

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART.

"Somehow I never thought of you as a baby at all," she went on, plainly distressed. "Oh, what ever did the little children do then for Santa Claus? There was never any other, was there?"

"Niver a wan, swate eyes. I'm the original, simon pure Santa Claus an' no mistake. Troth, they had to get on the best they cud widout me. An' a sorry toime they had av it, wan an' all. Thin I came, an' the wurrid was a different place iver afther—so me mither towld me."

The child breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm so glad I got born when I did. I shouldn't have liked to be born before you came. I'm half past six, you know. Who filled your stocking?" she demanded the next moment as the new idea occurred to her.

"Divil a wan I had to hang up when I was a spalpeen. 'Twas barefuted an' bare legged I went."

"But Christmas—the little maid's lip trembled—"what did you do at Christmas?"

"'Twas like anny plain, ordinary iv-ry day to me, agra, an' no differ, except that wast in jest so often me mither hid a plum in the bit cake she was afther makin' fer me an' I'd the joy av searchin' it out meself, same as ye'd seek out a naydle in a hayrick. An' toimes it was fat an' toimes ag'in 'twas like the shadder av itself. But, glory be, I niver missed it! An' 'twas so good, fat or lane, that I used to drame I'd give iv'ry child in the wurrid a cake all shuffed wid plums when I growed up."

"That was what put it into your head to be Santa Claus."

The man cast a sidelong glance at his companion's eager face.

"S'pose so," he muttered.

"But the star knew all along, and that's why it danced and couldn't keep still. She stole her hand into the curve of his arm and gave it a soft little squeeze. "Tell me 'bout that first time," she coaxed.

"What first toime?"

"When you went Santa Clausin. Were you very long growin' up?"

"'Twas a terrible long spell from the b'y's ind an' a terrible short wan from the man's, all av which you'll understand when your hair is me own color. But 'twas over an' done wid sooner or late, an' there I was a man grown, though the heart av me has always been like a child's because av the shtar."

"And 'cause you belong to us."

"'Tis a Solymon king av Sheba ye are, alanna. Well, I want about me work, an' I tolled up an' down the wurrid, but the goin' was joyful like. 'count av the fun I left in me wake, an' iv'rywheres folks seemed powerful glad to see me."

"I tried to keep awake last Christmas eve," she broke in shrilly, "afther muvver hanged up my stocking, but the sandman would come. I'd been awake so long that when he crept in in his long gray cloak and with his bag on his back I thought it was truly you, and my heart went thumpety thump. But he shook out the sand—sprinkle, sprinkle, sprinkle. 'Tonight of all nights you must sleep,' he said. And I cried 'No' and closed my eyes quick so's the sand couldn't get in, and when I opened them the next minute it was quite morning—not yellow morning you know, but just the baby light that comes first. Then very soft, so's not 'sturb muvver, I crawled out of bed, 'cause it made me uncomfortable to lie still, and there was my stocking full to the brim. I knew who filled it." She stopped in her recital to smile at him and to pat his arm again.

"Then I climbed up on a chair to take it down, and muvver laughed out loud. 'Come back to bed, dear my little own,' she said. 'Bring the stocking and a cuddle down warm and snug in blanket land.' So I did, and she kissed me and I kissed her, and we both said 'Merry Christmas' to each iver."

She went fast asleep again, but cert'ly you couldn't expect a little girl could sleep. I felt all my presents. Muvver says us little folks have eyes in our fingertips, and every minute the light grew brighter, and then—I really saw! Dear, dear Santa Claus, how could you 'member just what I wanted?" She rubbed her dimpling cheek ecstatically against the old sleeve. "But you didn't put anything in muvver's stocking," she added softly.

He could not meet her reproachful glance.

"'Twas in a hurry I was," he mumbled, "an' me bastes shtampin' widout in the cowlid."

"Oh, she didn't know," the child interrupted, "'cause when she was tight asleep I found her stocking, and I put that very rosy checked apple you'd put in mine quite far, far down in hers and some nuts too. Cert'ly I couldn't give her the little doll or the picture book, 'cause grownups don't care for such things, really. But things to eat are different. You don't mind, do you?"

He did not answer. For the moment it almost seemed as if he had not heard. His head was turned quite away.

