noo york which youd ort not to find it hard to git down the chimbley bein on the topp flor closte to the roofe so i thort ide rite and tell you what me and jimmyd like to hav you bring us wenn you come. I nede some noo shues and a hatt and my lasst dol babys all wore out and sum candy if you can work it in sumhow, not havin had much since popper lost his jobb, and jimmies only gott one mitt left and his shues is wore throo like mine is only a little worser, and a baseball batt and hed like sum candy to. if there wass anything lefft ovvur for us from lass crissmis wich you dident kno ware to find us to giv it to us we wuddent mind havin that two but you needent mind about that if its misslayde we can git along all rite all rite on whot ive sed alreddy. ime leven and jimmies nine and we hope youl hav a mery crismiss like wede hav if youd come to see us.

"yure efexinite frend mary muligan.

"p. s dont fergit the adres topp flor 469 varrick strete noo york. take back chimbley middel floo."

"I'm sorry to say, Mr. Hetherington," said the sergeant, clearing his throat with vociferous unction, "that the town's full of Mary and Jimmie Mulligans—but, anyhow, I guess this is good enough evidence for me to scratch out your name and enter the record under James Mulligan."

"Thank you, sergeant," said Hetherington, gratefully. "And it's good enough evidence for me that this town needs a Santa Claus a blooming sight more than I thought it did. What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty," replied the sergeant.

"Good!" said Hetherington. "Shops don't close till ten—I guess I've got time. Good night—see you first thing in the morning. Come along, chauffeur, I'll need you for some time yet."

"Good night, Mr. Hetherington," said the sergeant. "Where are you bound in

case I need you any time?"

"Me?" said Hetherington with a grin, "why, my address is 561 Fifth Avenue, but just now I'm off to do my Christmas shopping early."

And resuming possession of his own hat and overcoat, and taking the Santa Claus costume under his arm, Hetherington passed out, the chauffeur following.

"These New York sports is a queer bunch!" said the sergeant as Hetherington disappeared.

IV

At half-past nine down-town was pretty well deserted, which made it easy for the chauffeur of a certain red taxi-cab to make fairly good time down Broadway; and when at nine-forty-five the panting mechanism drew up before the grim walls of a brick tenement, numbered 469 Varick Street, the man on the box was commendably proud of his record.

"That was goin' some, sir," he said, with a broad grin on his face. "I don't believe it's ever been done quicker outside o' the fire department."

"I don't believe it has, old man," said Hetherington as he alighted. "Now if you'll help me up-stairs with these packages and that basket there, we'll bring this affair to a grand-stand finish."

The two men toiled slowly up the stairs, Hetherington puffing somewhat with the long climb; and when finally they had reached the top floor he arrayed himself in the once despised garb of Santa Claus again. Then he knocked at the door. The answer was immediate. A white-faced woman opened the door.

"Jim!" she cried. "Is it you?"

"No, madam," replied Hetherington. "It's a friend of Jim's. Fact is, Mrs. Mulligan, Jim has—"

"There's nothin' happened to Jim, has there?" she interrupted.

"Nothing at all, madam, nothing at all," said Hetherington. "The work was a little too much for him to-day—that's all—and he keeled over. He's safe, and comfortable in the—well, they took him to the hospital, but don't you worry—he'll be all right in a day or two, and meanwhile I'm going to look after you and the kiddies."

The chauffeur placed the basket inside the door.

"You'll find a small turkey, and some—er—some fixings in it, Mrs. Mulligan," said Hetherington. "Whatever ought to go with a turkey should be there, and—

er—have the kiddies gone to bed?"

"Poor little souls, they have," said the woman.

"Well, just you tell 'em for me," said Hetherington, "that Santa Claus received little Mary's letter, will you, please? And—er—and if they don't mind a very late call like this, why I'd like to see them."

The woman looked anxiously into Hetherington's eyes for a moment, and then she tottered and sat down.

"You're sure there's nothin' the matter with Jim, sir?" she asked.

"Absolutely, Mrs. Mulligan," Hetherington answered. "It's exactly as I have told you. The cold and hunger were too much for him, but he's all right, and I'll guarantee to have him back here inside of forty-eight hours."

"I'll call the childer," said Mrs. Mulligan.

Two wide-eyed youngsters shortly stood in awed wonder before their strange visitor, never doubting for a moment that he was Santa Claus himself.

"How do you do, Miss Mulligan?" said Hetherington, with a courtly bow to the little tot of a girl. "I received your letter this afternoon, and was mighty glad to hear from you again, but I've been too busy all day to write you in return, so I thought I'd call and tell you that it's all right about those shoes, and the hat, and the new doll-baby, and the things for Jimmie. Fact is, I've brought 'em with me. Reginald," he added, turning to the chauffeur, who stood grinning in the doorway, "just unfasten that bundle of shoes, will you, while I get Jimmie's new mitts and the base-ball bat?"

"Yes, sir," said the chauffeur, suiting his action to the orders, and with a right good will that was pleasant to see.

"Reginald is my assistant," said Santa Claus. "Couldn't get along without Reginald these days—very busy days they are—so many new kiddies in the world, you know. There, Jimmie—there's your bat. May you score many a home-run with it. Here's a ball, too—good thing to have a ball to practise with. Some day you'll be a Giant, perhaps, and help win the pennant. Incidentally, James, old boy, there's a box of tin soldiers in this package, a bag of marbles, a select assortment of tops, and a fur coat; just try that cap on, and see if you can tell yourself from a Brownie."

The children's eyes gleamed with joy, and Jimmie let out a cheer that would have aroused the envy of a college man.

"You didn't mention it in your note, Mary, dear," continued Santa Claus, turning to the little girl, "but I thought you might like to cook a few meals for this brand-new doll-baby of yours, so I brought along a little stove, with a few pots and pans and kettles and things, with a small china tea-set thrown in. This

ought to enable you to set her up in housekeeping; and then when you go to school I have an idea you'll find this little red-riding-hood cloak rather nice—only it's navy blue instead of red, and it looks warm."

Hetherington placed the little cloak with its beautiful brass buttons and its warm hood over the little girl's shoulders, while she stood with her eyes popping out of her head, too delightedly entranced to be able to say a word of thanks.

"Don't forget this, sir," said the chauffeur, handing Hetherington a package tied up in blue ribbons.

"And finally," said Hetherington, after thanking Reginald for the reminder, "here is a box of candy for everybody in the place. One for Mary, one for Jimmie, one for mother, and one for popper when he comes home."

"Oh thank you, thank you, thank you!" cried the little girl, throwing herself into Hetherington's arms. "I knowed you'd come—I did, I did, I did!"

"You believed in old Santa Claus, did you, babe?" said Hetherington, huskily, as the little girl's warm cheek pressed against his own.

"Yes, I did—always," said the little girl, "though Jimmie didn't."

"I did so!" retorted Jimmie, squatting on the floor and shooting a glass agate at a bunch of miggles across the room. "I swatted Petey Halloran on the eye on'y yesterday for sayin' they wasn't no such person."

"And you did well, my son," said Hetherington. "The man or boy that says there isn't any Santa Claus is a—is a—well, never you mind, but he is one just the same."

And bidding his little friends good night, Hetherington, with the chauffeur close behind him, left them to the joys of the moment, with a cheerier dawn than they had known for many weary days to follow.

V

"Good night, sir," said the chauffeur, as Hetherington paid him off and added a good-sized tip into the bargain. "I didn't useter believe in Santa Claus, sir, but I do now."

"So do I," said Hetherington, as he bade the other good night and lightly mounted the steps to his house.

A Merry Christmas Pie

Take a quart of pure Good Will,Flavor well with Sympathy;Boil it on the fire tillIt is full of bubbling Glee.Season with a dash of Cheer,Mixed with Love

and Tenderness;Cool off in an atmosphereThat is mostly Kindliness.

Stick a dozen raisins inMade of grapes from Laughter's vine,And such fruits as you may winIn a purely Jocund line.Make a batter from the creamOf Good Spirits running high,And you'll have a perfect dreamOf a Merry Christmas pie!

THE CHILD WHO HAD EVERYTHING BUT—

I

I KNEW it was coming long before it got there. Every symptom was in sight. I had grown fidgety, and sat fearful of something overpoweringly impending. Strange noises filled the house. Things generally, according to their nature, severally creaked, soughed and moaned. There was a ghost on the way. That was perfectly clear to an expert in uncanny visitations of my wide experience, and I heartily wished it were not. There was a time when I welcomed such visitors with open arms, because there was a decided demand for them in the literary market, and I had been able to turn a great variety of spooks into anywhere from three thousand to five thousand words apiece at five cents a word, but now the age had grown too sceptical to swallow ghostly reminiscence with any degree of satisfaction. People had grown tired of hearing about Visions, and desired that their tales should reek with the scent of gasoline, quiver with the superfervid fever of tangential loves, and crash with moral thunderbolts aimed against malefactors of great achievement and high social and commercial standing. Wherefore it seemed an egregious waste of time for me to dally with a spook, or with anything else, for that matter, that had no strictly utilitarian value to one so professionally pressed as I was, and especially at a moment like that—it was Christmas morning and the hour was twenty-eight minutes after two—when I was so busy preparing my Ode to June, and trying to work out the details of a midsummer romance in time for the market for such productions early in the coming January.

