

Santa Claus Sweetheart

By Imogen Clark

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Our readers will be interested in this delightful and timely Christmas story which we have secured for publication during the Yuletide season.

Chapter I.
Enter Santa Claus.

TERRY O'CONNOR always declared he was born under a happy star, and he also maintained that at the time of his coming into the world it had danced for very joy. This statement, which, no matter how much others might doubt but could not dispute, he had direct from his mother's mother, who was present on that most auspicious occasion and had observed the unusual conduct of the stellar body from the window. And, moreover, as if to establish quite conclusively the connection between the shining meridian in the skies and the advent of the little child on earth, the first thing the baby did was to smile. Old Mrs. Mulcahey knew what she was talking of. She had seen many newborn children in her time, and all of them, with the exception of her small and only grandchild, had worn such doleful countenances that a less hopeful person than herself would have been cast into despair. Whether that dazzling, dancing star had blinded her eyes or had given them a truer vision, who shall say? She had seen—what she had seen! A little joyful slip of humanity come valiantly in to this world of trouble equipped from the outset with the sign royal of a light heart.

It was the humblest of cradles. But to it, as to all cradles—so runs the old belief—had trooped, unseen, the good fairies with their gifts, and hither also had come the wicked fairy, who is seldom absent at such times and whose malignant generosity mars all the gracious giving, making possession only too often of doubtful value. Here, as elsewhere, she wreaked her evil will so that the little child grew to be a man known through the countryside as a good for naught. That was the extent of her work, however. She was powerless to prevent another testimony. He was also known as a kindly, happy go lucky fellow, his own worst enemy, but the friend of all the world. Such was the record of five and sixty years, and such it would be to the end.

Terry dragged his squirrel cap closely down about his ears and pulled the collar of his fur coat up to meet it shutting out the shouts that rose from the group of



Idlers gathered around the roaring fire in Wistar's tavern. Not even Ulysses on that memorable voyage of his past the sirens ever strove so vigorously to dull his hearing as did this little commonplace man, who was generally in thrall to his own pleasures. In spite of the laughter which reached him in faint bursts he strode solemnly to the door and let himself out into the still, white world. For a moment his will, nerved as it seldom was, faltered. Back of him, through the open door, he could see the gleaming eye of the fire winking and blinking in friendly wise. The grinning human faces turned his way, joyful as they were, were alluring, but the knowledge that the morrow would be Christmas and his rude sleigh contained what would go to the needs and also to the meager pleasuring of the shanty men at Thornby's logging camp, as well as another and still more potent thought, lent an unusual

firmness to his step. He was not sure of himself even then, however, though he cleared the distance with a bound which landed him in the center of his waiting sleigh and shook out the reins with a wild halloo that startled the placid old horses and made them whirl forward on the frozen road with the friskiness of youth. The noise of the hurried departure brought the men within the tavern running to the open door, to stand there bareheaded, gazing at the diminishing speck which they knew—and did not know. A man of determination, surely, and hitherto their acquaintance had been with one who never could say "no," or a quarter of a "no," on any occasion—the real Terry O'Connor.

Meanwhile, as the sorry looking nags sobered down to their everyday gait, the man back of them knew which was the real self. His own conduct, despite the fact that he held its key, had surprised him even more than it



His Voice Rang Out Loud and Far-reaching.

had his companions, and as his thoughts turned longingly to the spot he had just quitted he let his grasp slacken on the reins. It was better that the horses should take their own way for awhile. He could not quite trust himself. Presently, however, when no backward glance revealed the tavern and all around the country lay wrapped in the white silence of winter, he gathered the lines more firmly between his fingers and called a jovial word of encouragement. His voice rang out loud and far-reaching—the only sound to break the stillness save the monotonous singsong of the sleigh bells that struck a vibrant note on the clear air and the sharp crunching of the hardened snow under the passing hoofs. Another man in Terry's place, doing his duty against his inclination, would have performed the task stolidly if there were no one by to applaud his action and recognize what a fine fellow he was. With Terry it was different. Once starting out to do a thing he carried his own lightness of heart into the matter, which was probably the result of being born under a happy star.

