

SANTA CLAUS
SWEETHEART





Class PZ7

Book C 5476S

Copyright N^o _____

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.

SANTA CLAUS'
SWEETHEART



“ Will ye tell me good-by now, swateheart ? ”

Page 93.

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

BY
IMOGEN CLARK

ILLUSTRATED



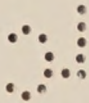
NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY
31 WEST TWENTY-THIRD STREET

LIBRARY of CONGRESS
Two Copies Received
AUG 24 1906
Copyright Entry
July 31, 1906
CLASS *a* XXc. No.
152179
COPY B.

*PZ7
C5476S*

COPYRIGHT, 1906,
E. P. DUTTON & Co.

Published September, 1906.



THE UNIVERSITY PRESS, CAMBRIDGE, U. S. A.

TO

E. A. M. M.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. ENTER SANTA CLAUS . . .	3
II. THE RIDE TOGETHER . . .	30
III. EXIT SANTA CLAUS . . .	66
IV. CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBY'S	97
V. THE PEACE OF GOD . . .	130
VI. CHRISTMAS DAY . . .	165

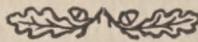
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

“Will ye tell me good-by now, swate-
heart?” (p. 93) . . . *Frontispiece*

She stood waiting, listening to the
bells *Facing page 96*

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

SANTA CLAUS'
SWEETHEART



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 con-

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

duct of the stellar body from the window. And, moreover, as if to establish quite conclusively the connection between the shining merriment 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 new-born 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 into this world of trouble,

ENTER SANTA CLAUS

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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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 resolutely 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,

ENTER SANTA CLAUS

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, jovial as they were, were less alluring, though he knew what comfort lay in their mirth, and what additional comfort would be passed from lip to lip as the hours went by. He was not unfamiliar with such scenes, but the knowledge that the morrow would be Christmas and his rude sleigh contained what would go to the needs, and also to the meagre pleasuring of the shantymen 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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

bound which landed him in the centre 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 bare-headed, gaping 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

ENTER SANTA CLAUS

own conduct, despite the fact that he held its key, had surprised him even more than it 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 a while; 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 sing-song of the sleigh bells that struck a vibrant note on the clear air, and the

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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 is 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

ENTER SANTA CLAUS

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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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 Vélin had made. For Narcisse, smarting under what he termed "a slight to hees honor-r," had declared that Terry would never be able to leave Wistar's tavern and the jolly crowd assembled there, and the shantymen 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

ENTER SANTA CLAUS

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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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 shtories ’t was the year, ye mind, whin Terry, the little jool av a man, wud n’t stay along wid us though we besached most beguilin’, an’ the grog was that edifyin’ ’t was 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 avil-minded folks as give out that he an’ his promises don’t walk on the same side av the way — now the howly saints fergive thim!” He

ENTER SANTA CLAUS

flapped the reins on the horses' backs.

“Hi, there, me byes!” he shouted. “’T is a fine supper ye ’ll be havin’, an’ Narcisse Vélin will be afther payin’ the score. Kape a-goin’, me beauties. The moon will be up whin we go into Merle, an’ ye ’ll be dhroppin’ wid fatague; but aisy! now—aisy!—there won’t be anny work to-morry, childer—oh, jist ye wait an’ see! They ’ll be afther thinkin’ we ain’t comin’, an’ Narcisse will say in his Frenchy way: ‘Bieng! did n’t I tol’ ye so? The bet is mine, an’ little Terry ’ll have to pay up; ye can’t put no daypindince in a man av his build iver—’ An’ whilst the avil wurrds are dhroppin’ from his mouth I ’ll walk in on thim all as inconsequenshul-like as if I was

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

goin' to a fair. That's the toime the laugh will be wid me, an' Narcisse will want to slink aff to some remoted place. Oh, there does be no sinse at all to make wagers onlesst ye be sure av winnin' — thin 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

ENTER SANTA CLAUS

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. 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

SANTA 'CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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;

ENTER SANTA CLAUS

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 was n'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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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'r'aps 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 could n'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 singing, 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.

ENTER SANTA CLAUS

She cast a quick glance at the north along the road he must travel, and 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 imperilled the fulfilment 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 twelve av the clock, Christmas Eve,” Nar-

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

cisse 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 lips 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 keen 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 pro-

ENTER SANTA CLAUS

portions 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 here was no question of wrong, certainly. The possibility of the passing of such an Important Personage had never occurred to her elders, and they, who loved to see her happy, would never refuse to let her go with him; it was n't necessary to ask — she could n'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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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-cheeked, 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

ENTER SANTA CLAUS

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 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 impos-

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

sible 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 must n't ketch the p-noo-moany,”

ENTER SANTA CLAUS

he cried. “Divil a bit av it! What do I percaive — is it missin’ a mitten ye are? Sure that’s disthressful, fer we can’t hunt it up now wid toime racin’ by like a millshtrame —”

“I’m unpartikilar, truly. I don’t mind the leastest bit —”

“Well, mine wud be too shmall fer the likes av ye annyway, an’ I nade thim mesilf. So tuck your hands clost under, me darlint, an’ ye won’t be afther falin’ the cold. Now thin, is it ready ye are?”

“Yes, oh, yes.”

“Hi, there, Danny! Hi, there, Whitefut!” he shouted. “Buckle to, me byes; the luck av the wurrld is foldin’ her arrms about me at this toime, an’ no mishtake. Git a move on ye, childer.”

The horses obeyed his voice with

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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 did n'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

ENTER SANTA CLAUS

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 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 flung out in a silent good-by.

CHAPTER II

THE RIDE TOGETHER

“**A**N’ the shtar danced whin I
was born —”

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

“Faith, ’t was because I was
mesilf — jest a slip av a babe that
wud have gladdened your eyes to
see. ’T was a happy shtar, an’ it
came geekin’ 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 wurrlld,
jest shmiled back for an answer.
A shmile, or a laugh, is the best
spache afther all, an’ don’t ye

THE RIDE TOGETHER

fergit it. Why, even the brute dorgs know the differ betwixt glum looks an' cheerful ones. An' the shtar was n't to be bate by a dorg, not it! Iv'ry blessed wurrd that lay in me heart an' cud n't git to me tongue's end — the way bein' thin unknown — was clear to it, an' twinkle, twinkle, hop, skip, jump it wint, a-twangin' its little fiddle in chune to its steps. Me mither's mither — may the peace av hivin be her sowl's rist! — near dhropped me aff 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 fer a cushion, but niver a whoop did I let forth, bein' all took up mesilf wid the joy av the shtar. Sure, she cud have made a clove apple av me

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

intoirely an' I wud n't have been none the wiser. She rectified her mishtake did she, an' if she 'd been in doubts that all the saylestial fandarago was in me honor, she saw the truth av it thin. 'Mavourneen,' she sez to me mither, 'there 's a little happy shtar widout in the hivins doin' a quick-shtep, an' up an' down the middle, an' ballings to corners all because av this new-born 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 shud n't the whole firmymint be set into a commotion av gladness because av him? Faith, if ye cud pennythrate to me heart,' sez she, 'ye 'd see it dancin' as niver was. Bring him here to me arrms, alanna, that I

THE RIDE TOGETHER

may cuddle him clost, so 's he can
fale the bate av it.' Thin the ould
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'yus like
into me own, an' it's lived there
iver since."

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

"Faith, she did n't — not thin,
nor aftherwards. She called me
Cushla ma-chree, — which manes
Pulse av me Heart, — an' Jool, an'
Precious, 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 spake the wurrl'd over. Don't

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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 undershtand as well as you an' me. Heart's Contint, an' Wurrld'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 remimber me own mither whisperin' something akin to it wanst whin I snuggled clost to her. Whist! 't is out av their falin's fer us that they do be gettin' the wurrds afther all, an' that's betther than learnin' thim

THE RIDE TOGETHER

from the books. Whin ye come to think av it, it ain't to be wondered at that there's a sort av fam'ly raysimblince betwixt thim, seein' as their hearts are av the same complexion. Oh, there ain't annything annyw'eres like 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 shyly.

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

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 mishtake. 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 wurrl'd 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 should n't have liked to be borned before you came. I'm half-past six, you know. Who filled your stocking?” she de-

THE RIDE TOGETHER

manded the next moment, as the new idea occurred to her.

“Divil a wan I had to hang up whin I was a spalpeen; ’t was bare-futted an’ bare-legged I wint.”

“But Christmas,” — the little maid’s lip trembled, — “what did you do at Christmas?”