"And she was s'prised—oh, you can't think—and glad too. So glad her eyes got all shiny and bright. But you can't guess what happened next. She said, 'Bless my Santa Claus! Wasn't that funny? And then she kissed me most 's if she 'spected."

Danny and Whitefoot felt a sudden queer twitch on the reins—a compelling touch that made them both swerve out of the direction they were taking. It was almost as if their driver meant them to turn around. Much earlier in the day, when they first left Wistar's, for instance, such a command would not have appeared singular, but coming at a time when the tavern lay so far behind as to be forgotten, when the world seemed a blanket of drift and down and glistening silver, with no house in sight, the action was at least puzzling to their equine minds. They stopped instantly, however, the noise of their bells hushed into silence.

Whitefoot turned a wondering face upon his master, and almost immediately Danny looked protestingly around. The man met their gaze half guiltily. Beyond—oh, very far beyond—lay Merle, with its Christmas fun. Merle, where he must be that night or his name would be the jibe of the countryside, and back of them, a good twelve miles, perhaps fifteen, they had jogged on at such a steady pace, was that solitary house. If he turned round it must be good by to Merle. It would be impossible for Danny and Whitefoot to make the journey again without rest. He shifted the reins from one hand to the other.

"Why are we stopping?" asked the child.

He looked at her in some perplexity. Then his brow cleared.

"To give the bastes their feed. They're perishin' wid hunger, so they are, the saints forgive me," he answered in a relieved tone, glad to postpone his decision for a time.

He threw back the robes as he spoke and sprang out on the ground. Where they had stopped the narrow, lanelike road widened for a considerable space into plain again, and a well not far distant from the track now furnished water for the team, after which a bag at the back of the sleigh poured forth grain into the pails, and when these were set before the horses they fell to work as if Terry's words were in danger of coming true. The child watched the proceedings with wide eyes.

"They're only just very woolly horses, after all," she said, with a tinge of disappointment in her voice. "In the books they're reindeer."

"Sure, the reindeers is at home savin' up formin' this night. I cudn't be drivin' them in the broad daylight, alanna dear. Folks wud think us a travellin' circus widout the elephant, Begorra, 'tis shtarvin' I am meself, an' I'll take my Alfred Davy ye're in the same boat. We'll be afther havin' a snack ourselves an' a d'rop av some thin' varmin'. Tumble back into the sleigh, mavournen, an' wrap yourself up close till I spread the tablecloth ag'inst the bankquid."

"The toast?" She looked around bewildered. "Why, we've eaten all the bread, and there isn't any fire!"

"This is the fire an' the bread too," roared Santa Claus. "Bless your innocent sowl, me dear, 'tis a propysition I'm afther askin' ye for. Whist now, the felles at the tavern sit 'round, an' before they drink wan will get up an' say, a-wavin' av his glass, 'Here's to him'—namin' some one prisint—or 'Here's to honest hearts an' true,' or 'Here's to him at home, God love him!' an' we all drink to it. So, now, thin, swateeyes, sprake quicky."

She got to her feet quite gravely, her eyebrows drawn together in the little pucker they always made when she was thinking very hard, and first she looked up at the sky and then around at the stretch of land where the sparkles under the crusted snow flashed like so many imprisoned diamonds and then at the sky again as if for inspiration. Finally her glance rested upon him, leaning forward, regarding her with his merry smile.

"Why, here's to you," she cried, "our very own, ownest Santa Claus!"

She smelled the odor of the fiery liquid, and it was so offensive her hand shook.

"Saints above, child, howid your hand stiddy!" Terry shouted. "'Tis your hood shtrings an' your coat as is gettin' all that precious oilcr, an' iv'ry d'rop av a fool."

"Oh, take it away very quick," she gasped. "I'm sorry to spill it, but it's most dreffly horrid."

"Aisy, me darlint, aisy! There's no accountin' fer tastes, as the old woman said when she kissed her cow."

"Did ye iver taste betther?" he made out to ask.

"Never," she answered promptly. And she really spoke the truth. Sawdust eaten in such companionship would have seemed as palatable as sugar, and the present food was like the ambrosia of the high gods. Even those delicious sandwiches that her mother made for her sometimes, with the little slice of ham blushing faintly between the dainty pieces of bread where the butter lay like a filmy, glistening veil, had never seemed so good and satisfying as these big, grownup ones eaten under the high blue sky in that country of snow and ice.

