

OLD SANTA

By Eugene Woods, in the Christmas Number of Everybody's Magazine.

For an adult to say to a little, innocent, trusting child: "Aw, there ain't no Santa Claus! It's just your father and your mother," is something so brutal, so revolting to the moral sense that I often find myself earnestly trying to imagine it taking place.

It isn't morbid of me. Really, it's no more morbid than for a mother to say: "What if George should find the razor, and try to whittle with it, and cut his hand off at the wrist, and bleed to death?" You wouldn't call that morbid. You'd understand at once why she was doing it. Fate is a contrary creature that she cannot endure to have anyone say: "There! I knew that would be the way of it." Fate cannot stand it that we should have even that much satisfaction. So when she hears a mother say, with sucked-in lower lip: "What if George should"—whatever the horrible calamity is—why, Fate immediately crosses that calamity off the list of possibilities, and tries to find something else, equally dreadful, which is not at all difficult when there's a boy about the house.

So all the mother has to do, d'ye see? Is to think up all the horrible calamities that might occur, scaring herself blue with agonizing details, and then Fate, just to be mulish, won't let the things occur. But omit nothing in the harrowing category: it is the unforeseen that happens.

It is for this reason that I try so hard to imagine a grown person saying to a child: "There ain't any Santa Claus." I'm doing all I can to avert such a misfortune.

Why! This wouldn't be any kind of a country at all, and the heroes of our history, from George Washington down, would have fought, bled, and run for office all in vain if, every evening, from now on until the 25th inst., the father did not take little George on his knee and begin the wondrous tale:

"And just as soon as it begins to get dark, on Christmas Eve, old Santa takes the harness down off the peg and starts to hitch up the reindeer."

"Why don't he have snow-deer?"

"No, honey, that isn't what it means. You see, there's three kinds of reindeer. There's the rain where you have to take an umbrella, and there's the reign, like, now, supposing there was a king—"

"There's a boy named Harry King that goes to my kindergarten. Harry Adolphus King, and—"

"Yes, dear, and then there's rein like what you drive horses with. You

remember the deer we saw when we went to the park? Well, they're wild deer."

"Do they bite?"

"No, they don't bite. They're got big horns, big, sprangly horns, and they hook with them. Old Santa's deer he can drive with reins; that's why they are called reindeer."

"Does his deer hook?"

"Well, I s'pect they might hook somebody they didn't know, but not old Santa. He just goes right up to 'em and slaps 'em on the flank, and says: 'Hyste over there, you! Hyste over!' And they mind him. They don't think of hooking him."

"Would they hook good little boys?"

"A pregnant question! Granted that unwelcome rain falls both upon the just and the unjust, isn't it more satisfactory for our purposes that it should barely sprinkle a weenty-teeny mite upon the righteous while the wicked come home soakin' wet? I think so."

"No, indeed, they wouldn't hook good little boys. They like good little boys who brush their teeth every morning without being told, and run errands for their mama to the grocery, and go get their papa's slippers when he—"

"What else does Santa Claus do?"

"He opens the stable-door on Christmas Eve when it begins to get dark and hooks the door back so it won't slam, and he takes down the harness from the peg, and says: 'Here, Blixen! Come get into your place, because tonight we're going to—'

"Is that their names—Blixen?"

"Oh, I know. 'Cause they can go like the very blixens."

"That's one of their names. Blixen is the night leader—"

"What's a leader?"

"Why, George, I told you all that last night."

"Tell me again."

"The two reindeer that run in front are the leaders. Blixen is the night leader and—"

"What's his name?"

"Here is where mama, busy with her list, who's to get just a Christmas card and who's really to get something, and about how much she ought to spend on each, considering what each did last year—here is where mama should interpose with:

"George dear, if you want papa to tell you about Santa Claus, you must keep still and let him tell you. And listen! Santa Claus doesn't like for little boys to ask too many questions. When they ask too many, he doesn't leave them any nice toys or anything; he puts an old potato or a lump of coal into their stockings."

"What does he do that for?"

"Ah-ah! That's just it. What for? They want what-for, and they get what-for!"

(So Santa Claus is in the Tompkins too, is he? I declare I don't see how the human race has managed to get along as far as it has. It isn't only when we are children; it's till we die. Is isn't only people who are tired of hearing it, papa and mama and Aunt Susie; it's all the powers, natural and supernatural. All of them! perpetually scolding: "Don't ask so many questions!" "Why, dad-blame it all, here we are, thrown neck and crop into the midst of the worst mix-up mess of mysteries you almost ever saw, and our only salvation, apparently, being to find out "Why?" and "What for?" and "What makes it so that way?" and yet they're always jawing, "Don't ask so many questions!" It's the strangest thing! What are we here for, anyways, if not to pry into things and twist her secrets out of old Dame Nature's stings, tight-shut fast?)