“’T was like anny plain, ordinary iv’ry day to me, agra, an’ no differ; except that wanst 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 mesilf, same as ye ’d seek out a naydle in a hayrick. An’ toimes it was fat, an’ toimes ag’in ’t was like the shadder av itsilf; but glory be! I niver missed it. An’ ’t was so good, fat or lane, that I used to drame I ’d give iv’ry child in the wurrlld a cake all

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

shtuffed wid plums whin 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 could n'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 Claus-ing. Were you very long growing up? ”

“ 'T was a terrible long spell from the b'y's ind, an' a terrible short wan from the man's, — all av which you 'll undershtand whin

THE RIDE TOGETHER

your hair is me own color. But 't was 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.”

“ 'T is a Solymon King av Sheba ye are, alanna. Well, I wint about me work, an' I toiled up an' down the wurld; 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, “ after 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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

on his back, I thought it was truly you, and my heart went thumpety thump. But he shook out the sand—sprinkle, sprinkle, sprinkle. ‘To-night of all nights you must sleep,’ he said; and I cried ‘No,’ and closed my eyes quick, so’s the sand could n’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 to ’sturb muvver, I crawled out of bed, ’cause it made me incontented to lie still, and there was my stocking, full to the brim. I knew who’d 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

THE RIDE TOGETHER

bed, dear my little own,' she said; 'bring the stocking, and 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 other. She went fast asleep again, but cert'inly you could n't expect a little girl could sleep. I felt all my presents; muvver says us little folks have eyes in our finger tips; 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 did n't put anything in muvver's stocking," she added softly.

He could not meet her reproachful glance.

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

“ ’T was in a hurry I was,” he mumbled, “ an’ me bastes shtampin’ widout in the cowld — ”

“ Oh, she did n’t know,” the child interrupted, “ ’cause when she was tight asleep I found her stocking, and I put that very rosy-cheeked apple you ’d put in mine quite far, far down in hers, and some nuts, too. Cert’inly I could n’t give her the little doll or the picture book, ’cause grown-ups 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

THE RIDE TOGETHER

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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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.

THE RIDE TOGETHER

“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 fergive 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, lane-like road widened for a considerable space into a 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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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 forninst this night. I cud n’t be dhrivin’ thim in the broad daylight, alanna dear; folks wud think us a thravellin’ circus widout the elefant. Begorra, ’t is shtarvin’ I am mesilf, an’ I ’ll take my Alfred-Davy ye ’re in the same boat. We ’ll be afther havin’ a snack oursilves an’ a dhrop av somethin’ warmin’. Tumble back into the sleigh, mavourneen, an’ wrap yoursilf up clost till I shpread the tablecloth ag’instant the bankquid.”

THE RIDE TOGETHER

The tablecloth, as was speedily disclosed, was nothing more than a very greasy newspaper, which was 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 ate a nail wid relish if nothin’ else was handy,” he laughed, as he made his first

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

onslaught on the sandwich he was holding, and lessened it by a third, "but this is a dish to set before a king, so tinder an' tasty as it is. Take a rale thry at it, me darlint; ye do be nibblin' sech little grand lady bites ye'll niver be t'rough. 'Tis wan sandwidge I've put away already, an' ye but embarkin' on the top roof av yours. Here's the second to kape ye comp'ny, 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.

"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 palat-

THE RIDE TOGETHER

able 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 grown-up 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 cracker 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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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 flat, 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 wud n’t disdain; here’s something he wud n’t give the go-by to, not he!”

“What is it?” the little maid asked curiously.

“What is it? Troth, ’t wud take an hour by the clock to tell all the names it has the wurld over; an’ some is good, an’ some is bad — the names, I’m manin’. Merry-go-down an’ Tangle-legs, — that’s shlander’us! an’ Water av Health, an’ Odivvy, as the Frenchies say, which is the same as Water av

THE RIDE TOGETHER

Life; but I'm not so much fer water in it mesilf, likin' it nate. Then there 's Oil av Gladness an' — Sure ye shall have the first taste, mavourneen, as 't is fit an' proper — ladies always lead. Come, shtand up an' give us the toast — ”

“ The toast — ” she looked around bewildered; “ why, we've eaten all the bread, and there is n't any fire — ”

“ This is the fire an' the bread too,” roared Santa Claus. “ Bless your innercent sowl, me dear, 't is a propysition I'm afther askin' ye fer. Whist now, the fellies at the tavern sit 'round, an' before they drink wan will git up an' say, a-wavin' av his glass, ‘ Here 's to him ’ — namin' some wan prisint; or ‘ Here 's to honist hearts an' true; ’ or ‘ Here 's to thim at home,

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

God love thim!' an' we all drink to it. So now thin, Swate Eyes, spake quickly, an' drink long, an' pass the bottle spadily if ye love me, fer iv'ry minnit 's an hour till it quinches me thirst."

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."

THE RIDE TOGETHER

She tipped the bottle against her lips as she finished speaking, gurgled a little, choked, spluttered —

“ Saints above! child, howld your hand stiddy,” Terry shouted. “ ’T is your hood-shtrings an’ your coat as is gettin’ all that precious elixir, an’ iv’ry dhrop av it a jool.”

“ 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 ould woman said when she kissed her cow. It ’s a quare wurld this is; but sure, ’t is a most glorious dis-pinsation 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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

honor av it; 't is 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 wurld, — the love av a little child.”

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

“ Here 's me hand on me heart to your toast,” she echoed, “ an' the honor of it, 't is 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 draught. 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.

THE RIDE TOGETHER

“You can’t like it,” she shuddered.

“I’m not quarrellin’ wid the taste,” he answered, “an’ anny-way, ’t is by the docthor’s orders I do be takin’ a dhrop 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 have n’t yet given, an’ that ’s to our next merry meetin’, an’ may it come sooner than ’t is 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.

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

“An’ now to juty, swateheart,” he cried, springing out of the sleigh, “the raypast is over, an’ the horses have gorged thimsilves like magisthrates, the rapaycious gossoons! Come, be shpry, an’ lind 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.

“Jest food forninst to-morry fer the shantymen,” 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’, cud n’t say no till thim. If I’d hardened me heart like Phareyo

THE RIDE TOGETHER

we wud n't be knowin' aitch other this blessed minnit; so 't is glad I am that I'm mild as a mid-summer night by nature an' dish-position. Let's limber up a bit afore we shtart ag'in on our thravels; 't is shtiff I am in the fate av me. All hands down the middle, sashy to corners. Gintlemin, take your pardners — gintlemin twirl your gurrls! 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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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, besides their meagre light, a smell of dripping tallow, where the air was noisy with the scraping and pounding of many feet, and shouts and laughter 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 shin-

THE RIDE TOGETHER

ing 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 curtsy so low that her skirts stood stiffly out on the ground, — “a cheese” she

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

would have called it; then the next instant she sprang to her feet again and poised on tip-toe, 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 close, 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 swift sliding steps

THE RIDE TOGETHER

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 fun they had had. Only an old man and a small child light of heart and heels dancing out there in the wide country, do you say? Oh, no! oh, no! Santa Claus and his little sweetheart; and, as if that were not happiness enough, there were the others besides, —

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

the snow fairies (and no dancers are like them anywhere), and the spirits of the plains sending back the gay music and laughter, and the spirits that dwell in the woods in their soft shadowy robes winding between the trees in a stately measure, and the spirits of the wind laughing softly among the snow-laden, ice-gemmed branches, and the spirit of the high blue sky smiling down on everything.

Hitherto the little maid had only danced by herself, or with her shadow, or her dolls, — those rather unsatisfactory partners whose limp legs went every which way; but she was happy at all times because she kept the fairy, Content, in her breast. Now joy came to her in larger fashion. She waved her hand to sparkling earth

THE RIDE TOGETHER

and smiling sky as she darted up and down like some belated butterfly caught tenderly up into the heart of winter, a bit of glowing color. She saw the dancers in the clearing, — young eyes are sharp eyes, surely! — and I think she caught glimpses, too, of the shy woodland creatures peering out in open-mouthed amazement; she blew a kiss toward them, anyway. Tired? Not a bit. Tired? She could dance forever. Faster, faster, faster, like the little red top at home she spun, and then slower, slow-er, and more slowly. The little top always did that just before it hummed off to sleep. Faster again, slow — Two strong arms caught her and flung her up quite high toward the sky; how blue it was! Then — how blue

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

Santa Claus' eyes were, and how they twinkled, giving back the picture of herself! She laughed into them gayly, and his deep merriment echoed her flute-like notes. Swiftly he carried her to the sleigh, wrapped her close in the thick rug again, then sprang to his place, and gathered up the reins.

“Och, 't is the most thriminjious shteppeer-out ye are,” he cried. “'T was the iligantest shport in the wurrd, bar none. Go on, me b'ys.”

