



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Santa Claus Family

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Part One: The Story of Mr. Santa Claus

You don't believe in Santa Claus? I didn't, when I was as little as you — but I did when I was seven, and I still do now I'm twenty-seven. Why? Because I've seen her.

What are you laughing at? Santa Claus isn't a *her*? He's a man? Ah — that's what you think. I know better.

You want to hear about her, do you? Well, go ask Mummy if Uncle Tom may tell you just one story before bed. Mummy's coming to listen too? Hmph. This story wasn't meant for Mummy — but she was always an inquisitive person. When I was a fat little baby she stuck a pin in me to see if I'd squeak. You can ask Gran if you don't believe me. Mummy may laugh now, but she didn't then — not after Gran came in!

The story happened at Christmas, when I was a very naughty little boy of seven — almost as naughty as Bob, though that hardly seems possible. My father was abroad, and your Mummy had scarlet fever, and Gran was nursing her; so they sent me to stay with an old lady named Munson, who had been Gran's nurse. She was very old by then, and her servant was very old too. Neither of them had much time for a tiresome little boy. Mrs. Munson even forgot to buy the Christmas present that Gran had sent money for — but we won't talk about that, because it'll upset Gran if we do.

You can imagine how dull I was. It rained for about a week, and even on fine days they wouldn't let me go out in case I caught a cold. So I spent most of my time pressing my nose against the window and watching the street — and especially I watched for the beautiful young lady next door. I thought she was like a princess in a story, and I think so still. You can tell your Mummy not to look so curious, because I don't know the beautiful lady's name, and I jolly well wish I did. No, Bob — "jolly well" is not a swear. Neither is "jolly miserable," and that's exactly how I felt.

On Christmas morning I felt worse, because I'd hung up my stocking the night before, and when I went to look — there was nothing in it. I'm not saying whether I cried, because boys have no business to cry. But if ever a little boy was jolly well down on his luck, I was. I stared out the window at all the happy,

smiling people passing below, and that made me feel worse. When the beautiful lady came home from church she laughed and waved her hand and called out, "A Merry Christmas, dear!" And then — well. If I cried at any point, it was then.

Why, Eva, you little goose — there's nothing to cry about now. How about a kiss for Uncle Tom to make up for it? There.

I didn't eat much dinner, and the old servant got cross about that, and I flew into a temper and said I wished I was dead, and she got crosser still, and went out and banged the door. And then — mind, I'm not saying I *did* cry, but if I did, that was the moment. I was sitting in the armchair in front of the fire, and I think I was saying to myself that I wanted Mummy — *my* Mummy, you know, not yours. Yes, I mean Gran. And there was a knock at the door, and Santa Claus walked in.

He had a long red cloak trimmed with white fur — rather like the opera cloaks ladies wore in those days — and a wreath of holly on his head. He had a long white beard, and carried a staff and a great armful of packages, and spoke in a deep voice, just like your Mummy does when she plays bears with you.

"Tommy," he said, "I'm Santa Claus!" And he gave me all the parcels — five of them.

There was a clockwork engine, and a box of bricks, and a box of tops, and two little men who wrestled when you pulled a string — Santa Claus knelt right down on the floor and showed me how — and some reins to play horses. I danced and laughed till I saw the reins, and then I — I didn't laugh.

"Oh, Santa Claus," I said. "Sissy is ill in bed. It's scarlet fever. And perhaps I shan't ever have her to play horses with again."

Santa Claus picked me up and sat in the armchair and hugged me — and his beard came off — and he was the beautiful, beautiful lady from next door.

"Sissy will get well," she told me. "And you shall come in and play with me this afternoon. I love playing horses."

I said, "And I love *you*." I remember it very particularly, because I'd never said that to a lady before, and I've never said it to one since. And directly after I said, "I love you better than if you were Mr. Santa Claus," and she said, "I'm *Miss* Santa Claus, Tommy." And then she kissed me, and I kissed her.

"Ever done that since?" I think Mummy whispered to you to ask that. You can tell Mummy she is a great deal too curious.

The beautiful lady took me into her house, and we played horses and wild Indians and built card houses and blew each other's down, and when I was tired of playing she took me on her lap and told me stories. When it was quite late she took me home — to Mrs. Munson's, I mean. And when she was going I kissed her

and said, "I think you are lovely, and when I am a man I will marry you."

