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The Guard of the Christmas Gems By James Raymond Perry Copyright, 1906, by James Raymond Perry

But, after all, not forgetting the fact remained that quite the most enchanting thing on the Christmas tree was the wonderful dancing fiddler.

He was barely a foot high and proportionately slender, but for all that he was a very lifelike little manikin.

And the way he could dance and fiddle was quite the real thing, even if it was a kind of shuffle instead of the "light fantastic" kind.

All you had to do to make him fiddle and dance was to wind up a spring tucked away somewhere under his little coat.

Robbie at once named the dancing fiddler Sambo, because Sambo was the reputed name of a dusky fiddler who in summer often came up on his street with fiddle and song and a shuffling dance to catch the pennies of the peevish youngsters dwelling there.

This little Christmas Sambo was not nearly as dark as the big summer Sambo, but he was quite dark nevertheless—after the style of a sun-browned Italian.

His garments, too, were gaudy and in keeping with the character. He had quite speaking dark eyes—this little manikin—and so well had his maker done his work that at last Sambo got to scripping and dancing who had a droll sense that beneath his crimson waistcoat a tiny human heart must beat.

He was that lifelike, you see.

Though Robbie belted his sword on at once he let it hang unnoticed at his side, and though he kept the air gun close by him he gave it but scant attention, so busy was he with the spring and watching Sambo fiddle and dance.

Whether the little heart under the crimson vest finally rebelled at having to work so hard on Christmas eve—or of nights—whether for other and more mechanical reasons, Robbie did not know.

But now Robbie was more certain than ever that the beads must be something very choice, else his mamma could not have been so particular about hiding them away from robbers.

"I know where I'll put them," he heard her say as the box lid snapped down and shut in the beautiful bead.

There! And this spray of holly thrown over it quite hides the box. No burglar would think of looking there for it.

And tomorrow, Robert, you must put them in the safe deposit vault. It's too valuable a necklace to keep here in the house.

Just look at Robbie! He's taken his sword and gun to bed with him! He added, coming nearer. He knew it was a mistake, but he couldn't help it.

Robbie's gaze followed to where the troubling beam rested. Whether, having heard the burglar mention the fireplace and knowing the concealed jewels were now in extreme peril, Sambo had concluded it was time for him to take a hand in the affair, or whether for other and less sentimental reasons, it is certain he had become an actor in the scene, for with a click of his sword he sprang off the bed started, and down there on the floor he lay in the wavering light of the lantern he was industriously scripping away at his notched fiddle and vigorously shuffling through his grotesque dance.

The burglar uttered a relieved little laugh. "Sure, I thought 'twas some one," Robbie heard him mutter. The man stood for a moment watching the droll manikin, a grin on his rough features. Then he moved toward the fireplace again.

It cannot be asserted positively that the presence of the burglar and the peril of the pretty beads now caused the heart of the faithful Sambo to burst with emotion, but certainly a strange thing happened, for just as the burglar was again stepping toward the fireplace the silent fiddler ceased, and there was a buzz and whir and vibrant twink as if a dozen clock springs had suddenly started to rattle and him in musical chorus.

Something in little Sambo's boom had given way and released the coiled springs that controlled him, and it was these that were making a wild tattoo as they uncoiled with a rush against wall and ceiling.

The commotion had not ceased when there was the sound of some one bounding out of bed in the next room, and with a half smothered oath, the burglar turned and fled to the window through which he had climbed.

And now Robbie boasts proudly to the other little boys on his street, albeit a little sadly in spite of the new Sambo his father bought him, how the old Sambo gave up his life to save his mamma's spring of pretty beads.

him only last week about one Charlie's father had seen, and he knew this was one because Charlie had said they carried those queer little lights with them.

And now this one had come for those pretty beads. He felt quite sure of it because what his mamma had said when she put the box in the fireplace—that no burglar would think of looking there for it.

Robbie wondered if this burglar would think to. But, of course, he wouldn't, for hadn't his mamma said particularly that one wouldn't? Still he might, and they were such pretty beads, and his mamma had seemed to like them so much.

It would be a shame if he should find them and carry them off and mamma should never see them again!

Robbie reached softly for his gun. Yes, there it was! And there, just beyond it, was the sword. And then suddenly he couldn't see the beam creeping up and down and round the room, but in place of it a quite small but dazzling light was right in front of his wide staring eyes, and he heard a voice not at all pleasant or kind, though it was low, saying: "Don't yer make a noise, kid! Not a sound, or I'll—"

The unwhispered threat was quite as terrible as if the burglar had gone into minute particulars of what he would do. But that unusual light in front of his eyes and the voice had completely unnerved Robbie, and he had no intention of making a noise—in fact, he couldn't have made one if he'd had tried.