Jingle, jangle went the bells; sober music surely, after what had gone before. It was like the little tune when the dance is done and the lights are burning low that, no matter how jolly it may be, still sounds sad, because in and out of

THE RIDE TOGETHER

its lilt run the words: "Good-by, pleasure, good-by."

Jingle, jangle clashed the bells as Danny and Whitefoot settled very gravely to their work. On and on they went, through the woods and over the barren stretches, but always toward the north. There was no thought of turning back.

CHAPTER III

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

THE air bit more keenly, for the afternoon was wearing on; already the dazzling sparkles had vanished from the snow, and rosy 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, ’t is me hist’ry from the cradle up that I ’m afther tellin’ ye, ’t is your turn now. I don’t know so much as your name, though I do be runnin’ away wid ye.”

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

“ Muvver calls me heart-names — I telled you what; and uncle says E-lis-a-beth when he ’s cross, uvver times, child, or Betty. I wroted it at the end — Betty Hammond. It was just make b’lieve writing, only I thought you ’d know — ”

“ Aisy, swateheart, aisy! Av coorse I did.”

“ You got it, did n’t you? ” she demanded, sitting bolt upright, and facing him as the possibility of a dreadful mischance took possession of her whole being.

“ What do ye mane, mavourneen? ”

“ Why, the letter I wroted; oh, ever so long ago, — the letter that went up the chimbly. I saw it fly away. Muvver says that ’s the children’s post-box ev’rywheres.”

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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 into 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 long 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 letther,” 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

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

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 ’t will burrst 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. Pathrick! I was afther thinkin’ they was extrys.”

“You must get a most ’normous lot of letters,” she said thoughtfully, a moment later.

“’T would be aisier countin’ the sands on the sayshore than to count thim,” he answered, entering

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

heartily into his rôle of the jolly saint, “me secretarries an’ under-secretarries niver rest at all; they do be dhroppin’ wid fatague, the poor fellies! ’Tis entries they have to make, an’ double-entries, an’ charges an’ counter-charges, an’ I must give each wan my speshul suprevision —”

“Do you burn our letters up after you’ve read them?”

“Do I look like a man as wud desthroy his love-letters, alanna, fer that’s what they are? Not me! I’ve the walls av me mansion papered wid thim, an’ I’ve auty-graph quilts an’ tablecloths made out av thim, an’ curt’ins to me doors an’ windys, an’ sofy-pillers an’ chair-sates, — oh, ’tis an injaneyus mind I have. Sure, the shtuff av drames makes foine

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

wearin' material, an' don't ye fer-
git it. I had to build an appin-
dix to me house year before last,
an' last year there was an ad-
denda, an' this year I 'm goin' to
t'row out an L, an' if things con-
tinny 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 wurrd 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. 'T is as much as
I can manage to kape me auty-
graph collection intacks, so I have
workin' drawin's av the toys, an'
the big dipartmintal shtores in the
cities an' towns an' villidges do

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

kape the rale articles. An' by the same token I've me dep-puties 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 did n't finish her sentence, and he, looking down, discovered the reason.

“ The darlint,” he said. “ Faith, 't is tired out completely ye are, an' the slape will refresh ye. Cuddle clost, mavourneen. 'T is a day fer a notch on the shtick annyway, an' I 'll niver fergit it.”

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

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 loudly, the diverting history of “Kelly’s Cat”: —

“It was on a Sunday evenin’ — I’ll mind
it evermore,
Whin Paddy Kelly wint to bed an’ fergot
to bar the door,
The cat riz up an’ shook hersilf widout
either dread or fear,
An’ over the hollow to Barney’s she
quickly thin did steer.

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

dreamed me arm was held in the grip av a monsther. 'T is useless an' shtiff it is this very minnit. Faith, 't is as sound aslape as if ould Pickett was tellin' wan av his wurrd widout ind shtories. 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, 't is no shtiffness at all, at all,” he muttered. “ What's the weight av a feather fer a man to complain av? 'T is like the touch

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

av an angel's wing, so it is, an' proud I am to fale it, — proud an' plazed. Lie shtill, *Cushla machree*, lie shtill."

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 laugh-

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

ter 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 did n't seem to him that he was singing it, for through the words he could hear his mother's worn voice carrying the tune for-

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

ward, 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 roisterers at Wistar's, or up at Merle, would never have recognized it. But if they could have heard him they would n'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

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

made 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 does n'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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

through the rose-colored glasses of fancy, but plod along in the dull light of a 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 copy-book 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,

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

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 up 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 shantymen'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 smote the air sullenly

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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 — and there stood the house again, square, squat, unpicturesque, 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:

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

“Now Mrs. McGrath to the Sargint said,
Sure I'd like me son to be a corpril
made,
Wid a foine rid coat an' a goold laced
hat —
Och Tiddy me b'y, wuddent 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 — 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 monoto-

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

nous 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 shtooped to desate," the old man murmured. "What will I do wid juty sayin' 'go forrard,' an' juty sayin' 'go back'? 'T is most thirty miles from the shantymen's hut to

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

that lonely little house, an' I can't take the journey over ag'in. Whist there, mither, wid your callin' to the colleen, or 't is cracked me heart will be intoirely. Aisy now! the voice av you is far away loike, an' yet 't is plain as thunder in me ears. Sure, I thought the fun av the wurrl'd was in this thing, an' I meant no harm at all — whist there, mither dear! They do be waitin' fer me up at Merle, — thim an' the Christmas fun — an' Christmas only comin' wanst a year! — an' there 's the wager besides. Och! wurra, wurra, what will I do? I must go on, but 't is n'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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

were two very different things. He could n'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 could n't take her

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

with him, that was impossible! And equally he saw, because he knew himself so well, he could n't take her back to her mother's longing arms. He could n'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 shamefaced fashion, and with none of his usual jauntiness, though he straightened his shoulders, and tried to appear unconcerned. He began to whistle, too, as if to

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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, “’t is sorry I am fer ye, darlint, but ’t will all come right in the mornin’ — troubles always do. Whist now! ’t is sorriest I am fer mesilf, since I can’t help mesilf at all — I bein’ what I am, ye see.”

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

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

cheap gilt locket 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 locket 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.

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

“ 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 must n't fale the edges

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

— 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-morry. Remember! An' second — faith, me second is hardest fer me, fer 'tis good-by 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' Whitefut will be proud to draw ye; but 'tis 'most night, an' the way gets bad up yonder, an' there 's the lake to cross, an' I 'm not always the stiddy driver — to me shame be it said —"

"I 'd sit very still —"

"An' 't will be cold, bitther cold! Thin I 've been thinkin', I did n't

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

tell ye this afore; but no child has iver seen me house — 't is a thing av drames (an' sure that's the truth!). Whisper 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 coorse ye could kape on wid the dep-puties; I've trained thim well, an' the spirit av Christmas niver dies, the givin' an' the lovin', fer the Lord made thim in his own imidge. But ye 'd be missin' me, ye know.”

She was very still, the little pucker showing between her anxious brows.

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

“ I ’ve an iligint plan. Yon ’s a foine place to spind the night, an’ iv’rything 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’ ’t will be Merry Christmas all ’round. Will ye tell me good-by now, swateheart, an’ let me go on to kape me wurrd that I ’ve been afther passin’ sacred-loike? ”

“ Yes, ” she said gravely. “ I wanted to see Vixen and Oncome-it close, but I ’ll let you go, ’count o’ the children, ev’rywheres. ”

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; al-

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

ready 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 fellies. 'T is but a shtep up there annyhow; ye can't niver miss it — see, where the rid light shows t'rough the cracks. An' ye'll not ferget 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

EXIT SANTA CLAUS

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.

“Good-by,” she called in a breaking voice.

And back from the distance came the answer:

“Good-by, little swateheart.
God love ye an’ —”

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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 half way 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.



She stood waiting, listening to the bells.

CHAPTER IV

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBYS

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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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.

“Did n'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

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBY'S

to expect when yer singled him out to fetch the grub. A sorry Christmas we 'll have. Any meal left in the bar'l, Cooky?"

"'Nough to make pap fer you 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 oncet 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* come in with a wreath o' greens 'bout its brown head, an' its sides

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

crackin' open with plums the size o' Jake's thumb there. An' there was clouds o' incinse risin' from it, an' the smell o' the burnin' sperits, an' the blue flames lickin' each other with joy at the taste they got — 'T is 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? ” “ T'row 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 never seed its like. An' a-fire, you say. What was thet fer? ”

“ Why, fer the celebration, ijit. ”

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBYS

“ Begorra,” another voice broke in, “ I ’d like to live in the counthry where they ’ve the crayther to burn. Did it smell good? ”

“ Smell good? ” again the young fellow laughed. “ ’T was better than a gardin full o’ roses when the wind blows soft an’ warm over ’em; ’t was finer an’ more penetratin’ than the o-dick-alone the tenderfoots parfume 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.”

