



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

How Christmas Came To The Santa Maria Flats

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There were twenty-six flat children, and none of them had ever been flat children until that year. Previously they had all been home children. and as such had, of course, had beautiful Christmases, in which their relations with Santa Claus had been of the most intimate and personal nature.

Now, owing to their residence in the Santa Maria flats, and the Lease, all was changed. The Lease was a strange forbiddance, a ukase issued by a tyrant, which took from children their natural liberties and rights.

Though, to be sure—as every one of the flat children knew—they were in the greatest kind of luck to be allowed to live at all, and especially were they fortunate past the lot of children to be permitted to live in a flat. There were many flats in the great city, so polished and carved and burnished and belackeyed that children were not allowed to enter within the portals, save on visits of ceremony in charge of parents or governesses. And in one flat, where Cecil de Koven le Baron was born—just by accident and without intending any harm—he was evicted, along with his parents, by the time he reached the age where he seemed likely to be graduated from the go-cart. And yet that flat had not nearly so imposing a name as the Santa Maria.

The twenty-six children of the Santa Maria flats belonged to twenty families. All of these twenty families were peculiar, as you might learn any day by interviewing the families concerning one another. But they bore with each other's peculiarities quite cheerfully and spoke in the hall when they met. Sometimes this tolerance would even extend to conversation about the janitor, a thin creature who did the work of five men. The ladies complained that he never smiled.

"I wouldn't so much mind the hot water pipes leaking now and then," the ladies would remark in the vestibule, rustling their skirts to show that they wore silk petticoats, "if only the janitor would smile. But he looks like a cemetery."

"I know it," would be the response. "I told Mr. Wilberforce last night that if he would only get a cheerful janitor I wouldn't mind our having rubber instead of Axminster on the stairs."

"You know we were promised Axminster when we moved in," would be the plaintive response. The ladies would stand together for a moment wrapped in gloomy reflection, and then part.

The kitchen and nurse maids felt on the subject, too.

"If Carl Carlsen would only smile," they used to exclaim in sibilant whispers, as they passed on the way to the laundry. "If he'd come in an' joke while we was washin'!"

Only Kara Johnson never said anything on the subject because she knew why Carlsen didn't smile, and was sorry for it, and would have made it all right—if it hadn't been for Lars Larsen.

Dear, dear, but this is a digression from the subject of the Lease. That terrible document was held over the heads of the children as the Herodian pronunciamiento concerning small boys was over the heads of the Israelites.

It was in the Lease not to run—not to jump—not to yell. It was in the Lease not to sing in the halls, not to call from story to story, not to slide down the banisters. And there were blocks of banisters so smooth and wide and beautiful that the attraction between them and the seats of the little boy's trousers was like the attraction of a magnet for a nail. Yet not a leg, crooked or straight, fat or thin, was ever to be thrown over these polished surfaces!

It was in the Lease, too, that no peddler or agent, or suspicious stranger was to enter the Santa Maria, neither by the front door nor the back. The janitor stood in his uniform at the rear, and the lackey in his uniform at the front, to prevent any such intrusion upon the privacy of the aristocratic Santa Marias. The lackey, who politely directed people, and summoned elevators, and whistled up tubes and rang bells, thus conducting the complex social life of those favoured apartments, was not one to make a mistake, and admit any person not calculated to ornament the front parlours of the flatters.

It was this that worried the children.

For how could such a dear, disorderly, democratic rascal as the children's saint ever hope to gain a pass to that exclusive entrance and get up to the rooms of the flat children?

"You can see for yourself," said Ernest, who lived on the first floor, to Roderick who lived on the fourth, "that if Santa Claus can't get up the front stairs, and can't get up the back stairs, that all he can do is to come down the chimney. And he can't come down the chimney—at least, he can't get out of the fireplace."

"Why not?" asked Roderick, who was busy with an "all-day sucker" and not inclined to take a gloomy view of anything.

"Goosey!" cried Ernest, in great disdain. "I'll show you!" and he led Roderick, with his sucker, right into the best parlour, where the fireplace was, and showed him an awful thing.