And right in the midst of all this pressure there rose up these beastly symptoms of an impending visitation. At first I strove to fight them off, but as the minutes passed they became so obsessively intrusive that I could not concentrate upon the work in hand, and I resolved to have it over with.

"Oh, well," said I, striking a few impatient chords upon my typewriting machine, "if you insist upon coming, come, and let's have done with it."

I roared this out, addressing the dim depths of the adjoining apartment, whence had risen the first dank apprehension of the uncanny something that had come to pester me.

"This is my busy night," I went on, when nothing happened in response to my summons, "and I give you fair warning that, however psychic I may be now, I've got too much to do to stay so much longer. If you're going to haunt, haunt!"

It was in response to this appeal that the thing first manifested itself to the eye. It took the shape first of a very slight veil of green fog, which shortly began to swirl slowly from the darkness of the other room through the intervening portières into my den. Once within, it increased the vigor of its swirl, until almost before I knew it there was spinning immediately before my desk something in the nature of a misty maelstrom, buzzing around like a pin-wheel in action.

"Very pretty—very pretty indeed," said I, a trifle sarcastically, refusing to be impressed, "but I don't care for pyrotechnics. I suppose," I added flippantly, "that you are what might be called a mince-pyrotechnic, eh?"

Whether it was the quality of my jest, or some other inward pang due to its gyratory behavior, that caused it I know not, but as I spoke a deep groan issued from the centre of the whirling mist, and then out of its indeterminateness there was resolved the hazy figure of an angel—only, she was an intensely modern angel. She wore a hobble-skirt instead of the usual flowing robes of ladies of the supernal order, and her halo, instead of hovering over her head as used to be the correct manner of wearing these hard-won adornments, had perforce become a mere golden fillet binding together the great mass of finger-curls and other distinctly yellow capillary attractions that stretched out from the back of her cerebellum for two or three feet, like a monumental psyche-knot. I could hardly restrain a shudder as I realized the theatric quality of the lady's appearance, and I honestly dreaded the possible consequences of her visit. We live in a tolerably censorious age, and I did not care to be seen in the company of such a peroxidized vision as she appeared to be.

"I am afraid, madam," said I, shrinking back against the wall as she approached—"I am very much afraid that you have got into the wrong house. Mr. Slatherberry, the theatrical manager, lives next door."

She paid no attention to this observation, but, holding out a compelling hand, bade me come along with her, her voice having about it all the musical charm of an oboe suffering from bronchitis.

"Not in a year of Sundays I won't!" I retorted. "I am a respectable man, a steady church-goer, a trustee for several philanthropic institutions, and a Sunday-School teacher. I don't wish to be impolite, but really, madam, rich as I am in reputation, I am too poor to be seen in public with you."

"I am a spirit," she began.

"I'll take your word for it," I interjected, and I could see that she told the truth,

for she was entirely diaphanous, so much so indeed that one could perceive the piano in the other room with perfect clarity through her intervening shadiness. "It is, however, the unfortunate fact that I have sworn off spirits."

"None the less," she returned, her eye flashing and her hand held forth peremptorily, "you must come. It is your predestined doom."

My next remark I am not wholly clear about, but, as I remember it, it sounded something like "I'll be doomed if I do!" whereupon she threatened me.

"It is useless to resist," she said. "If you decline to come voluntarily, I shall hypnotize you and force you to follow me. We have need of you."

"But, my dear lady," I pleaded, "please have some regard for my position. I never did any of you spirits any harm. I've treated every visitor from the spirit-land with the most distinguished consideration, and I feel that you owe it to me to be regardful of my good name. Suppose you take a look at yourself in yonder looking-glass, and then say if you think it fair to compel a decent, law-abiding man, of domestic inclinations like myself, to be seen in public with—well, with such a looking head of hair as that of yours."

My visitor laughed heartily.

"Oh, if that's all," she said, most amiably, "we can arrange matters in a jiffy. Your wife possesses a hooded mackintosh, does she not? I think I saw something of the kind hanging on the hat-rack as I floated in. I will wear that if it will make you feel any easier."

"It certainly would," said I; "but see here—can't you scare up some other cavalier to escort you to the haven of your desires?"

She fixed a sternly steady eye upon me for a moment.

"Aren't you the man who wrote the lines,

The World's a green and gladsome ball,And Love's the Ruler of it all,And Life's the chance vouchsafed to meFor Deeds and Gifts of Sympathy?

Didn't you write that?" she demanded.

"I did, madam," said I, "and I meant every word of it, but what of it? Is that any reason why I should be seen on a public highway with a lady-ghost of your especial kind?"

"Enough of your objections," she retorted firmly. "You are the person for whom I have been sent. We have a case needing your immediate attention. The only question is, will you come pleasantly and of your own free will, or must I resort to extreme measures?"

These words were spoken with such determination that I realized that further resistance was useless, and I yielded.

"All right," said I. "On your way. I'll follow."

"Good!" she cried, her face wreathing with a pleasant little nile-green smile. "Get the mackintosh, and we'll be off. There's no time to lose," she added, as the clock in the tower on the square boomed out the hour of three.

"What is this anyhow?" I demanded, as I helped her on with the mackintosh and saw that the hood covered every vestige of that awful coiffure. "Another case of Scrooge?"

"Sort of," she replied as, hooking her arm in mine, she led me forth into the night.

II

We passed over to Fifth Avenue, and proceeded uptown at a pace which reminded me of the active gait of my youth. My footsteps had grown unwontedly light, and we covered the first ten blocks in about three minutes.

"We don't seem to be headed for the slums," I panted.

"Indeed, we are not," she retorted. "There is no need of carrying coals to Newcastle on this occasion. This isn't a slum case. It's far more acute than that."

A tear came forth from her eye and trickled down over the mackintosh.

"It is a peculiarity of modern effort on behalf of suffering humanity," she went on, "that it is concentrated upon the relief of the misery of the so-called submerged, to the utter neglect of the often more poignant needs of the emerged. We have workers by the thousand in the slums, doing all that can be done, and successfully too, to relieve the unhappy condition of the poor, but nobody ever seems to think of the sorrows of the starving hundreds on upper Fifth Avenue."

"See here, madam," said I, stopping suddenly short under a lamp-post in front of the Public Library, "I want to tell you right now that if you think you are going to take me into any of the homes of the hopelessly rich at this hour of the morning, you are the most mightily mistaken creature that ever wore a psyche-knot. Why, great heavens, my dear lady, suppose the owner of the house were to wake up and demand to know what I was doing there at this time of night? What could I say?"

"You have gone on slumming parties, haven't you?" she demanded coldly.

"Often," said I. "But that's different."

"Why?" she asked, with a simplicity that baffled me. "Is it any worse for you

to intrude upon the home of a Fifth Avenue millionaire than it is to go unasked into the small, squalid tenement of some poor sweatshop worker on the East Side?"

"Oh, but it's different," I protested. "I go there to see if there is anything I can do to relieve the unhappy condition of the persons who live in the slums."

"No doubt," said she. "I'll take your word for it, but is that any reason why you should neglect the sufferers who live in these marble palaces?"

As she spoke, she hooked hold of my arm once more, and in a moment we were climbing the front door steps of a palatial residence. The house showed a dark and forbidding front at that hour in the morning despite its marble splendors, and I was glad to note that the massive grille doors of wrought iron were heavily barred.

"It's useless, you see. We're locked out," I ventured.

"Indeed?" she retorted, with a sarcastic smile, as she seized my hand in her icy grip and literally pulled me after her through the marble front of the dwelling. "What have we to do with bolts and bars?"

"I don't know," said I ruefully, "but I have a notion that if I don't bolt I'll get the bars all right."

I could see them coming, and they were headed straight for me.

"All you have to do is to follow me," she went on, as we floated upward for two flights, paying but little attention to the treasures of art that lined the walls, and finally passed into a superbly lighted salon, more daintily beautiful than anything of the kind I had ever seen before.

"Jove!" I ejaculated, standing amazed in the presence of such luxury and beauty. "I did not realize that with all her treasures New York held anything quite so fine as this. What is it, a music-room?"

"It is the nursery," said my companion. "Look about you and see for yourself."

I did as I was bidden, and such an array of toys as that inspection revealed! Truly it looked as if the toy-market in all sections of the world had been levied upon for tribute. Had all the famous toy emporiums of Nuremberg itself been transported thither bodily, there could not have been playthings in greater variety than there greeted my eye. From the most insignificant of tin-soldiers to the most intricate of mechanical toys for the delectation of the youthful mind, nothing that I could think of was missing.

The tin-soldiers as ever had a fascination for me, and in an instant I was down upon the floor, ranging them in their serried ranks, while the face of my companion wreathed with an indulgent smile.

"You'll do," said she, as I loaded a little spring-cannon with a stub of a lead-

pencil and bowled over half a regiment with one well-directed shot.