As soon as the sandwiches had disappeared Santa Claus covered a crackle with bits of cheese like nuggets of

gold and presented it to her with a bow as if she were a queen. It seemed a fitting crown to the feast, though apparently he had quite other ideas of a crown, as was soon shown. When the crackers and cheese were all eaten and even the last crumb chased home and captured he put his hand into the breast of his coat and drew out a fat, dark bottle which he regarded with loving eyes.

"Here's me beauty!" he cried. "Here's what's to top aff a faste a king wudn't disdain. Here's something he wudn't give the go-by to, not he!"

"What is it?" the little maid asked curiously.

"What is it? Troth, 'twud take an hour by the clock to tell all the names it has the wurrid over. An' some is good an' some is bad—the names, I'm manin'. 'Merry go-down' an' 'tangle legs'—that's 'shlinder'us!—an' 'water av health' an' 'silvery' as the Frenchies say, which is the same as 'water av life.' But I'm not so much for water in it meself, likin' it nate. Then there's 'oil av gladness' an'—Sure ye shall have the first taste, mavournen, as 'tis fit and propen, ladies always

lead. Come, shtand up an' give us the toast!"

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"Here's me hand on me heart to your toast," she echoed, "an' the honor of it. 'Tis proud I am at this minute."

Then she climbed back on the seat and watched him with round eyes as he tilted his head very far back and took a deep draft. If his attack on the sandwiches had astonished her this new conduct awakened all her wonder. As he took the bottle from his lips he uttered a sigh which immediately slipped into a loud guffaw at sight of her expression.

"You can't like it," she shuddered. "I'm not quarrellin' wid the taste," he answered, "an', anyway, 'tis by the doctor's orders I do be takin' a d'rop av the crayther to kape the cold out an' the warm in. A nip once in jest so often, the wise ould man sez, an' don't improve on the occasions, mind ye! But, sure, there's a toast I haven't yet given, an' that's to our next merry meetin', an' may it come sooner than 'tis expected."

He neither looked nor bowed her way. Indeed, the words were addressed to his familiar spirits, and his eyes were fixed solely upon what he held in his hand. After a moment he put the bottle back in his breast and buttoned his coat securely across.

"An' now to juty, swateheart," he cried, springing out of the sleigh. "The rapast is over, and the horse-have gorged themselves like magistrates, the rapacious gossoms! Come, be shpry, an' lend a hand wid the pails."

She did not wait to be told twice, but bustled around delightedly, helping him stow the buckets among the dingy bags and barrels which formed the prosaic load this Santa Claus carried.

"Best food forninst tomorry fer the shanty men," he explained as she prodded the bulging sacks with inquisitive fingers. "They axed me to fetch along their Christmas dinner. Oh, they knowed their man. An' I, that obligin', cudn't say no to them. If I'd hardened me heart like Phareyo we wudn't be knowin' natch other this blessed minnit, so 'tis glad I am that I'm mild as a midsummer night by nature an' disposition. Let's limber up a bit afore we shtar ag'in on our travels. All hands down the middle, sashy to corners. Gintlemn take your pardners—gintlemn twirl your gurrils! Ladies change!"

He roared out the calls as he had so often done in the different taverns when he sat with his fiddle beneath his chin and played such enlivening strains that nobody who heard them could keep still. This time, however, he was going to cut pigeon wings himself and do wonderful double shuffles, and he needed both hands to swing his little thistledown of a partner, so the old fiddle lay undisturbed in the bottom of the sleigh, while he whistled and sang the tunes with great gusto.

It was a scene unlike any he had ever known. Instead of the long, low

rooms, with the candles set a-row in bottles spluttering through the haze of dust and giving out, beside their meager light, a smell of dripping tallow, where the air was noisy with the scraping and pounding of many feet and shouts of laughing rose on every side, was this wide, beautiful place, with its pure white carpet and the roof of blue far, far above. Its remote walls were hung with white, where the low hills climbed skyward. And nearer, where the woods began, tall, snow crowned trees stood, their branches shining with frost. Clumps of bushes, with here and there a stunted, isolated tree, dressed in the same glittering garments, took on fantastic shapes as if they were spectators. Nor were they the only ones—the furtive little people of the forest, in feathers and fur, peeped out from their shelter to watch with all their eyes and then to murmur under their breaths, "How mad these mortals be!"