Of course, to the ordinary observer, there was nothing awful about the fireplace. Everything in the way of bric-a-brac possessed by the Santa Maria flatters was artistic. It may have been in the Lease that only people with esthetic tastes were to be admitted to the apartments. However that may be, the fireplace, with its vases and pictures and trinkets, was something quite wonderful. Indian incense burned in a mysterious little dish, pictures of purple ladies were hung in odd corners, calendars in letters nobody could read, served to decorate, if not to educate, and glass vases of strange colours and extraordinary shapes stood about filled with roses. None of these things were awful. At least no one would have dared say they were. But what was awful was the formation of the grate. It was not a hospitable place with andirons, where noble logs of wood could be laid for the burning, nor did it have a generous iron basket where honest anthracite could glow away into the nights. Not a bit of it. It held a vertical plate of stuff that looked like dirty cotton wool, on which a tiny blue flame leaped when the gas was turned on and ignited.

"You can see for yourself!" said Ernest tragically.

Roderick could see for himself. There was an inch-wide opening down which the Friend of the Children could squeeze himself, and, as everybody knows, he needs a good deal of room now, for he has grown portly with age, and his pack every year becomes bigger, owing to the ever-increasing number of girls and boys he has to supply

"Gimini!" said Roderick, and dropped his all-day sucker on the old Bokara rug that Ernest's mamma had bought the week before at a fashionable furnishing shop, and which had given the sore throat to all the family, owing to some

cunning little germs that had come over with the rug to see what American throats were like.

Oh, me, yes! but Roderick could see! Anybody could see! And a boy could see better than anybody.

"Let's go see the Telephone Boy," said Roderick. This seemed the wisest thing to do. When in doubt, all the children went to the Telephone Boy, who was the most fascinating person, with knowledge of the most wonderful kind and of a nature to throw that of Mrs. Scheherazade quite, quite in the shade—which, considering how long that loquacious lady had been a Shade, is perhaps not surprising.

The Telephone Boy knew the answers to all the conundrums in the world, and a way out of nearly all troubles such as are likely to overtake boys and girls. But now he had no suggestions to offer and could speak no comfortable words.

"He can't git inter de front, an' he can't git inter de back, an' he can't come down no chimney in dis here house, an' I tell yer dose," he said, and shut his mouth grimly, while cold apprehension crept around Ernest's heart and took the sweetness out of Roderick's sucker.

Nevertheless, hope springs eternal, and the boys each and individually asked their fathers—tremendously wise and good men—if they thought there was any hope that Santa Claus would get into the Santa Maria flats, and each of the fathers looked up from his paper and said he'd be blessed if he did!

And the words sunk deep and deep and drew the tears when the doors were closed and the soft black was all about and nobody could laugh because a boy was found crying! The girls cried too—for the awful news was whistled up tubes and whistled down tubes, till all the twenty-six flat children knew about it. The next day it was talked over in the brick court, where the children used to go to shout and race. But on this day there was neither shouting nor racing. There was, instead, a shaking of heads, a surreptitious dropping of tears, a guessing and protesting and lamenting. All the flat mothers congratulated themselves on the fact that their children were becoming so quiet and orderly, and wondered what could have come over them when they noted that they neglected to run after the patrol wagon as it whizzed round the block.

It was decided, after a solemn talk, that every child should go to its own fireplace and investigate. In the event of any fireplace being found with an opening big enough to admit Santa Claus, a note could be left directing him along the halls to the other apartments. A spirit of universal brotherhood had taken possession of the Santa Maria flatters. Misery bound them together. But the investigation proved to be disheartening. The cruel asbestos grates were everywhere. Hope lay strangled!

As time went on, melancholy settled upon the flat children. The parents noted it, and wondered if there could be sewer gas in the apartments. One over-anxious mother called in a physician, who gave the poor little child some medicine which made it quite ill. No one suspected the truth, though the children were often heard to say that it was evident that there was to be no Christmas for them! But then, what more natural for a child to say, thus hoping to win protestations—so the mothers reasoned, and let the remark pass.

The day before Christmas was gray and dismal. There was no wind—indeed, there was a sort of tightness in the air, as if the supply of freshness had given out. People had headaches—even the Telephone Boy was cross—and none of the spirit of the time appeared to enliven the flat children. There appeared to be no stir—no mystery. No whisperings went on in the corners—or at least, so it seemed to the sad babies of the Santa Maria.

"It's as plain as a monkey on a hand-organ," said the Telephone Boy to the attendants at his salon in the basement, "that there ain't to be no Christmas for we—no, not for we!"

Had not Dorothy produced, at this junction, from the folds of her fluffy silken skirts several substantial sticks of gum, there is no saying to what depths of discouragement the flat children would have fallen!