"Well," says papa, taking up his burden, "Donder and Blixen are the two leaders, and the wheel reindeer are . . . Let me see . . . And papa gives a fine imitation of a total loss of memory.

"Dancer!" shouts George eagerly.

"Why to be sure, Dancer! And what's his partner's name, again, now?"

"Prancer!"

"Prancer, Dancer and Prancer, and how many's that? Count 'em on your fingers. Donder . . . and Blixen . . . and Dancer . . . and Prancer . . . How many's that?"

"All but my thumb," replies the first class in elementary arithmetic.

"Yes, I know, but how many?"

"Count 'em. Donder—that's one, and Blixen—that's two, and Dancer's three, and Prancer—is how many?"

"Oh, papa! You been tellin' stories! Hee-ee! You been tellin' stories! There's a white spot on your finger-nail where you told a story!"

"Four reindeer, all going to be hitched up to the sleigh to carry Christmas presents to all the little boys and girls! So when Santa calls to them to come and be hitched up, they come a-runnin'! And he takes the harness, and throws it on their backs, ker-jing!"

"What makes it go 'ker-jing'?"

"Because it's all over little bells. And all the time he's hitching them up, they're so impatient and in such a hurry to get away that they stamp their feet, and fuss and fidget, and

every time they move the bells go jingle-jingle, jingle-jongle!

"And the boys are helping him—old Santa's boys. There's young Santa, he's 'most as big as his Pop now, and there's Adolf, and Fritzle, and Hanslein, and—"

"Ain't he got any little boy named George?"

"Well, sir, if he hasn't, I s'pec' he wishes he had. The boys are running back and forth with their arms full of Christmas presents all wrapped up in paper and the names written on them, who they're to go to and all, and—"

"Is the little boys manna there?"

"Who? Old Sis Claus? You betchy. She's always on hand Christmas Eve. She's helping, too—carrying things out to the sleigh—dolls—oh, the cutest dolls you ever saw! My! My! The sweetest golden hair, all curly and eyes that shut when they go by-by, and doll-wagons to ride them in, and doll-dishes, and doll-houses, and—What's the matter, mister? What are you looking so glum about?"

"Ain't they anything for little boys?"

"Why, didn't I just tell you? Dolls and doll-wagons and doll—"

"Oh, don't play with dolls!"

"Oh, don't they? I thought they did."

"Well then, my lord, if it was you helping carry out the Christmas presents what would you choose?"

(Here is where papa gets a line on Master George's preferences.)

"Revolvers!" cries Master George, thoroughly interested. "Big, bang, shootin' revolvers! Bang, bang! Old burglar come, bang, bang, bang! Kill him dead. And his blood run out on the floor and—on the wall, and—on the chairs, and—on the now, table, and—on the . . . His eyes dilate as he tries to think of more objects for the burglar's blood to stop its crimson tide upon.

"For Lord's sakes!" gasps his father, half-whispering to himself in awe. Is this sweet, innocent, little George? Or is that angel-face only a mask out of whose eye-holes glare the dead-and-gone? A long, long, line of them there is, all who dropped to follow gladly the drumming drum and whistling life; a long, long line of them through the backward centuries, Indian-fighters, peasants who thrilled at the chance to become food for cannon, away back to conquering Romans, ravening Danes, blood-drinking Celts, and Britons blue with wood, screeching at Caesar's legionaries; farther back and further back—as far back as ever they could be called men at all, who grunted with fierce joy when they could give the killing stroke, and wildly exulted to see the victim topple over and lie sprawling and loosed-jointed! Ah! That's being a man! When you kill someone-

"Well," says papa, "I hardly think there will be any revolvers in old Santa's sleigh, but I'm pretty sure there are boxes of soldiers and building-blocks for forts and spring-cannons to bombard them with. And there will be Noah's Arks and picture-books and jumping-jacks, and—oh, all kinds of toys for little boys."

"The old burglar'd cry, wouldn't he, when he got shot, and the blood'd come out and—"

"And old Santa," says papa, raising his voice so as to override George, "old Santa looks at his watch and says: 'My goodness me! Is it as late as that?' And he gets to Mrs. Claus, 'You'll have to get a move on, old lady—'

"You'll have to shake a leg, old lady," corrects George, who is letter-perfect in the dialogue and can prompt his father when he "goes up" in his lines.

"You'll have to shake a leg, old lady," papa accepts the phrase-eagerly—anything to get away from the bleeding burglar—"you'll have to shake a leg, because I've got Jots of places to go to to-night, and I must make an early start. Jump, you young rascals!" And you better believe they jump. Oh, they just fly around, and finally they get everything in, and old Sis Claus, she brings him his overcoat, and his fur cap, and his mittens, and he kisses them all good-by—

"And the dog, too?"

