



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

How Santa Claus Came

Willam Osborn Stoddard

"Now, Don," said Rad Burnell, dolefully, "do you believe any kind of a snow-storm could stop Santa Claus?"

"From coming?"

"Well, yes, that's it. I heard father tell mother 'he' couldn't get here in time, and I know he meant something about Christmas, by the way he looked at Petish and Molly."

"Was Berry there?"

"She was sound asleep in the cradle, and mother said, 'Berry won't care, but it'll be a dispoint for the rest of 'em.'"

"It's an awful snow-storm, Rad, but I guess Santa Claus'll come, for all of that."

Just a little later, Mr. Burnell said to his wife, "I'm sorry we didn't get our things in the village, Maria; but it's too late now. Don't say anything to the children. It'll be bad enough when it comes."

Nobody else heard him, but Mrs. Burnell looked as if she wanted to cry.

That was one of the whitest nights anybody in the world ever saw, for the snow had thrown the thickest kind of a white blanket over everything. Some of the roads were drifted level from fence to fence, and the railroads were having a tremendous time of it. Anything so black as a locomotive could hardly feel at home, pushing its way along through so white a country or into so white a village as Middleville was that Christmas-eve.

It was a dreadfully long night, and Petish woke up three times, and tried to make herself believe it was morning. The last time she heard the great clock in the Academy steeple, on the village green, pounding away at its task of telling what time it was.

"I'll count," said Petish. "Nine—twelve—seven—fourteen—fiveteen—six—I guess it's 'most time to get up. Must be it's Christmas now."

Just then she heard a noise in the next room, and she listened with all her ears. First it was a rustle, and then the loudest kind of a whisper—loud enough to have been heard in daytime.

"Rad! Rad! it's just struck five. Let's take a scoot down stairs and see about it. We can hurry right back again."

"They're pulling on their stockings," said Petish. "I'll get up and pull on mine, but I won't let them see me."

She tried very hard to get up without waking Molly; but it was of no use, for Molly's sleep had been begun at the right time, and was fairly over now, considering that it was Christmas morning.

"Oh, Petish, what are you going to do?"

"Sh! 'sh! Molly. The boys are going down stairs to look, and I'm going too. Lie still."

But Molly was two years older than Petish, and she wouldn't lie still. She was out on the floor in a twinkling, and she made Petish wrap herself all up in a blanket, and she pretty nearly buried her own chubby shape in a comfortable.

That was about what Rad and Don had done already, and they were now carefully creeping down stairs in the dark.

The door of the front parlor was nearest the foot of the stairs, and the boys left it open after them when they went in, but Molly and Petish closed it very softly and carefully the moment they were safe in the dim, gloomy parlor. The boys were just beyond the folding-doors at that moment, and did not see that they were followed.

Berry was sound asleep in her crib, within reach of her mother, or she would have heard her say, just then, "Oh, John, it's a dreadful disappointment! What will those poor children do?"

"Poor Petish!" said Mr. Burnell. "We can explain it to the boys, and they can wait, and to Molly, but it'll be bad enough for any of 'em."

"But Petish'll break her little heart if she finds that Santa Claus hasn't come."

"It'll be almost as much of a disappointment to Aunt Sally and Frank. I hope they'll bring Mid with them when they come."

"Of course they will."

Now that had been a very long, white, beautiful, dark night, and a great many queer things had happened in it. They are sure to, in any "night before Christmas"; but there had been a wonderfully deep snow-storm.

Away on toward morning, just when the Academy clock was trying to make sound-asleep people hear that it was really four, a tired-out and frosty-looking railway train came smoking and coughing up to the platform at the village

railway station.

It did not stop long, but some people got out of one of the sleeping-cars, and some baggage was tumbled out of the baggage-car, and a sleepy man with a lantern said: "Yes, sir. Carriage yer in a minute, sir. All right."

"We don't want any carriage, my man. Take our checks, and have our trunks brought over to Mr. Burnett's before seven o'clock. We'll walk right there now. Come, Sally. Come along, Mid."

"Frank! husband! you'll drop some of those things!"

"No, I won't, Sally."

"Mid, my dear boy, look out for that box; it's only pasteboard."

"I'll be careful, mother. I ain't awake yet. But it takes all three of us to Santa Claus this pile. Hope it isn't far."

The cold, frosty air was fast getting Mid wide awake, and they did look, all three of them, as if they would have done better with a sleigh and a good team of reindeer.