“ Thet’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 wail: “ Hang thet Terry O’Connor.

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

He'd oughter remembered to-morrer'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 reely light. Don' know as there's any sound quite so nice as that. Wisht I was home to hear it — Gord! I do.”

“ Never hed no little stockin' hangin' afore my chimbley,” — the occupant of the big barrel chair

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBY'S

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 chimbly av me own at all," a reckless voice interrupted with a hard laugh. "Here to-day, an' gone to-morrer, an' divil a sowl to care where I was. It made little differ to me thin, but 't is a wide wurld 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 turr'ble over-masterin' — turr'ble! When ye come to think uv it, there ain't anything like a baby fer over-masterin'ness; he jes' makes a clean sweep o' ev'ry blessed thing."

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

The Frenchman in the corner leaned forward excitedly.

“ I nevaire hang ze stockin' up zat time I was what you call a keed,” he cried, “ but zere was a leetle tree an' a Christ chil' up at ze ver' top. Zey had eet een ze *église* an' every chil' een ze pareesh was made ver' happy. So for two-t'ree years did I get a — a — what you say? ”

“ A present, Frenchy.”

“ But yes, a — a prresent. Zen I must go to worrk, an' Christmas eet is ovaire for me. ‘ *Adieu, beaux jours 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 ould faymale

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBY'S

widdy woman, Shawe, wid your fidgets an' starts, an' your inquisitiveness. That? 'T is an ash fallin' to the hearth; 't is a burd askin' to be let in; 't is 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 yoursilf."

"Yes, go an' be hanged to you!"

The chorus was unanimous.

Shawe did not wait for the permission, go he would; as for being hanged, 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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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.

“My God!” 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

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBYS

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 shoulder with tender fingers; she was no spirit then.

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

“I ’m Santa Claus’ sweetheart, — you know Santa Claus. He left some things for you out there, then he went away.”

“Mother o’ Moses! the child must mane Terry,” one of the men, quicker than the rest, exclaimed. “The ould riprobate! An’ but fer your ears, Shawe, she might ha’ be’n froze shtiff fer all we’d knowed — an’ Christmas Day to-morrer.”

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

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBYS

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 unknotting 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

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

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; they widened at the sight, then the smiles brimmed over and her whole face broke up into glee. How could she feel strange, or afraid, in a place where — big, grown-up men though they all were — such signs of expectancy were so openly displayed? She slipped from the protecting arm and ran close to the hearth, clapping her hands in delight.

“ Oh! you 're all ready for Santa Claus,” she cried. “ My! how he 'll have to work — there 's such

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBYS

a 'normous lot. But he 'll fill 'em all." She threw out this balm in eager haste. " He 's truly coming; he said so. If I 'd gone home with him his house would have cracked to — to smithereens, so I stayed."

A deafening roar of laughter greeted her words and sent her, unerringly as a homing bird, back to her first friend, who still knelt on the floor; but resting against him her fears vanished almost instantly, and, as she glanced around with renewed confidence, her pretty silvery laugh tinkled out to join their rougher merriment. The men pressed closer, one of them, the oldest, acting as spokesman. He was the man whose chimney had never seen any Christmas stockings hanging before it, the baby's sock being too tiny in that

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

far-away year; but he seemed to know better than any of them how to ask just the right questions that would set free the little tongue. Betty climbed gladly up on his knee, and from her new perch poured forth an account of her wonderful adventures.

It was the fault of her companions, surely, and not her own that the things that were so real and true to her were like myths out of Fairyland to them, because they had travelled farther down the stream of time. Much of what she said was unintelligible to their dull, grown-up minds; but if each word had been of gold they could not have waited for it more eagerly; and when she stopped in her recital of that marvellous journey to laugh at some remembrance of

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBYS

Santa Claus' fooling, they looked at one another, smiling in perfectest sympathy. Perhaps, after all, they understood — who shall say? There was no interruption, except when old Jerome hazarded some remark that helped on the tale; and the only person to move was a tall, gaunt man, who bent mysteriously over the fire and made something that smelled like — like the most delicious thing in all the world. You have to ride for hours through the snow, and feel the keen air in your face, and be as hungry as a bear into the bargain, to know just what that is.

By some remarkable law of coincidence the story and the cooking came to an end at one and the same moment; nothing could have been more timely. Betty's whole atten-

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

tion was quickly transferred to the tin plate which was placed before her; and her evident appreciation of the good things of life was so keen that the lookers-on, who even in that short time had learned that their rougher ways frightened her, laughed gently among themselves. Well, they understood that too! While she was busy over her supper, to the utter forgetting of her surroundings, several of the men went outside to see if they could find any traces of the recreant Santa Claus; they returned after a hasty search, bringing in the barrel and bags — sufficient proof that Terry, despite all convictions, wise head-shakings, and gloomy forebodings, had not failed them. He had kept his word. But the mystery deepened — Who was the

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBY'S

little maid? Aside from her name, which was an unfamiliar one to them, they had not been able to learn anything definite about her. The excited little brain only seemed to live over the immediate past, in which Santa Claus had figured so importantly; the fact that she was his sweetheart apparently outweighing every other consideration.

“Terry O'Connor hain't a chick, nor child, an' never hed,” old Jerome declared stoutly, as somebody ventured this solution of the difficulty, “nor there ain't any kin b'longin' to him — guess I orter know — I've knowed him 'nintimut these thirty years —”

“Losh, man!” interrupted Sandy, “then he just inveegled the bairn awa', makin' oot he was Santa Claus. The e-normity of it!”

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

“Oh, Terry must olluz be jokin’; it ’s his way,” Jerome returned tolerantly. With his arm around the small form, and the little golden head resting on his breast, he was knowing one of the rare, happy moments of his life; there could be scant condemnation from him under the circumstances.

Betty, who had been alternately blinking at the fire, and smiling contentedly to herself for some time, now interrupted any dispute that might have arisen concerning her absent friend by giving utterance to a series of baby yawns. The discussion came to a speedy close, such signs needing no interpretation to her hearers.

“Don’t ye want to go to sleep, deary?” the old man asked.

She signified her willingness

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBY'S

without delay, though first her stocking must be hung up among the others. He proceeded to draw it off; but before that could be accomplished, he was let into the secrets the buttons on your shoe always tell, — what you are to be, what you will wear, and in what manner you will travel through life, — in carriage, cart, wheelbarrow, or wagon. When this “sure-as-sure” knowledge had been mastered he stripped off the stocking, and Shawe, imperiously summoned, came close and put the wee packet, as she directed, way down in its very toe; then he hung it up in the centre, where even the blindest deputy, supposing Santa Claus unable to get round, would never have passed it by. A rollicking little cheer went up at sight of

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

the small red stocking swinging slightly to and fro in the breath of the fire; but it died away on the instant, for the child had slipped to the floor and knelt there by the old man's knee, her face hidden in her chubby hands. Perhaps in the intense stillness she missed the voice that generally guided hers, for there was a moment of hesitation on her part; then she began to pray aloud, halting over the words:

“ Jesus, tender shepherd, hear me ;
 Bless thy little lamb to-night,
In the darkness be thou near me,
 Keep me safe till morning light.
Let my sins be all forgiven,
 Bless the friends I love so well,
Take me when I die to heaven,
 There for ever with thee to dwell.”

She paused a moment: “ And please, God, take care of muvver,

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBYS

and uncle, and far-away daddy, and make Betty a good girl f'rever and ever. Amen."

It was very still all around; and usually when she finished her prayers a soft cheek was laid against her own, while a soft voice echoed, "Amen," and that meant "my heart wants it to be exactly so!" Now, however, no one spoke. Betty glanced wonderingly about as she rose to her feet, a trifle dazed and even frightened; but such grave, quiet, *kind* faces looked back at her that swiftly she dropped to her knees again with another petition: "God bless ev'rybody, an' most speshilly Santa Claus."

"Amen," said old Jerome, in the pause that followed.

A bed had been hastily con-

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

structed in the warmest corner, out of the best materials the camp afforded, and thither Jerome carried the child. She nestled down drowsily while he tucked the covering about her; but his was an alien touch, and through the room there suddenly sounded a low, wailing cry:

“Muvver — oh! muvver —”

“There, Honey; there, Blossom —” the man's voice broke, the hand that soothed was clumsy and old, and it trembled — “there, Honey —”

The men sat breathless — waiting, dreading to hear the cry again; but moment after moment passed, and it did not come. There was one little sob, then the dream-fairy stooped with her comfort.

