

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART.

By the diverting history of "Kelly's Cat."

It was on a Sunday evenin'—I'll mind it evermore—Whin Paddy Kelly went to bed an' fergot to bar the door;

The cat ris up an' shook herself widout either dread or fear, An' over the hollow to Barney's she quickly thin did steer.

The night bein' cold an' stormy, an' the cat bein' poor an' thin, An' the windy, it bein' open, she'—

He broke off here, his chin falling forward on his chest. Danny and Whitefoot, however, were used to his ways and knew their own duty too well to stop because the reins fell so slack on their backs. They jogged on quite as steadily as if he were awake. It was a lonely country where there was little travel, so there was no fear of meeting any one and no reason for turning out. All they had to do was to keep on. Presently he stirred and opened his eyes.

"'Tis forty winks I've been havin', an' they've made a new man av me," he said, with a prodigious yawn. "But, begorra, I dreamed me arm was held in the grip av a monster. 'Tis useless an' shuffit it is this very minnit. Faith, 'tis as sound asleep as if I could Pickett was tellin' wan av his wurrid widout ind shrothers. Arrah, wake up wid ye!"

He started to jerk his arm free and glanced down with some impatience, but the sight of what rested there made him pause. So that was the monster he had dreamed was holding him fast! He had forgotten the child for the moment—forgotten, too, the part he was playing. Then everything came back with a rush as he gazed at her peaceful little face.

"Sure, 'tis no shuffiness at all, at all," he muttered. "What's the weight av a feather fer a man to complain av? 'Tis like the touch av an angel's wing, so it is, an' proud I am to fale it—proud an' pleased. Lie still, cushla machree: lie still!"

But she had been partially aroused by his attempt to ease himself and very obligingly changed her position, cuddling down on the seat. He helped to fix her anew, murmuring fond little phrases, and as her eyelids fluttered open he bade her go to sleep again. She obeyed without question. The air made her very drowsy, and the steady forward motion of the sleigh was like the lulling of a cradle. He began to sing again almost immediately, though in a subdued key, and still about "Kelly's Cat." But he took scant pleasure in the song. Half of its fun lay in hearing the laughter it always evoked, and he missed her silvery merriment. To sing a comic song just for one's own amusement is rather dreary work, after all. Everything is better when it is shared. A laugh is always jollier and even the heaviest sorrow will grow lighter at a true word of sympathy.

He did not complete the history of the celebrated combat, therefore, but after a few lines brought it to a close and began something else. Then, before he knew it, a song that had lived in the background of his memory for many years found its way, for the little child's sake, to his lips. Curiously enough, it didn't seem to him that he was singing it, for through the words he could hear his mother's worn voice carrying the tune forward, and his own voice, the best in all the country round for trolling out a drinking catch or some fantastic rigamarole set

to music, grew so tender that the roisters at Wistar's or up at Merle would never have recognized it. But if they could have heard him they wouldn't have laughed. The song would have been like a little key unlocking the gates of childhood. Even if the words had been unfamiliar to them the sweet sounds would have taken them back.

After he had finished singing he sat very still, one hand holding the reins, the other resting gently on the warm little bundle at his side. But his thoughts were far back in that distant past where, because of his light heart, he only dwelt on the golden spots—and his nature had many such. Then he began to build some castles in that dear, impossible, ever true country where one may rear the most beautiful houses and have them ready to be lived in in the wink of an eye; where there are never any vexing questions of rent or taxes and one doesn't have to bother about gas or electricity (such a wonderful lighting system as they have there, by the way), and there are never any repairs to be made. Perhaps a prosaically minded architect would never have called Terry's dream house a castle, but such sober matter of factness is not to be envied. Very much happier are the people who live in the clouds at times, though they do have many a tumble to earth, than the ones who never see things through the rose colored glasses of fancy, but plod along in the dull light of common grayness.

Terry belonged to the first kind, and because his mind was still full of the nonsense he had uttered to his companion he began to build a beautiful palace where the dreams of little children could come true. On every side he could see their wishes written plainly, sometimes in copybook writing, sometimes in big print and sometimes

again in those funny, wavering, uphill lines that Santa Claus never fails to read. And everywhere he could hear merry laughter and shouts and the sounds of scrambling, racing feet. It was a beautiful palace! He chuckled to himself, seeing it so distinctly, and then, suddenly—very suddenly—just in front of him, a trifle at one side of the road, stood a small, square house of the sort that your eminently practical, no-thought-of-beauty contractor would build. Terry's hand, reins and all, went to his eyes to clear the mist from before them. Impossible! He knew the country as well as Danny and Whitefoot, and he knew, too, that no such house stood there. The shanty men's hut, the only human habitation for miles, was still some distance off. He looked again sharply, convinced that in the darkening land some snow covered tree had taken on the likeness to a building. And he was quite right—there was no house.

