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READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

This Is Sarah Jane Collins

John J. Á Becket

Probably you never heard of Sarah Jane Collins. It would be surprising if you had. But I really feel that for the encouragement of small, unknown women everywhere, the world should hear of Sarah Jane — and of the way in which she conquered Santa Claus.

Sarah Jane Collins, at the time of this memorable achievement, was toppling toward her ninth year. She was not heavily burdened with knowledge — not even compared with other little nine-year-old girls. But she had learned one thing that stuck to her small mind like a burr: Christmas is a time when Santa Claus simply rampages around shedding gifts upon children.

For some unaccountable reason, he had never shed any of his bounty on Sarah Jane.

She had expected, witnessed, and survived several Christmases, not only without a single present, but without so much as a card or note of apology from Santa Claus to account for this absolute neglect. This might have shaken the faith of some small girls in the old Saint's generosity. But it had not that effect on Sarah Jane.

However, she felt there was something wrong somewhere — or why did she not get Christmas presents? If he supposed that she did not care about them, why, then, the Saint was sadly mistaken. Sarah Jane's soul was filled with a desire for Christmas presents.

This little girl lived in Barrytown with her mother and her brother John, who was eleven years old but several years younger in his ways than Sarah was. The chief industry in Barrytown was coal-mining. John had a position at a coal-mine. He was a "picker." As the coal came streaming down the chute in the breaker, the pickers snatched out the slate, since people do not like to buy coal and find large incombustible chunks of slate mingled with it. When John came home from picking, any stranger would have taken him for a different creature entirely — he was so completely black with coal-dust, from his hair to his boots, that you could barely see the boy underneath.

The Collins family lived on the outskirts of town, and beyond them were the coal-breakers and heaps of "culm" and hills. In fact, the Collins mansion sat on the crest of a hill. It was a wooden house two stories high, but it had a spare room,

and that was rented to a Mr. Sullivan, who worked in the mine of course, and who paid one dollar a week for his lodging.

Well, it was getting on toward Christmas. The river was frozen over, the culm-heaps wore white robes of snow, and the streets afforded splendid coasting. Sarah Jane, sliding wildly down the hill in a warm glow of delight, was really a far worthier subject for a poem than many that poets choose to write about. But in her small heart lurked the memory of past Christmases barren of gifts, and that remembrance was like a skeleton at the feast. When she and John made excursions through the business streets of town, the shop-windows — stocked with the very things from which Santa Claus replenished his sleigh — brought home to Sarah more sharply than ever the unfairness of things.

There was no selfishness or vanity in her nature; she simply never saw any reason why she should not have presents. It was an oversight on Santa Claus's part. They lived so far out on the edge of town that the good Saint might well be unaware that Sarah Jane Collins had waited there through several Christmases — forgotten. It was only his unfortunate ignorance of her whereabouts that had led to her passing such fruitless holiday seasons. That was all.

But Sarah Jane, with a most logical appreciation of the situation, reasoned that his ignorance had been quite enough to cause her to be overlooked in the past, and would doubtless prove sufficient this Christmas too, unless she could bring herself to the good Saint's notice. So, about four days before the eventful day, she went to her mother and showed that worthy woman a small note.

"Mother," said Sarah Jane, "here's a letter I've written to Santa Claus. But I don't know how to get it to him."

"Sarah Jane! Why have you written to Santa Claus?" exclaimed poor Mrs. Collins.

"So that he'll know where I am and bring me my presents," said Sarah Jane, with the greatest gravity.

"Shall I read what you've written?" asked her mother, with a troubled look.

"Yes."

Sarah Jane handed the sheet of white notepaper to her mother, who read, in large, laboriously formed letters, this communication:

December 21 92.

DEER SANTA CLAUS: I now take the plesure of riting to you to ask you if you would please remember me on Christmas eve and my little brother because we are very poor and I have no papa to send any dollars but I will try and pay you bak when I grow a big woman and I am satsfyed with anything that you wish to

bring me Deer Santa Claus. I have seen your stores and I think you have lots of pretty things in them and I would like to get something. We hold our Christmas on Monday Deer Santa Claus because we have Sunday School on Christmas day and our teacher says we must keep Sunday so we don't have no school for a whole week and so my mama says we can say our Christmas day is on Monday. Deer Santa Claus, Please remember the right house, it is the house nearest going up to the school and ours is the only chimney on the whole block for my brother was out looking. This is the address, Deer Santa Claus.

SARAH JANE COLLINS 401 Blank Street.

Mrs. Collins held the letter in her hand and looked at her small daughter. The letter was addressed simply to "Mr. Santa Claus."

"Will I just drop it in the letter-box?" asked Sarah Jane, eagerly.

"I will attend to that for you, Sarah," said her mother. Mrs. Collins was somewhat distressed; but she had in her mind's eye some very kind people who, she thought, would know Santa Claus's address if she showed them this letter.

So Sarah Jane entrusted the precious missive to her mother's care. That good woman soon put on her best shawl and bonnet and went to a house where two young women lived whom she knew. They had very pretty faces and, what is better, very kind hearts. Mrs. Collins gave them the letter. They were much moved by Sarah Jane's direct appeal to Santa Claus, and when Mrs. Collins started home it was with the comforting thought that Sarah Jane would not be left out this year.

She reported to the eager young correspondent that the letter had been sent on its way.

Then life took on new and rosy meanings for Sarah, and she almost counted the hours. She frequently asked her mother whether she thought Santa Claus could possibly miss the house. It would be trying if Sarah Jane's letter were to bring the old gentleman around their way, only for him to unload the gifts intended for her at a neighbor's house!

