

# The Whole World 'Kin

By Alfred Henry Lewis

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"Bobbie on his knees sent up his petition"

## A Christmas Story of the Boyish Millionaire Who Was Good to the Little Wecks and How He Raided the Toy Shops

THE day was the twenty-fourth of the month, and the month was the month of December. However, let me begin with the block—a city block on New York's East Side.

Should you for any reason walk around this block, you will find that the Bowery side offers the usual rank of second-rate stores, foul grog-shops, and penny-in-the-slot establishments, with a bank on one corner—walled and buttressed and barred this bank like unto any citadel. The other three sides show unbroken fronts of dwelling houses, which were rich and tremendously impressive one hundred years ago when they were built.

The only curious thing—and I mention it simply because it is curious—is an entrance between the two middle houses on the second avenue side, just wide enough to permit a hearse to squeeze through without scratching the house walls with its hubs.

That is all you would see were you to circle the block, but should you prevail on the sexton to open the locked iron gates—and he couldn't be expected to do this under a dollar—and enter by the hearseway, you will find yourself in an ancient burying-ground, tucked away in the heart of the block.

The windows of the little Wecks overlooked it, and both Bobbie and baby Paul had found the prospect very pleasant during the summer months, when the green was on the ground. On our twenty-fourth of December there was no green, the same having been white obliterated by the falling snow, which was coming down in flakes as big and soft and clinging as a baby's hand.

The three little Wecks were all alone in the world. Their father had been gone these three years; and, since the ship he sailed in as second officer went down with all on board, somewhere off the Horn, the general impression that he was sound asleep at the bottom of the South Atlantic had much to sustain it. This view was certainly entertained by Mrs. Weck, who herself perished of a pneumonia the April before the Christmas in present hand, and was buried somehow. The little Wecks lived on the second floor of the house. They had the two rear rooms, one small, the other smaller, the windows presenting that graveyard glimpse already chronicled. Miss Clancy, who made flowers out of colored paper and was very young and plump and pretty, was at home in the front room, second floor, and the alcove over the front hall. The third and only remaining floor—all of it—belonged to the fiddle-making, fiddle-mending, fiddle-playing Herr Bernstein, who in fact leased the whole house and sublet to the others, and from whose aerial there occasionally floated down energetic odors, born of garlic and cheese and fish and onions, as he went about his solitary cookery.

Herr Bernstein, bitter poor like all the others, dwelt alone, having neither wife nor wean, and shifted for himself in things domestic. He washed and swept and scrubbed and cooked and mended, and the only help he asked or had came from a professional fire-lighter, who appeared at 6 o'clock every Saturday morning, to set a match to Herr Bernstein's kindling, for which service he received 5 cents. Herr Bernstein was extremely pious and orthodox, as you might have known by the little locks of hair which jutted out just forward of each ear, and the praying shawl so much about his neck.

Policeman McCue did not live in the house; he walked the street in front, and when he didn't sleep in his precinct station, found a bed at his mother's in East Broadway.

Mr. Van Brent, our remaining character, so far from dwelling in the house, had never so much as heard of it, and owned a huge gray-stone mansion, Central Park East, where he transacted existence in a lofty, weary way of extreme fashion and cynicism. Many mothers, mindful of the young gentleman's millions and mansion and lonely single state, had sought to marry their daughters to Mr. Van Brent. He was still a bachelor, however; for was it not written that it is vain for the fowler to spread his net in the sight of any bird?

After Mrs. Weck died, the little Wecks had shifted for themselves. That is to say, Jack became the bread-winner, going forth night and morning to sell papers, run errands, or do whatever else he should find taskwise into his young hand, bringing home an average of 30 cents a day and once or twice a dollar. Bobbie remained at home to look after baby Paul, who for his sage part took life easily and contentedly, as became his perfect health and want of years.