The bells moaned the air sullenly and soberly as the horses started once more on their patient, even course. They did not merit the sharp flap of the reins on their backs—they were doing their best. Terry tried to go on with his dreams, but the thread of fancy, once broken, is hard to recover. He caught bravely at it—there stood the house again, square, squat, picturesque, with the low stable at one side connected by the covered way, as is the custom in cold countries. He rubbed his eyes, and it was gone again—they had driven right through it! He laughed, but not gayly. Two parts of him seemed to be dreaming—the one that built a castle for little children, the other that thought of solemn, elderly folk. He began to sing:

"Now Mrs. McGrath to the saintin' said, Sure I'd like me son to be a copril made, Wid a foine rid coat an' a gold faced hat— Och Tiddy me by, wudndent you like that? Musha ti ral la!"

It was no use! The house was quite near him again, with its chimney breathing out a soft little line of smoke and its tin roof dull in the level light of the roof that had flashed like a reproving eye hours earlier. And then he knew! He turned and looked back fearfully. As far as he could see there was no sign of life. Before him it was the same tale—even the house his fancy had conjured up had vanished. It was very still save for the bells on his horses, and they were not clinking merrily just then, only giving out a monotonous jog trot sound that did not deafen him to the faint voice crying very far away, "Dear my little own, where are you?" He shivered among his furs, still looking back, and sobbingly the words came again, "Dear my little own, where are you?"

Danny and Whitefoot pawed the snow uneasily. Merle was still distant, and they were anxious to be at rest. They even determined to pull more steadily, more swiftly. They had been saving their best wind for that, but the hand on the reins kept them still.

"Och, wurra, wurra, that iver I shtoooped to desate," the old man murmured. "What will I do wid juty sayin' 'go foward' an' juty sayin' 'go back'? 'Tis most thirty miles from the shanty men's hut to that lonely little house, an' I can't take the journey over ag'in. Whist, there, mither, wid your callin' to the colleen or 'tis cracked me heart will be intorely, Aisy now! The voice av you is far away lolke, an' yet 'tis plain as thunder in me ears. Sure, I thought the fun av the wurrid was in this thing, an' I meant no harm at all. Whist, there, mither dear! They do be waitin' fer me up at Merle, thin an' the Christmas fun, an' Christmas only comin' want a year, an' there's the wager besides. Och, wurra, wurra, what will I do? I must go on, but 'tisn't wid me the darlint can be goin'."

He recognized that very clearly now when it was almost too late. His home as the child dreamed of it and his home as it really was were two very different things. He couldn't take her to the tavern at Merle, with its rough, carousing crowd—such fun was not for her—and he had nowhere else to go. Then he thought of the road ever getting darker and darker, of the frozen lake, with its treacherous ice, that he must cross; of the night growing colder. He knew how to keep himself warm, but it was another matter where she was concerned. And when he went driving into Merle to claim his bet his hand might not be steady—that had happened so often before—and there was that ugly bit just below the tavern, where even the most careful driver must pick his way warily. But with a little child—the thought made him giddy. No, no, no! He couldn't take her with him—that was impossible! And equally he saw, because he knew himself so well, he couldn't take her back to her mother's longing arms. He couldn't go back! He sat quite still, turning over different plans in his mind, while the precious minutes slipped by unheeded. Finally his brow cleared a trifle. There was but one solution to the difficulty—the lumbermen might help him, must help him. He would see that they had no choice in the matter. As he reached this decision some of his old reckless daring came back to him, but he bore himself in a shamed fashion and with none of his usual jauntness, though he straightened his shoulders

and tried to appear unconcerned. He began to whistle, too, as if to silence the wailing cry that still pursued the sleigh. He would not let himself listen.

"Och, child," he said, looking down at the little maid. "'Tis sorry I am fer ye, darlint."



"Och, child," he said, "'tis sorry I am fer ye, darlint." "Ye, darlint, but 'twill all come right in the mornin'—troubles always do. Whist now! 'Tis sorriest I am fer meself, since I can't help meself at all, I bein' what I am, ye see."

Chapter V. The Gift of Santa Claus.

HE put his hand into his coat, and though his fingers came in contact with the flat bottle they did not draw it forth. They groped farther, past the inner coat and beneath the blouse, to something that hung against his chest suspended from a cord. When he brought out his hand it held a dingy little bag. He stripped off the outer covering, disclosing a cheap gilt lock and the half of a broken sixpence. With shaking fingers he took a wisp of hair from the trinket and, wrapping it up again, thrust it back into his breast, but the lock and the coin he folded in a bit of newspaper and stooped once more to the child.