One day, as Mr. Sullivan was going to his room to remove the coal-dust he had brought back with him from the mine, Sarah approached him in the small passageway and said:

"Mr. Sullivan, will you please clean out the chimney so that when Santa Claus comes he can get down easily? I will mend and brush your clothes for a week if you will."

And Mr. Sullivan, who had a very large heart though he lived in a very small way,

grinned and said, "Sure, I'll make it so clean the old Saint would love to slide right down it!" And if he did not clean the chimney with quite such scrupulous care as he might have, it was because he knew Santa Claus was not a man to be balked in his gift-bearing course by a little soot. Sarah faithfully fulfilled her part of the contract, mending and brushing Mr. Sullivan's clothes every day with heroic dedication.

Johnny Collins too was infected by the feverish delight with which Sarah Jane looked forward to the great day. She had told her brother she had informed Santa Claus that they both wanted gifts. When Mrs. Collins saw her daughter casting glances at the clean chimney, she knew exactly what picture was in Sarah's mind.

On the evening before their Christmas, Sarah went to her bed at her usual hour and tried to compose herself to sleep as quickly as possible. She feared that if Santa Claus were to come and find her awake, he would take flight at once. Sarah Jane was convinced that the good old Saint couldn't leave a present while anybody looked on, because his generosity was of so modest a kind.

It was not easy to fall asleep, but at last Sarah drifted off. When Mrs. Collins passed through the room, she saw the small girl with her hands folded outside the coverlet and her eyes closed in slumber.

But she noticed something on the headboard, and she stepped softly to the side of the bed to see what it was.

There, carefully pinned above the sleeping child, was a large sheet of plain wrapping-paper, on which Sarah had neatly printed in large letters:

THIS IS SARAH JANE COLLINS

She could hardly keep from laughing at the picture of her artless little girl sleeping so soundly with this label fixed above her, as if she were an exhibit at a fair. The bright notion of Sarah was perfectly clear: Santa Claus should have no excuse for neglecting her *this* Christmas. She had not left him a single loophole for escape. Those words told him clearly and unmistakably that "this was Sarah Jane Collins." After her letter to him, this identification was the only thing still necessary.

Sarah awoke very early and sat up in bed, listening for the sound of fairy sleigh-bells or a sliding noise in the chimney. She heard nothing. A glance around showed her that the bed was not strewn with presents. She put her hand back to feel whether the paper she had prepared for the perfect enlightenment of Santa Claus was still in its place — and it was. Then, thinking she must give him every

opportunity, she put her head back on the pillow and with great determination went to sleep again, and dreamed she was in a room full of presents, and that they were all for her and Johnny.

She got up at seven o'clock and went all through the small house. There were no marks of Santa Claus anywhere. She scanned the chimney opening to see whether there were any signs of his having tried to get down — but there was nothing to show that he had come near the house.

Her small face was very rueful, and after breakfast she and Johnny held a consultation. Could Santa Claus have gone astray? Or had he not received her letter? Sarah Jane felt like sitting down and having a good cry, if it was Christmas day. There were tears in her voice when she sought Mrs. Collins to see whether her mother could offer any reasonable explanation for this sad delay on Santa Claus's part.

"Why, my dear," said Mrs. Collins, cheerfully, "you told him that you held your Christmas on Monday. This is only nine o'clock Monday morning, and there is a great deal of time left for him to come. But you and Johnny can go to the Sunday-school concert this afternoon — and don't fret; I feel sure he will come."

Mrs. Collins knew from the kind young ladies, who were so well acquainted with Santa Claus, that he would surely come that afternoon. If there had been any doubt of it she would not have spoken so confidently to Sarah Jane. As it was, the little girl and Johnny went to the concert and enjoyed it very much.

They ran quickly home afterward, and Sarah was in a tumult of agitated hopes when she burst in at the door. The front-room door was just a little ajar, as if some visitor had not quite closed it after him. Sarah Jane pushed it wide open and flew into the room with a cry of delight.

There in the corner stood the most beautiful little Christmas tree!

The wax tapers on it were shining like stars, and festoons of white popcorn were wreathed from bough to bough, as if the tree had traveled through a snowstorm. Then the presents! There were things in bright-colored paper tied with pretty ribbons in a way so dainty and charming that it was surprising an old man like Santa Claus could have managed it.



Oh, how full and beautiful that Christmas tree looked to Sarah Jane, who danced with delight before it, her eyes shining and her whole face one broad, happy smile! Then, although it was hard to leave the lively spectacle even for a

moment, she ran up to her mother, who was seated quietly in the next room, and shouted:

"Oh, Mama, he's been here. Didn't you hear him? Come and see the tree!"

She grasped her mother's hand and hurried her in. And after they had looked at the brilliant tree and enjoyed it thoroughly, Sarah Jane had to go and fetch Mr. Sullivan so that he too might share the beautiful sight.

"It's mine," said Sarah Jane to him, standing as tall as she could — "mine and Johnny's. I wrote Santa Claus a letter for it."

"Sure, he's a fine, decent old man!" said Mr. Sullivan, with great consideration.

"But he didn't come down the chimney," said Sarah Jane, animatedly. "Don't you see that tree is too big for the chimney?"

"And after me cleaning it so fine, and you mending my clothes for a whole week!" cried Mr. Sullivan.

"Oh, that's all right!" returned Sarah Jane, heartily.

"He came in at the door with it," said Johnny. "The boys at the mine told me he could open any door he wanted to."

But no matter how he came — he had come. And there was the proof of it: that gay, luminous tree. And the presents were so exactly what Sarah wanted that she exclaimed to her mother, "He *must* have known me. But wasn't it lucky I sent him that letter?"

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