"These are the finest tin-soldiers I ever saw!" I cried with enthusiasm.

"Only they're not tin," said she. "Solid silver, every man-jack of them—except the officers—they're made of platinum."

"And will you look at that little electric railroad!" I cried, my eye ranging to the other end of the salon. "Stations, switches, danger-signals, cars of all kinds, and even miniature Pullmans, with real little berths that can be let up and down—who is the lucky kid who's getting all these beautiful things?"

"Sh!" she whispered, putting her finger to her lips. "He is coming—go on and play. Pretend you don't see him until he speaks to you."

As she spoke, a door at the far end of the apartment swung gently open, and a little boy tiptoed softly in. He was a golden-haired little chap, and I fell in love with his soft, dreamy eyes the moment my own rested upon them. I could not help glancing up furtively to see his joy over the discovery of all these wondrous possessions, but alas, to my surprise, there was only an unemotional stare in his eyes as they swept the aggregation of childish treasures. Then, on a sudden, he saw me, squatting on the floor, setting up again the army of silver warriors.

"How do you do?" he said gently, but with just a touch of weariness in his sad little voice.

"Good morning, and a Merry Christmas to you, sir," I replied.

"What are you doing?" he asked, drawing near, and watching me with a good deal of seeming curiosity.

"I am playing with your soldiers," said I. "I hope you don't mind?"

"Oh, no indeed," he replied; "but what do you mean by that? What is playing?"

I could hardly believe my ears.

"What is what?" said I.

"You said you were playing, sir," said he, "and I don't know exactly what you mean."

"Why," said I, scratching my head hard in a mad quest for a definition, for I couldn't for the life of me think of the answer to his question offhand, any more than I could define one of the elements. "Playing is—why, it's playing, laddie. Don't you know what it is to play?"

"Oh, yes," said he. "It's what you do on the piano—I've been taught to play on the piano, sir."

"Oh, but this is different," said I. "This kind is fun—it's what most little boys

do with their toys."

"You mean—breaking them?" said he.

"No, indeed," said I. "It's getting all the fun there is out of them."

"I think I should like to do that," said he, with a fixed gaze upon the soldiers. "Can a little fellow like me learn to play that way?"

"Well, rather, kiddie," said I, reaching out and taking him by the hand. "Sit down here on the floor alongside of me, and I'll show you."

"Oh, no," said he, drawing back; "I—I can't sit on the floor. I'd catch cold."

"Now, who under the canopy told you that?" I demanded, somewhat impatiently, I fear.

"My governesses and both my nurses, sir," said he. "You see, there are drafts —"

"Well, there won't be any drafts this time," said I. "Just you sit down here, and we'll have a game of marbles—ever play marbles with your father?"

"No, sir," he replied. "He's always too busy, and neither of my nurses has ever known how."

"But your mother comes up here and plays games with you sometimes, doesn't she?" I asked.

"Mother is busy, too," said the child. "Besides, she wouldn't care for a game which you had to sit on the floor to—"

I sprang to my feet and lifted him bodily in my arms, and, after squatting him over by the fireplace where if there were any drafts at all they would be as harmless as a summer breeze, I took up a similar position on the other side of the room, and initiated him into the mystery of miggles as well as I could, considering that all his marbles were real agates.

"You don't happen to have a china-alley anywhere, do you?" I asked.

"No, sir," he answered. "We only have china plates—"

"Never mind," I interrupted. "We can get along very nicely with these."

And then for half an hour, despite the rich quality of our paraphernalia, that little boy and I indulged in a glorious game of real plebeian miggs, and it was a joy to see how quickly his stiff little fingers relaxed and adapted themselves to the uses of his eye, which was as accurate as it was deeply blue. So expert did he become that in a short while he had completely cleaned me out, giving joyous little cries of delight with every hit, and then we turned our attention to the soldiers.

"I want some playing now," he said gleefully, as I informed him that he had beaten me out of my boots at one of my best games. "Show me what you were

doing with those soldiers when I came in."

"All right," said I, obeying with alacrity. "First, we'll have a parade."

I started a great talking-machine standing in one corner of the room off on a spirited military march, and inside of ten minutes, with his assistance, I had all the troops out and to all intents and purposes bravely swinging by to the martial music of Sousa.

"How's that?" said I, when we had got the whole corps arranged to our satisfaction.

"Fine!" he cried, jumping up and down upon the floor and clapping his hands with glee. "I've got lots more of these stored away in my toy-closet," he went on, "but I never knew that you could do such things as this with them."

"But what did you think they were for?" I asked.

"Why—just to—to keep," he said hesitatingly.

"Wait a minute," said I, wheeling a couple of cannon off to a distance of a yard from the passing troops. "I'll show you something else you can do with them."

I loaded both cannon to the muzzle with dried pease, and showed him how to shoot.

"Now," said I, "fire!"

He snapped the spring, and the dried pease flew out like death-dealing shells in war. In a moment the platinum commander of the forces, and about thirty-seven solid silver warriors, lay flat on their backs. It needed only a little red ink on the carpet to reproduce in miniature a scene of great carnage, but I shall never forget the expression of mingled joy and regret on his countenance as those creatures went down.

"Don't you like it, son?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said, with an anxious glance at the prostrate warriors. "They aren't deaded, are they?"

"Of course not," said I, restoring the presumably defunct troopers to life by setting them up again. "The only thing that'll dead a soldier like these is to step on him. Try the other gun."

Thus reassured, he did as I bade him, and again the proud paraders went down, this time amid shouts of glee. And so we passed an all too fleeting two hours, that little boy and I. Through the whole list of his famous toys we went, and as well as I could I taught him the delicious uses of each and all of them, until finally he seemed to grow weary, and so, drawing up a big arm-chair before the fire and taking his tired little body into my lap, with his tousled head cuddled up close over the spot where my heart is alleged to be, I started to read a story to him out of one of the many beautiful books that had been

provided for him by his generous parents. But I had not gone far when I saw that his attention was wandering.

"Perhaps you'd rather have me tell you a story instead of reading it," said I.

"What's to tell a story?" he asked, fixing his blue eyes gravely upon mine.

"Great Scott, kiddie!" said I, "didn't anybody ever tell you a story?"

"No, sir," he replied sleepily; "I get read to every afternoon by my governess, but nobody ever told me a story."

"Well, just you listen to this," said I, giving him a hearty squeeze. "Once upon a time there was a little boy," I began, "and he lived in a beautiful house not far from the Park, and his daddy—"

"What's a daddy?" asked the child, looking up into my face.

"Why, a daddy is a little boy's father," I explained. "You've got a daddy—"

"Oh, yes," he said. "If a daddy is a father, I've got one. I saw him yesterday," he added.

"Oh, did you?" said I. "And what did he say to you?"

"He said he was glad to see me and hoped I was a good boy," said the child. "He seemed very glad when I told him I hoped so, too, and he gave me all these things here—he and my mother."

"That was very nice of them," said I huskily.

"And they're both coming up some time to-day or to-morrow to see if I like them," said the lad.

"And what are you going to say?" I asked, with difficulty getting the words out over a most unaccountable lump that had arisen in my throat.

"I'm going to tell them," he began, as his eyes closed sleepily, "that I like them all very, very much."

"And which one of them all do you like the best?" said I.

He snuggled up closer in my arms, and, raising his little head a trifle higher, he kissed me on the tip end of my chin, and murmured softly as he dropped off to sleep,

"You!"

III

"Good night," said my spectral visitor as she left me, once more bending over my desk, whither I had been re-transported without my knowledge, for I must

have fallen asleep, too, with that little boy in my arms. "You have done a good night's work."

"Have I?" said I, rubbing my eyes to see if I were really awake. "But tell me—who was that little kiddie anyhow?"

"He?" she answered with a smile. "Why, he is the Child Who Has Everything But—"

And then she vanished from my sight.

"Everything but what?" I cried, starting up and peering into the darkness into which she had disappeared.

But there was no response, and I was left alone to guess the answer to my question.

A HOLIDAY WISH

When Santa Claus doth visit meWith richly laden pack of toys,And tumbles down my chim-i-neyTo scatter 'round his Christmas joys,I trust that he will bring the kindThat can be shared, for it is truePast peradventure to my mindThat joy is sweeter shared by two.

I never cared for solitaire.I do not pine for lonely things.I love the pleasure I can shareBecause of all the fun it brings.A selfish pleasure loses zestWith none to share it with you by,And shrinks the longer 'tis possest,While joys divided multiply.

SANTA CLAUS AND LITTLE BILLEE

I

HE was only a little bit of a chap, and so, when for the first time in his life he came into close contact with the endless current of human things, it was as hard for him to "stay put" as for some wayward little atom of flotsam and jetsam to keep from tossing about in the surging tides of the sea.

His mother had left him there in the big toy-shop, with instructions not to move until she came back, while she went off to do some mysterious errand. She thought, no doubt, that with so many beautiful things on every side to delight his eye and hold his attention, strict obedience to her commands would not be hard. But, alas, the good lady reckoned not upon the magnetic power of attraction of all those lovely objects in detail. She saw them only as a mass of

wonders which, in all probability, would so dazzle his vision as to leave him incapable of movement; but Little Billee was not so indifferent as all that.