How quiet the room was! And

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBYS

this was Christmas Eve — the time when each man was to do a stunt for the amusement of his fellows and the glory of himself. Generally on this occasion the Lord of Misrule held high carnival, — the flowing bowl was like a perpetual fountain, and laughter, shouting, and horse-play abounded on every side. There was rum in plenty since Terry had not failed them, but no effort was made to secure it; desire of that kind was dead, it seemed. They were content to sit there listening to the soft rise and fall of the child's breath; the land of dreams, into which she had slipped, open to them also. And though it was so different from those other Christmas Eves, it was far from being dull. Into each heart there had crept a soft glow,

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

which did not come from the blazing logs, and which no grog, no matter how skilfully blended, could have given, for once again the presence of one of God's little ones made holy a humble place.

Shawe was the first to bring the stillness to an end. They had been sitting quiet, nobody could tell how long, when he got to his feet. Noiselessly as he moved he broke the spell, and eyes that had grown misty looked at him, some with resentment, others with curiosity, and others again with reproach. Old Jerome's gaze held the latter quality. Nobody knew much about Shawe, anyway. He was not one of them. He had come to the camp some weeks before, and would be gone in a day or so — up to Merle this time, and then — He was a

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBY'S

wanderer — some outcast, perhaps, from a better life gone by. Nobody knew him. They had no quarrel with him; he was a good enough fellow, only not of them. They watched him, therefore, almost coldly, yet noting with jealous satisfaction that he stepped warily as he passed from the room; then they fell to thinking again — with a difference.

He came back after a short absence with a soft, dark mink's skin in his hand, — a bit of fur that a woman's fingers could fashion into a cap to cover a child's golden hair, — and went to the small stocking, cramming the gift far down to keep that other company. A breath of approval fairly twinkled around the room. The grave faces melted into smiling delight; and

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

just as the circles widen in a pool of water when a stone is thrown in, spreading farther and farther till the whole surface is disturbed, so every one present came within the influence of Shawe's action. As if by one accord the men hurriedly left their places, making scarcely any noise, yet jostling against one another in their eagerness to play at being Santa Claus; each man seeking out his kit, and returning with what would be the likeliest thing to please a little child.

A bright red handkerchief, an orange one, a third as many colored as Joseph's coat, an old *habitant* sash worth its weight in gold to a connoisseur, a scarf-pin set with a cairngorm the size of a man's thumb-nail — this from Sandy! —

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBY'S

a — you must n't laugh — a pair of brand-new suspenders, and big and little coins that spelled liquor or tobacco to the givers, and now bought what pleased them infinitely more. Of course one stocking could n't begin to hold the gifts, though they were massed into a dizzy pyramid at the top, so its mate was pressed into service and crowded likewise. There was a distressing similarity in the presents when you came to think of it, especially where handkerchiefs were concerned; still, no man withheld his giving because another's choice was necessarily the same; he added his contribution proudly, as if it were the only one of its kind. Frenchy, who had a pretty trick of carving, gave a really beautiful little frame which his deft fingers

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

had made in the long evenings; and the cook, when no one was looking, slipped in his prayer-book, though I don't believe any one that night would have laughed at his having it with him. The young fellow they called Kid — he was something of a dandy — added a ring of massive proportions. It was n't gold, but he pretended it was, and liked to wear it when he went to dances to make the girls think he was a fine, up-and-coming man. And Jerome — poor old Jerome —

It was a very meagre kit that he rummaged through again and again, — one that he himself had packed; and when a man has to take care of himself he does n't put in any useless traps, any — what you'd call gewgaws; not when

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBY'S

he's old, that is. So he could find nothing there; and a search through his pockets revealed the same depressing poverty. He had nothing — nothing but a certain battered snuff-box that had been his companion for so many years that it would be easier to imagine him without his head than without the box. He was evidently of that opinion, for he stowed it down in his pocket with an air of great finality. But nevertheless, polished to an almost glittering show of youth and filled with coins, it very fitly crowned the motley collection.

It had taken some time to play Santa Claus, for each man had to wait his turn to stow away his gift; there were no deputies allowed on this occasion, and the bungling

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

fingers could n't work very quickly, — did n't try to, if the truth were known. But all too soon the joyful task came to an end, and the men stood back radiant-eyed, looking at those bulging little red stockings as if they were the most beautiful things in all the world.

How the glow spread and spread in their hearts, though the fire, banked for the night, was shining quite dimly now! That mighty threefold cable of the Christmas-tide — with its strand of inheritance, its strand of opportunity, its strand of affection — bound them very closely to one another; in that moment old wrongs and heart-burnings, bitternesses and rivalries slipped away, and they knew the blessedness of peace and

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THORNBY'S

good-will. Happy? There was just one thing to make them happier, — the merry voice of a little child greeting the misty light of the Christmas dawn.

CHAPTER V

THE PEACE OF GOD

TOWARD midnight somebody stepped close to the improvised bed and stood looking down with troubled eyes at the child curled up among the blankets there. The light from the low fire cast an occasional flickering flame upon the tiny segment of cheek just visible above the woollen covering, like a snowdrop peeping out of a mass of old bracken, and on the floating strands of hair that had lost their golden sheen in the semi-obscurity. An hour or so earlier the men had gone to their bunks in the long loft

THE PEACE OF GOD

overhead, and their heavy breathing now proclaimed the fact that they were resting from their labors. Every one in the house was sleeping but Shawe; even old Jerome, who sat huddled by the side of the little one, nodded at his post. He had maintained the right of watching, by supremacy of his years and her evident preference for him, jealously putting aside all offers that his vigil be shared. He stirred now and opened his eyes, staring into the face of the man above him.

“What is it?” he demanded with a low, savage growl.

“I could n't sleep,” Shawe whispered back, “for thinking of the ones who are mourning for her, — her mother and uncle. The father is n't home, she said. Don't you remember — ‘God bless far-away

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

daddy'? So he won't be troubled. But the others — they ought to know. We've had all the Christmas sport and they nothing but black misery and bitterness. They ought to know quickly."

Old Jerome's hand fluttered above the little head, half fell to it, then was drawn reluctantly back.

"Ye-es, they'd orter know," he said dully, "but how? Who is she?" He shifted his position, averting his eyes. "I've be'n thinkin' thet p'r'aps she's nobut a little Christmus sperit come to cheer us in this God forsook spot —"

"That's nonsense, man. Look at her sleeping there as human as we are, though with a difference. I tell you she has kith and kin, and their hearts are bleeding for her

THE PEACE OF GOD

at this moment. I 'm going to find them — ”

“ Ye sha'n't take her with yer, Shawe,” the old man whimpered. “ I 'll roust up the others, an' they 'll fight yer — I — I can't; she 's made me too trembly. But ye sha'n't take her.”

“ You 're crazy! I 'd no thought of taking her. It 's colder than charity outside, and the frost is like a badger's tooth. Besides, it must be almost thirty miles to Wistar, and there 's no house nearer, is there? No, I go by myself.”

“ An' ef ye don't win through — there 's thet chanst.”

“ I don't — that 's all. But I 'm not hopeless — I 've got to win through.”

“ Best wait till mornin',” Jerome said, after the silence between them

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

had grown unbearable, "p'r'aps somebody'll be goin' by from Merle, an' ye could git a lift, or p'r'aps her folks'll come from somewhars — Ye don' know whar she come from, anyways," he finished triumphantly.

"We worked out the sum that she came with that man Terry. Everything she said about Santa Claus fitted him like a glove, you — who know him — say. And he came from Wistar, so she belongs there. Perhaps her people did n't miss her till late; and what traces would she leave if she came on in his sleigh? Answer me that. How would they ever dream of searching for her up here when there's the river — Good God! a child like that would n't notice the spruce bush signals put up where the ice

THE PEACE OF GOD

is thin; and there are the open water-holes by the barns —” He stopped with a deep intake of breath, and moved nearer the fire; Jerome, watching him furtively, saw that he was fully dressed to go out.

“Wal!” he muttered slowly, after a time, “ef ye be so sot on goin’, ye ’re goin’, I s’pose. P’r’aps ye ’re right. Somehow I was only thinkin’ from my side, an’ hed n’t got ’roun’ to the mother’s; mebbe an ol’ codger like me never would ha’ got ’roun’ — can’t say. Here ’s my hand.”

It was an unusual demonstration, but Shawe showed no particular surprise; everything being a little out of the ordinary that night. He grasped the extended hand warmly, then let it drop,

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

and turned away, bending again for a moment over the sleeping child.

“Wish I were going to hear her laugh over the stocking,” he said half to himself.

“Got a wife an' fambly?” Jerome asked.

“No,” the other returned.

“Thought mebbe ye hed, 'count o' yer thinkin' how the mother 'd feel — mebbe ye hed oncet.”