The small Wecks were living in their two rear rooms when their mother passed away, and since Herr Bernstein, with a forgetfulness that ill became his age and race, had never once asked for his rent, they naturally remained. They did very well, too; for pretty Miss Clancy looked often in to sweep and dust and set things to rights, and see to it that the young Wecks didn't slip back into savagery for want of buttons, and water from the hall faucet wherewith to wash their hands and faces.

gravity and forethoughtfulness that would have adorned a grown-up. Feeling, therefore, the family load, his injured foot, and the consequent suspension of his labors, gave Jack great concern. Not that starvation was threatened; both baker and milkman, following a private conference with Herr Bernstein called by that virtuoso, had sent voluntary word that they would "trust."

But how about Christmas, and what gifts should go with and grace the day? Jack was inclined to take the latter subject to heart, and he troubled thereby. Baby Paul looked forward to the festival as a matter of instinct, and Bobbie did the same as the hopeful offspring of instinct, added to an experience which covered two Christmases. Bobbie had a clear memory of those two Christmases, each celebrated by a turkey and sundry gifts entrancingly gaudy.

Also, both children had been told the marvelous story of Kris Kringle; and, implicitly believing the same, they nursed an unshaken faith in a coming Christmas opulence. Indeed, the very snow gave aid to their anticipations, it being pointed out by Bobbie, who discussed the business with baby Paul, that the roofs would be in prime condition to afford Kris Kringle and his reindeer team every possible sleighing facility.

This Kris Kringle talk between Bobbie and baby Paul took place just after Miss Clancy had looked in to trim the one Weck evening lamp. The two bearable church bells were ringing "6 o'clock" at the time. The sleigh and reindeer views of Bobbie and baby Paul rendered Jack, as head of the household, quite desperate. Under the circumstances he summoned heart, and resolved to make an explanation. It was bad of course to be obliged to explain, but it was better than baid, daybreak disappointment next morning. Bobbie and baby Paul were even then settling where their stockings ought to hang to best attract the reindeer one's attention.

Hobbie in particular deemed this question of stocking location extremely important. "For," as he well said, "Santa Claus will have so much to do, and so many boys to look after, that he can't stay any place very long, and we had better fix our stockings so as to save him all the trouble we can."

It was this stocking earnestness, mounting to enthusiasm, that decided Jack to speak fully out. The word was fairly in his mouth, when he halted. No, he couldn't lay bare to baby Paul the emptiness of that Kris Kringle myth; baby Paul was too young. The power to believe comes early, while it takes years to give us strength enough to disbelieve.

After baby Paul had been fled away in a kind of truckle bed, like a small human document in its proper pigeonhole, and Jack and Bobbie—who slept together—found themselves safe beneath their own blankets, Jack began softly and cautiously to let in the light concerning Christmas and the sure barrenness of the coming morning, upon the darkened Bobbie.

Jack, now the ice was broken, gave Bobbie his honor, as the head of the house of Weck, that nothing of truth abode in Kris Kringle and his sleigh loaded with gifts. He said that poverty, born of his sprained foot and a consequent monetary inability to buy presents, obliged him to confess as much. He told these things to Bobbie, since he could rely upon that iron manhood which belonged with Bobbie's great age of 8 to support the truth.

"But what worries me is baby Paul," concluded Jack, in real distress. "He's too little to see that Santa Claus is only a joke, and I ain't got so much as a nickel to get him anything."

Bobbie lay silently thinking. At last he whispered: "Jack, all mother told us wasn't a joke, was it? What she said about prayin', an' heaven answerin' our prayers, was true?"

"Sure!" said Jack; "what mother told us about prayin' is all right. But we have prayed."

"That was only a 'No-I-lay-me' prayer," returned Bobbie, as he began scrambling out of bed. "I'm goin' to pray for Christmas presents. I won't say anything about Santa Claus," he continued, reflecting that it might be the part of sagacity to avoid overloading his orisons with a drift of detail as to whom and how; "I'll just pray for some presents for baby Paul, and stop."

music of the orchestra, it came booming out upon the night: One!—two!—three!—four!—five!—six!—seven!—eight! Eight o'clock.

Whence arose the impulse? Mr. Van Brent ever professed ignorance. The one thing sure is that, with the final clang of "eight" he walked back into the cafe. Going to the desk, he called the manager.

"Garnier," said he, "let me have a thousand."