When a phonograph at the other end of the shop began to rattle off melodious tunes and funny jokes, in spite of the instructions he had received, off he pattered as fast as his little legs would carry him to investigate. After that, forgetful of everything else, finding himself caught in the constantly moving stream of Christmas shoppers, he was borne along in the resistless current until he found himself at last out upon the street—alone, free, and independent.

It was great fun, at first. By and by, however, the afternoon waned; the sun, as if anxious to hurry along the dawn of Christmas Day, sank early to bed; and the electric lights along the darkening highway began to pop out here and there, like so many merry stars come down to earth to celebrate the gladdest time of all the year. Little Billee began to grow tired; and then he thought of his mama, and tried to find the shop where he had promised to remain quiet until her return. Up and down the street he wandered until his little legs grew weary; but there was no sign of the shop, nor of the beloved face he was seeking.

Once again, and yet once again after that, did the little fellow traverse that crowded highway, his tears getting harder and harder to keep back, and then—joy of joys—whom should he see walking slowly along the sidewalk but Santa Claus himself! The saint was strangely decorated with two queer-looking boards, with big red letters on them, hung over his back and chest; but there was still that same kindly, gray-bearded face, the red cloak with the fur trimmings, and the same dear old cap that the children's friend had always worn in the pictures of him that Little Billee had seen.

With a glad cry of happiness, Little Billee ran to meet the old fellow, and put his hand gently into that of the saint. He thought it very strange that Santa Claus's hand should be so red and cold and rough, and so chapped; but he was not in any mood to be critical. He had been face to face with a very disagreeable situation. Then, when things had seemed blackest to him, everything had come right again; and he was too glad to take more than passing notice of anything strange and odd.

Santa Claus, of course, would recognize him at once, and would know just how to take him back to his mama at home—wherever that might be. Little Billee had never thought to inquire just where home was. All he knew was that it was a big gray stone house on a long street somewhere, with a tall iron railing in front of it, not far from the park.

"Howdidoo, Mr. Santa Claus?" said Little Billee, as the other's hand unconsciously tightened over his own.

"Why, howdidoo, kiddie?" replied the old fellow, glancing down at his new-found friend, with surprise gleaming from his deep-set eyes. "Where did you drop from?"

"Oh, I'm out," said Little Billee bravely. "My mama left me a little while ago while she went off about something, and I guess I got losted."

"Very likely," returned the old saint with a smile. "Little two-by-four fellows are apt to get losted when they start in on their own hook, specially days like these, with such crowds hustlin' around."

"But it's all right now," suggested Little Billee hopefully. "I'm found again, ain't I?"

"Oh, yes, indeedy, you're found all right, kiddie," Santa Claus agreed.

"And pretty soon you'll take me home again, won't you?" said the child.

"Surest thing you know!" answered Santa Claus, looking down upon the bright but tired little face with a comforting smile. "What might your address be?"

"My what?" asked Little Billee.

"Your address," repeated Santa Claus. "Where do you live?"

The answer was a ringing peal of childish laughter.

"As if you didn't know that!" cried Little Billee, giggling.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Santa Claus. "Can't fool you, can I? It would be funny if, after keeping an eye on you all these years since you was a babby, I didn't know where you lived, eh?"

"Awful funny," agreed Little Billee. "But tell me, Mr. Santa Claus, what sort of a boy do you think I have been?" he added with a shade of anxiety in his voice.

"Pretty good—pretty good," Santa Claus answered, turning in his steps and walking back again along the path he had just traveled—which Little Billee thought was rather a strange thing to do. "You've got more white marks than black ones—a good many more—a hundred and fifty times as many, kiddie. Fact is, you're all right—'way up among the good boys; though once or twice last summer, you know—"

"Yes, I know," said Little Billee meekly, "but I didn't mean to be naughty."

"That's just what I said to the bookkeeper," said Santa Claus, "and so we gave you a gray mark—half white and half black—that doesn't count either way, for or against you."

"Thank you, sir," said Little Billee, much comforted.

"Don't mention it; you are very welcome, kiddie," said Santa Claus, giving the youngster's hand a gentle squeeze.

"Why do you call me 'kiddie' when you know my name is Little Billee?" asked the boy.

"Oh, that's what I call all good boys," explained Santa Claus. "You see, we divide them up into two kinds—the good boys and the naughty boys—and the good boys we call kiddies, and the naughty boys we call caddies, and there you are."

Just then Little Billee noticed for the first time the square boards that Santa Claus was wearing.

"What are you wearing those boards for, Mr. Santa Claus?" he asked.

If the lad had looked closely enough, he would have seen a very unhappy look come into the old man's face; but there was nothing of it in his answer.

"Oh, those are my new-fangled back-and-chest protectors, my lad," he replied. "Sometimes we have bitter winds blowing at Christmas, and I have to be ready for them. It wouldn't do for Santa Claus to come down with the sneezes at Christmas-time, you know—no, sirree! This board in front keeps the wind off my chest, and the one behind keeps me from getting rheumatism in my back. They are a great protection against the weather."

"I'll have to tell my papa about them," said Little Billee, much impressed by the simplicity of this arrangement. "We have a glass board on the front of our ortymobile to keep the wind off Henry—he's our shuffer—but papa wears a fur coat, and sometimes he says the wind goes right through that. He'll be glad to know about these boards."

"I shouldn't wonder," smiled Santa Claus. "They aren't very becoming, but they are mighty useful. You might save up your pennies and give your papa a pair like 'em for his next Christmas."

Santa Claus laughed as he spoke; but there was a catch in his voice which Little Billee was too young to notice.

"You've got letters printed there," said the boy, peering around in front of his companion at the lettering on the board. "What do they spell? You know I haven't learned to read yet."

"And why should you know how to read at your age?" said Santa Claus. "You're not more than—"

"Five last month," said Little Billee proudly. It was such a great age!

"My, as old as that?" cried Santa Claus. "Well, you are growing fast! Why, it don't seem more than yesterday that you was a pink-cheeked babby, and here you are big enough to be out alone! That's more than my little boy is able to do."

Santa Claus shivered slightly, and Little Billee was surprised to see a tear

glistening in his eye.

"Why, have you got a little boy?" he asked.

"Yes, Little Billee," said the saint. "A poor white-faced little chap, about a year older than you, who—well, never mind, kiddie—he's a kiddie, too—let's talk about something else, or I'll have icicles in my eyes."

"You didn't tell me what those letters on the boards spell," said Little Billee.

"'Merry Christmas to Everybody!'" said Santa Claus. "I have the words printed there so that everybody can see them; and if I miss wishing anybody a merry Christmas, he'll know I meant it just the same."

"You're awful kind, aren't you?" said Little Billee, squeezing his friend's hand affectionately. "It must make you very happy to be able to be so kind to everybody!"

II

Santa Claus made no reply to this remark, beyond giving a very deep sigh, which Little Billee chose to believe was evidence of a great inward content. They walked on now in silence, for Little Billee was beginning to feel almost too tired to talk, and Santa Claus seemed to be thinking of something else. Finally, however, the little fellow spoke.

"I guess I'd like to go home now, Mr. Santa Claus," he said. "I'm tired, and I'm afraid my mama will be wondering where I've gone to."

"That's so, my little man," said Santa Claus, stopping short in his walk up and down the block. "Your mother will be worried, for a fact; and your father, too—I know how I'd feel if my little boy got losted and hadn't come home at dinner-time. I don't believe you know where you live, though—now, honest! Come! 'Fess up, Billee, you don't know where you live, do you?"

"Why, yes, I do," said Little Billee. "It's in the big gray stone house with the iron fence in front of it, near the park."

"Oh, that's easy enough!" laughed Santa Claus nervously. "Anybody could say he lived in a gray stone house with a fence around it, near the park; but you don't know what street it's on, nor the number, either. I'll bet fourteen wooden giraffes against a monkey-on-a-stick!"

"No, I don't," said Little Billee frankly; "but I know the number of our ortymobile. It's 'N. Y.'"

"Fine!" laughed Santa Claus. "If you really were lost, it would be a great help to know that; but not being lost, as you ain't, why, of course, we can get along

without it. It's queer you don't know your last name, though."

"I do, too, know my last name!" blurted Little Billee. "It's Billee. That's the last one they gave me, anyhow."

Santa Claus reflected for a moment, eying the child anxiously.

"I don't believe you even know your papa's name," he said.

"Yes, I do," said Little Billee indignantly. "His name is Mr. Harrison."

"Well, you are a smart little chap," cried Santa Claus gleefully. "You got it right the very first time, didn't you? I really didn't think you knew. But I don't believe you know where your papa keeps his bake-shop, where he makes all those nice cakes and cookies you eat."

Billee began to laugh again.

"You can't fool me, Mr. Santa Claus," he said. "I know my papa don't keep a bake-shop just as well as you do. My papa owns a bank."

