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READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

A Boy's Visit to Santa Claus

Richard Thomas Wyche

Once upon a time there was a little boy who talked a great deal about Santa Claus. He talked to his father, his mother, his brother and sisters, until it was Santa Claus at the breakfast table, Santa Claus at dinner, and Santa Claus at supper. This little boy had been told that far away in the Northland lived Santa Claus. He was sitting by the fire one day, watching the embers glow, and seeing castles in the glowing coals. "There is Santa Claus's house," he said, "the great building covered with snow. Why can't I go and see him?"

The little boy had worked and saved some money. He took the money, went down to the depot, bought a ticket, and before his father or mother knew anything about it he was gone to see Santa Claus.

He traveled a long time on the train, and by and by reached the end of the railroad. He could go no farther by train, for there was a great wide ocean — but people crossed the ocean, and so must the little boy. There was a great ship lying in port, soon to sail over the seas, and along with many other people the little boy went aboard. Soon every sail was spread, and out from the port went the ship, leaving far behind them the town.

The ship sailed and sailed a long time, and finally land came in sight. They had reached an island lying somewhere far out in the mid-seas. Some of the people went ashore, and so did the little boy. But what a funny land it was! All the people were little people — the grown men no taller than the little boy himself — and they rode little ponies no larger than dogs. The little boy asked, "What land is this? Does Santa Claus live here?"

And they said, "No.

This is the land that lies east of the sun

And west of the moon.

You have not come too soon.

Northward you must go,

To the land of ice and snow."

And so one day the little boy found a ship that was sailing to the Northland, and in this ship he went. The ship sailed and sailed until it finally came to where the sea was all frozen over, to the land of icebergs and snowfields. The ship could go no farther — so what do you suppose the little boy did then? He was in the land

of the reindeer, and over the snowfields he went in search of Santa Claus.

One day, as he was traveling through the snow, he saw not far away what at first seemed to be a hill — but soon he saw that it was not a hill at all, but a house covered with ice and snow. "That must be Santa Claus's house," he said. Soon he was standing in front of the great building, whose towers seemed to reach the sky. Up the shining steps he went, and soon he was standing at the door. He saw no doorbell, so he knocked. No one answered. He knocked louder. Still no one answered. He began to feel afraid — perhaps this was the house of a giant. But once more he knocked.

Then he heard a noise far down at the other end of the hall. Someone was coming. The latch went *click*, and the door stood wide open. And who do you suppose was there? Santa Claus? No — a little boy with blue eyes and a bright, sweet face.

"Good morning," said the little boy. "Does Santa Claus live here?"

"Yes!" said the other little boy. "Come in, come in. I am Santa Claus's little boy." He took him by the hand. "I am very glad to see you."

The two little boys walked down the long hallway, doors on this side and doors on that, until they came to the last door on the left-hand side. On this door Santa Claus's little boy knocked, and a great voice said, "Come in." He opened the door and walked in — and who do you suppose was there?

Santa Claus! Yes, Santa Claus himself: a great big, cheerful man sitting by the fire, with a long white beard, blue eyes, and the merriest, kindest face you ever saw.

"Father," said Santa Claus's little boy, "here is a little boy who has come to visit you."

Santa Claus looked down over his spectacles. "Well, how are you? I am mighty glad to see you. Yes, yes, I know this boy. I have been to his house on many a night and filled up his stocking. How are Elizabeth and Louise and Katherine?"

Over on the other side of the fireplace sat Mrs. Santa Claus. She looked just like a grandmother, with white hair and gold-rimmed spectacles, sitting by the fire knitting. She put her arms around the little boy and kissed him.

Then the two little boys sat down in front of the fire and talked together. By and by, Santa Claus's little boy said, "Don't you want to go over the building and see what we have in the different rooms? This building has a thousand rooms."

"*A thousand!*" said the little boy.

"Yes," said Santa Claus's little boy. "And something different in every one."

