



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

One Young Laddie's Christmas

Unknown writer

It was Christmas Eve, and the hurrying, happy crowd filled the Boston streets and shops. Sandy Martin was a very small atom in that crowd, but he carried a large share of the Christmas spirit — though his hands were mittenless and his pockets full of holes. It was impossible to feel anything but light-hearted in the midst of all that joyful bustle. Standing at the big toy-shop window with his nose pressed flat against the glass, Sandy watched people go in and out and wondered what they were buying, and which lucky boy or girl would unwrap those mysterious parcels.

After a while, though, he grew cold, and the cold set him thinking. Walking up past the Common, he began to wonder — just a little — why Santa Claus had so much to do with all these people and so little to do with him. He was still wearing that puzzled look when he glanced across the street and stopped dead in his tracks.

There was Santa Claus himself, walking through the Common.

Sandy stared until his eyes couldn't open any wider. It had to be Santa — that jolly face, the long white beard, the fine furry clothes, the big boots. There were toys about him, too, and he carried a large sign with letters on it that told passers-by about the finest Christmas stocking stuffers to be found at a certain big store on Washington Street. Sandy couldn't read, so he didn't bother with the letters. He just stared and stared.

Santa seemed tired; he soon paused and sat down on one of the park benches.

"That's him, all right," Sandy said to himself. "I'm going over to ask why he never comes down *our* chimney."

And off he went. Marching straight up to the old man, he said cheerfully, "How do you do, Mr. Santa Claus?"

Santa looked up, a little surprised, but smiled warmly at the ragged boy before him. "Well, young man — how do you do? And what's your name?"

"Sandy Martin." Without waiting for a further invitation, Sandy pulled himself up onto the bench beside the old man. "I've come to ask you a question. Why don't you ever come to our house at Christmas? We've got just as good a chimney as anyone, and there's an old lightning rod beside it where you could tie your

reindeer."

Santa chuckled, clearly delighted. "You know," he said, "I have so many places to visit, it's very hard to find them all. Where do you live?"

"Gower Street — number sixty-five. I thought you might have forgotten."

Just then Sandy noticed a third person nearby. A tall, dark-haired lady in deep mourning had come up while they were talking and stood waiting for the streetcar. Her face was very pale and sad, and it surprised Sandy that anyone could look so sorrowful at Christmastime — especially with Santa Claus right there. When she caught him staring, a brief smile chased away the sadness. Sandy smiled right back and called out cheerfully, "Merry Christmas, ma'am!"

She smiled, but sighed too. "Thank you, my dear. I hope you have a merry Christmas. But the day cannot be a merry one for me."

Sandy looked from Santa to the lady in bewilderment. "Why not? Don't grown-ups have merry Christmases?"

"Sometimes," the lady answered quietly.



"I always thought it was even more fun for grown-ups than for children," Sandy said. "Because you all know Santa Claus and have secrets with him. Every other person I've seen today looked jolly and glad — everyone busy thinking how they'd surprise someone else."

A shadow crossed Sandy's face, and the lady saw it.

"My dear little boy," she said, her voice soft though her eyes were smiling now, "don't let me spoil your Christmas. You are right, and I've been wrong. Everyone should be happy at this season — and I am going to have a secret with Santa Claus and a merry Christmas after all."

Sandy brightened at once and began to slide off the bench. "I have to head home before dark. I'm so glad I met you, Mr. Santa Claus — I hope you find your way all right tonight. If you can, please bring Maggie a doll with blue eyes and Benny a sled and Mother a new shawl." He leaned close and whispered loudly: "And please give that lady there something she likes, and help her have a good time."

Then Sandy trudged off, and when he glanced back he was delighted to see the sad lady and Santa deep in conversation.

That evening, Sandy kept the whole family spellbound over supper with his story of meeting Santa Claus. His mother, worn out from a long day of sewing, sighed

and tried to persuade him that it couldn't really have been Santa — but she got nowhere. Before bed, each child hung a ragged stocking behind the kitchen stove.

Mrs. Martin looked at those stockings and sat down and wept. She had worked hard all day, poor soul, but the money she'd earned was barely enough for rent and food — there was nothing left over for Christmas morning. What would the children say when they found the stockings empty?

She looked around the room, then stood and lifted her shawl from its peg.

"I can't bear to disappoint them," she said. "I'll pawn this and get a few things to put in those stockings."

She crossed the room and opened the door — but didn't go out, because someone was standing there.

"Good evening, ma'am," said the man, stepping inside. "I am Santa Claus. I couldn't very well get down the chimney, so I took the liberty of using the door. I've brought a few things for the little ones — your boy invited me, and I see he was ready for me."

And with that, Santa Claus set to work.

Mrs. Martin sank into her chair and said nothing at all. It felt like a dream. Had the stories of her childhood come true? Surely it could be no one else — hadn't this kind old man said so himself with his own lips?

She sat perfectly dazed and watched as he stuffed the ragged stockings to bursting, tucked sprigs of evergreen here and there, and piled packages and a big market basket on the table. Then, before she could find her voice, he was gone with a "Merry Christmas!" — leaving her to wonder whether she had truly been awake.

Before first light, the noise at 65 Gower Street was tremendous. It settled for a moment into hushed awe when Mother told them solemnly that she herself had watched Santa Claus fill the stockings.

"But I thought you said there wasn't a Santa Claus," Sandy said reproachfully.

"Well, I didn't believe there was," his mother admitted, helpless. "But if that wasn't Santa Claus, I don't know who it was."

"Of course it was Santa Claus!" Maggie declared. "Didn't Sandy tell him to bring me a doll with blue eyes?" Sandy nodded solemnly. "And he did, didn't he? The darling — see, Ma, she has lace-edged clothes all the way through, and real buttoned boots!"

"And didn't Sandy tell him to bring me a sled?" Benny broke in. Sandy nodded

again. "And isn't it right here? And didn't it snow last night? And am I not going coasting on the Common this very day?" He flung himself onto the shiny sled and tried to coast across the kitchen floor.

Sandy turned to his mother. "And didn't I ask him to bring you a new shawl?"

Mrs. Martin laid her hand on the soft, thick shawl Maggie had spread over the rocking chair and gently patted Sandy's shoulder. "What did you tell him to bring for you?" she asked.

Sandy looked up in sudden surprise. "Why — I never thought to ask! It was getting late and I just remembered Maggie and Benny and you. I forgot all about me." He paused, then his eyes went wide. "But he knew what I wanted, didn't he. So it *must* have been Santa Claus."

"So it must!" Maggie agreed. "There's the tool chest, and the harmonica, and the big picture book."

Benny had his head deep in the market basket. "There's nuts and oranges and bananas and grapes — and red jelly — and a *turkey*!"

"I see crackers and bread and potatoes," Maggie called from the other side. "Oh, Ma — we can have a proper dinner!"

All the comfort and joy of that Christmas at 65 Gower Street goes without saying. But Sandy's faith in Santa Claus has never wavered — and even Mrs. Martin half-believes that the good old saint truly does exist somewhere, and was drawn down to their humble home by one small boy's Christmas spirit.

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