There were other reasons in this instance besides the performance of his duty to make Terry happy. He had never heard that duty done in the soul's fireside. Indeed, had he been consulted on the subject he would have frankly cast his vote for Wistar's fireside, with the hot toddy going around at blessed intervals, rather than for any warmth that might come from his soul because of his own well doing. He knew little of his soul and cared less. That was something, according to him, to be reserved for the time when illness or old age should overtake him. At present, with his lusty health and his gay heart that was bubbling over with youth despite his years, he disregarded the acquaintance entirely. He had turned his face resolutely toward the north, and to the north he would go, though first the provisions would be duly left at the camp. But he had no intention of remaining there himself. A glass of grog, another—they could scarcely offer him less than two!—and he would be away again. Like a beacon, out of the distance, beckoning to him was the jollity up at Merle. It was there he meant to keep the Christmas eve vigil and, moreover, win the bet Narcisse Velin had made. For Narcisse, smarting under what he termed "a slight to hees honor," had declared that Terry would never be able to leave Wistar's tavern and the jolly crowd assembled there, and the shanty men would be obliged to do without their Christmas cheer because they had chosen so unworthy a bearer instead of a more capable man—he would mention no names—and then, with an evil laugh, he had made a heavy wager that his words would come true.

Terry shivered momentarily under his furs, though he was so well wrapped up that the cold was powerless to reach him. How nearly had Narcisse been right, how nearly had he, Terry O'Connor, been the loser! The grog was so good at Wistar's, and Baptiste, the most famous story teller of them all, had just come in with a new and wonderful adventure at his tongue's end, and the glow of the fire was like a gentle hand soothing one into forgetfulness. Then suddenly he

had remembered the packed sleigh without, with Danny and Whitefoot waiting patiently, though mournfully shaking their bells from time to time to remind him of themselves, of his duty and, more than all, of Narcisse. The latter thought was the real spur to goad him out of the ease into which he had fallen. So he had left the tavern, and the surprise his action had caused filled him with great glee.

"They'll niver be t'rough talkin' av it," he chuckled aloud, "niver! They'll say whin they tell their shories 'twas the year, ye mind, whin Terry, the little jool av a man, wudn't stay along wid us, though we besached most be gullin'. An' the grog was that edifyin' 'twas its own monymint. He wint out into the piercin' cold, did that brave little felly!" Terry's chest swelled with pardonable pride—"because he'd passed his say so. He's a square sowl, is the lad, though there do be some av-minded folks as give out that he an' his promises don't walk on the same side av the way—now the howly saints forgive him!" He flapped the reins on the horses' backs.

"Hi, there, me byes!" he shouted. "Tis a fine supper ye'll be havin', an' Narcisse Velin will be aft'er payin' the score. Kape a-goin', me beauties. The moon will be up whin we get into Merle, an' ye'll be droppin' wid fatigue. But—aisy, now, aisy—there won't be anny work tomorry, childer. Oh, jist ye wait an' see! They'll be aft'er thinkin' we ain't comin', an' Narcisse will say in his Frenchy way: 'Bieng! Didn't I tol' ye so? The bet is mine, an' little Terry 'll have to pay up. Ye can't put no daypindence in a man av his build, iver.' An' whilst the avil wurd's as droppin' from his mouth I'll walk in on thim all as in-consequensul-like as if I was goin' to a fair. That's the toime the laugh will be wid me, an' Narcisse will want to slink aft' to some remoted place. Oh, there does be no sense at all to make wagers onless ye be sure av winnin'—thim ye can make thim big."

The thought so pleased him that he laughed boisterously and flicked the horses with the whip, much as a man would nudge his neighbor with a friendly elbow at some witticism. Then, his merriment abating a trifle, he began to sing.