“Yes,” Shawe answered shortly.

“Then ye know how turr'ble masterful the kids are. Strange, ain't it? Mine hed got so ez he could patty-cake, ye understan'. Lord! there warn't never a sight like it — never. Thought fust 't was a kinder fool thing the mother 'd learned it; but bless yer!

THE PEACE OF GOD

I did n't think so long; 't was the purties' sight —

“ ‘ Patty-cake, patty-cake, baker's man — ’ ”

Shawe moved cautiously across the room, and paused at the door to look back at the old man softly clapping his palms together. Something in his glance recalled Jerome to a sense of his surroundings; he got up in his turn and joined his companion.

“ Ye 'll keep an eye out fer them deers, won't yer? ” he whispered anxiously. “ Christmus Eve they all kneel in the woods an' look up to he'vin, ye know. Thet's Injin talk 'roun' here from way back; some o' the oldest fellers swear their folks seed the thing done. Can't say 'xactly ez I b'lieve it myself, but 't would be a purty sight — an' anyways, ye jes' watch out.

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

Wal, luck to ye, lad, luck to ye."

"Oh! you 'll see me again, never fear," Shawe said lightly, to cover the other's concern. "I'm a bad penny. So long!"

He let himself out into the night, closing the door speedily, and with as little noise as possible; but quick as he had been, a blast of the nipping air filled the room. Jerome hurriedly drew the blankets closer about his little charge; then he stooped to the fire, coaxing it into a brighter glow.

"Fer a bad penny," he mumbled, as he went back to his place, "Shawe rings oncommon true. There ain't nary of us ez would ha' thought o' doin' what he's a-doin' — nary a blessed one of us. I swan he's dif'runt somehow —

THE PEACE OF GOD

kinder apart, but square — square. Never knowed nothin' 'bout Shawe; hed to take him on his face value, so to say; he ain't a gabblin' 'bout himself, but gen-i-al — gen-i-al — an' oncommon quick-witted inter the barg'in. We'd a-waited till Kingdom come afore we'd thought 'bout fillin' them stockin's ef he hed n't started the game; an' 't was him ez heerd her callin' when the rest of us was deaf ez postses. Hmm! mebbe — ” but praise and conjecture alike were silenced as the grizzled head dropped forward and the old chopper fell into a heavy doze.

Shawe, meanwhile, oblivious to both, thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and started off on his lonely errand. It might prove fruitless, but results were not for

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

him to consider; his was to do the duty of the moment, and by the moment. Nor did it seem to him that he was doing anything to be especially commended. He had been driven out into the night by his thoughts of the distress in the child's home, and once they had taken possession of him it was impossible to stay warm and comfortable in his bunk. He simply had to go — he could not wait. Besides, he told himself, it was n't much; he had been out on nights to which this, bitter as it was, was balmy by comparison. He had faced gales, terrible as that chill wind which the old Moslem fable says will blow over the earth in the last days, and yet had come safely through. There was no air stirring at this time; the intense silent

THE PEACE OF GOD

cold of the North wrapped everything close. He was guarded against it, however, and while he could keep in rapid motion he had little to fear from its searching tooth.

He drove his hands deeper into his pockets and strode on. The way had been broken through some weeks earlier and was well defined; there was no chance of missing it. In the clearing the night was as bright as day; under the light of the moon the snow lay like an immense silver shield across which the trees threw bars of shadow; but as the road wound through the woods the brightness retreated in great measure, shimmering only here and there through the high trunks, striking off a gleam from this snowy head and that, or shiver-

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

ing down like a lance of steel as if to pierce the deeper blackness which crouched beyond.

Shawe knew no fear. He passed on silently and as swiftly as possible, casting a wary glance around occasionally; but he seemed to be the only living creature abroad that night. The deer, if there were any, were not stirring, or his eyes, perhaps, were too sceptical to witness the simple spectacle of their adoration. There was no sign of life anywhere. It was almost as if it were the end of the world, and he the last man — the last of creation — left on earth, so wide and empty were the spaces about him; the great vault overhead, in which the moon and stars rode calmly, was out of his pygmy reach.

Presently, as the trees grew

THE PEACE OF GOD

sparser and the road showed its slighter depression through the plain of snow lying beyond like some frozen sea, he became conscious of life and motion close at his side. With the instinct of the woodland creatures, he held himself perfectly tense, and waited. Then right across his path there lumbered a huge, clumsy shape, its breath showing like smoke on the moonlit air. Suddenly great drops of moisture stood out on Shawe's face as if it were mid-summer, and his weight of furs had become intolerable; he had never felt fear before, yet now panic gripped him. It was not the thought of physical hurt that appalled him, but rather the sense of the utter futility of his endeavor. So the end had come; and over there, still very far away,

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

a little child's mother was sobbing — he could almost hear her moans.

He stirred his hand from his pocket to his belt, and grasped the butt of his pistol, drawing it forth swiftly. It might not be too late! His finger was firm as iron as it touched the trigger; but the next instant the beast slouched noisily into the shadows beyond. There was no other sound — had been no other sound; the cartridges lay unused in their chambers. Shawe lowered his hand. He had not been dreaming, he told himself; he could swear to that. And the animal was no creature of fancy; he had seen it quite plainly, had felt its breath as it passed, had met the dull stare of its eyes. It was real, — as real as he was at that moment, yet he had not fired

THE PEACE OF GOD

because there had seemed no need — the beast had simply disregarded him. Then suddenly Shawe laughed aloud, not boisterously, but very gently, — the way you do sometimes when something has happened that seems almost too good to be true, and the quick tears rush into your eyes, — I think, perhaps, they were in his also.

“It’s the peace of God,” he said softly to himself, “the peace of God —”

For on the moment he remembered the old tradition he had heard in many lands, that on the night before Christmas, from the day’s close to the day’s coming, there is no slaughter anywhere among the beasts; that the fiercest and most savage of them all are as harmless as doves to one another, and even

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

to their natural enemy — man. He put his pistol back into his belt, unspeakably glad that no shot of his had broken the holy truce. It was useless to try to account for what had happened. To believe in the legend, or to laugh it away and attribute the animal's indifference to some natural cause. The whole experience — dream, or reality — left him throbbing with a sense of gratitude that nothing had interfered with his mission. The thought seemed to lend him greater activity, as if his moccasined feet had suddenly become winged. There could be no loitering anywhere while the mother mourned for her little one, her voice crying vaguely, vainly, through that wonder-space of time when, because of another Little Child,

THE PEACE OF GOD

God's peace wrapped the earth close.

There were no landmarks discernible. Terry would have recognized certain ones, as would also some of the lumbermen; but to Shawe, who was a stranger, the whole country was unfamiliar; all he could do, therefore, was to lessen the distance step by step, knowing that while he kept the road he could not miss his destination. Yet he never lost heart, nor was he particularly tired. As boy and man, much of his time had been spent in the open. He was used to hardships, rough weather, and great exertion; the present undertaking seemed slight compared to others he had known.

Presently the white light of early dawn crept faintly up, —

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

little Peep o' Day he's called, — a tiny fellow, truly, to be sent out to fight the darkness, and yet so persistent and undaunted that every moment he glowed more confidently at his task, and grew bigger and bigger with his efforts. The moon had looked scornfully at the coming of such an adversary; but now she paled visibly, and called in her routed army of moonbeams, while below, — the sleeping world laughed here and there at the contest, stirring out of its slumbers. As soon as his duties were accomplished, the little champion stole away, losing himself in the brightness that filled the sky, and made it and the land look like tinted silver; but nobody missed him, for the morning was at hand. There was a gorgeous,

THE PEACE OF GOD

rosy flush along the east melting into purple, out of which the sun came up like a wonderful flower, opening slowly, first pink, then yellow, then red — and it was Christmas Day!

Shawe's eyes gladdened at the sight, though he did not pause; he could n't — oh! now less than ever — now, he must hurry — hurry. Back in the shantymen's hut the little child was already waking, he knew, and her glee was filling the house; but in her home others were waking, too, — they had not slept, — and listening in vain for the music of her laughter. He must hurry! So he kept on; but somehow, though he was beginning to be very tired, the going was much easier. Joy comes with the morning, and new hope; all the

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

doubts and fears of the night disappear; they are some of the foes little Peep o' Day vanquishes so triumphantly. Shawe could n't feel despondent in that beautiful world while the still morning brightened around him, especially when every step brought him nearer his goal. He laughed like a boy, and shouted out "Merry Christmas!" though there was no one by to answer his greeting; but the clear cold air bore it wide, and it helped to swell the chorus going up all over the earth.