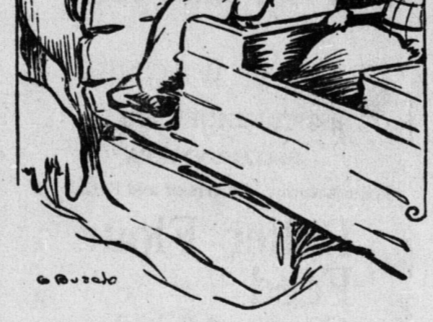
"Sure, it ain't a dolly that will shut its eyes, mavourneen, that I do be givin' ye fer a Christmas gift," he whispered, "but mebbe ye'll like it fer the sake av wan as loved it. An' God Almighty an' all the howly saints bless ye feriver an' iver, amin'."

She stirred at his touch and opened her eyes, misty still with sleep. For a moment she looked at him in some doubt; then, as she struggled into a sitting position, she laughed gayly. "Oh, it's really and truly you," her glance swept their surroundings. "And are we home now—at your very home? Is that it?"

The walls of the lumbermen's hut showed indistinctly through the clearing. It was almost dark. The night that comes swiftly in the north lands was folding its mantle like a great soft wing over the whole country, though in the west there was still a faint streak of rose, as if the day was sorry to go, and so it lingered in that little, tender time between the lights, when one can dream best of all.

"Is that home?" she asked again, very softly.

"Listen, swateheart. But first take this wee packidge. Aisy, now! Ye musn't fale the edges—an' shtow it away in your pocket if ye have wan. 'Tis not to be looked at nor so much as prodded, mind ye, till sunrise to-morrow."



"Is that home?" she asked again, very softly. "Remember! An', second—faith, me second is hardest fer me, fer 'tis goodly I must be sayin'." Her lip trembled. "But I'm goin' with you all the way," she declared stoutly. "Sure, an' I wish it from me heart, only 'tis partin' we must be. Ye see, ye can go on, an' Danny an' Whitefoot will be proud to draw ye, but 'tis most night, an' the way gets bad yonder, an' there's a lake to cross, an' I'm not always the stiddy driver—to meshame be it said!"

"I'd sit very still!" "An' 'twill be cold, bitter cold! Thin I've been thinkin'—I didn't tell ye this afore—but no child has iver seen me house. 'Tis a thing av drames (an', sure, that's the truth!) Whispr, now, cud ye see it, it wud all split to smithereens wid a crack like doom. An' where wud I be thin? The folks wud have to do widout me, I'm thinkin'!"

"The little children—us?" she asked, round eyed. "That wud be the size av it. Av course ye cud kape on wid the deputies. I've trained them well, an' the spirit av Christmas niver dies, the givin' in an' the lovin', fer the Lord made thin in his own imidge. But ye'd be missin' me, ye know."

She was very still, the little pucker showing between her anxious brows. "I've an illigit plan. Yon's a foine place to spend the night, an' ivry thing will come right in the mornin'. Oh, ye'll see! An' ye'll hang up your shtockin' same as usuwil. But, first, ye must put that bit there down in the toe av it, an' 'twill be Merry Christmas all round. Will ye tell me goodby now, swateheart, an' let me go on to kape me wurrd that I've been after passin' sacred-loike?"

"Yes," she said gravely. "I wanted to see Vixen and On-come-it close, but I'll let you go, 'count o' the children ev'rywhere."

He lifted her gently to the ground, and she stood quietly at one side while he tumbled out the barrel and the bags from the back of the sleigh with great caution. He could not stay for a word. Already he had much time to make up, and discussion of any sort, hospitality, even, would retard him. The light had quite disappeared from the west, and a few pale stars—God's candles, he called them—were beginning to kindle in the dark above. He stooped to her.

"Whin I'm gone, cushla machree, ye'll go to the door an' they'll let ye in—they're foine fellers. 'Tis but a shtep up there, anyhow. Ye can't niver miss it—see, where the rid light shows t'rough the cracks. An' ye'll not forget me, little wan?"

"No—no," she choked. He caught her in his arms and kissed her. But though he held her very close he could not see her face well because of the misty curtain that had dropped suddenly before his eyes. In that moment he realized how far, how very far, below her thought of him he really was. He put her down almost roughly, detaching the little clinging fingers with scant tenderness and sprang into the sleigh. An instant, from that vantage point, he looked her way. Then Danny and Whitefoot, surprised into using their best wind by a fierce sting of the whip, dashed into the dark, their bells swinging out a sharp, tremulous cry of bronze that cut the air like a knife.