Suddenly he broke off in his song, and his fingers closed tightly over the slack reins. The horses felt the authoritative touch and came to an instant standstill. Before them lay the road which here led across the open country, though farther on it wound through the woods and over the low hills. Back of them, three good miles by now, was the little settlement, with Wistar's tavern (which had given the place its name) as a nucleus, while to the left stretched the plain, empty of all sign of life, and to the right there was the same level whiteness, broken only by a solitary house which fronted the road at some distance away and seemed like a belated straggler held captive by the relentless bonds of winter as it peered longingly in the direction of the small town from whose companionship it was forever set apart.



"Are you Santa Claus?" she demanded, with bated breath.

There was an air of forlornness about it, surrounded as it was by all that glitter of ice and glint of frost, though the chimney smoke curling slowly up through the sharp air told of a certain homely cheer within. It was off the beaten track, however, and, despite the fact that Terry had halted, he made no attempt to give evidence of his presence by so much

as a shout. Out of the earth, almost beside him, there had unexpectedly risen a small figure, and he now found himself staring into a child's eager face.

"Are you Santa Claus?" she demanded, with bated breath.

He looked back at her, taking in, even in his dull fashion, the delight that widened her eyes and shrilled her voice. Suppose he told the truth—what then? How the disappointment would cloud the upturned radiant face at the commonplace statement that he was only Terry O'Connor. He hesitated an inappreciable moment. Then, because he had been born under a dancing star and loved a jest, he answered her question.

The child's laugh rang out on the air in happy triumph, waking the echoes. The horses stirred a little and their dull, old bells gave forth a low sound, but it wasn't music compared to that which filled Terry's ears. He took up the reins reluctantly. She pressed nearer, putting out a small, resolute hand as if she were one of those old time, fierce browed highwaymen and meant to stop his further progress.

"Ah, please don't," she protested in a tone no knight of the road would ever have employed, "please!" Then, with a little rush, as if the words were eager to escape: "I was so sure it was truly you, so sure, I saw you when you were way off—just a teeny, weeny speck—and first I thought maybe it was Pierre or p'raps the doctor or Mr. Higgins, and I came down here 'cause they always say 'How are you?' as they pass—they're such noticing big men. I couldn't see very clear, you know, with the sun shining one way and the snow sending back baby sparkles the other, but everything seemed so happy, and when I heard you sing I knew why—even your bells sounded glad, glad! I just could hardly wait. I've thought so much about you always—I knew you'd come some day. Where—where are you going now, sir?"

"Home," answered Terry, honestly enough.

She cast a quick glance at the north along the road he must travel and



Her Fancy Led to an Enchanted World.

which, to her fancy, led henceforth to an enchanted world. Then her eyes sought his face again.

"Oh," she cried breathlessly, "must you go quite—quite yet?"

At the possibility of his departure the joy that had been written all over her confident little person seemed suddenly to take wing, leaving her dejected and forlorn. The pleasure had been so brief—a mere flash of brightness that was over almost as soon as it had come.

Terry hesitated. Every moment he lingered imperiled the fulfillment of his wager, for his horses were old, and their best was apt to be very slow indeed. He could not afford to loiter. "Before 12 av the clock, Christmas eve," Narcisse had taunted him. But the little child! It seemed almost a sin to cheat her of this happiness. He must go, yet everything about her—drooping lids and saddened eyes—bade him stay. Then, filled with a desire to please her and, at the same time, not interfere with his own plans, he bent down.

"Come along wid me," he suggested jocosely.

He had not been prepared for the effect his words would have on her. The joy in her face was as a dagger's point, and, seeing it, he would not temporize.

"Come wid me," he urged.