"Splendid! Made of tin, I suppose, with a nice little hole at the top to drop pennies into?" said Santa Claus.

"No, it ain't, either!" retorted Little Billee. "It's made of stone, and has more than a million windows in it. I went down there with my mama to papa's office the other day, so I guess I ought to know."

"Well, I should say so," said Santa Claus. "Nobody better. By the way, Billee, what does your mama call your papa? 'Billee,' like you?" he added.

"Oh, no, indeed," returned Little Billee. "She calls him papa, except once in a while when he's going away, and then she says, 'Good-by, Tom.'"

"Fine again!" said Santa Claus, blowing upon his fingers, for, now that the sun had completely disappeared over in the west, it was getting very cold. "Thomas Harrison, banker," he muttered to himself. "What with the telephone-book and the city directory, I guess we can find our way home with Little Billee."

"Do you think we can go now, Mr. Santa Claus?" asked Little Billee, for the cold was beginning to cut through his little coat, and the sandman had started to scatter the sleepy-seeds all around.

"Yes, sirree!" returned Santa Claus promptly. "Right away off now instantly at once! I'm afraid I can't get my reindeer here in time to take us up to the house, but we can go in the cars—hum! I don't know whether we can or not, come to think of it. Ah, do you happen to have ten cents in your pocket?" Santa added with an embarrassed air. "You see, I've left my pocketbook in the sleigh with my toy-pack; and, besides, mine is only toy-money, and they won't take that on the cars."

"I got twenty-fi' cents," said Little Billee proudly, as he dug his way down into his pocket and brought the shining silver piece to light. "You can have it, if you want it."

"Thank you," said Santa Claus, taking the proffered coin. "We'll start home right away; only come in here first, while I telephone to Santaville, telling the folks where I am."

He led the little fellow into a public telephone station, where he eagerly scanned the names in the book. At last it was found—"Thomas Harrison, seven-six-five-four Plaza." And then, in the seclusion of the telephone-booth, Santa Claus sent the gladdest of all Christmas messages over the wire to two distracted parents:

"I have found your boy wandering in the street. He is safe, and I will bring him home right away."

III

Fifteen minutes later, there might have been seen the strange spectacle of a foot-sore Santa Claus leading a sleepy little boy up Fifth Avenue to a cross-street, which shall be nameless. The boy vainly endeavored to persuade his companion to "come in and meet mama."

"No, Billee," the old man replied sadly, "I must hurry back. You see, kiddie, this is my busy day. Besides, I never go into a house except through the chimney. I wouldn't know how to behave, going in at a front door."

But it was not to be as Santa Claus willed, for Little Billee's papa, and his mama, and his brothers and sisters, and the butler and the housemaids, and two or three policemen, were waiting at the front door when they arrived.

"Aha!" said one of the police, seizing Santa Claus roughly by the arm. "We've landed you, all right! Where have you been with this boy?"

"You let him alone!" cried Little Billee, with more courage than he had ever expected to show in the presence of a policeman. "He's a friend of mine."

"That's right, officer," said Little Billee's father; "let him alone—I haven't entered any complaint against this man."

"But you want to look out for these fellers, Mr. Harrison," returned the officer. "First thing you know they'll be makin' a trade of this sort of thing."

"I'm no grafter!" retorted Santa Claus indignantly. "I found the little chap wandering along the street, and, as soon as I was able to locate where he lived, I brought him home. That's all there is to it."

"He knew where I lived all along," laughed Little Billee, "only he pretended he didn't, just to see if I knew."

"You see, sir," said the officer, "it won't do him any harm to let him cool his heels—"

"It is far better that he should warm them, officer," said Mr. Harrison kindly. "And he can do that here. Come in, my man," he added, turning to Santa Claus with a grateful smile. "Just for a minute anyhow. Mrs. Harrison will wish to thank you for bringing our boy back to us. We have had a terrible afternoon."

"That's all right, sir," said Santa Claus modestly. "It wasn't anything, sir. I didn't really find him—it was him as found me, sir. He took me for the real thing, I guess."

Nevertheless, Santa Claus, led by Little Billee's persistent father, went into the house. Now that the boy could see him in the full glare of many electric lights, his furs did not seem the most gorgeous things in the world. When the flapping front of his red jacket flew open, the child was surprised to see how ragged was the thin gray coat it covered; and as for the good old saint's comfortable stomach—strange to say, it was not!

"I—I wish you all a merry Christmas," faltered Santa Claus; "but I really must be going, sir—"

"Nonsense!" cried Mr. Harrison. "Not until you have got rid of this chill, and —"

"I can't stay, sir," said Santa. "I'll lose my job if I do."

"Well, what if you do? I'll give you a better one," said the banker.

"I can't—I can't!" faltered the man. "I—I—I've got a Little Billee of my own at home waitin' for me, sir. If I hadn't," he added fiercely, "do you suppose I'd be doin' this?" He pointed at the painted boards, and shuddered. "It's him as has kept me from—from the river!" he muttered hoarsely; and then this dispenser of happiness to so many millions of people all the world over sank into a chair, and, covering his face with his hands, wept like a child.

"I guess Santa Claus is tired, papa," said Little Billee, snuggling up closely to the old fellow and taking hold of his hand sympathetically. "He's been walkin' a lot to-day."

"Yes, my son," said Mr. Harrison gravely. "These are very busy times for Santa Claus, and I guess that, as he still has a hard night ahead of him, James had better ring up Henry and tell him to bring the car around right away, so that we may take him back—to his little boy. We'll have to lend him a fur coat to keep the wind off, too, for it is a bitter night."

"Oh," said Little Billee, "I haven't told you about these boards he wears. He

has 'em to keep the wind off, and they're fine, papa!" Little Billee pointed to the two sign-boards which Santa Claus had leaned against the wall. "He says he uses 'em on cold nights," the lad went on. "They have writing on 'em, too. Do you know what it says?"

"Yes," said Mr. Harrison, glancing at the boards. "It says 'If You Want a Good Christmas Dinner for a Quarter, Go to Smithers's Café.'"

Little Billee roared with laughter.

"Papa's trying to fool me, just as you did when you pretended not to know where I lived, Santa Claus," he said, looking up into the old fellow's face, his own countenance brimming over with mirth. "You mustn't think he can't read, though," the lad added hastily. "He's only joking."

"Oh, no, indeed, I shouldn't have thought that," replied Santa Claus, smiling through his tears.

"I've been joking, have I?" said Little Billee's papa. "Well, then, Mr. Billiam, suppose you inform me what it says on those boards."

"'Merry Christmas to Everybody,'" said Little Billee proudly. "I couldn't read it myself, but he told me what it said. He has it printed there so that if he misses saying it to anybody, they'll know he means it just the same."

"By Jove, Mr. Santa Claus," cried Little Billee's papa, grasping the old man warmly by the hand, "I owe you ten million apologies! I haven't believed in you for many a long year; but now, sir, I take it all back. You do exist, and, by the great horn spoon, you are the real thing!"

IV

Little Billee had the satisfaction of acting as host to Santa Claus at a good, luscious dinner, which Santa Claus must have enjoyed very much, because, when explaining why he was so hungry, it came out that the poor old chap had been so busy all day that he had not had time to get any lunch—no, not even one of those good dinners at Smithers's café, to which Little Billee's father had jokingly referred. And after dinner Henry came with the automobile, and, bidding everybody good night, Santa Claus and Little Billee's papa went out of the house together.

Christmas morning dawned, and Little Billee awoke from wonderful dreams of rich gifts, and of extraordinary adventures with his new-found friend, to find the reality quite as splendid as the dream things. Later, what was his delight when a small boy, not much older than himself—a pale, thin, but playful little fellow—arrived at the house to spend the day with him, bringing

with him a letter from Santa Claus himself! This was what the letter said:

DEAR LITTLE BILLEE:—You must not tell anybody except your papa and your mama, but the little boy who brings you this letter is my little boy, and I am going to let you have him for a playfellow for Christmas Day. Treat him kindly for his papa's sake, and if you think his papa is worth loving tell him so. Do not forget me, Little Billee. I shall see you often in the future, but I doubt if you will see me. I am not going to return to Twenty-Third Street again, but shall continue my work in the Land of Yule, in the Palace of Good-Will, whose beautiful windows look out upon the homes of all good children.

Good-by, Little Billee, and the happiest of happy Christmases to you and all of yours.

Affectionately,

SANTA CLAUS.

When Little Billee's mama read this to him that Christmas morning, a stray little tear ran down her cheek and fell upon Little Billee's hand.

"Why, what are you crying for, mama?" he asked.

"With happiness, my dear little son," his mother answered. "I was afraid yesterday that I might have lost my little boy forever, but now—"

"You have an extra one thrown in for Christmas, haven't you?" said Little Billee, taking his new playmate by the hand. The visitor smiled back at him with a smile so sweet that anybody might have guessed that he was the son of Santa Claus.