Mr. Van Brent did not carry money. Millionaires never do; it is one of their caste marks. Mr. Van Brent went up and down the face of nature, and when he wanted gold he wheeled into the nearest door and demanded it. And he always got it.

Thrusting the roll of bills into an inside pocket, Mr. Van Brent summoned one of those Russian sleighs—with its plumes, its bells and its billowy robes. Throwing himself into the high-backed rear seat, where his glances could command the world, Mr. Van Brent began to give directions. This was the route his fancy took— took it with no more of hesitation than the carrier-pigeon

hand, had sent the tipy rough to Roosevelt Hospital, like an officer and a gentleman.

Beginning thus violently, the Clancy-McCue acquaintance broadened apace. In two weeks Miss Clancy and Officer McCue were warm friends; in three she had called upon his mother in East Broadway; in four they adored each other and were lovers engaged—such being the rapid habit of the East Side in these tender affairs.

Officer McCue, to the scandal of all police regulations, had just tossed a furtive but heartfelt kiss at Miss Clancy's unseeing blinds, when he was hailed by the bearskin driver and Mr. Van Brent. Officer McCue, shoulders squared like the foreyard of a brig, came forward, twisting his club professionally.

Mr. Van Brent, for once in his life, found himself in verbal difficulty; he didn't know how to begin. At last he said:

"Officer, my name is Van Brent."

"Are you the man who established the Van Brent medal? I've got one," touching his hat.

"That was my father."

"Shake! I'm proud to meet the son;" and Officer McCue extended his hand.

Mr. Van Brent, as his father's representative, took the outstretched hand, and was impressed by the steady, manly, steel-like grip. The handshake seemed to clear away the verbal obstructions.

"It's this," said Mr. Van Brent. "I was thinking that, for the lark of the thing, don't you know, I'd ask if you knew of any poor family who'd be the better for a little Christmas cheer?—somebody that's sick or helpless or out of work and money, and not able to meet Christmas in the way he or she would like? The fact is, officer," continued Mr. Van Brent, confidentially, "I want to make some one a Christmas present; and I don't know a soul on earth to whom a gift would bring a glint of joy. I thought that perhaps you, walking about in your duty, might be able to help me."

It was as well that Van Brent's opening speech was long, since it gave time for Officer McCue's earlier conviction that he was drunk to wear away.

"This rich sport is mebbe doin' it on a bet," thought Officer McCue tolerantly, for he himself was a sporting soul in a moderate way. Then he continued aloud: "There's three kids—boys—who live in this very house. They're orphans, and haven't got a splinter. Oldest is 10. They're up agin' it, too, and I should say a gift or so right now would be 't' bit of their lives."

"The very people!" quoth Mr. Van Brent. Then ensued doubt and hesitation. "In what manner might his Christmas philanthropy best lay siege to those kids?"

Officer McCue reflected, head all on one side, like a crow looking into a jug. Then he made a snowball, and hurled it, not without a certain caressing softness, incapable of description, against the virgin pane of Miss Clancy. There were no delays; Miss Clancy's pretty nose had been close to the window for ten minutes, and the official snowball no more than landed than up went the sash and out popped the curly head.

"Stir up old Bernstein, Anna, and tell him to come down."

Miss Clancy withdrew her head, and Officer McCue turned to Mr. Van Brent.



"Herr Bernstein proceeded to revive the spirits of his company"

betrays in its swift-darting home flight: Down Fifth avenue to Washington square; through the square to Fourth street, and across to the Bowery; south along the Bowery to Third street; and then east on Third street at a walk.

The driver in his bearskin, cast a tentative glance over his shoulder at Mr. Van Brent among the robes.

"Where next, sir?"

"Smart—old Bernstein is; Solomon was a fool to him. If you don't mind, I'll give you over to him. He'll steer you through; he knows them kids, and what they need."

"Their name is Weck," said Officer McCue, as Herr Bernstein, wrapped up as though for Siberia, came coughing and shuffling out into the snow; "the kids, I mean. This is Bernstein."