The distance was short, but Aunt Sally talked pretty nearly all the way.

"We must do it, Frank," she said, as they drew near the gate. "I'm sure they've given us up. We can get in. There never was any bolt on the kitchen window, over the pump. Middleton can climb right in, and come and open the side door for us."

"Oh, but won't that be fun!" exclaimed Mid, as he hurried silently forward.

"Sh! there, Sally," whispered Uncle Frank, as he and his portly, merry-faced wife lugged their bundles after Mid.

It was less than half a minute before they were in the kitchen. They promptly shut the door between the dining-room—that was the sitting-room too—and the back parlor, and then how they did work!

Plenty of wood and shavings and kindlings were lying in front of the great Franklin stove in the dining-room, and there was quickly a blazing fire there, and in the kitchen too, and Mid insisted on lighting every lamp and candle he could lay his hands on.

Then the bundles came open, and their contents began to shine all around the chimney and over the mantel, and even on some of the chairs.

"It's too bad we haven't any of their stockings," began Aunt Sally; but she exclaimed, the next instant: "Oh, Frank! here's Maria's work-basket, all full of stockings. I know them. Those are Don's. There's a pair of Rad's. Molly's. Petish.

Berry's—the dear little kitten! We've got 'em."

"Mother, let's set the table."

"That's it. You help him do it, father. Won't we give 'em a surprise!"

It was wonderful how those three did work, and not make any noise about it, and how they did change the looks of that dining-room and kitchen before five o'clock. Aunt Sally even put on the tea-kettle, and made some coffee, and it was evident that for once Santa Claus was disposed to be very much "at home."

If they had not been drinking their coffee, perhaps they might have heard a voice, not many minutes after five o'clock, whispering anxiously to somebody in the back parlor, "I say, there's a light coming through the key-hole!"

"There's a rattle, too, in there."

"Burglars?"

"Pooh! No; it's Christmas."

"Oh, boys, is Santa Claus really in there? Has he got here?"

"Is that you, Petish? And Molly too? Keep still. I'm just going to open the door a little mite of a crack, but you can all peek in."

Aunt Sally's ears must have been good ones, for, carefully as Don opened that door, and faint as was the squeak it made, she sprang suddenly toward it.

"Is that you, Maria? Hush! Don't make a sound. Not a loud noise for anything!"

"We won't, Aunt Sally. Hush-sh-sh!"

Even Petish did just as she was told for once, for she was a little scared when the great blaze of light came shining through the door as Aunt Sally pushed it wide open.

It was shut again the moment they were all in the room, and then it was all Aunt Sally and Uncle Frank could do to keep up any kind of silence in that merry assembly. They could not have done it at all if Aunt Sally had not told them all: "It's a great secret. You must help us give papa and mamma a big surprise. Now let's get breakfast for them."

"Biddy went away yesterday morning," said Molly, "but I know where the eggs are."

Whatever she and Petish could not find, Don and Rad could, and Aunt Sally was the best kind of a cook.

It was nearly six o'clock when Mrs. Burnell said to her husband: "I'm glad Berry waked up. She's all dressed now, and I can wrap her up warm."

"So am I, my dear. I'll go right down with you."

"Those poor children! I haven't the heart to look at them. Let's hurry down."

So they did, and Berry went down in her mother's arms, but they little dreamed what was coming.

A great shout welcomed them as they opened the door of the dining-room.

"Wish you Merry Christmas."

"Oh, Sally! Frank! I am so glad! But how did you get in?"

"Breakfast's ready."

"Christmas has come."

Nobody could have described that next half-hour to have saved his life, and Aunt Sally said she had never been so happy in all hers.

"Molly," said Petish, "won't you go up stairs and bring down all our clothes?"

"Yes, children," said their mother, "you must get dressed."

"Yes; and, mother," said Petish, "there was only two pairs of my stockings in the basket, and they're both full. If Molly'll bring the pair I had on, there's more'n enough to fill 'em."

So there was, for Aunt Sally had not only bought and brought everything Mr. and Mrs. Burnell had written to her about, but she had heaped on a huge assortment of presents on her own account, and Petish had at least her share, while Uncle Frank had looked out for Molly, and nobody had forgotten Berry or any of the boys.

It was quite the usual time when they got ready to eat at last, but there was nothing of what Rad and Petish called a "dispoint" in any face at that breakfast table.

Santa Claus had come.



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