



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Hard Times in Elfland

Sidney Lanier

Strange that the termagant winds should scold
The Christmas Eve so bitterly!
But Wife, and Harry, the four-year old,
Big Charley, Nimblewits, and I,

Blithe as the wind was bitter, drew
More frontward of the mighty fire,
Where wise Newfoundland Fan foreknew
The heaven that Christian dogs desire—

Stretched o'er the rug, serene and grave,
Huge nose on heavy paws reclined,
With never a drowning boy to save,
And warmth of body and peace of mind.

And as our happy circle sat,
The fire well capp'd the company:
In grave debate or careless chat,
A right good fellow, mingled he:

He seemed as one of us to sit,
And talked of things above, below,
With flames more winsome than our wit,
And coals that burned like love aglow.

While thus our rippling discourse rolled
Smooth down the channel of the night,
We spoke of Time: thereat, one told
A parable of the seasons' flight.

Those seasons out, we talked of these:
And I, with inward purpose sly,
To shield my purse from Christmas-trees,
And stockings, and wild robbery

When Hal and Nimblewits invade
My cash in Santa Claus's name,—
In full the hard, hard times surveyed,

Denounced all waste as crime and shame;

Hinted that "waste" might be a term
Including skates, velocipedes,
Kites, marbles, soldiers, towers infirm,
Bows, arrows, cannon, Indian reeds,

Cap-pistols, drums, mechanic toys,
And all th' infernal host of horns
Whereby to strenuous hells of noise
Are turned the blessed Christmas morns;

Thus, roused—those horns! to sacred rage,
I rose, forefinger high in air,
When Harry cried, some war to wage,
"Papa is hard times ev'ywhere?

"Maybe in Santa Claus's land
It isn't hard times none at all!"
Now, blessed vision! to my hand
Most pat, a marvel strange did fall.

Scarce had my Harry ceased, when "Look!"
He cried, leapt up in wild alarm,
Ran to my Comrade, shelter took
Beneath the startled mother's arm,

And so was still: what time we saw
A foot hang down the fireplace! Then,
With painful scrambling, scratched and raw,
Two hands that seemed like hands of men,

Eased down two legs and a body through
The blazing fire, and forth there came
Before our wide and wondering view
A figure shrinking half with shame,

And half with weakness. "Sir," I said,—
But with a mien of dignity
The seedy stranger raised his head:
"My friends, I'm Santa Claus," said he.

But oh, how changed! That rotund face
The new moon rivall'd, pale and thin;
Where once was cheek, now empty space;
Whate'er stood out, did now stand in.

His piteous legs scarce propped him up;
His arms mere sickles seemed to be:
But most o'erflowed our sorrow's cup
When that we saw—or did not see—

His belly: we remembered how
It shook like a bowl of jelly fine:
An earthquake could not shake it now;
He had no belly—not a sign.

"Yes, yes, old friends, you well may stare:
I have seen better days," he said:
"But now with shrinkage, loss, and care,
Your Santa Claus scarce owns his head.

"We've had such hard, hard times this year
For goblins! Never knew the like.
All Elfland's mortgaged! And we fear
That gnomes are just about to strike.

"I once was rich, and round, and hale,
The whole world called me jolly brick;
But listen to a piteous tale,
Young Harry,—Santa Claus is sick!



"'Twas thus: a smooth-tongued railroad man
Comes to my house and talks to me:
'I've got,' says he, 'a little plan
That suits this nineteenth century.

"'Instead of driving as you do,
Six reindeer slow from house to house,

Let's build a Grand Trunk Railway through
From here to earth's last terminus.

"We'll touch at every chimney-top
An Elevated Track, of course,
Then, as we whisk you by, you'll drop
Each package down: just think the force

"You'll save, the time! Besides, we'll make
Our millions: look you, soon we will
Compete for freight—and then we'll take
Dame Fortune's bales of good and ill—

"Why, she's the biggest shipper, sir,
That e'er did business in this world!
Then Death, that ceaseless traveller,
Shall on his rounds by us be whirled.

"When ghosts return to walk with men,
We'll bring 'em cheap by steam, and fast:
We'll run a branch to heaven! and then
We'll riot, man; for then, at last,

"We'll make with heaven a contract fair
To call each hour, from town to town,
And carry the dead folks' souls up there,
And bring the unborn babies down!'

"The plan seemed fair: I gave him cash,
Nay every penny I could raise.
My wife e'er cried, 'Tis rash, 'tis rash:'
How could I know the stock-thief's ways?

"But soon I learned full well, poor fool!
My woes began that wretched day.
The President plied me like a tool,
In lawyer's fees, and rights of way,

"Injunctions, leases, charters, I
Was meshed as in a mighty maze;
The stock ran low, the talk ran high,
Then quickly flamed the final blaze.

"With never an inch of track—'tis true!
The debts were large ... the oft-told tale.
The President rolled in splendor new,—
He bought my silver at the sale.

"Yes, sold me out: we've moved away.
I've had to give up everything;
My reindeer, even, whom I ... pray,
Excuse me" ... here, o'er-sorrowing,

Poor Santa Claus burst into tears,
Then calmed again: "My reindeer fleet,
I gave them up: on foot, my dears,
I now must plod through snow and sleet.

"Retrenchment rules in Elfland, now;
Yes, every luxury is cut off,—
Which, by the way, reminds me how
I caught this dreadful hacking cough:

"I cut off the tail of my Ulster furred
To make young Kris a coat of state
That very night the storm occurred!
Thus we become the sport of Fate.

"For I was out till after one,
Surveying chimney-tops and roofs,
And planning how it could be done
Without any reindeers' bouncing hoofs.

"My dear,' says Mrs. Claus, that night,
A most superior woman she!
'It never, never can be right
That you, deep sunk in poverty,

"This year should leave your poor old bed,
And trot about, bent down with toys;
There's Kris a-crying now for bread—
To give to other people's boys!

"Since you've been out, the news arrives
The Elfs' Insurance Company's gone.
Ah, Claus, those premiums! Now, our lives
Depend on yours: thus griefs go on.

"And even while you're thus harassed,
I do believe, if out you went,
You'd go, in spite of all that's passed,
To the children of that President!"

"Oh, Charley, Harry, Nimblewits,
These eyes that night ne'er slept a wink;

My path seemed honeycombed with pits,
Naught could I do but think and think.

"But, with the day, my courage rose.
Ne'er shall my boys, my boys, I cried,
When Christmas morns their eyes uncloze,
Find empty stockings gaping wide!

"Then hewed, and whacked, and whittled I;
The wife, the girls, and Kris took fire;
They spun, sewed, cut,—till by and by
We made, at home, my pack entire!"

He handed me a bundle here.
"Now, hoist me up: there, gently: quick!
Dear boys, don't look for much this year:
Remember, Santa Claus is sick!"

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