About six o'clock it seemed as if the children would smother for lack of air! It was very peculiar. Even the janitor noticed it. He spoke about it to Kara at the head of the back stairs, and she held her hand so as to let him see the new silver ring on her fourth finger, and he let go of the rope on the elevator on which he was standing and dropped to the bottom of the shaft, so that Kara sent up a wild hallo of alarm. But the janitor emerged as melancholy and unruffled as ever, only looking at his watch to see if it had been stopped by the concussion.

The Telephone Boy, who usually got a bit of something hot sent down to him from one of the tables, owing to the fact that he never ate any meal save breakfast at home, was quite forgotten on this day, and dined off two russet apples, and drew up his belt to stop the ache—for the Telephone Boy was growing very fast indeed, in spite of his poverty, and couldn't seem to stop growing somehow, although he said to himself every day that it was perfectly brutal of him to keep on that way when his mother had so many mouths to feed.

Well, well, the tightness of the air got worse. Every one was cross at dinner and complained of feeling tired afterward, and of wanting to go to bed. For all of that it was not to get to sleep, and the children tossed and tumbled for a long time before they put their little hands in the big, soft shadowy clasp of the Sandman, and trooped away after him to the happy town of sleep.

It seemed to the flat children that they had been asleep but a few moments

when there came a terrible burst of wind that shook even that great house to its foundations. Actually, as they sat up in bed and called to their parents or their nurses, their voices seemed smothered with roar. Could it be that the wind was a great wild beast with a hundred tongues which licked at the roof of the building? And how many voices must it have to bellow as it did?

Sounds of falling glass, of breaking shutters, of crashing chimneys greeted their ears—not that they knew what all these sounds meant. They only knew that it seemed as if the end of the world had come. Ernest, miserable as he was, wondered if the Telephone Boy had gotten safely home, or if he were alone in the draughty room in the basement; and Roderick hugged his big brother, who slept with him and said, "Now I lay me," three times running, as fast as ever his tongue would say it.

After a terrible time the wind settled down into a steady howl like a hungry wolf, and the children went to sleep, worn out with fright and conscious that the bedclothes could not keep out the cold.

Dawn came. The children awoke, shivering. They sat up in bed and looked about them—yes, they did, the whole twenty-six of them in their different apartments and their different homes. And what do you suppose they saw—what do you suppose the twenty-six flat children saw as they looked about them?

Why, stockings, stuffed full, and trees hung full, and boxes packed full! Yes, they did! It was Christmas morning, and the bells were ringing, and all the little flat children were laughing, for Santa Claus had come! He had really come! In the wind and wild weather, while the tongues of the wind licked hungrily at the roof, while the wind howled like a hungry wolf, he had crept in somehow and laughing, no doubt, and chuckling, without question, he had filled the stockings and the trees and the boxes! Dear me, dear me, but it was a happy time! It makes me out of breath to think what a happy time it was, and how surprised the flat children were, and how they wondered how it could ever have happened.

But they found out, of course! It happened in the simplest way! Every skylight in the place was blown off and away, and that was how the wind howled so, and how the bedclothes would not keep the children warm, and how Santa Claus got in. The wind corkscrewed down into these holes, and the reckless children with their drums and dolls, their guns and toy dishes, danced around in the maelstrom and sang:

"Here's where Santa Claus came!
This is how he got in—
We should count it a sin
Yes, count it a shame,
If it hurt when he fell on the floor."

Roderick's sister, who was clever for a child of her age, and who had read Monte Cristo ten times, though she was only eleven, wrote this poem, which every one thought very fine.

And of course all the parents thought and said that Santa Claus must have jumped down the skylights. By noon there were other skylights put in, and not a sign left of the way he made his entrance—not that the way mattered a bit, no, not a bit.

Perhaps you think the Telephone Boy didn't get anything! Maybe you imagine that Santa Claus didn't get down that far. But you are mistaken. The shaft below one of the skylights went away to the bottom of the building, and it stands to reason that the old fellow must have fallen way through. At any rate there was a copy of "Tom Sawyer," and a whole plum pudding, and a number of other things, more useful but not so interesting, found down in the chilly basement room. There were, indeed.

In closing it is only proper to mention that Kara Johnson crocheted a white silk four-in-hand necktie for Carl Carlsen, the janitor—and the janitor smiled!

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