



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

A College Santa Clause

Ralph Henry Barbour

Satherwaite, '02, threw his overcoat across the broad mahogany table, regardless of the silver and cut-glass furnishings, shook the melting snowflakes from his cap and tossed it atop the coat, half kicked, half shoved a big leathern armchair up to the wide fireplace, dropped himself into it, and stared moodily at the flames.

Satherwaite was troubled. In fact, he assured himself, drawing his handsome features into a generous scowl, that he was, on this Christmas eve, the most depressed and bored person in the length and breadth of New England. Satherwaite was not used to being depressed, and boredom was a state usually far remote from his experience; consequently, he took it worse. With something between a groan and a growl, he drew a crumpled telegram from his pocket. The telegram was at the bottom of it all. He read it again:

E. SATHERWAITE,

Randolph Hall, Cambridge.

Advise your not coming. Aunt Louise very ill.

Merry Christmas.

PHIL.

"Merry Christmas!" growled Satherwaite, throwing the offending sheet of buff paper into the flames. "Looks like it, doesn't it? Confound Phil's Aunt Louise, anyway! What business has she getting sick at Christmas time? Not, of course, that I wish the old lady any harm, but it--it--well, it's wretched luck."

When at college, Phil was the occupant of the bedroom that lay in darkness beyond the half-opened door to the right. He lived, when at home, in a big, rambling house in the Berkshires, a house from the windows of which one could see into three states and overlook a wonderful expanse of wooded hill and sloping meadow; a house which held, besides Phil, and Phil's father and mother and Aunt Louise and a younger brother, Phil's sister. Satherwaite growled again, more savagely, at the thought of Phil's sister; not, be it understood, at that extremely attractive young lady, but at the fate which was keeping her from his sight.

Satherwaite had promised his roommate to spend Christmas with him, thereby bringing upon himself pained remonstrances from his own family, remonstrances which, Satherwaite acknowledged, were quite justifiable. His bags stood beside the door. He had spent the early afternoon very pleasurably in packing them, carefully weighing the respective merits of a primrose waistcoat and a blue-flannel one, as weapons wherewith to impress the heart of Phil's sister. And now-
-!

He kicked forth his feet, and brought brass tongs and shovel clattering on the hearth. It relieved his exasperation.

The fatal telegram had reached him at five o'clock, as he was on the point of donning his coat. From five to six, he had remained in a torpor of disappointment, continually wondering whether Phil's sister would care. At six, his own boarding house being closed for the recess, he had trudged through the snow to a restaurant in the square, and had dined miserably on lukewarm turkey and lumpy mashed potatoes. And now it was nearly eight, and he did not even care to smoke. His one chance of reaching his own home that night had passed, and there was nothing for it but to get through the interminable evening somehow, and catch an early train in the morning. The theaters in town offered no attraction. As for his club, he had stopped in on his way from dinner, and had fussed with an evening paper, until the untenanted expanse of darkly furnished apartments and the unaccustomed stillness had driven him forth again.

He drew his long legs under him, and arose, crossing the room and drawing aside the deep-toned hangings before the window. It was still snowing. Across the avenue, a flood of mellow light from a butcher's shop was thrown out over the snowy sidewalk. Its windows were garlanded with Christmas greens and hung with pathetic looking turkeys and geese. Belated shoppers passed out, their arms piled high with bundles. A car swept by, its drone muffled by the snow. The spirit of Christmas was in the very air. Satherwaite's depression increased and, of a sudden, inaction became intolerable. He would go and see somebody, anybody, and make them talk to him; but, when he had his coat in his hands, he realized that even this comfort was denied him. He had friends in town, nice folk who would be glad to see him any other time, but into whose family gatherings he could no more force himself to-night than he could steal. As for the men he knew in college, they had all gone to their homes or to those of somebody else.

Staring disconsolately about the study, it suddenly struck him that the room looked disgustingly slovenly and unkempt. Phil was such an untidy beggar! He would fix things up a bit. If he did it carefully and methodically, no doubt he could consume a good hour and a half that way. It would then be half past nine. Possibly, if he tried hard, he could use up another hour bathing and getting

ready for bed.