Terry stood at one side of the road some distance beyond the sleigh, and opposite him, her face aglow with excitement, her eyes like twin stars, the child waited. As he bowed with a great flourish, bringing his old cap to rest over his heart, she swept him a curtsey so low that her skirts stood stiffly out on the ground—"a cheese" she would have called it. Then the next instant she sprang to her feet again and poised on tiptoe, watching eagerly for his signal.

"Now," he called, "now, thin, darlint, ready!"

She raised her right hand high in air as if to meet the one he extended toward her and skimmed across the shimmering floor very close to him. Their fingers met, clasped parted—and she was in his place and he in hers. Then, dipping, bowing, swaying, they advanced, retreated, advanced again, passed each other, now disdaining hands, each twisting and turning alone as if the other did not exist. Then, repentant, meeting, joining forces and, with hands crossed, setting off together—oh, happy word!—in the swift sliding that scarcely touched the ground, so light they seemed. And up

the road and down the road they went, laughing, shouting, singing. It was the maddest, merriest dance! The snow whirled up from their flying feet in soft clouds, and, lo, each tiniest particle was a fairy. The air was full of graceful, bending shapes fluttering here and there, there and here, until at last, quite tired-out, they dropped to earth again to twinkle and sparkle, chattering softly to one another of the

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"Aisy, swateheart, aisy! Av course I did."

"You got it, didn't you?" she demanded, sitting bolt upright and facing him as the possibility of a dreadful mishance took possession of her whole being.

"What do ye mane, mavournen?"

"Why, the letter I wrote, oh, ever so long ago—the letter that went up the chimney. I saw it fly away. Muvver says that's the children's post box ev'rywheres."

A light dawned upon him—not, alas, from his own childhood, which had been poor and sordid enough and held no such golden make believes, though in other ways he had entered the beautiful kingdom to the utter forgetting of cold and hunger, want and sorrow, but from what he had heard here and there from little lips in his journey through life. He had always been the children's friend. He looked into her anxious eyes, therefore, and winked slowly.

"Whist, now, your Christmas letter," he said, "an' that's what—the wan that towld me how to set to work. Come, say the list over slow till I see if we both mane the same thing."

She put up her hand and dragged his head down until his ear was on a level with her lips. Then she poured in the secret, interrupted by happy bursts of laughter.

"Begorra, the stockin' will have to be made av injy rubber or 'twill burst intoirely."

"I'm going to put a chair under," she confided hurriedly, "and if the things won't go quite in you can leave them there. Did you 'member 'em all? The little crosses low on the paper I meant for kisses, you know."

"Howly St. Patrick! I was afther thinkin' they was extrys."

"You must get a most 'normous lot of letters," she said thoughtfully, a moment later.

"'Twould be aisler countin' the sands on the sayshore than to count them," he answered, entering heartily

into his role of the jolly saint. "Me secretaries an' undersecretaries niver rest at all. They do be droppin' wid fatigue, the poor felles! 'Tis entries they have to make an' double entries an' charges and countercharges, an' I must give each wan my speshul supervision."

"Do you burn our letters up after you've read them?"

"Do I look like a man as wud destroy his love letters, alanna, fer that's what they are? Not me! I've the walls av me mansion papered wid them, an' I've autygraph quilts an' tablecloths made out av them an' curtains to me doors an' windys, an' sofy pillows an' chair sates—oh, 'tis an in-janeyus mind I have. Sure, the shuff av drames makes foine wearin' material, an' don't ye ferget it. I had to build an appendix to me house year before last, an' last year there was an addenda, an' this year I'm goin' to 'trow out an' L. an' if things continy the same I'll have to add the whole alphabet before I know it."

"Of course it must be a big place to keep all the toys of the world there."

"Whist, me darlint, no house in the wurrid wud be big enough to howld all the toys an' all the drames av the childer, too, an' I'd sooner be havin' the latter than the former anny day. 'Tis as much as I can manage to kape me autygraph collection intacks, so I have workin' drawin's av the toys, an' the big dipartmental shtores in the cities an' towns an' villidges do kape the rare articles. An', by the same token, I've me deputies stationed iv'rywhere to git things ready forninst me comin', an' thin I can make the journey wid the spade av the wind."