So for a moment Robbie was just a bit envious. Then he had looked back at Sambo, manfully scripping at the fiddle and dancing to its silent time, and his envy slipped away. Sambo was worth a hundred strings of beads, and he wouldn't give Sambo to him instead of to mamma, so mamma ought to have the beads, and he was glad she'd got them, but a little sorry for her that she hadn't got a Sambo instead.

Sambo must cost a great deal of money, thought, and papa, rich as he was, couldn't be expected to buy two Sambos for the same Christmas. So if he had been only a passing shadow for Robbie, so light and fleeting that it had scarcely dimmed the brilliancy of the Christmas tree at all.

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A Gallego's Shelter (Original)

A party of American Army officers ordered to Cuba when the United States intervened in Cuban affairs were sitting in an open air cafe when the funeral of a peasant went by.

A Cuban told the officers that the coffin was lined and would doubtless be muffled over and over again, the corpse being buried without covering, whereupon a Portuguese remarked that a similar custom prevailed in his native country.

He went on to explain that in Lisbon the coffin is substantially made, covered with red leather and studded with a profusion of brass nails. The lid has hinges so that it may be opened and shut like a trunk.

When a funeral procession reaches the grave at the Prazeres cemetery the undertaker's men lift the coffin lid, take out the corpse and lower it. The empty coffin remains where it is till a Gallego, a native of Galicia in Spain, comes and takes it away.

With this preface the Portuguese told the following story: One rainy afternoon the guard at the gate of the Prazeres cemetery, who had paid more attention to keeping from getting wet than attending to his duties, glanced up the road and saw a suspicious box lying on the ground on one side of the road close under a wall.

The rain had driven every one inside, and there was not a person in sight. Doubtless smugglers had been carrying the box and, having been surprised or frightened, had dropped it and run away.

Now, the guard was a dapper little fellow who was dying to snatch some piece of bravery, so he drew his sword and walked slowly up the road toward the box.

Every now and again he would pause and look about him, as if expecting to see some person or person emerging from hiding places to resume their burden.

But nothing stirred except the branches of the trees with the wind, and nothing was heard except the patter of the rain. The day was dark, and since it was late in the afternoon a gloom was beginning to settle over everything.

There lay the box, oblong in shape, five or six feet in length, two, possibly, in breadth and height. From his smuggling theory he began to have fears from the box itself. It might be an infernal machine, but he rather dreaded something supernatural than mechanical.

He advanced another dozen yards, bent down and peered through the deepening gloom at the object which so profoundly interested him.

He saw that the box was oblong, covered with red leather and studded with brass nails. It was a coffin, but this did not conflict with his theory.

More than one smuggler had carried dutiable goods into the cemetery in a coffin and hidden them there till he could get them away. The officer advanced a few steps, when he saw that the coffin was open from within, and a corpse looked out.

Here was something no sword thrust could injure. The guard turned and took to his heels, never stopping till he had reached the cemetery. There he called to his comrades to go with him to see a corpse that for some reason, having been abandoned instead of taken to its decently buried, had opened its coffin.

The men, not realizing that powder and ball are not ineffective in such cases, seized their carbines and marched to the gates, their daylight commander leading the way. But he had no sooner come to a view of the road than he saw the corpse advancing with his coffin on his shoulder. Turning, his face blanched, his eyes starting from their sockets in terror, he ran straight through the ranks. Sambo is easily commiserated, and the men, seeing their commander's flight and a tall spectral looking creature coming toward them bearing his coffin, broke and ran as fast as their legs would carry them.

Rushing into the cemetery, they soon collected the men employed there and told them that a deserted corpse was coming to bury itself. All gathered at a convenient distance from the gate to watch the specter's entrance and see how he would dig his own grave and by what supernatural means he would get the earth over him. But when the corpse reached the gate he set his coffin on the ground on one end under a covering and looked up at those watching. There was something more human in his appearance than had appeared to the officer under the influence of his imagination, and he was emboldened to advance a few steps and call out:

"Who are you?" "A Gallego. What's the matter with you people?" "Did you come out of that coffin?" "Yes."

"What were you doing inside of it?" "I was carrying it to the shop after a funeral, and the rain came on. I'm a victim of lung trouble, and, fearing to get wet, I set the coffin down, opened the lid and got in. Hearing some one approach stealthily, I thought a trick was to be played on me—that I would be locked in. So I just lifted the lid to see. I didn't understand what you fellows were running away from me for and came to find out."

The officer looked sheepishly at his men, and the men looked sheepishly at the officer. Then they followed him back to the gate, and the officer took the Gallego to his quarters, where he was put under the care of his men, and ordered something hot to ward off the chill.

"I was comfortable," said the poor Gallego, "till you made me think I would be locked up. Had you let me alone I would have been dry enough."

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