As a first step, he removed his coat from the table, and laid it carefully across the foot of the leather couch. Then he placed his damp cap on one end of the mantel. The next object to meet his gaze was a well-worn notebook. It was not his own, and it did not look like Phil's. The mystery was solved when he opened it and read, "H.G. Doyle--College House," on the fly leaf. He remembered then. He had borrowed it from Doyle almost a week before, at a lecture. He had copied some of the notes, and had forgotten to return the book. It was very careless of him; he would return it as soon as--Then he recollected having seen Doyle at noon that day, coming from one of the cheaper boarding houses. It was probable that Doyle was spending recess at college. Just the thing--he would call on Doyle!

It was not until he was halfway downstairs that he remembered the book. He went back for it, two steps at a time. Out in the street, with the fluffy flakes against his face, he felt better. After all, there was no use in getting grouchy over his disappointment; Phil would keep; and so would Phil's sister, at least until Easter; or, better yet, he would get Phil to take him home with him over Sunday some time. He was passing the shops now, and stopped before a jeweler's window, his eye caught by a rather jolly-looking paper knife in gun metal. He had made his purchases for Christmas and had already dispatched them, but the paper knife looked attractive and, if there was no one to give it to, he could keep it himself. So he passed into the shop, and purchased it.

"Put it into a box, will you?" he requested. "I may want to send it away."

Out on the avenue again, his thoughts reverted to his prospective host. The visit had elements of humor. He had known Doyle at preparatory school, and since then, at college, had maintained the acquaintance in a casual way. He liked Doyle, always had, just as any man must like an honest, earnest, gentlemanly fellow, whether their paths run parallel or cross only at rare intervals. He and Doyle were not at all in the same coterie, Satherwaite's friends were the richest, and sometimes the laziest, men in college; Doyle's were--well, presumably men who, like himself, had only enough money to scrape through from September to June, who studied hard for degrees, whose viewpoint of university life must, of necessity, be widely separated from Satherwaite's. As for visiting Doyle, Satherwaite could not remember ever having been in his room but once, and that was long ago, in their Freshman year.

Satherwaite had to climb two flights of steep and very narrow stairs, and when he stood at Doyle's door, he thought he must have made a mistake. From within came the sounds of very unstudious revelry, laughter, a snatch of song, voices raised in good-natured argument. Satherwaite referred again to the fly leaf of the notebook; there was no error. He knocked and, in obedience to a cheery

"Come in!" entered.

He found himself in a small study, shabbily furnished, but cheerful and homelike by reason of the leaping flames in the grate and the blue haze of tobacco smoke that almost hid its farther wall. About the room sat six men, their pipes held questioningly away from their mouths and their eyes fixed wonderingly, half resentfully, upon the intruder. But what caught and held Satherwaite's gaze was a tiny Christmas tree, scarcely three feet high, which adorned the center of the desk. Its branches held toy candles, as yet unlighted, and were festooned with strings of crimson cranberries and colored popcorn, while here and there a small package dangled amidst the greenery.

"How are you, Satherwaite?"

Doyle, tall, lank and near-sighted, arose and moved forward, with outstretched hand. He was plainly embarrassed, as was every other occupant of the study, Satherwaite included. The laughter and talk had subsided. Doyle's guests politely removed their gaze from the newcomer, and returned their pipes to their lips. But the newcomer was intruding, and knew it, and he was consequently embarrassed. Embarrassment, like boredom, was a novel sensation to him, and he speedily decided that he did not fancy it. He held out Doyle's book.

"I brought this back, old man. I don't know how I came to forget it. I'm awfully sorry, you know; it was so very decent of you to lend it to me. Awfully sorry, really."

Doyle murmured that it didn't matter, not a particle; and wouldn't Satherwaite sit down?

No, Satherwaite couldn't stop. He heard the youth in the faded cricket-blazer tell the man next to him, in a stage aside, that this was "Satherwaite, '02, an awful swell, you know." Satherwaite again declared that he could not remain.

Doyle said he was sorry; they were just having a little--a sort of a Christmas-eve party, you know. He blushed while he explained, and wondered whether Satherwaite thought them a lot of idiots, or simply a parcel of sentimental kids. Probably Satherwaite knew some of the fellows? he went on.

Satherwaite studied the assemblage, and replied that he thought not, though he remembered having seen several of them at lectures and things. Doyle made no move toward introducing his friends to Satherwaite, and, to relieve the momentary silence that followed, observed that he supposed it was getting colder. Satherwaite replied, absently, that he hadn't noticed, but that it was still snowing. The youth in the cricket-blazer fidgeted in his chair. Satherwaite was thinking.

