

THE SLAVES OF ST. NICK

By Wallace Irwin

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'Twas the week before Christmas, when fairies and elves
Are flying by moonlight enjoying themselves,
And Wee Willie Jones lay in bed just as snug
As the average bug in the average rug,
Or the average bear in his long winter hug,
With visions delighted
His brain was excited;
His fancy a-tingle with thoughts of Kris Kringle,
Who, laden with gifts, would appear at the ingle
To fill up each stocking, then off jingle-jingle.

Thus pondered Wee Willie, when suddenly—ouch!
The window flew up and the sorry imp Grouch
Popped into the room
With a manner of gloom
Like a cobwebby witch on the back of a broom.
His hair was dishevelled, his eyes were bedevilled,
His shoulders were shrunk, his complexion was sallow
As, dropping his jowl, he began with a growl
This argument grumpy and bumpy and fallow—

"Now how do you know, little man,"
He began,
"There's any such person as Santa Claus—say!
Did you ever see him?
Do folks ever tree him
Or make him come out to be photographed, pray?
And how, if there is such a silly old dunce,
Can he visit nine million chimneys at once,
In Maine and in Spain and in Guam and Siam,
Paraguay, Uruguay, Brooklyn, Dakota,
Iceland, Bogota, far Minnesota,
These, to say nothing of Jutland and Ounce
And places in Russia I dread to pronounce—
Doing all this between dusk Christmas eve
And sunrise next morn'?"
Here the imp laughed in scorn.
"It's a pretty large tale—Willie, can you believe?"

So saying, imp Grouch, with a leer and a leer
And a sneeze and a sniff and a snort and a sneer
With a whisk of his tail through the window out-spod
And left Willie Jones sitting upright in bed
A-feeling as though
Somewhere out in the snow
Poor Santa Claus, friend of all childhood, lay dead.
So he drooped like a willow and lay on his pillow
While tears in his eyes welling up like a spring
Cried, "Santa Claus? Never was any such thing!"

II.

Now it happened that night
By the fairyland light
Of a moon that was jolly and frosty and bright
The little gnome Cheerup, the merriest fairy
That ever shed Christmas good-will in his flight,
Was out for a spin on his aeroplane airy,
And, hearing Wee Willie's sore wail of despoite,
"Highly-tite!" cried the Sprite,
"And it's likewise do-duddy!
It seems rather queer
At this time of the year
For folks to be weeping—what ails little Buddy?"

So his airship he tied to the bedpost beside
The pilly where Willie so ardently cried
And he laughed, "Holly-ho!
Now tell me, sweet child, why you take on so wild?
Is it mince-meat that troubles you so?
Is your hair stuck with gum, have you pains in your tum,
Have you lost your dog Fido? Oh, what is the matter?"
But Willie responded with tear-drops a-spatter,
"What—what shall I do? Is it right, is it true
That Santa Claus never existed—boo-hoo?
And if he does live, is he able to climb
On nine million separate roofs at a time
In Labrador, Singapore, London and Ounce—
And places in Russia I cannot pronounce?"

"Aha! let us see!" the small gnomekin replied;
"Now get on my aeroplane close to my side
And straight to the Christmas Headquarters we'll buzz it.
So there we may see how old Santa Claus does it."
Then **burrr-r** went the fly-wheel and **flap** went the wings
And Fairy and Child flew as happy as kings
O'er snow-fields and icebergs and strange panoramas—
And Willie still clad in his cotton pajamas!

III.

They flew over Boston, they flew over France,
They flew over Switzerland's Alpine expanse;
O'er Europe and Asia they sped through the night,
But when they reached Iceland they turned to the right.
"Hang on!" whispered Cheerup, "for sure as my soul
In seventeen minutes we'll be at the Pole."
So, faithful to schedule, they flew in a trice
Right over the jag
Of that Boreal crag
And there at the Pole stood a Palace of Ice
On the top of whose door a bright sign-board did glow—

CHRISTMAS HEADQUARTERS
of
S. CLAUS & CO.
Joy furnished Here
By the Mile or the Year:
Orders for Happiness easily filled.

Willie cowered back—he was dazed, he was thrilled,
For over the ice, far as sight of the eye,
Thousands and thousands of Grown Folks trooped by;
And as Willie they feared
He observed something weird—
Each wore a snowy-white Santa Claus beard
Each wore a cloak such as Santa Claus wears
Each bore a sack such as Santa Claus bears!
Short ones and tall ones,
Fat ones and small ones,
Rough Santas, bluff Santas,
Tender and tough Santas,
Onward they marched without rests, halts or pauses,
Over a million complete Santa Clauses,
On, ever on, rank on rank moving fast
Till into the Christmas Headquarters they passed.