Her head dropped against his arm.

"Not Whitefoot and Danny," she said drowsily, "but Dancer and Prancer and Vixen. I like Vixen best in the picture. Then there's On-come-et, and—"

She didn't finish her sentence, and he, looking down, discovered the reason.

"The darlint!" he said. "Faith, 'tis tired out completely ye are, an' the slape will refresh ye. Cuddle close, mavournen. 'Tis a day fer a notch on the shtick, anyway, an' I'll niver ferget it."

He tucked the rugs about her as tenderly as her mother could have done, though his fingers were clumsy and unused to such offices. Then, after he had seen to her comfort, he bethought himself of his own and had a merry meeting with that other—quite a longish meeting this time—and he murmured the same toast, repeating the words again and again, with funny little nods by way of emphasis, after which he fell to singing rather loud.

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(Continued on page 6)



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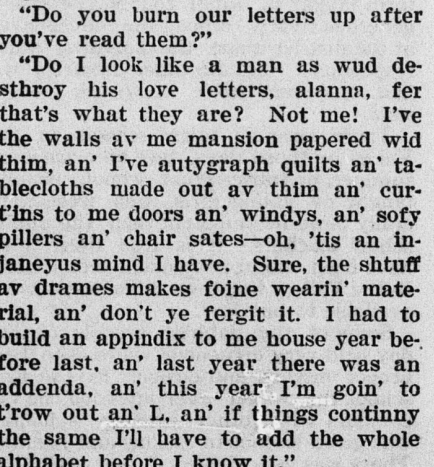
It Seemed a Fitting Crown to the Feast.



He Needed Both Hands to Swing His Little Thistledown of a Partner.



"Did you 'member 'em all?"



Two Arms Caught Her.



"Shook out the sand—sprinkle, sprinkle."

Chapter III. "Our Very Own, Ownest Santa Claus."

THE tablecloth, as was speedily disclosed, was nothing more than a very greasy newspaper which had been wrapped around a huge pile of sandwiches, each with a rim of bacon showing darkly between its thick slices of bread, a hunk of cheese and some fat crackers. But the finest damask under other circumstances would not have seemed half so beautiful in her eyes. And she had no quarrel with the coarse fare. Hunger, after all, is the best sauce for appetite that can be served with any meal, and it is more apt to come in with the plain dishes than with the elaborate ones, as Santa Claus and his little sweetheart proved.

"Faith, I cud eat a nail wid relish if nothin' else was handy," he laughed as he made his first onslaught on the sandwich he was holding and lessened it by a third, "but this is a dish to set before a king, so tunder an' tasty as it is. Take a rale try at it, me darlint. Ye do be nibblin' sech little grand lady bites ye'll niver be t'rough. 'Tis wan swandige I've put away already, an' ye but embarkin' on the top roof av yours. Here's the second to kape ye company, brown eyes." He took an enormous mouthful and smiled at her, while he was rendered speechless, and she smiled back, mute, too, from a similar reason.

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"Never," she answered promptly. And she really spoke the truth. Sawdust eaten in such companionship would have seemed as palatable as sugar, and the present food was like the ambrosia of the high gods. Even those delicious sandwiches that her mother made for her sometimes, with the little slice of ham blushing faintly between the dainty pieces of bread where the butter lay like a filmy, glistening veil, had never seemed so good and satisfying as these big, grownup ones eaten under the high blue sky in that country of snow and ice.

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She Prodded the Bulging Sacks With Inquisitive Fingers.

It's a queer wurrid this is, but sure 'tis a most glorious dispensation av Providence that we don't all be thinkin' alike. See! I'll have to take your share as well as me own. An', first, here's me hand on me heart to your toast an' the honor av it. 'Tis proud I am at this minnit. An', next, here's to ye—shtandin'—here's to the best thing a man can have in this wurrid, the love av a little child."

She stood up facing him and bowed as he had done.

Chapter IV. Exit Santa Claus.

THE air bit more keenly, for the afternoon was wearing on. Already the dazzling sparkles had vanished from the snow, and rasy sunbeams slipped among the glistening tree shafts and lay with the tall shadows upon the ground of the forest aisles. She nestled closer against him.

"Tell me some more," she urged.

"Sure, 'tis me hist'ry from the cradle up that I'm af