"Goodby," she called in a breaking voice. And back from the distance came the answer: "Goodby, little swateheart. God love ye an'—"

She stood waiting, listening to the bells that grew faint and fainter until they were like a chime from fairyland. When at last her loving ears could hear them no longer she turned and trotted obediently to the house. The door was closed, but a narrow thread of light glimmered warmly at the sill, and a tiny fiery eye peeped out halfway up the dark surface. She struck the wood with her little clinched fist—struck it once, then again. A twig snapping off in the teeth of the frost would have sounded louder.

From within there came the noise of many voices and great bursts of laughter, but no lessening of the merriment made room for her appeal. It was a large, roughly finished room, lighted for the most part by the great heap of logs that blazed on the hearth, though a lantern fixed against the wall at the opposite side, in front of a tin reflector, shone bravely, as if to say that it was doing its best despite the fact that no one heeded its efforts. For the occupants of the room, without an exception, were gathered about the camboose, or fireplace, where, in the full glow of the leaping flames, a number of stockings were hung—not because it was Christmas eve, but for the more prosaic reason that they must be dried. Every working day showed the same display, the men, on an average, hanging up two or three pairs apiece. Still they were keeping their Christmas eve vigil after a fashion, though it was not in the orthodox way, and, notwithstanding its noise, it lacked the real flavor of the blessed season.

"What was that?" Shawe asked suddenly. "Didn't hear a blessed thing. Fire ahead, Sandy. Ev'ry chap's got a stunt to do this night, an' the fust lot's fell to you. Come, begin—Where's that lazy raskill Terry? He'd oughter be'n here hours ago."

"Back at Wistar's," a young fellow growled. "Told yer what to expect when yer singled him out to fetch the grub. A sorry Christmas he'll have. Any meal left in the bar'l, Cooky?"

"Nough to make pap fer ye in the mornin', kid." Cooky responded with a grunt. "So don't be sheddin' tears—you an' yer delikit appetite will pull t'rough. 'Tis plum puddin' the child was expectin'."

The young fellow laughed almost good naturedly. "Gorry! What'd I give to smell a plum puddin', even? There was a Christmas onct when I'd the taste o' one. There was turkey before, an' the bird was a tip-topper, but it don't live in my mem'ry like the puddin'. That

came in with a wreath o' greens 'bout its brown head, an' its sides crackin' up with plums the size o' Jake's thumb there. An' there was clouds o' incense risin' from it, an' the smell o' the burnin' sperits an' the blue flames leekin' each other with joy at the taste they got—'tis before my eyes this bloomin' minnit, an' my ears is deafened with the roars the fellers sent up. You could ha' heard 'em a mile off!"

A chorus of protesting voices interrupted further reminiscences. "Shut up, will yer?" "Trow him out, some one." "You've no call to make our mouths water so."

"A pudden," a thin faced man said dreamily as the din subsided. "I nev-



And Back From the Distance Came the Answer.

er seed its like. An' afre, you say! What was that fer?" "Why, fer the celebration, jjit!" "Begorra," another voice broke in, "I'd like to live in the country where they've the crayther to burn. Did it smell good?"

"Smell good?" Again the young fellow laughed. "'Twas better than a garden full o' roses when the wind blows soft an' warm over 'em. 'Twas finer an' more penetratin' than the o-dick-alone the tenderfoots perfume themselves with. An' there was the sarse besides, with a dash o' rum in it to make it slip down easier."

"Sarse!" The ejaculation was a groan. "My things come plain." "That's about the size o' it fer ev'ry mother's son of us," some one began philosophically. "Then, in helpless rage at the turn affairs had taken, he finished with a wall: 'Hang that Terry O'Connor! He'd oughter remembered tomorrow's Christmas!'"

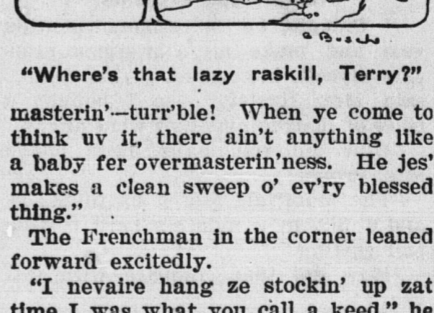
"Christmas is like any other day to us," an elderly chopper interposed grimly. "It's only meant fer the kids." A man near the fire stirred restlessly. "Back there," he said, with a sweep of his thumb, "they hang up the stockin's all in a row—six of 'em—an' my woman makes shift to fill 'em, too!"