Ten minutes were devoted to explanations on the side of Mr. Van Brent and Officer McCue, and understanding them on the part of Herr Bernstein. Then Herr Bernstein climbed into the billowy robe-filled sleigh with Mr. Van Brent, and the pair drove away. Officer McCue waved them "good fortune!" and then, pausing only to throw a second kiss toward Miss Clancy's casement, which this time harbored her pretty face, resumed the round of duty.

wardrobe. Then there were gifts of a more established Christmas order, mere joy-givers, of no use on earth, and the better for being useless. Herr Bernstein knew his way to twenty stores, all raring furnaces of trade on Christmas eve. Also, it was he who called a necessary cart, and caused it to accompany the trade procession which Mr. Van Brent and himself inaugurated. To this cart were consigned the countless Christmas spoils of the conquering Mr. Van Brent, who under the guidance of Herr Bernstein became an Attila of toys, devastating whole shops. What did they buy, those two, the old Jew with the beady eyes and the society-carved millionaire? What did they not buy? No such avalanche of gifts threatened any three children in town, to compare with that which hung pending over the sleeping heads of the little Wecks.

At 11 o'clock, Officer McCue there to supervise, Miss Clancy ready at the stairhead to assist, the overloaded cart came creaking up the street, and halted in front of Miss Clancy's radiant windows. At this point Herr Bernstein took complete charge, releasing Mr. Van Brent, who, plumes nodding triumphantly, bells ringing songs of victory, went his sleighing and snow-crunching way back to Delmonico's.

"Garnier," quoth Mr. Van Brent to that functionary, when again at his customary table and refreshing himself from the labors of the night, "I've a dinner order, a very particular order."

"Let me see," said the politely careful Garnier, after the long command had been taken down; "let me see! Seven people, you say, four grown, three children. To be served tomorrow, at 1 in the afternoon. Yes, sir! I shall do my best."

The gray-blue of a wintry Christmas morning came streaking the east. Herr Bernstein's principal room, while not so large as a ten-acre lot, was by odds the largest in the house. In it reposed the Van Brent gifts, mountains of careless opulence! I shall not describe the scene. Who am I that should paint you the impossible? Suffice it that no vintage wail groaning upon its purple-freighted homeward way ever offered such a picture of richness.

Miss Clancy was up by 6 of the morning clock, as blooming as June at dawn. Herr Bernstein had not gone to bed at all. Seven o'clock found him rattling feverishly at the poor portals of the sleepy little Wecks.

"Merry Christmas!" cried Herr Bernstein, in his rasping, osprey accents.

The little Wecks had never seen his hair so grizzled, his beard so wild, his nose so hooked, his eyes so black, beady and glittering.

"Come upstairs," he went on; "Miss Clancy has bread and coffee for you, and milk for the baby one. Santa Claus, who said your room was too small, has left your presents with me."

Presently Santa Claus! The little Wecks were out of bed on the instant. As they scrubbed their faces and tugged at their locks with a comb, Bobbie whispered to Jack: "I only prayed for presents, but of course Santa Claus had to bring them. Some one had to come."

Miss Clancy paid them a visit to help with the buttons. Then she conveyed the three to Herr Bernstein's regions above. Being there, she was asked by that venerable man to remain and modify their transports, and see to it that their appetites were kept within bounds of health. As superintendent of the brideless joy of the little Wecks, Miss Clancy's morning was not an idle one. Upon her breast, by the way, reposed a little heart of gold, but that belongs to the story of herself and Officer McCue, which is another story, and has neither art nor part nor lot herein.

One o'clock! Delmonico's wagons back up. The Wecks are dragged downstairs to Miss Clancy's room, carrying armfuls of their most gorgeous belongings. Delmonico's forces go aloft to Herr Bernstein's domains, bearing tables, chairs, china, silver and napery—white as the snow outside. Hampers follow, and curious contraptions in the way of portable ovens and unauthorized-looking furnaces.

There were flowers and oysters and soups and fishes and turkey and salads and ices and puddings and candies and fruits and jellies and crackers and camembert. Manager Garnier had been told of Herr Bernstein. Thus, enter, on behalf of Herr Bernstein, one goose, what Manager Garnier called a "Jew goose," "videlicet," a goose that had lived an orthodox life, died an orthodox death, and was and had ever been in all things orthodox.

