

The Slaves of St Nick.

IT WAS 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 ingie
 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 disheveled, his eyes were bedeviled,
 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 outsped
 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 despite,
 "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,
 And why are 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 burr-r-r went the flywheel and flap went the wings,
 And fairy and child flew, 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 signboard did glow:

CHRISTMAS HEADQUARTERS
 of
 S. CLAUS & CO.
 Joy Furnished Here
 By the Mile or the Year;
 Orders for Happiness Easily Filled.

Willie covered back—he was dazed, he was thrilled,
 For over the ice, as far as sight of the eye,
 Thousands and thousands of grown folks trooped by:
 And as Willie they neared
 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 Yule! 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 Crown Folks who love their chicks dearly

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 you'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 6000 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 snacks,
 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, "Dearie!
 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.

*** Hello!
 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, "Whoopee!
 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!"
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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 phonograph!

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 pop in through the chimney once more.
 Sorrow, the Wolf, will slink out by the door;
 Stockings hang heavy, so hearts should hang light,"
 Chuckled the Gnome.
 And I think he was right.

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