Of course, he was not wanted there; he realized that. Yet, he was of half a mind

to stay. The thought of his empty room dismayed him. The cheer and comfort before him appealed to him forcibly. And, more than all, he was possessed of a desire to vindicate himself to this circle of narrow-minded critics. Great Scott! just because he had some money and went with some other fellows who also had money, he was to be promptly labeled "snob," and treated with polite tolerance only. By Jove, he would stay, if only to punish them for their narrowness!

"You're sure I shan't be intruding, Doyle?" he asked.

Doyle gasped in amazement. Satherwaite removed his coat. A shiver of consternation passed through the room. Then the host found his tongue.

"Glad to have you. Nothing much doing. Few friends, Quiet evening. Let me take your coat."

Introductions followed. The man in the cricket-blazer turned out to be Doak, '03, the man who had won the Jonas Greeve scholarship; a small youth with eaglelike countenance was Somers, he who had debated so brilliantly against Princeton; a much-bewhiskered man was Ailworth, of the Law School; Kranch and Smith, both members of Satherwaite's class, completed the party. Satherwaite shook hands with those within reach, and looked for a chair. Instantly everyone was on his feet; there was a confused chorus of "Take this, won't you?" Satherwaite accepted a straight-backed chair with part of its cane seat missing, after a decent amount of protest; then a heavy, discouraging silence fell. Satherwaite looked around the circle. Everyone save Ailworth and Doyle was staring blankly at the fire. Ailworth dropped his eyes gravely; Doyle broke out explosively with:

"Do you smoke, Satherwaite?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid--" he searched his pockets perfunctorily--"I haven't my pipe with me." His cigarette case met his searching fingers, but somehow cigarettes did not seem appropriate.

"I'm sorry," said Doyle, "but I'm afraid I haven't an extra one. Any of you fellows got a pipe that's not working?"

Murmured regrets followed. Doak, who sat next to Satherwaite, put a hand in his coat pocket, and viewed the intruder doubtingly from around the corners of his glasses.

"It doesn't matter a bit," remarked Satherwaite heartily.

"I've got a sort of a pipe here," said Doak, "if you're not overparticular what you smoke."

Satherwaite received the pipe gravely. It was a blackened briar, whose bowl was burned halfway down on one side, from being lighted over the gas, and whose

mouthpiece, gnawed away in long usage, had been reshaped with a knife. Satherwaite examined it with interest, rubbing the bowl gently on his knee. He knew, without seeing, that Doak was eying him with mingled defiance and apology, and wondering in what manner a man who was used to meerschaums and gold-mounted briars would take the proffer of his worn-out favorite; and he knew, too, that all the others were watching. He placed the stem between his lips, and drew on it once or twice, with satisfaction.

"It seems a jolly old pipe," he said; "I fancy you must be rather fond of it. Has anyone got any 'baccy?"

Five pouches were tendered instantly.

Satherwaite filled his pipe carefully. He had won the first trick, he told himself, and the thought was pleasurable. The conversation had started up again, but it was yet perfunctory, and Satherwaite realized that he was still an outsider. Doyle gave him the opportunity he wanted.

"Isn't it something new for you to stay here through recess?" he asked.

Then Satherwaite told about Phil's Aunt Louise and the telegram; about his dismal dinner at the restaurant and the subsequent flight from the tomblike silence of the club; how he had decided, in desperation, to clean up his study, and how he had come across Doyle's notebook. He told it rather well; he had a reputation for that sort of thing, and to-night he did his best. He pictured himself to his audience on the verge of suicide from melancholia, and assured them that this fate had been averted only through his dislike of being found lifeless amid such untidy surroundings. He decked the narrative with touches of drollery, and was rewarded with the grins that overspread the faces of his hearers. Ailworth nodded appreciatingly, now and then, and Doak even slapped his knee once and giggled aloud. Satherwaite left out all mention of Phil's sister, naturally, and ended with:

"And so, when I saw you fellows having such a Christian, comfortable sort of a time, I simply couldn't break away again. I knew I was risking getting myself heartily disliked, and really I wouldn't blame you if you arose en masse and kicked me out. But I am desperate. Give me some tobacco from time to time, and just let me sit here and listen to you; it will, be a kindly act to a homeless orphan."