She hesitated in her turn and cast a backward glance at the silent house whose tin roof flashed almost like an admonishing eye in the sun. Duty was a word of even less proportions in her vocabulary than in Terry's, though she knew its existence—knew, too young as she was, the wide gulf that lies between right and wrong doing. Yet there was no question of wrong, certainly. The possibility of the passing of such an important personage had never occurred to her elders, and they would never refuse to let her go with him. It wasn't necessary to ask—she couldn't wait. The house was so lonely. Her uncle was away at his work, and her mother sat sad and quiet, sewing the livelong day. There were no children's voices in the empty rooms, no rollicking, romping feet in the hall or on the stairs. Just silence, save for the little sounds she herself made as she played with her dolls or, tired of them, watched the big, desolate world from the window. That was the picture the house held for her. This—she looked again at the little red

checked, blue eyed man smiling at her from under his big fur cap, his white beard framing his jovial face—why, he had just stepped from her story book. Hundreds of times he had met her glance in this same friendly fashion from the printed page. Just so had he looked at her in those long day dreams, gleamed at her so in the twilight from the leaping fire, haunted her slumbers at night. Even the sound of his voice was familiar, though she had never thought to hear him say, "Come with me, come with me."

The road, stretching away to the north, gleamed like silver under the dazzling sky, twinkling and beckoning to her as with a thousand hands, and innumerable voices, too fine to be



She Watched the Big, Desolate World From the Window.

heard by ordinary ears, echoed the invitation. The voices of the sleeping plains waking at the thought of the happiness in store for her, the voices of the snow covered trees where the little leaves danced in the summer time, and all the spirits of the birds that had once darted in and out among them and had nested there sang now in a mighty chorus. "Come, come, come!"

Oh, that happy, happy road! Never a child of all the multitude of children on earth who had loved him, dreamed about him and longed to see him had been so fortunate as she. It was impossible to hesitate a moment longer, especially when the pursed up lips might so quickly slip from the magic word into a chirrup to the horses and, in consequence, sleigh and occupant would vanish into thin air.

"Do you really mean it?" she asked tremulously. "Do you really mean it?" For, though she was deafened by the noisy voices, his had been the first to speak. "Will you take me, truly?"

For answer he threw back the robes, and as she sprang to his side he gave a great laugh and drew her closer to him. Then he dragged an extra rug from the bottom of the sleigh and folded it about her.

"Santa Claus' swateheart mustn't ketch the p-noo-moony," he cried. "Divil a bit av it! What do I perceive? Is it missin' a mitten ye are? Sure that's distressful, fer we can't hunt it up now wid toime racin' by like a mill shtrame!"

"I'm unparitikkilar, truly. I don't mind the leastest bit!"

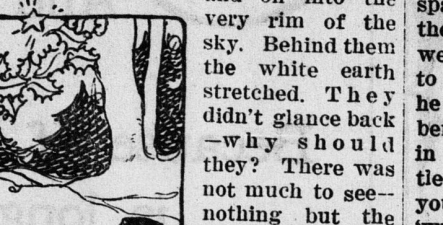
"Well, mine wud be too small fer the likes av ye, annyway, an' I nade thim meself. So tuck your hands close under, me darlint, an' ye won't be aft'er fallin' the cold. Now, thim, is it ready ye are?"

"Yes, oh, yes!"

"Hi, there, Danny! Hi, there, Whitefoot!" he shouted. "Buckle to, me byes. The luck av the wurrid is foldin' in her arms about me at this toime, an' no mishtake. Git a move on ye, childer."

The horses obeyed his voice with alacrity, as if they were eager to get their work over. The bells jingled, the snow beneath the runners gave out a sharp hissing sound by way of answer and the little sweetheart, only her face showing out of the old brown rug as she nestled close against the man's arm, laughed merrily.

Before them the happy road, its joyous voices still calling to her, went on and on into the very rim of the sky. Behind them the white earth stretched. They didn't glance back—why should they? There was not much to see—nothing but the empty plain and the lonely little house that seemed to shiver there all by itself; the silent little house where no child played or looked from any of its windows. It seemed to have no love for the outer world and no interest in it, yet zigzagging from its door were the prints of certain steps—too big for a fairy, too tiny for a man—a



"The luck av the wurrid is foldin' in her arms about me at this toime."

strange huddle of marks ever forming new paths and finally coming to an end at the side of the road.