She kissed me again and said, "I'm afraid I shall be frightfully old by then, darling — but I'll tell you what you can do. You can marry someone else who is like me."

I said, "Yes, Miss Santa Claus — and I won't ever marry anyone unless she is *exactly* like you." Do you know, I have said that every Christmas since. Mummy may shrug all she likes — I never will. So it's no use her telling me I'm "getting on" and ought to settle down.

Afterwards? There wasn't much of an afterwards. Aunt Annie came for me the next morning and took me to her house and was very kind. I ran next door to say goodbye to Miss Santa Claus, but she was out. I have never seen her again. And I have never found the lady who is like her exactly. I don't think there can be such a lady. Miss Santa Claus was so very lovely.

Try to find her? Of course I have. I've got a man making inquiries right now. If you don't see me at Christmas dinner tomorrow, you'll know I've had word of Miss Santa Claus and gone to see her. If real things happened properly, the way they do in stories, she ought to have a little boy who needs a Santa Claus — and I ought to be Mr. Santa Claus to him. Don't you think?

Now it's half past bedtime! Up you go — I'll carry Eva and Bob, and Mummy can take Boy. Yes, Bella, my dear? Gospel true, every word. Yes, I know it's ridiculous — but do you know, if I met a girl like she was, I'd marry her tomorrow. Good night, kiddies. Eh? Mr. Santa Claus? Well — I warn you, if you call me that, I shall have to live up to the name. Good night!

Part Two: The Story of Mrs. Santa Claus

Yes, dears. It is a strange Christmas without Daddy. Poor old Daddy — so far away, working so hard to make things right for us. I think he is more worried about not being able to send us money for presents than we are about going without them. I'm so glad we all wrote him those lovely letters. He has the mail by now, I expect.

Have we been brave? I think we have, don't you? "Pretty *and* brave?" Oh, Dick, darling. I shall write that down and put the date on it: *That is what my big son said of his mother*. Stop, all of you — you'll make me frightfully vain. Your *young* mother, thank you very much. Of course I'm young with you all around me. Though it is a different sort of young, you know.



There was a time when I looked exactly as Sis looks now — when I was nearly nineteen. And there is somebody, at this very moment, looking for Sis for that very reason — if he hasn't forgotten. He vowed he would marry someone exactly like me when he grew up. Such a nice little fellow. He said your young mother was lovely.

You want to hear about him? Very well.

It was Christmas, when I was about Sis's age — nearly nineteen. He was a little boy who had come to stay with an old woman next door, because his sister had scarlet fever. A pretty little fellow with curly hair, about seven years old. The old lady had been a nurse in her day, and some of the ladies she'd nursed kept her comfortable in her old age, so she wasn't badly off. I think she'd been a kind woman once, and fond of children — but she was too old to do much for a lively little boy, and her servant was a terrible cross-patch. The poor child was terribly dull and lonely. He used to stand at the window all day, and I used to smile at him. I wanted to ask if he might come in for tea, but I was afraid the cross-patch would tell me to mind my own business — and they never let him out, so I couldn't very well speak to him.

On Christmas morning, when I came home from church, he was at the window as usual. I called out to wish him a Merry Christmas — and instead of answering, he turned and ran away from the window. I was sure he was crying. I said as much to Mother, and the housemaid heard me.

"And no wonder, miss," she said. "I was talking to the woman next door and she let on that she'd forgotten to get the Santa Claus his mother sent money for. 'It'll do just as well tomorrow,' she says. It's plain she doesn't know much about children and what they set by hanging up their little stockings."

"Oh, the poor little boy!" I said — and I nearly cried myself. "I shall go round to Mr. Harmer's and buy him some presents and take them in. I don't care how rude the woman is. I shan't leave till he has them."

I went to the shop — that is, I went to the house. The shop was shut, it being Christmas Day, but when I explained to Mr. Harmer, he got the toys for me. As

soon as dinner was over I took them next door. Father teased me about it, but he was secretly pleased — afterwards he gave me back most of what I'd spent and called me "Miss Santa Claus." And that gave me a bright idea. I do have them sometimes.