Then they went into a large room — and what do you suppose was in there? Nothing but dolls; some with long dresses and some with short, some with black eyes and some with blue. Into another room they went, and it was full of toys: wagons and horses and spinning tops. Another room was full of storybooks. Another was a candy kitchen where Santa Claus made all his sweets. Another was a workshop where he made the toys. Then they went into a long, large room — the largest of them all — and in this room were a great many tables covered with suits and cloaks and hats, shoes and stockings, all sizes and colors.

"What do you do with so many clothes?" the little boy asked.

"We take these to the little children who have no father or mother to make them clothes," said Santa Claus's little boy.

And so they went through all the rooms of the great building — all except one, which was away upstairs in the corner. What was in this room no one would tell the little boy, nor would they take him in. And the little boy wondered.



He stayed at Santa Claus's house for several days and had a splendid time. Some days the two boys would slide down the hill on a sled; some days they would hitch up the reindeer and go sleighing; some days they would go into the candy kitchen and help Santa Claus make sweets, or into the workshop and help him make toys.

But one day something happened. Santa Claus came to the little boy and said, "I am going away for a little while today — my wife and my little boy are coming with me. Now, you can come along, or you can stay here and keep house for us while we are gone." The little boy thought to himself that Santa Claus had been so good to him that the least he could do was stay and keep house. So he said he would stay.

Santa Claus handed him a great bunch of keys. "Now," he said, "you can go into all the rooms and play, but you must not go into that room upstairs in the corner."

"All right," said the little boy.

And with that, Santa Claus, his wife, and his little boy went down the steps, climbed into the sleigh, wrapped themselves up in furs, cracked the whip — and away they went! The little boy stood and watched them until they disappeared behind the snow hills.

Then he turned and went back into the house. He felt like a little man, alone in

that great place. From room to room he went. He rolled the great rubber balls in the game room — some of them as tall as his head, and so bouncy that if you dropped one from the rooftop it would spring clear back to the top. He ate candy in the candy kitchen. He worked on some toys in the workshop. He read books in the library. He banged on the piano in the parlor.

But after a while he grew tired and lonely. "I wish Santa Claus would hurry and come back," he said. So he decided to climb up to the rooftop and look out to see if Santa Claus was coming home. Up the steps he went, then another flight, then another — up, up, up, until it seemed he had climbed a thousand steps. Finally he came out on top.

He stood there with his hand on the railing and looked out. All he could see were the snowfields, white and glistening. Santa Claus was nowhere in sight. He could see only the track the sleigh had made across the snow.

Then down the steps he came — and it just happened that he passed by the room Santa Claus had told him not to go into. He stopped in front of the door.

"I wonder what they have in that room," he said to himself, "and why they didn't want me to go in?"

He took hold of the knob and gave it a turn, but the door was locked. He shut one eye and peeped through the keyhole — but it was all dark. He put his mouth to the keyhole and blew — but he could hear nothing. He put his nose there and sniffed — but he could smell nothing.

"I wonder what they have in there," he said. "I believe I'll see just for fun which one of these keys fits the lock."

He tried one key — it didn't fit. He tried another, and another, and another, working through the whole great bunch, until he came to the very last one. "Now," he said to himself, "if this key doesn't fit, I'm going." He tried it — and it was the only key on the bunch that fit. "Now," he said, "I shan't go into the room. I'll just turn the key and see if it will unlock the lock."

He turned the key slowly and the latch went *click, click* — and the door flew wide open.

What do you suppose was in the room?

It was all dark. The little boy could see nothing. But somehow, as the door swung open, it seemed to pull him forward — and when he stepped over the threshold, he felt a strange breeze blowing. Then he looked down, and found that the room had no floor at all. Just a dark hole.

Down he fell, away down, down, down — turning in the dark, shutting his eyes, expecting every moment to strike something and be killed —

But before he did, someone caught him by the shoulders and shook him and said, "Wake up! Wake up!"

He opened his eyes.

And where do you suppose the little boy was?

At home. It was Christmas morning, and his father was calling him to get up. The sun was shining across his little bed. He looked toward the fireplace, and there were all the stockings, hanging full and fat.

The little boy had been to see Santa Claus — but he had gone by that wonderful road we call Dreamland.

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