"Why? Tell me why,"
Quoth the Boy with a cry,
"Why do a million Kris Kringles go by
And why are they here?" Said the Gnome with a grin,
"Whiff! you're invisible—follow them in!"

IV.

Spirit of Yuic! what a scene of surprise
Lay before Willie's wide-wondering eyes!
Think of a room packed with Christmas-tree stores
Forty times bigger than all of Outdoors
Stretching through galleries ninety-six floors!
Think of a million Kris Kringles in line
Round a great platform of jolly oak-wood
Where in his pride the real Santa Claus stood
Viewing the ranks with expression condign!
Suddenly clapping his hands as a sign,
Every Kris before Wee Willie's eyes
Put up his hand and removed his disguise,
Whisk went the whiskers and Santa Claus cloaks,
Off came the Santa Claus boots—of all jokes!
There in their natural shapes were revealed
Plain Men of Business nowise concealed,
Fathers and Uncles, Big Brothers and Cousins,
Grandfathers also by thousands of dozens,
(Any bright boy in that vast congregation
Surely would recognize some male Relation
Who oft at Christmas in Santa clothes foxy
Gave out the Santa Claus presents by proxy.)
And there in the line, less than ten feet away,
Willie's own Father stood out plain as day,
(Willie kept quiet and looked rather silly,
Being invisible—lucky for Willie!)
Standing full-height,
(Which was not very tall),
With his eyes flashing bright
Santa gazed at them all
Then spoke like a Marshal reviewing his ranks,
"Ho, Slaves of St. Nick, ye are here—many thanks!
Now first let me ask,
Were you true to your task?
Last Christmas morn were you all at the Tree
Wearing your boots and your whiskers like Me,
Lighting the candles and giving out toys,
Dolls for the Girls and guns for the Boys?"
(Cries of "We were!") "I'm delighted to see
All have obeyed my now famous Decree
Saying 'The World has so populous grown
No single Saint can supply it alone;

Therefore the Grown Folks who love their chicks deary
Must come to the Pole and report to me yearly,
And on this condition
Each one I commission
To act as my substitute fully disguised
And at twelve of the clock
To fill up each sock
Of Well-Behaved Children with presents most prized,
To slide, if ye will, down the chimneys soot-blackening
Or up the dumb-waiter if chimneys be lacking,
Yet always be sly in the tricks that ye're brewing
That no Child on earth may suspect what ye're doing!
So," said the Saint, "since the midnight is fleeting,
Substitute Santas, I give you all greeting!"

"Hurrah!" cried the Grandpas in hundreds of dozens,
"Rah!" cried the Fathers and Uncles and Cousins;
And soon round the Hall sauntered nobles and peasants
Talking together and picking out presents.
Santa strolled with them responding to questions,
Hinting and helping and giving suggestions,
"This book is charming for bright little men—
These are nice skates for a schoolboy of ten—
That Paris doll would just suit tiny Jen."
While this occurred Willie's Father stepped out,
Spoke to the Saint in a manner of doubt,
'Sir, if I may
Ask it, what would you say
A suitable present for Willie would be?"
Santa, surprised,
Pursed his lips, closed his eyes,
Puzzled a moment, then said, "Let me see!"
Then very softly, that no one might hear,
Whispered a word in the gentleman's ear.
(Willie, with heart-beats 'most ready to choke,
Leaning far forward to hear what they spoke,
Almost dropped off his invisible cloak.)
"Good!" winked his Father, and Santa, says he,
"That we can find in Lot 6,000 B."
And as they set forth down the corridors hollow
Willie and Cheerup decided to follow.
Onward they sped with invisible tread,
Past stacks and stacks
Of pretty knick-knacks,
Candy in sacks and stacks of sweet smacks,
Bright jumping-jacks,
Dolls of pink wax with hair golden flax,
Books with bright backs
And charming kodaks
Angling and dangling from tacky black racks.

