Ririro
READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

A Night with Santa Claus

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Not very long ago, and not far from here, lived a little boy named Bobby Morgan — Rob, to everyone who knew him. Blue-eyed was Rob, and fair-haired, and pug-nosed, which his mother declared was just the sweetest trifle of a nose she had ever seen.

On the day before Christmas, Rob decided it would be a fine thing to run down Main Street and see what was going on. After dinner his mother tied his scarf, pulled down his fur cap, and filled his pockets with crackers and cookies. She told him to be very polite to Santa Claus if he happened to meet him.

Off he trotted, merry as a cricket, now skipping, now sliding. At every corner he held his breath, half expecting to run straight into Santa himself. Nothing of the sort happened, however, and he soon found himself in front of a toy-shop window.

There he saw a spring hobby-horse as large as a Shetland pony, fully saddled and bridled, lacking nothing but a rider. Rob pressed his nose against the glass and tried to imagine the feelings of a boy in that saddle. He might have stood there all afternoon, had a ragged little fellow not tugged his coat.

"Wouldn't you just love that popgun?" the boy piped.

"Catch me looking at popguns!" said Rob. But when he saw how tattered the boy's jacket was, he added more softly, "Maybe you'd like a cookie?"

"Try me!" said the boy.

There was a queer lump in Rob's throat as he emptied one pocket of its cakes and put them into the eager, dirty hands. Then he marched down the street without so much as a glance at the glorious horse.

Brighter and brighter grew the windows, fuller and fuller of toys. At last Rob stood, eyes and mouth wide open, before a great store blazing with light from top to bottom, for it was growing dark. He nearly took off his cap and said, "How do you do, sir?" — to whom? Why, to a life-size image of Santa Claus himself, holding a Christmas tree laden with wonderful fruit.

A happy thought struck Rob. *Surely this must be Santa's own store, where he comes to fill his basket with toys. What if I were to hide and wait for him?*

He was a brave little fellow. He walked straight into the store with the crowd of grown-ups. Everyone was busy; no one had time to notice one small boy. He searched in vain for a quiet corner until he spotted a winding staircase leading to the upper floor. He crept up, scarcely daring to breathe.

What a fairyland! Toys everywhere — oceans of toys, nothing but toys, except for one very happy little boy. Fifty great rocking-horses piled in a heap! Whole flocks of woolly sheep and curly dogs with real barks inside them! Towers of drums, regiments of soldiers armed to the teeth, companies of toy firemen hauling their hose carts, and more wheelbarrows and bicycles than you could count.

Rob screwed his knuckles into his eyes as a firm hint that they had better not play tricks on him, and then stared with all his might.

He thought he heard a footstep on the stairs. Fearing to be caught, he hid behind a baby carriage. No one came, however, and as he was growing hungry, he took out his remaining cookies and had himself a fine supper.

Why didn't Santa Claus come?

Rob was getting sleepy. He stretched out his tired legs and, tipping one of the woolly sheep onto its side, pillowed his curly head upon it. It was so cozy to lie there looking up at the ceiling hung with toys, with the faint hum of voices rising from below. His blue eyes grew heavier and heavier. Rob was fast asleep.

Midnight.

The bells rang out loud and clear, as if they had great news to tell the world.

What noise was that, besides the bells? And look — oh, look! Who was that, striding up through the room with a great basket on his back? He had stolen his coat from a polar bear, and his cap too, by the look of it. His boots were red leather to the knee. His coat and cap were trimmed with wreaths of holly bright with scarlet berries.

Good sir, let us see your face — why, that was the best part of him! So round, so ruddy, such twinkling eyes, such a merry look playing about those dimples. But that long white beard — could he really be old?

Oh, very, very old. Over nineteen hundred years. That is a long life, little ones. But he has a young heart, this dear old man, and a kind one. Can you guess his name?

Hurrah for Santa Claus! The very one.

He set his basket down near Robby and shook the snow from his fur coat. Some

of the flakes fell on Rob's face and woke him from his sleep. Opening his eyes, he saw the white figure — but he kept perfectly still and didn't make a sound, afraid the vision would vanish.