As for the latter, Little Billee has not seen him again; but down at his father's bank there is a new messenger, named John, who has a voice so like Santa Claus's voice that whenever Little Billee goes down there in the motor to ride home at night with his papa, he runs into the bank and has a long talk with him, just for the pleasure of pretending that it is Santa Claus he is talking to. Indeed, the voice is so like that once a sudden and strange idea flashed across Little Billee's mind.

"Have you ever been on Twenty-Third Street, John?" he asked.

"Twenty-Third Street?" replied the messenger, scratching his head as if very much puzzled. "What's that?"

"Why, it's a street," said Little Billee rather vaguely.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Billee," said John, "I've heard tell of Twenty-Third Street, and they say it is a very beautiful and interesting spot. But, you know, I don't get much chance to travel. I've been too busy all my life to go abroad."

"Abroad!" roared Little Billee, grinning at John's utterly absurd mistake. "Why, Twenty-Third Street ain't abroad! It's up-town—near—oh, near—

Twenty-Second Street."

"Really?" returned John, evidently tremendously surprised. "Well, well, well! Who'd have thought that? Well, if that's the case, some time when I get a week off I'll have to go and spend my vacation there!"

From which Little Billee concluded that his suspicion that John might be Santa Claus in disguise was entirely without foundation in fact.

CHRISTMAS EVE

Slyly twinkling in the skies,Peeping from the Heaven's blue,Are a million starry eyesSmiling, Sweetheart, down on you;Peeping through the misty gauzeFrom their little homes aboveWhile we wait for Santa ClausWith his gifts of Cheer and Love.Hush-a-by, my Baby O!Santa Claus is on the way,And his sledges overflowWith the sweets of Christmas Day.Lull-a-by!Hush-a-by, my Baby O.

Santa Claus is coming byWith his pack of pretty toys.Fast his speedy rein-deer flyWith their load of Christmas joys.Now they flit across the moon,Now they flicker o'er the gold—We shall hear their patter soonOn the roof-tops crisp and cold.Hush-a-by, my Baby O!Soon will sound the merry hornThat will usher in the glowOf the golden Christmas morn.Lull-a-by!Hush-a-by, my Baby O.

Meet him half-way, Baby dear—Join the jolly pranksome bandOf the Elf-men with their cheerWaiting there in Slumberland.Santa Claus must come alongThrough the dreamy vales of Sleep.There with all the Fairy throngLet us too our vigil keep.Hush-a-by, my Baby O.Haste to Slumberland away,Where the Fairy children goOn the Eve of Christmas Day.Lull-a-by!Hush-a-by, my Baby O.

THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN SANTAS

FOR once the weather bureau had scored a good, clean hit. The bull's-eye was pierced squarely in the middle, and the promised blizzard falling upon the city at noon held the metropolis completely in its grip. Everything in the line of public transportation in and out of the town was tied up so tightly that it did not seem possible that it would ever be unraveled again. The snow was piling waist high upon the streets, and the cutting winds played their fantastic pranks with a chill and cruel persistence.

It was with great difficulty that Dobbleigh made his way into the Grand

Central Railway Station. Like other suburban commuters at Christmas time, he was heavily laden with bundles of one kind and another. He fairly oozed packages. They stuck out of the pockets of his heavy ulster. A half dozen fastened together with a heavy cord he carried in his right hand, and some were slung about his shoulders, and held there by means of a leathern strap. The real truth was that Dobbleigh had been either too busy, or had forgotten the wise resolutions of the autumn, and had failed to do his Christmas shopping early, with the result that now, on Christmas Eve, he was returning to the little Dobbleighs with a veritable Santa Claus' pack, whose contents were designed to delight their eyes in the early hours of the coming morning.

It was with a great sense of relief that he entered the vast waiting room of the station, and shook the accumulated snow from his coat, and removed the infant icicles from his eyes, but his joy was short-lived. Making his way to the door, he paused to wish the venerable doorman a Merry Christmas.

"Fierce night, Hawkins," he said, as he readjusted his packages. "I shall be glad enough to get home."

The old man shook his head dubiously.

"I'm afraid you won't enjoy that luxury to-night, Mr. Dobbleigh," he said. "We haven't been able to get a train out of here since one o'clock, and the way things look now there won't be any business at this stand for twenty-four hours, even if we have luck."

"What's that?" returned Dobbleigh. "You don't mean to say—"

"No trains out to-night, sir," said the doorman. "The line's out of commission from here to Buffalo, anyhow, and nobody knows what's going on west of there. The wires are down, and we're completely shut off from the world."

Dobbleigh gave a long, low whistle.

"By Jove, Hawkins," he muttered ruefully. "That's tough."

"Kind o' hard on the kiddies, eh?" said the old doorman sympathetically.

"Mighty hard," said Dobbleigh, with a catch in his voice. "No chance of anything—not even a freight?" he went on anxiously.

"Couldn't pull a feather through with thirty locomotives," was the disheartening response. "I guess it's the hotel for yours to-night, sir."

Dobbleigh turned away, and pondered deeply for a few moments. Taking care of himself for the night was not, under the circumstances, a very difficult proposition, for his club was not far away, so that he was not confronted with the uncomfortable prospectof sleeping on the benches of the railway station, but the idea of the little Dobbleighs not finding their treasures awaiting them on the morrow, to say nothing of the anxiety of Mrs. Dobbleigh over his non-

arrival, was, to say the least, disconcerting.

"Oh, well," he said philosophically, after going over the pros and cons of the situation carefully, "what's the use of worrying? What must be must be, and I'll have to make the best of it."

He buttoned his heavy coat up snugly about his neck, and, seizing his bundles with a firmer grip, wished the old doorman a good night, and went out again into the storm. Fifteen minutes later, looking more like a snowman than an ordinary human being, he entered the club, and, if it be true that misery finds comfort in company, he was not doomed to go without consolation. There were five other fellow-sufferers there trying to make the best of it.

"Hello, Dobby," cried his friend and neighbor, Grantham. "What's happened to you—an eighteen-karat family man spending his Christmas Eve at a club? Shame on you!"

"I am duly repentant, Gran," replied Dobbleigh, "but you see, as your neighbor, I felt it my duty to keep an eye on you this night. There are hobgoblins in the air. Why are you not at home in the bosom of your family yourself?"

"The walking is too bad," said Grantham. "And, besides, that confounded valet of mine forgot to put my snowshoes in my suit-case."

"They say the river is frozen solid all the way up," put in Billie Ricketts, who is a good deal of a wag, as all old bachelors are apt to be. "Why don't you fellows skate home?"

"I tried it," smiled Grantham, "but the wind is blowing down the river, and I live up. I hadn't been going more than two hours when I landed on Staten Island."

In this way the exiles strove to comfort each other, and on the surface succeeded, but inwardly a very miserable lot they were. Clubs have their attractions, but we have not yet succeeded in developing an institution of that kind which is a fair substitute for the home fireside on a Christmas Eve. Even the most confirmed old bachelor will confess to you that, way down deep in his heart, the comforts of such organizations seem cheerless and cold in contrast to the visions of smiling hearthstones and merry gatherings of happy children, that come to them in their dreams.

"You've got some bundle there, Dobby," said Grantham, as Dobbleigh relieved himself of his burden of packages. "What are you going to do, open a department store?"

"Huh!" ejaculated Ricketts. "You're a fine fellow to talk. Ought to have seen Gran when he staggered in here an hour ago, Dobby. I thought at first he was a branch office of the American Express Company—honest I did. Talk about

your bundle trust—Gran had the market cornered."

"Well, why shouldn't I have?" demanded Grantham. "Haven't I got five of the finest kids that ever climbed a Christmas tree?"

"Nope," said Dobbleigh, with an air of conviction. "Your five are dandies, Gran, but you ought to see my six."

"I've seen 'em," said Grantham, "and I'll give every blessed one of 'em honorable mention as high-steppers and thoroughbreds, but when it comes to the real thing—well, my five are blue-ribbon kids all right, all right."

"How you fathers do brag about little things!" snorted Ricketts. "You two braggarts can roll your eleven into one, and the aggregate wouldn't be a marker to what my children would be if I had any. I've half a mind to give up my state of single blessedness, just to show you vainglorious chaps what—"

Just what Ricketts was going to show the assembled gathering the world will never be able to do more than guess, for he was not permitted to finish the sentence. It was at this precise point that Doctor Mallerby, shedding snow from his broad, burly figure at every step, staggered into the room, and, with a scant greeting to his friends, hastened to the blazing log fire on the club hearth, and kneeling before it, began unwrapping a bundle of some size that he, too, carried in his arms.

"What on earth have you got there, doctor?" cried Ricketts, craning his neck over the newcomer's shoulder. "One of these new character dolls?"

"No, Billie, no," said Mallerby, fumbling away at the bundle. "I wish to Heaven it were. Can't you see, old man—it's the real thing!"

"The real what?" said Ricketts, bending lower.

"The real thing," returned Mallerby, in a low voice. "A poor little tot of a newsboy—"

"Where on earth did you pick him up?" gasped Ricketts, as the others gathered around.