"Shut up!" said Doyle heartily; "we're glad to have you, of course." The others concurred. "We--we're going to light up the tree after a bit. We do it every year, you know. It's kind of--of Christmassy when you don't get home for the holidays, you see. We give one another little presents and--and have rather a bit of fun out of it. Only--" he hesitated doubtfully--"only I'm afraid it may bore you awfully."

"Bore me!" cried Satherwaite; "why, man alive, I should think it would be the jolliest sort of a thing. It's just like being kids again." He turned and observed the tiny tree with interest.

"And do you mean that you all give one another presents, and keep it secret, and--and all that?"

"Yes; just little things, you know," answered Doak deprecatingly.

"It's the nearest thing to a real Christmas that I've known for seven years," said Ailworth gravely. Satherwaite observed him wonderingly.

"By Jove!" he murmured; "seven years! Do you know, I'm glad now I am going home, instead of to Sterner's for Christmas. A fellow ought to be with his own folks, don't you think?"

Everybody said yes heartily and there was a moment of silence in the room. Presently Kranch, whose home was in Michigan, began speaking reminiscently of the Christmases he had spent when a lad in the pine woods. He made the others feel the cold and the magnitude of the pictures he drew, and, for a space, Satherwaite was transported to a little lumber town in a clearing, and stood by excitedly, while a small boy in jeans drew woolen mittens--wonderful ones of red and gray--from out a Christmas stocking. And Somers told of a Christmas he had once spent in a Quebec village; and Ailworth followed him with an account of Christmas morning in a Maine-coast fishing town.

Satherwaite was silent. He had no Christmases of his own to tell about; they would have been sorry, indeed, after the others; Christmases in a big Philadelphia house, rather staid and stupid days, as he remembered them now, days lacking in any delightful element of uncertainty, but filled with wonderful presents so numerous that the novelty had worn away from them ere bedtime. He felt that, somehow, he had been cheated out of a pleasure which should have been his.

The tobacco pouches went from hand to hand. Christmas-giving had already begun; and Satherwaite, to avoid disappointing his new friends, had to smoke many more pipes than was good for him. Suddenly they found themselves in darkness, save for the firelight. Doyle had arisen stealthily and turned out the gas. Then, one by one, the tiny candles flickered and flared blue into flame. Some one pulled the shades from before the two windows, and the room was hushed. Outside they could see the flakes falling silently, steadily, between them and the electric lights that shone across the avenue. It was a beautiful, cold, still world of blue mists. A gong clanged softly, and a car, well-nigh untenanted, slid by beneath them, its windows, frosted halfway up, flooding the snow with mellow light. Some one beside Satherwaite murmured gently:

"Good old Christmas!"

The spell was broken, Satherwaite sighed--why, he hardly knew--and turned away from the window. The tree was brilliantly lighted now, and the strings of cranberries caught the beams ruddily. Doak stirred the fire, and Doyle, turning from a whispered consultation with some of the others, approached Satherwaite.

"Would you mind playing Santa Claus--give out the presents, you know; we always do it that way?"

Satherwaite would be delighted; and, better to impersonate that famous old gentleman, he turned up the collar of his jacket, and put each hand up the opposite sleeve, looking as benignant as possible the while.

"That's fine!" cried Smith; "but hold on, you need a cap!"

He seized one from the window seat, a worn thing of yellowish-brown otter, and drew it down over Satherwaite's ears. The crowd applauded merrily.

"Dear little boys and girls," began Satherwaite in a quavering voice.

"No girls!" cried Doak.

"I want the cranberries!" cried Smith; "I love cranberries."

"I get the popcorn, then!" That was the sedate Ailworth.

"You'll be beastly sick," said Doak, grinning jovially through his glasses.

Satherwaite untied the first package from its twig. It bore the inscription, "For Little Willie Kranch." Everyone gathered around while the recipient undid the wrappings, and laid bare a penwiper adorned with a tiny crimson football. Doak explained to Satherwaite that Kranch had played football just once, on a scrub team, and had heroically carried the ball down a long field, and placed it triumphantly under his own goal posts. This accounted for the laughter that ensued.