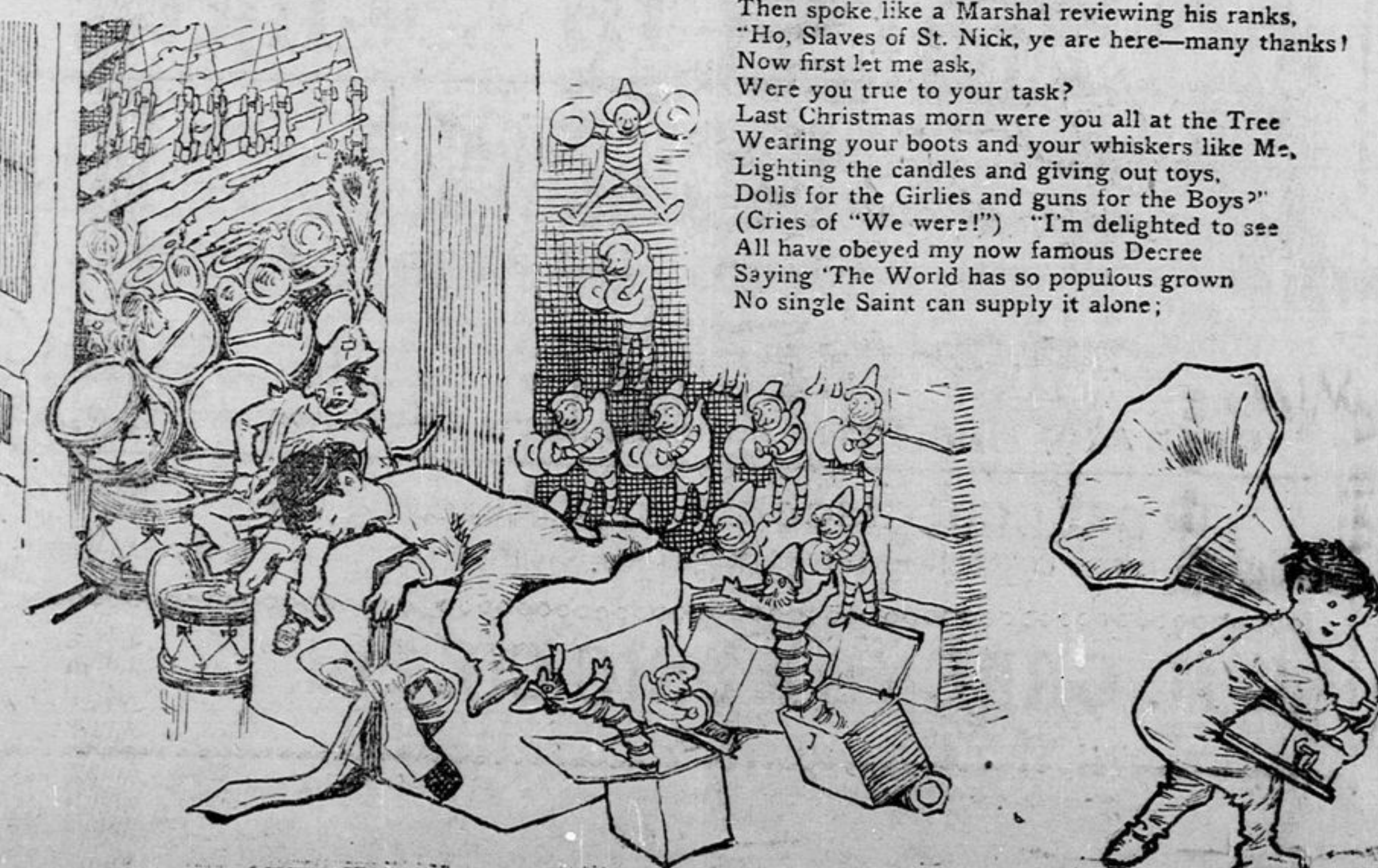
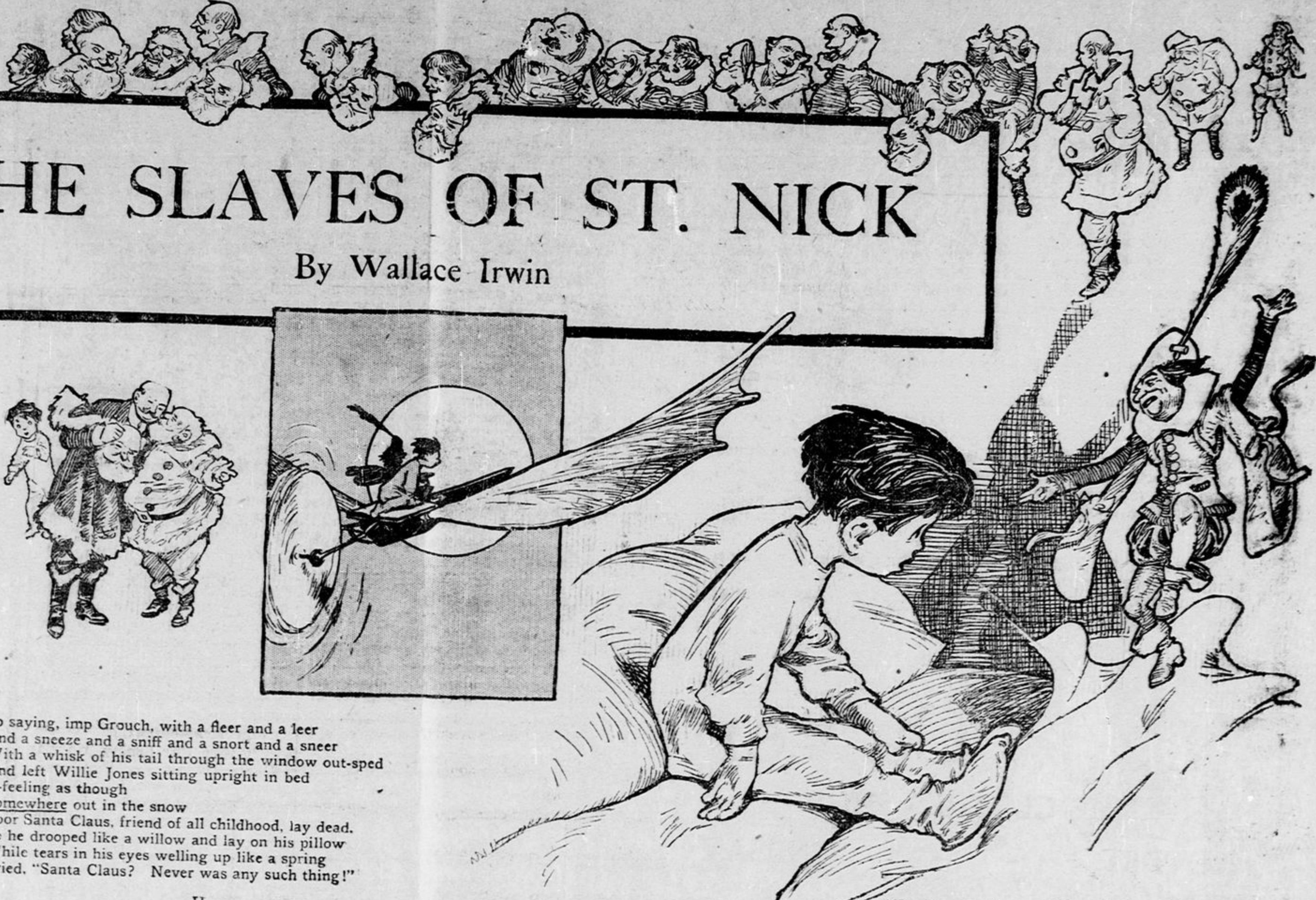
So onward and onward and onward they walked
While Mr. Jones gawked and Santa Claus talked
Till finally Willie to Cheerup cried, "Leerie!
I'm awfully weary;
My feet are quite heavy, my eyes are all bleary."
So down they both sat on a Christmas box nigh—
Willie lay back with a satisfied sigh,
Dropped his wee head upon Cheerup's wee knee,
Sighed, "Wake me up when there's something to see."
Sank to deep breathing, quite glad to forego
Santa Claus, Christmas, the Pole and . . .

V.

Snug as a guest in the Waldorf-Astoria
Willie awoke in his bed in Peoria.
First he said, "Where have I been?—let me see!"
Then he bounced upward exclaiming, "Whoopie!
Don't you say, 'Isn't no Santa' to me!
Folks who think lightly of Santa Claus had
Better not interview Me or My Dad!"

When it was Christmas and good Mr. Jones
Draped in white whiskers stood close to the Tree
Willie excitedly felt in his bones,
"Santa Claus picked out this present for me!"
Then came the gift—and he found with a laugh,
Just what he'd wanted—a new photograph!

Mending his airship high up in the eaves
Cheerup the gnome giggled deep in his sleeves.
"Christmas, though Santa Claus never comes near it,
Must be the same if he's there in the spirit;
Love will pon in through the chimney once more,
Sorrow the Wolf will slink out by the door;
Stockings hang heavy, so hearts should hang light,
Cnuckled the Gnome
And I think he was right.



H.C. GOULTAUS