"Out of the storm," said Mallerby. "I found him huddled up in the vestibule of Colonel Mortimer's when I came out of the house ten minutes ago. The poor little devil was curled up almost into a knot, trying to keep warm, and lay there fast asleep, with his papers under his arm. I honestly believe that if I hadn't come out when I did it would have been too late. This is a fierce storm."

"He isn't—he isn't frozen, is he?" faltered Dobbleigh, as he gazed into the blue little face of the unconscious urchin, a face grimy with the frequent mixture of two dirty little fists and his tears.

"Not quite," said Mallerby. "I think I got him in time, and he'll pull through, but he had a mighty close call of it. By George, boys, just think of a wee bit of

a tot like that, barely more than six years old, having to be out on a night like this! Why, the poor little cuss ought to be dreaming of Santa Claus in a nice warm bed somewhere, instead of picking pennies out of these arctic streets of ours, in order to keep body and soul together."

Warmed by the glow of the fire, the youngster stirred as the doctor spoke, and a weary little voice, scarce higher than a whisper, broke the stillness of the room:

"Extree! Bigges' blizzid in twenty years. Extree! Piper, sir?"

The seven sophisticated men of the world, gathered about the prostrate figure, stood silent, and three of them turned away, lest the others should see the unmanly moisture of their eyes.

"Here, by thunder!" gasped Ricketts, pulling a roll of bills from his pocket. "Hanged if I won't buy the whole edition."

"That's all right, Billie," smiled the doctor. "What he needs just now is something less cold than money. We'll take him upstairs, and give him a warm bath, fill his little stomach up with milk, and put him to bed, with a nice fuzzy blanket to thaw out his icy little legs."

"Splendid!" said Ricketts. "But, see here, doctor, I want to be in on this. Isn't there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes," said the doctor. "You might make this proceeding regular by putting him up as your guest on a ten-day card."

The little bundle of rags and humanity was tenderly carried to the regions above, and under the almost womanly ministrations of Doctor Mallerby was completely restored to cleanliness and warmth; what hunger he might have been conscious of was assuaged by a great bumper of milk, and then in the most sumptuous apartment the club was able to provide the thawed-out little gamin was put to bed.

The snowy sheets, the soft, downy pillows, and the soul-warming blankets, were not needed to lure him into the land of dreams, for the bitter experiences of the earlier hours of the night still weighed heavily upon his eyelids, even if his mind and heart were no longer conscious of them. He presented a most appealing picture as he lay there, after settling back with a deep-drawn sigh of content into the kindly embrace of a bed seven or eight sizes too big for him, his little legs scarcely reaching halfway to the middle, and his tousled head of red hair forming a rubricated spot on the milk-white pillow-case as it stuck up out of the bed-clothes, and lay comfortably back in what was probably the first soft nest it had known since it lay on its mother's breast—if, indeed, it had ever known that rare felicity.

"There," said the doctor, as the little foundling, with a suspicion of a smile on

his pursed-up lips, wandered more deeply into the land of Nod. "I guess he's fixed for the night, anyhow, and the rest of us can go about our business."

The seven men tiptoed softly out of the room, and adjourned to the spacious chambers below, where for an hour they tried to lose themselves in the chaos of bridge. They were all fairly expert players at that noble social obsession, but nobody would have guessed it that night. No party of beginners ever played quite so atrociously, and yet no partner was found sufficiently outraged to be acrimonious. The fact was that not one of them was able to keep his mind on the cards, the thoughts of every one of them reverting constantly to the wan little figure in that upper room.

Finally Dobbleigh, after having reneged twice, and trumped his partner's trick more than once, threw down his cards, and drew away from the table impatiently.

"It's no use, fellows," he said. "I can't keep my eye on the ball. I'm going to bed."

"Same here," said Ricketts. "Every blessed face card in this pack—queen, king, or jack—is a red-headed little newsboy to me, and every spade is a heart. It's me for Slumberland."

So the party broke up, and within an hour the clubhouse went dark. Doctor Mallerby assumed possession of a single room adjoining that of their little guest, so that he might keep an eye upon his newly acquired patient through the night, and the others distributed themselves about on the upper floors.

At midnight all was still as a sylvan dell in the depths of a winter's night, when no sounds of birds, or of rustling leaves, or of babbling waters break in upon the quiet of the scene.

It was three o'clock in the morning when Doctor Mallerby was roused suddenly from his sleep by the sound of stealthy footsteps in the adjoining room, where the little sleeper lay. He rose hastily from his couch, and entered the room, and was much surprised to see, in the dim light of the hall lamp, no less a person than Dobbleigh, acting rather suspiciously, too.

"Hullo, what are you up to, Dobby?" he queried, in a low whisper, as he espied that worthy, clad in a bath robe of too ample proportions, stealing out of the room.

"Why—nothing, Mallerby, nothing," replied Dobbleigh, evidently much embarrassed. "I—er—I just thought I'd run down, and see how the little chap was getting along. I'm something of a father myself, you know."

"What's all this?" continued the doctor, as his eye fell upon a number of strange-looking objects spread along the foot of the bed, far beyond the reach of the little toes of the sleeper—a book of rhymes with a gorgeous red cover; a

small tin trumpet, with a pleasing variety of stops; a box of tin soldiers; and a complete rough-rider's outfit, sword, cap, leggings, and blouse; not to mention an assortment of other things well calculated to delight the soul of youth.

"Why," faltered Dobbleigh, his face turning as red as the flag of anarchy, "you see, I happened to have these things along with me, Mallerby—for my own kiddies, you know—and it sort of seemed a pity not to get some use out of them on Christmas morning, and so—Oh, well, you know, old man."

The hand of the doctor gripped that of the intruder, and he tried to assure him that he did know, but he couldn't. He choked up, and was about to turn away when the door began moving slowly upon its hinges once more, and Grantham entered, quite as much after the fashion of the stealthy-footed criminal as Dobbleigh. He, too, carried a variety of packages, and under each arm was a tightly packed golf stocking. He started back as he saw Dobbleigh and the doctor standing by the bedside, but it was too late. They had caught him in the act.

"Ah, Grantham," said Dobbleigh, with a grin. "Giving an imitation of a second-story man, eh? What are you going to do with those two stuffed clubs? Sandbag somebody?"

"Yes," said Grantham sheepishly. "I've had it in for the doctor for some time, and I thought I'd sneak down and give him one while he slept."

"All right, Granny," smiled the doctor. "Just hang your clubs on the foot of the bed here, and after I've got to sleep again, come in, and perpetrate the dastardly deed."

"Fact is, boys," said Grantham seriously, "these things I was taking home to my youngsters are going to waste under the circumstances, and I had an idea it wouldn't hurt our guest here to wake up just once to a real Santa Claus feast."

"Fine!" said the doctor. "Looks to me as if this youngster had thrown doubles. Dobby here has already fitted him out with a complete army, and various other things, too numerous to mention."

"Why, look who's here!" cried Dobbleigh, interrupting the doctor, as the door swung open a third time, and Seymour appeared, his raiment consisting of a blanket and a pair of carpet slippers, causing him in the dim light to give the impression of an Indian on the warpath. "By Jove, Tommy," he added, "all you need is a tomahawk in one hand, and a bunch of wooden cigars in the other, to pass for the puller-in of a tobacco shop. What are you after, sneaking in here like old Sitting Bull, at this unholy hour of the morning? After the kid's scalp?"

"Why, you see, Dobby," replied Seymour, revealing a soft, furry cap and a pair of gloves that looked as if they had just been pulled off the paws of a bear cub,

"I happened to be taking these things home for my boy Jim—he's daft on skating, and it's cold as the dickens up at Blairsport—but Jimmie can wait until New Year's for his, I guess. It came over me all of a sudden, while I was trying to get to sleep upstairs, that our honored guest might find them useful."

"Look at those chapped little fists," said the doctor. "That's your answer, Seymour!"

"They're his, all right," said Seymour, sitting on the side of the bed, and comparing the gloves with the red little hands that lay inert on the counterpane. "By Jove!" he muttered, as he took one of the diminutive hands in his own. "They're like sandpaper."

"Selling papers in winter doesn't give these babies exactly the sort of paddies you'd expect to find on a mollycoddle," said the doctor.

And so, here in the House of the Seven Santas, things went for the next hour. One by one all the prisoners of the night, with the exception of Ricketts, dropped in surreptitiously, to find that the ideas of each were common to them all, and the little mite under the bedclothes was destined soon to emerge from the riches of his dreams into a reality even richer and more substantial. The varied giftswere ranged about the foot of the bed, the golf stockings bulging with sweets were hung at its head, and the big-hearted donors retired, this time to that real sleep which comes to him who has had the satisfaction of some kindly deed to look back upon.

"Poor Ricketts!" sighed the doctor, as he noted the one absentee. "How much these old bachelors lose at this season of the year!"

Two hours later, just as the first rays of the dawn began to light up the guest room, its small occupant opened his eyes, and began rubbing them violently with his fists.

"Chee!" was his first utterance, and then he sat up and gazed about him. His unfamiliar surroundings naturally puzzled him, and a look of childish wonder came over his face. "Where'm I at?" he muttered. "Guess diss must be dat Heaven place de guys down to de mission talks about."