"Sammy Doak" received a notebook marked "Mathematics 3a." The point of this allusion was lost to Satherwaite, for Doak was too busy laughing to explain it. And so it went, and the room was in a constant roar of mirth. Doyle was conferring excitedly with Ailworth across the room. By and by, he stole forward, and, detaching one of the packages from the tree, erased and wrote on it with great secrecy. Then he tied it back again, and retired to the hearth, grinning expectantly, until his own name was called, and he was shoved forward to receive a rubber pen-holder.

Presently, Satherwaite, working around the Christmas tree, detached a package, and frowned over the address.

"Fellows, this looks like--like Satherwaite, but--" he viewed the assemblage in embarrassment--"but I fancy it's a mistake."

"Not a bit," cried Doyle; "that's just my writing."

"Open it!" cried the others, thronging up to him.

Satherwaite obeyed, wondering. Within the wrappers was a pocket memorandum book, a simple thing of cheap red leather. Some one laughed uncertainly. Satherwaite, very red, ran his finger over the edges of the leaves, examined it long, as though he had never seen anything like it before, and placed it in his waistcoat pocket.

"I--I--" he began.

"Chop it off!" cried some one joyously.

"I'm awfully much obliged to--to whoever--"

"It's from the gang," said Doyle.

"With a Merry Christmas," said Ailworth.

"Thank you--gang," said Satherwaite.

The distribution went on, but presently, when all the rest were crowding about Somers, Satherwaite whipped a package from his pocket and, writing on it hurriedly, was apparently in the act of taking it from the tree, when the others turned again.

"Little Harry Doyle," he read gravely.

Doyle viewed the package in amazement. He had dressed the tree himself.

"Open it up, old man!"

When he saw the gun-metal paper knife, he glanced quickly at Satherwaite. He was very red in the face. Satherwaite smiled back imperturbably. The knife went from hand to hand, awakening enthusiastic admiration.

"But, I say, old man, who gave--?" began Smith.

"I'm awfully much obliged, Satherwaite," said Doyle, "but, really, I couldn't think of taking--"

"Chop it off!" echoed Satherwaite. "Look here, Doyle, it isn't the sort of thing I'd give you from choice; it's a useless sort of toy, but I just happened to have it with me; bought it in the square on the way to give to some one, I didn't know



who, and so, if you don't mind, I wish you'd accept it, you know. It'll do to put on the table or--open cans with. If you'd rather not take it, why, chuck it out of the window!"

"It isn't that," cried Doyle; "it's only that it's much too fine----"

"Oh, no, it isn't," said Satherwaite. "Now, then, where's 'Little Alfie Ailworth'?"

Small candy canes followed the packages, and the men drew once more around the hearth, munching the pink and white confectionery enjoyingly. Smith insisted upon having the cranberries, and wore them around his neck. The popcorn was distributed equally, and the next day, in the parlor car, Satherwaite drew his from a pocket together with his handkerchief.

Some one struck up a song, and Doyle remembered that Satherwaite had been in the Glee Club. There was an instant clamor for a song, and Satherwaite, consenting, looked about the room.

"Haven't any thump box," said Smith. "Can't you go it alone?"

Satherwaite thought he could, and did. He had a rich tenor voice, and he sang all the songs he knew. When it could be done, by hook or by crook, the others joined in the chorus; not too loudly, for it was getting late and proctors have sharp ears. When the last refrain had been repeated for the third time, and silence reigned for the moment, they heard the bell in the near-by tower. They counted its strokes; eight--nine--ten--eleven--twelve.

"Merry Christmas, all!" cried Smith.

In the clamor that ensued, Satherwaite secured his coat and hat. He shook hands all around. Smith insisted upon sharing the cranberries with him, and so looped a string gracefully about his neck. When Satherwaite backed out the door he still held Doak's pet pipe clenched between his teeth, and Doak, knowing it, said not a word.

"Hope you'll come back and see us," called Doyle.

"That's right, old man, don't forget us!" shouted Ailworth.

And Satherwaite, promising again and again not to, stumbled his way down the dark stairs.

Outside, he glanced gratefully up at the lighted panes. Then he grinned, and, scooping a handful of snow, sent it fairly against the glass. Instantly, the windows banged up, and six heads thrust themselves out.

"Good night! Merry Christmas, old man! Happy New Year!"

Something smashed softly against Satherwaite's cheek. He looked back. They

were gathering snow from the ledges and throwing snowballs after him.

"Good shot!" he called. "Merry Christmas!"

The sound of their cries and laughter followed him far down the avenue.

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