But why elaborate? It was a feast! No such banquet had been arranged since that celebrated evening when Dickens regaled his Seven Poor Travelers.

Van Brent arrived and was presented to Miss Clancy by Herr Bernstein with much formality. To the three small Wecks, Mr. Van Brent presented himself with no formality at all, but much of bashful hanging back on the Wecks' side. Officer McCue, off duty for the day, and as trim and upstanding in his plain clothes as any in the town, appeared.

The table was set and ready; the furnaces glowed, the ovens gave forth perfumes. The three little Wecks were mentally upset, being unable to believe their noses, ears and eyes.

Mr. Van Brent sent away the Delmonico men. Herr Bernstein took austere charge of the drinkables, and evinced a nice knowledge in wines. Officer McCue, whose bold breadth of soul was truly catholic, would have sampled every bottle in the room, but was repressed by Miss Clancy. The young Wecks talked all the time, mostly to one another. They began to take on a distended, shiny, unctuous look, like overfed puppies; thereupon Miss Clancy carried them away to her rooms below to recover, and consider in raptures what riches a kind Providence had showered upon them. They were restored to Herr Bernstein's apartments when the tables had been cleared away.

Mr. Van Brent, Officer McCue and Herr Bernstein sat about with coffee and perfectos, while Miss Clancy presided over the coffee-making and the pouring. Mr. Van Brent spoke of the joy of "doing right," and was corrected by Herr Bernstein.

"Don't do right," urged that philosopher and mender of lame fiddies; "don't do right; do good. It is better." With this, Mr. Van Brent perceived in Herr Bernstein an intellect capable of fine distinctions, and the two pledged each other for perhaps the fourth time.

Herr Bernstein brought out his pet violin, a priceless Strad, and the music he made would have caused Kubelik to rend his garments. He struck into an Irish reel; Officer McCue sprang to his feet like a lion. Miss Clancy, feigning reluctance, was dragged to the center of the floor, and the deeds the pair did in the dancing way were to the immortal glory of the East Side. Officer McCue entered upon this part of the entertainment with so much abandon that Miss Clancy declared he would infallibly tear down the house. Herr Bernstein, the Strad buried in his beard, his eyes shining like coals, was pleased to say in his role of landlord that he shouldn't care if Officer McCue did.

So I might go on and on. I might tell, for it is all as true as the almanac, how Mr. Van Brent conceived a friendship for Herr Bernstein, who later carried him among the fathers of his tribe, where Mr. Van Brent was told old-world stories and old-world wisdom. One night alone how one day the wedding bells went ringing for pretty Miss Clancy and Officer McCue; and how later, by one Christmas, they brought young McCue to the festivities, who spoke not at all, but lay on his back at the dining ceiling throughout, like a wrapt soul in the coils of mighty fancy!

Officer McCue was first roundsman, then lieutenant, and stepped finally into his captaincy when but seven years of the force. For Mr. Van Brent was prone to help him onward; only he didn't know how until Officer McCue, trained in Tammany politics, himself pointed out what buttons to push. Mr. Van Brent pushed doubtfully.

Herr Bernstein, who had been a millionaire in his youth in Manhattan, those divers ranks of roundsman, lieutenant and finally captain followed in gratifying sequence.

The little Wecks? Why, then, they grew up to become big Wecks; and to be known as "Van Brent's Wecks"; and to gnaw their way into the hearts of books, and develop into learned and successful men. That is to say they will; become learned and successful; for, to hold by the truth and the present, is the only way in his junior year at Yale. Also upon this same summary, Bobbie, who still kneels in prayer, has already fixed prophetic eyes, while, with ultimate thoughts thereof, Paul, no longer termed "baby," feeds the youthful fire of his hopes.

"Van Brent" exclaimed a club cronie, "you look young every year, you do. You're old and cheap!" "Nothing easier, my boy!" returned that hero, leaping the end of a fresh cigar; "nothing easier! I stand my interest to things outside of myself."