"Yes, he says good-by to the dog, too. Pats him on the head and tells him, 'Not this time, Rover. You can't go with me now.' And Mrs. Claus asks him when he'll be home, and he says along toward morning sometime and for her to look for him when she sees him. And he climbs into the sleigh and kisses his mouth at the reindeer, 'Pwep! Pwep! Ck-ck-ck-ck! Giddy up, there, Donder! Go on, Blixen!' And away they go, like they were shot out of a gun, jing-jing, jing-jing, jingle-jingle, jing-jing."

Papa hesitates and little George has to ask: "Nen what does Santa Claus do?"

"Ah, but it is hard to take it up from there! And it gets harder every year.

Every year the world gets bigger. I don't suppose there are so many more children than there used to be, but we are more aware of them. There are such multitudes for whom engines must puff and tug to drag the long trains up the grades, and ships splash through the seas, all laden chock-a-block with toys. And they must start away in hot weather to get there in time. And to have one little sleigh set out after dark that evening—it is too much. The imagination gives a groan and its knees double up under it. George must prod at it and prod at it before it can stagger to its feet and the sleighbells jingle and the

reindeer's hoofs patter, and the fat and jolly saint clucks at them as they leap—Uppp! you go—from the ground to the roof of the summer-kitchen, thence to the kitchen roof—Hi, there! Upppp! you go!—[ill at last they stand pawing the shingles of the comb of the house while old Santa drops down the chimney to deliver the presents he carries; for the little folks who live there; they stand there peering and snorting steam out of their nostrils till he crawls up and out again, takes the lines, "Ck-ck-ck-ck!" down to the ground, ker-bump! and then—

"Upppp! you go!" to the roof of the next house, and so on and so on the world around, till the sky lightens in the east—dipping to the ground and then rising to the house-tops, dipping to the ground, rising to the house-tops, like a little sailboat in a heavy sea, all night long, and home again at the North Pole by sun-up—

It gets harder and harder every year. The North Pole end of it isn't so bad; it's the local end of the story that taxes papa's strength.

When my grandpa was a little boy the size of George here, Santa Claus—if there had been any in his day—could have come down the chimney like a mouse. All he's have had to look out for would have been that when he set his foot on the swinging crane it didn't let him down into the fire. When that chimney was built my grandpa's pa didn't say to my grandma's ma, evenings after supper: "Well, Anna, which'll it be? Shall we go to the theatre or have a wood fire? Costs about the same either way." When that chimney was built, there were all those black walnut logs from the upper 'dead-nin' to be got rid of some way.

No difficulty at all then for old Santa to get down the chimney, hardly any when they began to burn soft coal in grates. But when you go to putting in base burners, how is Santa going to crawl out into the room without getting teetotally burned up alive? And when you go to building steam heated apartment houses ten and twelve stories

high with not so much as a summer-piece over a sham fireplace, how is papa to be convincing when he sings:

Ho! Ho! Ho! Who wouldn't go?
Ho! Ho! Ho! Who wouldn't go?
Up on the house-top, click, click, click!

Down through the chimney with good Saint Nick?

The path of duty seems to be arduous. It always is. But then we've got to treat it, arduous or not. And you'd better tell the tale while yet you may. Maybe this'll be your only chance. Maybe by this time next year the sixteenth century, so to speak, will have dawned for George and he who listened with wide-expanded eyes and drying mouth to the enchanting narrative of the old saint urging his feet reindeer as they go rearing straight up the side of a house—maybe he will look at you next year with a smile pinched tight between his lips, and out from under one corner eye-brow, as who should say: "Go wan! You can't stuff me with that any longer!"

They slip away from us so imperceptibly. A little while ago, and they were all ours; a little while to come and they will be all their own. The mind seeks a definite moment when the change occurs—and seeks in vain, unless that be the moment when for their own account they boldly say: "Ah, it's just your father and your mother!"

Don't hurry it. Let him find out for himself who brings the presents Christmas Eve. Let him find out for himself that the best test of truth we have is not who tells it to us but its probability. Disillusionize him, if you will, as to other myths; let him have the dismal truth—from you that no amount of faithful eating of the crust will ever put the faintest wave into his paintbrush hair; explain to him, if you must, that it is the moon that makes the tides and not the steamers showing the water before them in and out the bay; but spare the myth of Santa Claus. It's too sacred, some day.

And yet, why should it be? It isn't ancient. Old Santa isn't so very

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NO ALUM

IN ROYAL BAKING POWDER

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