He clambered out of bed, and as he did so his eyes took in the wondrous array of gifts spread before him.

"Well, whad'd'yer know about dat?" he muttered. "What kind of a choint is diss, anyhow?"

As he attempted to walk across the room his small feet became entangled in the flowing skirt of Mallerby's bath robe, which he wore in lieu of a nightshirt.

"Dat's it," he said, as he tripped, and stumbled to the floor. "I'm dead, dat's what I am—and dese is my anchel clo'es. Chee, but dey's hard to walk in. Seems to me I'd radder have me pants."

In a moment he had regained his feet, and the marvelous variety of toys began to reveal themselves in detail to his astounded vision.

"Will yer pipe de layout!" he gasped ecstatically. "Wonder what kid's goin' to have de luck to draw dem in his socks?"

And just then the door opened again, and a sleepy-eyed old bachelor came stealing in, in the person of Ricketts. He wore his pajamas, and a yellow mackintosh thrown over his shoulders.

"Good morning, kiddie," he said, closing the door softly behind him. "Merry Christmas to you!"

"Merry Chrissmus yerself!" smiled the youngster. "Say, mister, kin yer tell me where I'm at? Diss ain't like my reg'lar lodgin' house, and I must ha' got in wrong somehow."

"Where is your regular lodging house?" asked Ricketts, seating himself on the side of the bed.

"Oh, any old place where dere's room fer me an' me feet at de same time," replied the boy. "Packin' boxes mostly in de winter-time, and de docks in de summer."

"But your parents?" demanded Ricketts. "Where are they?"

"Me what?" asked the boy.

"Your parents—your father and mother?" explained Ricketts.

"I ain't never had no mudder," said the boy. "But me fadder—well, me an' him had a scrap over me wages las' summer, and I ain't seen him since."

"Your wages, eh?" smiled Ricketts. The idea of this little tad earning wages struck him as being rather humorous.

"He t'ought I ought to give him de whole wad," said the boy, "and when he licked me for spendin' a nickel on meself and a fr'en' o' mine las' Fourth o' July, I give him de skidoo."

"I see," said Ricketts, regarding the little guest with a singular light in his eye. "You've got a fine lot of stuff here from old Santa Claus, haven't you?"

"What, me?" asked the boy, gazing earnestly into Ricketts' face. "Is dese here t'ings for me?"

"Why, of course," said Ricketts. "Old Daddy Santa Claus on his rounds last night found you occupying a handsome apartment on Fifth Avenue, but the steam heat had been turned off, and, fearing you might catch cold, he picked you up and brought you to his own home. He'd been looking for you all day."

"And dese is—really—fer me?" cried the child.

"Every blessed stick and shred of them," said Ricketts fervently.

The boy squatted flat upon the floor, completely staggered by the sudden revelation of his wealth.

"Chee!" was all he could think of to say.

And then began a romp through a veritable toyland, in which two lonely wanderers through the vales of life had the first taste of joys they had never known before; the red-headed little son of the streets getting the first glimpse of kindness that his starved little soul had ever enjoyed; the confirmed old bachelor finding the only outlet that fate had ever vouchsafed him for those instincts of fatherhood which are the priceless heritage of us all.

Small wonder that the play waxed fast, furious, and noisy. The lad, up to this time confronted ever with the pressing necessities of life, developed a capacity for play that was all the more intense for the privations of his limited years; the bachelor finding the dam of his pent-up feelings loosened into an overwhelming flood of pure joyousness. There were cries of joy, and shrieks of laughter, and when, with some difficulty, because of his lack of experience, Ricketts finally succeeded in getting the lad arrayed in his rough-rider suit, whose buckles and buttons seemed aggravatingly small for hands that had developed nothing but thumbs, the tin trumpet, with all the stops save the one that would silence it even temporarily, was brought into play; and the battles that were fought in the ensuing hour between a noble army of warriors, led by the youngster against himself as either a Spanish army or a wild Indian tribe, have no equals in the annals of warfare.

The morning was pretty well advanced when the other sleeping Santas were roused from their dreams by shouts of victory, to be confronted upon investigation by a prostrate enemy, in the person of Ricketts, lying face downward upon the floor, with a diminutive rough-rider standing upon the small of his back, waving a nickel sword in the air, while he blew ear-splitting blasts upon his trumpet to announce the arrival of the conqueror.

"Well, well, well!" said Doctor Mallerby, with a loud laugh, as he and the others burst into the room. "What's going on? Another San Juan Hill?"

"The same," panted Ricketts, from his coign of disadvantage. "And I'm the hill. All that remains now is for some of you fellows to hurry up, and get a bath towel from somewhere, and hoist the flag of truce."

The morning passed, and the storm showing some signs of abatement, the exiled men began to cherish hopes of getting home before night. Communication with the railway station elicited the gratifying news that about four o'clock in the afternoon a train would be sent forth to carry the marooned suburbanites back to the scenes of their domestic desires.

Meanwhile, the honored guest received to the full all the attention of which the Seven Santas were capable; only in making up for the lost playtime of the past

the guest proved to be untiring, while the Seven Santas were compelled now and then to work in relays in order to keep up with the game.

Hence it was that at various hours of the day dignified business men were to be seen squatting upon the floor, irrespective of that dignity, running iron cars over tin railway tracks, arranging the serried ranks of tin soldiers in battle array, answering strident summonses to battle sounded on that everlasting tin trumpet, and, strange to say, joining their young friend in feasts of candy and other digestion-destroying sweets which they had forever eschewed long years before.

"I suppose I'll suffer for this," said Grantham, as at the command of his superior officer he swallowed the handle of a peppermint walking stick, after fletcherizing it carefully for several minutes, "but, by ginger, it's worth it."

"You'll be all right, Gran," laughed the doctor. "If worst comes to the worst, I'll blow you to a pony of ipecac, unless you prefer squills."

But at last even the strenuous nature of the guest began to show signs of the day's inroads upon his strength, and when the hour for the departure of the suburbanites came shortly before four, and they all gathered around to bid him their adieus, they were hardly surprised to find him cuddled up on the bearskin rug before the fire, fast asleep, with his tin trumpet hugged tightly to his breast.

"We're a great lot!" said Dobbleigh suddenly. "We can't all go off, and leave him here alone. What the dickens are we going to do?"

"Don't bother," said Ricketts, from the depths of the lounge, where he had been trying for some minutes to get a much-needed rest. "I—I—er—I haven't anything on hand, boys. Leave him to me. I'll take care of him."

"I move we all meet here to-morrow," said Grantham, "and see what's to be done with the kid."

Ricketts rose up from the lounge, and started to speak, but he was interrupted by the doctor.

"Did any of you think to ask the little tad his name?" he inquired.

"That's where I come in, boys," said Ricketts. "You needn't bother your heads about his name or his to-morrow—I'll take care of both. You men have provided him with the joys of to-day—pretty substantial joys, too, as those of us who have helped him to enjoy them can testify. As a hearthless old bachelor, bundleless and forlorn, I was unable to qualify on the toy end of things, but when it comes to names, I'll give him one as my contribution to his Christmas possessions."

"Good for you, Billie!" laughed Dobbleigh. "Would you mind telling us what it is to be, so that we can put him on our visiting lists?"

"Not in the least," returned Ricketts, with an affectionate glance at the boy. "He is to be known henceforth as William Ricketts, Junior."

"William Ricketts, Junior?" cried the others, almost in one voice.

"Precisely," said Ricketts, turning and facing them. "From now on you fellows will have to quit putting it all over me because you have children, and I haven't. I've come into a ready-made family—rather unexpectedly, but there it is. It's mine, and I'm going to keep it. I've been without one too long, and after what I have tasted this day I find that I have acquired a thirst for paternity that can never be cured. To-morrow I propose to adopt our small guest here formally by due process of law."

"But where do we come in on this?" cried Grantham. "It's bully of you, old man, but we can't permit you to shoulder the whole burden of this boy's—"

"Shut up, Gran!" retorted Ricketts, with an affectation of fine scorn. "You and the rest of this bunch are nothing but a lot of blooming uncles. And by the way, gentlemen," he added, with a courtly bow, "I thank you all from the bottom of my heart for your kindness to my son. Good night."

And with that, six of the exiles passed out into the twilight, and hurried back to their own firesides, leaving Ricketts to his own.

And that is why, too, that the club servants, when they came to make their rounds that night before turning out the lights, were surprised to find old Billie Ricketts lying fast asleep in the warm embrace of one of the richly upholstered armchairs of the lounging room, before the blazing log fire on the hearth, with a mite of a boy curled up in his lap, his little red head snuggled close to the manly chest of his protector, and a happy little smile upon his lips, that showed that his dreams were sweet, and that in those arms he felt himself secure from the trials of life.

There was that upon the faces of both that gave the watchers pause, and they refrained from waking them, merely turning out the electric lights, and tiptoeing softly out of the room, leaving the sleepers bathed in the mellow glow of the dancing flames.

Two lonely hearts had come into their own in the House of the Seven Santas!

THE END.