He ran a few paces, so wonderfully light-hearted had he grown, and flung out his arms, clapping them against his body to warm himself; then he sobered down — outwardly. Nobody would ever have supposed that the tall, fur-

THE PEACE OF GOD

clad figure with head bent a trifle, and only a bit of his face visible between his big cap and high collar was the bearer of joyful news. For one thing, he was walking quite stolidly, and your happy messengers are always winged; and for another, he was looking neither to left nor right. Was n't he? — Then why did he start suddenly, and throw back his head, laughing up again at the sky? Why? — Because just in front of him there was a house, — an ugly, squat little house, the glass in its windows twinkling in the sun. He drew nearer, and his heart, that had almost instantly rushed into his throat, fell back to its proper place with a most discouraging thump. The house seemed uninhabited, — deserted, — as if the people who

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

had lived there had grown tired of being so far from the settlement, and had gone back to be with their kind, perhaps to stay there always, or at least over this day of festivity. It was impossible to associate a merry Christmas with this sober, grown-up abode. A closer approach, however, revealed a small thread of smoke issuing from the chimney; but otherwise, the general air of dreariness about the place — its loneliness, its empty, staring windows — chilled Shawe more than the winter night had done.

He went quickly up to the door, over snow that had been tracked by the passing of many feet; there were footprints everywhere, — great marks of a man's boot, and the smaller ones of a woman's or

THE PEACE OF GOD

a girl's shoe. The sight turned him a little giddy. Was this his goal — could his happy news be spoken here? He tried to shout, but his voice seemed frozen in his throat; he fell to trembling. He — he could not speak. He tried again, choking out a faint sound. There was no sign from the silent house that his call had been heard, — no stir, no movement of life. He flung himself against the door, and battered it with his fists. The waiting seemed like eternity to him; then his hand sought the knob, turned it, and the door flew wide. He stared half dazed into the narrow passage-way with the stairs climbing at one side; all the light seemed out in the world behind him; the place was dim and chill. For a moment he paused,

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

then his voice sounded through the silence.

“Halloo! Halloo! Is a little child missing here?”

There was a quick sound of running feet overhead, an opening door, and a woman's scream.

“Uncle — Uncle, have you —”

The cry went up from below:

“Is a little child missing here?”

Something darted down the stairs; one would n't have said it was anything human, so swift was the motion; yet swifter than the flying feet, and very piteously human were the words that came from the mother's heart:

“Is — is — she — dead?”

“No, I tell you, no; she's alive and well. She's at Thornby's logging-camp — don't faint! She's

THE PEACE OF GOD

all right; she's safe, I tell you; don't — ”

Shawe was only just in time to catch the swaying form in his arms, and for the moment, as he stood there, holding the unconscious woman, he was unable to think what to do. It did n't seem possible to him that the joy of his message could harm her; perhaps he ought to have broken it more gently — but how could he? It had to be told — No — no — the joy could n't harm her! A little air, a touch of snow on her temples, and she would be herself again. He lifted his burden and turned to the open door. The clear light from without came searchingly in upon the still face on his breast, showing its pinched lines of distress and the ravages the tears had

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

made in its fairness; he started at the sight, and uttered a sharp exclamation.

The keen air revived her; she stirred a trifle with a low moan; a minute later her eyelids fluttered, and her words came disjointedly in little sobbing breaths:

“ Safe, my precious, safe — thank God, oh! thank — ” The cold whipped a tinge of color into her lips; her eyes opened wide, and she stared up into Shawe's face. A look of bewilderment suddenly clouded their gaze.

“ You,” she said softly, “ you — Humphrey? ”

She did not move from his arm; but very slowly she lifted her hand and touched him wonderingly, her fingers lingering over his coat, and creeping up and up to his cheek.

THE PEACE OF GOD

“ You, Humphrey — ”

Something like a sob broke from him.

“ Elisabeth! ” he cried.

“ I don't understand, ” she said weakly. “ It was so very long ago — oh! is it really you? I — I — thought you would never come back — so long ago — and you were angry — we were both angry; but I was the one to blame — ”

“ No, no, no, ” he interrupted, “ mine was the real fault. I knew that when it was too late, but I could n't let you know. Before we could make our port the ship was wrecked — oh! it's a sad story. Most of the crew were lost; but the few of us who were saved lived somehow on that desolate little island waiting — hoping — fear-

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

ing — through those interminable months before the rescue came. Then we were carried off to the other side of the world, and from place to place, — wanderers on the face of the globe; but I got home at last, and — there was no home for me — you had gone away, you and Baby. They could n't tell me where, but I searched for you, my girl, I searched for you. I would n't give up looking — I meant to find you — and it was so useless — ”

She clung closer to him, stroking his quivering face with gentle fingers.

“ I thought you never meant to come back,” she whispered, “ and I wanted to beg you to come. I wanted to tell you I was really the most to blame, but I did n't know

THE PEACE OF GOD

where to send a letter — I had to keep still. Oh! I waited so patiently, and every day was a year. Then when you did n't come, I could n't bear the neighbors' pity; it — it hurt! — so I stole away one night with Betty. We went to a big city where no one knew us, and we were very poor. I did n't mind much for myself, only for Baby. It was so hard to find work, I — I almost gave up. Then I remembered Uncle Steven, my mother's half-brother, who used to be with us a good deal when I was a child. I knew he was all alone out here, and I felt he would help Betty and me in our troubles. And he was so good — he is so good! He did n't even wait to answer my letter; he came to find us instead, and he brought us back to share

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

his home with him. That was three years ago—But you, how is it you are here?”

“It’s a long story, Bess, darling. I’ve knocked around everywhere. I had n’t the heart to settle to anything, you know, — hunting, trapping, whatever offered. I’d try first one thing and then another. Something made me come over here — I don’t know what it was — I simply had to come. I was on my way to the Northwest, and passed through Wistar three weeks ago, never dreaming you were so near; then I went on to the logging-camp and stopped there for a time, but I’d made all my plans to leave to-morrow —” his voice trembled, and he rested his face against hers. “Oh!” he went on brokenly, “I might have

THE PEACE OF GOD

missed you altogether; we might never have met again — never — if it had n't been for Santa Claus' sweetheart — ”

She looked up curiously, interrupting him with a quick exclamation, and bit by bit the account of the little child's arrival at the lumber-camp was told.

“ But did n't you know right away who she was? ” the mother asked jealously when he paused.

“ Dear, I did n't. She was such a baby when I left, — scarcely two years old, you remember. There was a likeness, though, to you that troubled me, but I told myself I was fanciful. I've seen that likeness so many times, — it has been uppermost in my mind, going with me everywhere, eluding me every-

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

where. And her name was different — Hammond.”

“That’s uncle’s name; he would have her called so. Then you came all that way not knowing who she was, nor for my sake?”

“Yes,” he answered honestly, “I only thought of the sorrow in the stricken household. I didn’t think of you at all. And yet it was for your sake, too. Ah! Bess dear, my heart has been very tender for all mothers since I left you to fend for the little one alone. I can never make up for that —”

“Hush!” she interposed, “you have made up. Even if I’d been somebody else, and Betty somebody else, it would have atoned and doubly atoned for you to do what you have done,” — she laughed unsteadily, she was so

THE PEACE OF GOD

happy that her words had become hopelessly tangled. "You know what I mean," she finished.

"I know," he smiled back.

"But you ought to have recognized Betty at once; there was no excuse."

"I thought she was a dear little tot."

"Why, Humphrey, she's the very dearest, the sweetest, the most precious, the —"

He stopped the loving catalogue with a kiss.

"You'll let me stay and find that out for myself, won't you?" he asked humbly.

She clung to him, trembling all over, her face quite drawn and white.

"It won't take long — oh! you must stay longer than that."

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

“I'll stay till the end, please God,” he said very solemnly.

As they stood together, faintly from the distance there came the sound of bells; the spirit of the blessed season filled the air, — the cheer, the peace, the good-will. North, south, east, west, along the happy roads that lead around the world, the message ran. Oh! very beautiful are the roads of the world, but surely the most beautiful of them all is little Forgiveness Lane that winds through tangles and briars, and over stony and waste places, from heart to heart and climbs at last up to the very gates of heaven.

CHAPTER VI

CHRISTMAS DAY

THE day was several hours older when Humphrey and Elisabeth Shawe started for Thornby's camp. Before that time, however, poor Uncle Steven, weary and disheartened and looking suddenly like an old, old man, had returned from his futile search in and around Wistar, accompanied by a number of the inhabitants of the little town who were eager to lend what aid they could, although they realized how unavailing their efforts must prove.