"Of course," I said. "I'll dress up as Santa Claus!"

And I did. I wore my red opera cloak and made a wreath of ivy for my hair with holly stuck in — rather like a Christmas pudding, Father said. I rubbed my cheeks to make them pink — your young mother had more colour in those days — and borrowed Father's walking stick for a staff. And my mother made me a beard from an old sheepskin mat. The cross-patch servant jumped half out of her skin when she opened the door.

"I'm Miss Lane, from next door," I told her, "and I've come to give these toys to the little boy and take him to tea. He must be so lonely."

She grumbled a great deal, and told me at length about everything she did for him, but she let me go upstairs. He was very pleased with the toys — and then my beard fell off, and I told him I was Miss Santa Claus, and took him home for tea and supper. We had splendid games. And when I carried him back and was saying goodbye, he said that when he grew up he would marry me.

I laughed to myself — you see, I was going out to the Cape the very next month to marry your father. But I didn't laugh at him, of course. I said I should be much too old, and he could marry someone else instead. And then he said he would never marry anyone unless she was exactly like me.

He said it with all his dear little heart. Such a darling little boy.

An aunt came for him the next morning, and they left a wrong address, and my letter came back. The following month I went off to marry Daddy. I've never seen the little boy since. He's probably quite forgotten Miss Santa Claus — it's twenty years ago, and he was so small. But if he hasn't — I'm afraid he won't be able to marry anyone, unless he finds Miss Sissy Santa Claus. In a story, that is exactly what would happen.

I don't think any girl was ever so like her mother as you are, Sis. Like I was, I mean. You dear silly thing. I'm just an old Mrs. Santa Claus now.

Whoever is that knocking? Why — ? What on earth are the children making that noise about? What do you mean, Mr. Santa Claus? Toys — for them? I — really. Are you — are you little Tommy?

My dear boy. You're rather too large to call that, but you see, you were little. The kindness wasn't much, Tommy. I mean, Mr. — ? Then you shall remain Tommy. This is my eldest daughter — the Miss Santa Claus of today. Don't you think she

is very like me, as I was?

As I am? I don't believe it, but I do love to be told so. You have treasured up that little kindness for twenty years, and taken all this trouble, and come to be my children's Mr. Santa Claus. Bless you, Tommy. No, no — I'm just an old Mrs. Santa Claus.

Part Three: The Letter of Miss Santa Claus

Dearest Minnie,

You will be astonished to hear that I am engaged. I believe my engagement is the prettiest story that ever happened, so I must tell you all of it.

He came to our house a fortnight ago, on Christmas Day, dressed as Santa Claus. He was a little boy who stayed next door to my dear, lovely Mummy twenty years ago — lonely and uncared for — and Mummy dressed up as "Miss Santa Claus" and brought him presents and played with him all afternoon. (She had just been telling us the story when he knocked at the door — you can imagine the uproar.) He said he would marry Mummy when he grew up, but she said she would be too old, and so he declared he would never marry anyone unless she was exactly like Mummy. He says I am. So does everyone.

He proposed two days ago, but he says he made up his mind the moment he saw me standing in the hallway under the lamp. I didn't make up *my* mind until much later — nearly half an hour — which was after he'd washed the red paint off his face and taken off his Santa Claus beard and cloak.

You see, I already knew he must be very nice. He had hired a detective to trace Mummy, and when he found that Father had had losses — though Father writes that things are going splendidly in Australia now, and we had quite a large cheque on Boxing Day — he found out all about us, bought presents for all the children, dressed up as Mr. Santa Claus, and came. I am so glad he did. I love him very much, Minnie darling.

Mummy says we shall be a proper Santa Claus family — Mr. Santa Claus and Miss Santa Claus and Mrs. Santa Claus and all the little Santa Clauses to come. When I said, "But you've left out Daddy," she laughed.

"Daddy," she said, "is all the Santa Clauses rolled into one." And — do you know — she actually blushed, like a girl. "I have my own name for Daddy, and I shan't tell you, and I won't call him anything else, not even in fun."

I think Daddy and Mummy are rather more than just Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus. They love doing things for everyone, all the year round. My Mr. Santa Claus is

like that too. And I am going to do my very best to be like all of them.

Your loving friend,
Sissy Santa Claus

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