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READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Mrs. Santa Claus

Carolyn Sherwin Bailey

IT was Christmas eve. Old Santa Claus was just ready to start out upon his long journey over the snowy treetops and roofs to find the waiting chimneys and the little empty stockings. Such a busy day as it had been—with the brownies finishing the packing and Mrs. Santa Claus sewing buttons on the last doll's dress, and tying the last hair ribbon, and smoothing the last curl! But everything was ready. The sleigh was packed from top to bottom, so full that it seemed as if old Santa Claus could never squeeze in himself. There were tops, and drums, and Jack-in-the-boxes, and steam engines, and hundreds of dolls, and barrels of chocolate drops; and peppermint canes were hanging out from the back. The reindeer were harnessed and prancing—Dasher, and Dancer, and Donner, and Vixen, and the rest. The sleighbells were ringing gaily, and old Santa Claus jumped in and took the reins.

"Good-bye, mother," he called to Mrs. Santa Claus, who stood in the door to watch the sleigh start. "Anything I can bring you from the city, dear?"

"I think I need a new pair of spectacles," said Mrs. Santa Claus. "My eyes are growing dim with so much sewing. If the stores are open when you finish to-night just bring me a stronger pair of glasses."

"I will. Good-bye!" shouted Santa Claus. With a dash and a jingle of bells the reindeer jumped to the top of the trees and started; and Mrs. Santa Claus went in to sit in her rocking-chair by the fire and doze.

The workshop was very still. Christmas eve, you know, is the only time of the whole year when Santa Claus' workmen may rest; so the little brownies who paint the sleds, and nail the doll houses, and test the steamboats, were curled up in heaps on all the benches fast asleep and snoring. The candy-kettles were polished and hung in a row upon the kitchen wall. Mrs. Santa Claus sat and rocked by the fire and thought of all the dolls she had dressed.

"There were four hundred with silk dresses," she said to herself, "And two hundred with blue. There were five hundred baby dolls, and I never finished dressing them until to-day. I wonder if Santa packed them all. I must go and see."

So Mrs. Santa Claus lighted a candle and went out to the sewing-room and peered about in every corner. There were piles of silk and velvet and satin and

ribbon all over the floor, but, oh!—there sat three dolls: a baby doll, a doll in pink and a doll in blue! Santa Claus had forgotten them!

"What shall I do? What shall I do?" cried Mrs. Santa Claus, looking out of the window to see if Santa were anywhere in sight—but he was not. "We counted them all, and there were just enough to go around. Three little girls will have no dolls on Christmas morning. I shall have to go with them myself!"

Out in the barn there was just one reindeer standing in his stall. It was Blitzen, who had a lame foot, so he could not take the long journey with the others. He was contentedly munching hay; but Mrs. Santa Claus tucked the dolls under her arm, put on her little red shawl, tied her cap strings tighter and hurried out to the barn.

"Come, Blitzen!" she said, as she saddled him and jumped on his back. "We must go as fast as ever we can after Santa Claus. He has left three dolls behind!"



So Blitzen dropped his hay and they started. Over the woods and the fields and the fences they dashed, so fast that the wind was left far behind. They looked very funny, indeed, for Mrs. Santa Claus had forgotten to take off her apron, and her cap was all awry; but on they hurried. And, when they came to the towns, Blitzen stopped at every roof, that Mrs. Santa Claus might look down the chimney; but Santa Claus had always been there first, and the stockings were filled and the dolls were waiting.

"Over the woods, the fields, and the fences they dashed."

"We counted them all," Mrs. Santa Claus kept saying to herself. "Some one will need a doll—" And, sure enough, she came to a very wee chimney of a very wee house; and there was a stocking hung, but there was only an apple in it—nothing else. So Mrs. Santa Claus dropped the beautiful doll that was dressed in pink silk into the stocking and started on once more.

Presently they came to another house, and when Mrs. Santa Claus looked down the chimney she saw no stocking at all hanging by the fireplace, and there was no fire even. There was nothing in the room but a table, and a broken chair, and a bed where a little girl—so thin and pale—lay sleeping. And Mrs. Santa Claus dropped the doll in the blue silk dress right down into the little girl's arms and hurried on again.

When they had come to the very end of the town, Mrs. Santa Claus saw a little girl standing out in the street. She had a bundle of papers to sell, and no one had

seen her, because she was so small, and she was waiting out in the cold and the snow. Mrs. Santa Claus dropped the baby doll down to the little girl's lap and then she turned Blitzen toward home again.

It was almost Christmas morning when they reached the barn, and, oh! they were very tired. When Santa Claus came back with his empty sleigh and the new spectacles, he found Mrs. Santa Claus fast asleep in her rocking-chair by the fire.

"Poor mother," he said, "she's been sewing too much!"

And Mrs. Santa Claus woke up, but she never told about the three dolls.

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