Santa Claus had no intention of vanishing until his night's work was done. He took a large book from his pocket, opened it to the first page, and studied it closely.

"Tommy Turner," was written at the top, and below it was a little map — yes, Tommy's heart, mapped out like a country. Part of the land was marked good, part bad. Here and there stood small flags marking the places where battles had been fought during the year, some of them black and some white. Wherever a good feeling had won the fight, there was a white flag.

"Tommy Turner," said Santa Claus aloud, "six white flags, three black ones. That leaves only three presents for Tommy — but we must see what we can do for him." He bustled among the toys and soon had a ball, a horse, and a Noah's ark tied up in a parcel, which he tossed into the basket.

Name after name was called out, some of them belonging to Rob's own playmates. You may be sure that the little boy listened with his heart in his mouth.

"Robby Morgan!"

In his excitement, Rob nearly knocked over the baby carriage — but Santa didn't notice.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven—" Rob's breath came very fast. "—whites!"

He almost clapped his hands.

"One, two, three blacks. Now I wonder what that little fellow would like. Here's a drum, a box of tools, a knife, a toy menagerie... If he hadn't run away from school that day — and then told a lie about it — I'd give him the rocking-horse."

Rob groaned in anguish.

"But bless him — he's a fine little fellow. Perhaps he'll do better next year if I give him the horse."

That was too much. With a "Hurrah!" Rob jumped up and turned a somersault right at Santa Claus's feet.

"Stars and stripes!" cried Santa. "What's this?"

"Come on — I'll show you the one!" Rob cried.

Santa Claus allowed himself to be led to the pile of horses. Rob's sharp eyes

picked out the one with the longest tail and the thickest mane before you could blink.

"Well, he beats every boy I ever saw! What am I going to do with this little spy?"

"Oh, dear Santa Claus," cried Rob, hugging the red boots, "please take me along with you. I'll hold on tight when you go down the chimney."

"Yes, I expect you would hold on tight — *in* the chimney, my little man."

"I mean on your back," Rob half-sobbed.

Santa Claus cannot bear to see little ones in distress. He scooped the boy into his arms and asked where he wanted to go.

"To Tommy Turner's — and also, you know, that boy in the awful old jacket who wanted the popgun."

Of course Santa knew him. He knows every boy and girl in the world. A popgun was added to the pile of toys. Then Santa Claus strapped Rob and the basket onto his back, crept through an open window to a ladder he had placed there, and ran down it as nimbly as a squirrel. The reindeer were eager to be off and jingled their silver bells with great merriment. An instant more and they were tucked under soft white robes; an instant more and they were flying like the wind over the snow.

Tommy's house. Santa sprang out, leaned his light ladder against the wall, and before Rob could blink properly they were on the roof, heading for the chimney. Whether it swallowed Santa or Santa swallowed it is still a puzzle to Rob.

Tommy lay sleeping in his little bed, dreaming of Christmas morning. His rosy mouth was caught somewhere between a whistle and a smile. Rob longed to give him a friendly poke, but Santa shook his head. They filled the stocking and slipped away, for empty little stockings the world over were waiting for that generous hand.

On they flew, never stopping until they came to a wretched little shack. A stovepipe stuck through the roof in place of a chimney.

Now, Rob thought, *he'll have to give up.*

But no — Santa quietly pushed the door open and stepped in.

On a ragged cot lay the boy to whom Rob had given the cookies. One of them, half-eaten, was still clutched in his hand. Santa gently opened the other small fist and placed the popgun in it.

"Give him my drum," Rob whispered.

Without a word, Santa set the drum beside the rumpled little head.

How swiftly they flew under the bright stars. How sweetly rang the bells.

When Santa reined in at Rob's own door, he found his small companion fast asleep. He carried him tenderly to his crib, drew off one stocking, and filled it with the smaller toys. The rocking-horse he placed close beside the crib, so that Rob could climb on and ride it the very first thing Christmas morning.

A kiss — and he was gone.

P.S. — Rob's mother says it was all a dream. Rob declares it is "as true as the Fourth of July." I prefer to take his word for it.

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