They had expected to find the house wrapped in gloom, but in-

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

stead, as they stopped at its door, a young woman with a radiantly happy face ran toward them crying out the joyful news. Then a mighty shout went up from the sleighs, — no one knew who started it, but it grew and grew, until it seemed to reach the sky, and when it died away — it was a long while before that happened, because it was always breaking out again — there was a great blowing of noses and clearing of throats, as if an epidemic of influenza was raging among them all. As soon as quiet was restored every one went within-doors to find Shawe, who was resting under the strictest orders not to move, and who was allowed to remain quiet no longer. There would be ample time on another day to get over his fatigue; for

CHRISTMAS DAY

the present he had to submit to being made much of. Such a shaking of hands as took place then, — Uncle Steven started it, — and such hearty wishes as were poured forth! It was n't Merry Christmas just once, but it was Merry, merry Christmas over and over again, until the house rocked with the noise. And there were no reproaches in word, or thought, about that sad past, with its mistakes and misunderstandings, it was all blotted out, — just as the snow stretched its sparkling whiteness over the earth, hiding many an ugly spot, so the beautiful mantle of charity lay close over what had been.

Finally, at Shawe's insistence, the sleigh was made ready. Not Uncle Steven's shabby cutter, but

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

the roomier one of the most important citizen of Wistar, who had been among the first to offer his services to find the little child. It was heaped high with robes from the other sleighs, until its gorgeousness and comfort were something to wonder at, and four horses were harnessed to it; then the best driver climbed up in front with much pride and, as soon as the husband and wife had taken their places behind him, he cracked his whip briskly, in a hurry to be gone. Again the air was rent with cheers, and amid the tumult the horses sprang forward. Ah! they were very different from sober old Danny and Whitefoot; they fairly flew over the road that had seen the jolly progress of Santa Claus and his little sweetheart the previous

CHRISTMAS DAY

day, and that solemn faring southward through the night of the messenger bearing his good tidings. The bells rang out merrily, — the gayest, gladdest tune, — and the spirits of the sky, the plains, the woods, laughed back in an ecstasy of delight, echoing the happiness everywhere; as far as eye could reach the snow twinkled and shone as if with rapture that Christmas Day. There was hardly any speech among the travellers, but joy sat very close to their hearts, and no one objected to the silence.

At last the logging-camp was reached, and, as the horses drew up with a great shaking of their bells, the door of the shanty flew open, and a body of men trooped out to greet the newcomers. They

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

had all heard of Shawe's errand from old Jerome, — all but the child, who was kept in ignorance, because no one knew what its result would be, — and at sight of their former comrade a shout of welcome — and something more — something deeper — burst from them, to be echoed again and again. Under cover of the happy sounds Shawe, too moved for any words, jumped from the sleigh and turned to help his wife; but she scarcely touched his hand, springing past him as if she were winged. Only too well the men knew who the shining-eyed woman was, yet they had no greeting for her, — the exultation in her face silenced them all; they opened a way speedily for her to pass through, and then turned by common accord to

CHRISTMAS DAY

look at the sight that would meet her. As if they could see with her eyes! And yet the picture was an unforgettable one to them.

They saw the rude familiar room, beautiful as it had never been until the previous night, with the huge fire blazing at one side, and on the hearth old Jerome bending down to the child, who, at the clatter without, had risen from her play, the skirt of her gown gathered up over a store of her new treasures as she turned wonderingly toward the door. The men, still looking, saw the little hand relax its hold hastily, so that the precious hoard fell to the floor unheeded — forgotten. The small face changed from bright to brighter, — to brightest, — they had not believed that possible, —

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

and then they saw nothing but two figures running toward each other and meeting in a close embrace, and they heard the cries uttered in shaking voices, "Muvver —" "Dear, my little own!" mingle and lose themselves in breaking sobs and a low peal of rippling laughter.

"I swan thet hick'ry makes the 'tarnaldest smoke," Jerome muttered a moment later, "it do beat all" — he stopped, choking over the words, — "it do beat all," he said again, blinking around with misty eyes.

Some one laughed unsteadily, and some one else coughed, then a third person sneezed — and so the charm was broken. The mother raised her head and gazed over the little shoulder at the other occu-

CHRISTMAS DAY

pants of the room with a look of deepest gratitude. How good every one was! Her thought was plainer to them all than the most eloquent words would have been. Indeed, words were not necessary at all. Betty, in the silence, turned, and still resting in the encircling arm, smiled right and left on her many friends, then her eyes came back to the face she loved so well, and she patted it with fond fingers.

“It’s the very happiest Christmas now,” she laughed, “’thout you ’t was n’t half so nice. Did dear Santa Claus bring you, too?”

“You can never guess,” Elisabeth Shawe answered, the delight in her voice vibrating like a bell. “It was some one far better and kinder than Santa Claus, though you and I, darling, have much to

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

thank that old man for, and we'll bless him all our days. Listen, sweet."

For a moment the woman bent close to whisper in the rosy ear, then, as if she realized that the men who had been so tender to her child had earned a right to share in the new-found happiness, she told the story aloud. She spoke very simply so the little hearer might understand,—indeed, it was meant chiefest for her,—but the others crowding near were not denied a glimpse of the great joy the morning had brought into three lives.

"Not daddy," Betty screamed, as the full truth dawned upon her, "not my very own, own daddy!"

She did n't wait for an answer but ran swiftly to Shawe, who was

CHRISTMAS DAY

standing just behind, and threw herself into his arms.

“ Oh! you won't be a far-away daddy ever any more, will you? ” she cried.

“ Never any more, ” he answered brokenly, then he gathered her close to his breast and kissed her.

The men looked on shy-eyed and silent in the presence of that boundless content. Who could say anything? Who could speak? Betty's laughter, as her father released his hold and she slipped to the floor, acted like magic upon them all; in a moment a deafening hubbub filled the room. After it had subsided a little the Kid, who had served as master of ceremonies on several occasions, assumed the leadership; though he was the youngest of them, *he* knew.

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

how things were managed out in the great world. Therefore he escorted Mrs. Shawe to the seat of honor with his very best company manner, — and there never was a manner like it anywhere, so his comrades heartily declared, and I'm quite sure they were right!

The great barrel-chair which Jerome usually occupied was drawn up to the centre of the hearth, and as soon as her mother was seated Betty brought all her new treasures and displayed them with great pride, while the men nudged one another slyly as the former owners were recognized; no matter how hard they tried to appear unconscious, a quirk of pleasure, or a I-mustn't-appear-as-if-I-had-ever-seen-that-before look was a sure indication when all other signs

CHRISTMAS DAY

failed. And Betty always found them out, shouting gleefully at each discovery, while her mother smiled in gratitude, no less pleased than the little one. Well, why should n't they be glad, too, to give all that pleasure? Somehow there was such a cosey, comfortable feeling about it they felt good all over, and they could n't keep quiet, — that was too much to expect! So the old room rang again and again with their mirth.

“Sing to us now, dear, my little own,” Elisabeth Shawe said, when the gifts had been duly admired, “sing the old song about this blessed day.”

Betty leaned against her mother's shoulder within the happy circle of her arm.

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

“ You too,” she whispered, “ just like we always do? ”

“ Yes, darling, in our own way.”

The child's glance went round the room, taking in the joyful faces that smiled back at her in friendly fashion; then she met her father's eyes, and, reaching out, she took his hand in hers, drawing it close, until it rested on that other hand above her heart. A moment later she began to sing in her sweet little thread of a voice:

“ ‘ I saw three ships come sailing in,
 On Christmas Day — on Christmas Day,
I saw three ships come sailing in,
 On Christmas Day in the morning.’ ”

Elisabeth Shawe took up the next verse:

“ ‘ Oh ! they sailed into Bethlehem,
 On Christmas Day — on Christmas Day,
Oh ! they sailed into Bethlehem,
 On Christmas Day in the morning.’ ”

CHRISTMAS DAY

It was Betty's turn:

“‘ And all the bells on earth shall ring
 On Christmas Day — on Christmas Day,
And all the bells on earth shall ring
 On Christmas Day in the morning.’ ”

Again there came the fuller, richer tones of the sweet antiphony:

“‘ And all the angels in heaven shall sing,
 On Christmas Day — on Christmas
 Day,’ ”

The voices of mother and child blended in unison, filling the room with happy, rippling music:

“‘ And all the angels in heaven shall sing
 On Christmas Day in the morning.’ ”

At a signal from Shawe the men joined in the next verse, waiting for the first line to be given, and then going on with the simple iteration, until the little carol became a mighty triumphal chorus:

SANTA CLAUS' SWEETHEART

““ And all the souls on earth shall sing
On Christmas Day — on Christmas Day,
And all the souls on earth shall sing
On Christmas Day in the morning.””

“Dang thet hick'ry,” old Jerome grumbled in the hush that followed, “it do set a man splutterin' ez never was!”

THE END

AUG 24 1906

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00021186119

