



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Christmas at the Hollow Tree Inn

Albert Bigelow Paine

Once upon a time, when the Robin and the Turtle and the Squirrel and Jack Rabbit had all gone home for the winter, nobody was left in the Hollow Tree except the 'Coon and the 'Possum and the old black Crow. Of course the others used to come back and visit pretty often, and Mr. Dog did too, now that he had become good friends with all the Deep Woods people. They thought a great deal of him once they got to know him, and Mr. Dog told them all sorts of things he'd learned at Mr. Man's house — which was probably one reason why they liked him so well.

He told them about Santa Claus, for one thing, and how the old fellow came down the chimney on Christmas Eve to bring presents to Mr. Man and his children, who always hung up their stockings for him. Mr. Dog said that once he had hung up his stocking too, and got a nice bone in it — so good he had buried it and dug it up again as many as six times before spring. He said that Santa Claus always came to Mr. Man's house, and that whenever the children hung up their stockings they were always sure to get something in them.

Well, the Hollow Tree people had never heard of Santa Claus. They knew about Christmas, of course, because everybody knows about that — even the cows and sheep. But they had never heard of Santa Claus. And they didn't know that Santa Claus only goes to Mr. Man's house, so they thought if they hung up their stockings he'd come to them too, and that's what they made up their minds to do.

They talked about it a great deal, and Mr. 'Possum looked over all his stockings to pick out the biggest one he had, and Mr. Crow made himself a brand-new pair on purpose. Mr. 'Coon said he'd never known Mr. Crow to make himself such large stockings before, but Mr. Crow said he was getting old and needed things roomier — and when he lent one of his new stockings to Mr. 'Coon, Mr. 'Coon said, "That's so," and guessed they were about right after all.

They didn't tell anyone at first, but by and by they told Mr. Dog what they were planning, and when Mr. Dog heard it he nearly laughed out loud. He knew perfectly well that Santa Claus never went anywhere except to Mr. Man's house, and he thought it would be a fine joke on the Hollow Tree people when they hung up their stockings and got nothing.

But then Mr. Dog had another thought. He thought it would be too bad, too — for them to be disappointed that way. He liked them all now, and once that idea settled in, he knew he had to do something about it. And what he decided was this: he would play Santa Claus himself.

He knew exactly how Santa Claus looked, because he'd seen plenty of pictures at Mr. Man's house, and he thought it would be great fun to dress up that way and bring a bag of presents to the Hollow Tree while everyone was asleep. But first he needed to be sure he could get in, so he said, casually, that he didn't see how they could expect Santa Claus when their chimneys were so small. Mr. Crow said they'd leave their latchstring out downstairs — which was exactly what Mr. Dog had been hoping for.

Then they said they were going to have all the summer friends over for Christmas dinner, to see the presents in their stockings, and they told Mr. Dog to drop by too if he could get away. Mr. Dog said he would, and went off laughing to himself, and ran all the way home, he felt so pleased.

He had to work hard, I tell you, to get everything ready. It wasn't finding the presents that was difficult so much as rigging up the Santa Claus costume. He found some long wool in Mr. Man's barn for the white whiskers, and he used shorter bits to trim the edges of his overcoat and the tops of his boots and around an old hat. Then he borrowed a big sack from the barn and fixed it up to swing over his back, just as Santa Claus carried his in the pictures.

He had a fine collection of things to bring. Three tender young chickens he'd borrowed from Mr. Man, for a start — and then he'd bought new neckties for all three Hollow Tree folk, and a big striped candy cane for each one, because candy canes always look splendid sticking out of a stocking. Besides all that, he had a new pipe for each of them and a packet of tobacco. Mr. Dog lived with Mr. Man and didn't need to spend much on himself, so he'd always saved his money. There were other things too, though I can't quite remember what they were — and when he set off, all dressed up as Santa Claus, his bag was very heavy indeed. He almost wished before he'd gone far that he hadn't packed quite so much.

It grew heavier and heavier all the way, and he was glad enough to arrive and find the latchstring out. He set his bag down to rest a minute before climbing the stairs, then eased the door open and listened. He couldn't hear a thing except Mr. Crow and Mr. 'Coon and Mr. 'Possum breathing quietly, and he knew any one of them might wake up any moment. He wouldn't have been caught there in the middle of things for anything. So he crept up as softly as you please, and when he reached the big parlour room he nearly laughed out loud — for there were the stockings, sure enough, all hung in a row, with a little card over each one giving the owner's name.

He listened again, and all at once he froze — Mr. 'Possum had said something. But Mr. 'Possum was only talking in his sleep: "I'll take another piece, please." Mr. Dog knew he was dreaming about the mince pie he'd had for supper.

So Mr. Dog opened his bag and filled the stockings. He put in the mixed candy and nuts and small things first, then the pipes and tobacco and candy canes so they showed at the top, and hung a nicely dressed chicken outside each one. I tell you, they looked splendid! It almost made Mr. Dog wish he had a stocking of his own to fill, and he forgot all about anyone waking up and sat down in a chair to admire the stockings.

It was a comfortable rocking chair, tucked back in a dark corner where no one peering out of a bedroom door would be likely to spot him. Mr. Dog felt quite safe now. He rocked gently and looked at the fine stockings and thought how pleased they'd all be in the morning, and how tired he was. You've heard of people being as tired as a dog — well, that's just how Mr. Dog felt. He was so tired he didn't feel the least bit like walking home, and by and by — he never did know quite how it happened — Mr. Dog fell sound asleep right there in the chair, Santa Claus suit and all.

And there he sat, empty bag in hand, the full stockings glowing before him, all through the night. Even when morning came and the room began to grow light, Mr. Dog slept on. He was that tired.

Then the door of Mr. 'Possum's room opened and he poked out his head. And just then the door of Mr. 'Coon's room opened and he poked out his head. And then the door of the old black Crow opened and out came his head. They all looked toward the stockings — and they didn't see Mr. Dog, or even each other. They saw their stockings, though.

"Oh, there's something in my stocking!" said Mr. 'Coon.

"Oh, there's something in my stocking too!" said Mr. Crow.

"Oh, there's something in *all* our stockings!" said Mr. 'Possum.

And with that they gave a great hurrah all together and rushed out to grab them — and turned around just in time to see Mr. Dog leap straight up from his chair, for he hadn't the faintest idea where he was.

"Oh — it's Santa Claus himself!" they all shouted, and made a dash for their rooms, frightened nearly to death.



But it all came back to Mr. Dog in an instant, and he started laughing at what a

fine joke it had been on everybody. And when they heard Mr. Dog's laugh they knew him straight away and came creeping back out, and he had to tell them everything — what he'd done and how he'd done it and why. So they emptied their stockings out onto the floor and ate some of the presents and admired the others, until they nearly forgot about breakfast, just as children do on Christmas morning.

Then Mr. Crow said he'd put on a little coffee, and Mr. Dog must stay and have some — and by and by they made him promise to spend the whole day and be there when the Robin and the Squirrel and Mr. Turtle and Jack Rabbit arrived. Which he did.

It was snowing hard outside, which made it a nicer Christmas than if it hadn't been. And when all the others came, they brought presents too. And when they heard how Mr. Dog had dressed up as Santa Claus and fallen asleep and been caught, they laughed and laughed. The snow fell so thickly that everyone had to stay the night, and after dinner they all sat around the fire telling stories. They had to stay the next night too — and all that Christmas week.

I wish I could tell you everything that happened that week, but I haven't the time. It was the very nicest Christmas that ever was in the Hollow Tree, or anywhere in the Big Deep Woods.

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