"How they chitter in the mornin'," another man chimed in, "before it's really light. Don't know as there's any sound quite so nice as that. Whist I was home to hear it—Gord, I do!"

"Never hed no little stockin' hangin' afore my chimby!" The occupant of the big barrel chair looked into the blaze thoughtfully as he made the statement. "Baby's sock was too teeny that fust year, an' after—"

"Faith, I niver had no chimby av me own at all," a reckless voice interrupted, with a hard laugh. "Here to-day an' gone tomorrow an' devil a sowl to care where I was. It made little differ to me thin, but 'tis a wide wurrid an' a lonely wan when a man's gittin' on in the years."

"Only got so fur ez the patty cakin' age, ez you might say"—it was the man in the barrel chair who was speaking again—"but turrble over



"Where's that lazy raskill, Terry?" "mesterin'—turrble! When ye come to think uv it, there ain't anything like a baby fer overmasterin'ness. He jes' makes a clean sweep o' ev'ry blessed thing."

"A present, Frenchy." "But yes, a—present. Zen I must go to work, an' Christmas eet is o'valre for me. 'Adieu, beaux jears de mon enfance!'"

The leaping firelight fell upon grave faces. Dear, lazy laughter had slipped very far away from the warmth and glow.

"What's that?" "You're like an old faymale widdy woman, Shawe, wid your digits an' starts an' your inquisitiveness. That's 'Tis an ash fallin' to the hearth; 'Tis a burd askin' to be let in; 'Tis Christmas come to hunt us up far from home an' the frien's we love so dear. Man alive, if you're so set to know what it is, go an' find out fer yourself!"

"Yes, go an' be hang'd to you!" The chorus was unanimous.

Shawe did not wait for the permission. Go he would. As for being hang'd, that was quite another matter. He left his place in the warm corner, and, picking his way dexterously over the tangle of outstretched legs, he strode across the room to the door, flinging it wide. The cold air rushed in in a great gust that caused the men to shiver in their places and made some of them swear angrily at him, but he did not heed their words. His ear had earlier caught a faint cry, yet as he stood facing the night his level eyes saw nothing in the darkness. Then the sound came again, and this time quite far below him. His glance fell. The next moment he started back in amazement.

"Great Scott!" he cried sharply. There was a great creaking of stools and boxes in the room behind him as the men, startled out of their indifference by his exclamation, turned to see what had occasioned it, those who were farthest away rising to their feet and craning curiously over the shoulders of their companions in front. Shawe had moved a trifle to one side, and they had an unobstructed view through the open door that framed the glimpse of the dark world without of the strip of snow in the foreground gleaming ruddily with lamp and firelight, and just where the glow fell brightest stood a little child, her face raised in entreaty. For a long moment they looked, with held breaths, incredulous, wondering, half fearful that the vision would disappear at the least movement on their part. Several of their number made the quick sign of their creed, and one man covered his eyes with a shaking hand, but no one spoke. Then Shawe stooped to her.

"Who are you?" he asked very gently, touching the little flesh and blood



"Great Scott!" he cried sharply.

shoulder with tender fingers. She was no spirit, then.

"'Tis Santa Claus' sweetheart. You know Santa Claus. He left some things for you out there; then he went away."

Chapter VI. Christmas Eve at Thornby's.

"MOTHER o' Moses, the child must mane Terry!" one of the men, quicker than the rest, exclaimed. "The old riprobate! An' but fer your ears, Shawe, she might ha' be'n froze shtiff fer all we'd knowed—an' Christmas day tomorrow."

Shawe drew his breath hard. "Thank God, I did hear!" he said through his closed teeth. Then he lifted the small stranger in his arms, and as the thronging men fell back on either side he carried her through the little lane thus formed up to the fire. He put her down gently and knelt before her, chafing her hands and face with rapid touches. After a few moments thus spent he set clumsily to work to unfasten her hood and coat. She kept very still while he knotted instead of unknotted the strings, only her eyes moving from face to face, frankly curious, yet without an atom of fear in their glance. There were forty pairs of eyes to meet, and in each she left a little smile.

At last the outer wrappings were cast aside, and as Betty stood before them, a small, slim figure, very different in appearance from the shapeless, roly poly bundle of a short time previous, with her fair hair ruffled into little curls and tendrils that made a soft nimbus about her head, she seemed even more like some lovely spirit than they, awed by the strangeness of her coming, had thought her. Yet her first action was quite sufficient to remove all doubts that she belonged to another sphere. Those inquisitive eyes of hers, taking a survey of the room and its inmates, lighted suddenly upon the stockings dangling before the fire.

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