And the road led north and the road led south, but nowhere was there any trace of a small maid faring forth on a mission of discovery. One would never have dreamed of her passing that way had it not been for those adventurous footprints and for the little red mitten that showed upon the snow like a hand hung out in a silent goodby.

Chapter II. The Ride Together.

"H" the shtar danced whin I was born."

"That was because you were Santa Claus," laughed the little maid.

"Faith, 'twas because I was wudliferst a slip av a babe that wud have gladdened your eyes to see. 'Twas a happy shtar, an' it came peekin' in at the windy. 'An' how are ye, me broth av a b'y?' it seemed to say. 'An' I, not knowin' the spache av the wurrid, jist shmlid back for an answer. A shmlie or a laugh is the best spache, after all, an' don't ye fergit it. Why, even the brute dorgs know the differ betwixt glum looks an' cheerful ones. An' the shtar wasn't to be late by a dorg, not it! I-ry blessed wurrd that lay in me heart an' cudn't git to me tongue's end—the way bein' thin unknown—was clear to it, an' I twinkle, twinkle, hop, skip, jump it wint, a-twangin' its little fiddle in clume to its steps. Me mither's mither—may the peace av hivin be her sowl's rist!—near drooped me aft her knees wid amazement, fer niver had she beheld such divarshions. An' by reason av the same she ran the pins into me body, mishtakin' it for a cushion, but niver a whoop did I let forth, bein' all took up meself wid the joy av the shtar. Sure, she cud have made a clove apple av me intirely an' I wudn't have been none the wiser. She rectified her mishtake, did she, an' if she'd been in doubts that all the saystlestial fandarago was in me honor she saw the truth av it thim. 'Mavornunen' she sez to me mither, 'there's a little happy shtar widout in the hivins don't a quick shtep an' up an' down the middle an' ballin's to corners all because av this newborn babe who's laughin' wid the humor av it.' 'An' why not?' sez me mither, wid a certain fierceness in the soft voice av her. 'Why shudn't the whole firmymint be set into a commotion av gladness because av him? Faith, if ye cud pennystrate to me heart, sez she, 'ye'd see it dancin' as niver was. Bring him here to me arms, alanna, that I may cuddle him close, so's he can fale the bate av it.' Thim the old woman did as she was bid, an' me mither—now the saints bless her swate sowl!—held me till her side an' talked to me low,

whilst the joy av her heart crept insid'us like into me own, an' it's lived there iver since."

"What did she say? Did she call you Santa Claus?"



"What did she say? Did she call you Santa Claus?"

"Faith, she did—not thim nor afterwards. She called me 'cushla machree'—which manes 'pulse av me heart'—an' 'jool' an' 'prelus' an' 'light av me eyes'—"

"But those are my own names, truly, all but the first one, and 'heart's content' and—"

"Ah, the mithers—bless thim! There does be but one langwidge they spase the wurrid over. Don't I know the truth av it? An' the haythins as well, that haven't a wurrd av English to their names—God pity thim, though he made thim an' gave thim their gibberish, too—they say the same thing in their outlandish tongue, an' the little haythins understand as well as you an' me. 'Heart's contin' an' 'wurrid's blessin' an'—"

"Dear my little own, only muvver made that up speshilly for me. She told me so—"

"Did she, now? Begorra, the familiarity av it sounds like music in me ears. I remember me own mither whisperin' somethin' akin to it wanst whin I snuggled close to her. Whist! 'Tis out av their fallin' fer us that they do gettin' the wurrids, after all, an' that's better than learnin' thim from the books. Whin ye come to think av it, it ain't to be wondered at that there's a sort av family raysimblance betwixt thim, seen' as their hearts are av the same complexion. Oh, there ain't annythin' annywhere's a mither's love!"

For just a little minute the eyes blazing with fun took on a misty twinkle, and something like a shadow crossed the old man's face, making it seem strangely grave, but it was gone as quickly as it had come, and he was his merry self once more.

"It must have been a most 'normous long while ago when you were a baby," the child said, inspecting him shily.

"It was, me darlint. It was the beginnin' av toime—fer me."