

A PERFECT CHRISTMAS.

CHAPTER I.

There was not a larger house in all the valley than Grandfather Vrooman's. It was old and comfortable, and seemed to lie sound asleep, with a snow blanket all over its roof.

Nothing short of a real old-fashioned Christmas could wake up such a house as that.

Christmas was coming!

Unless Santa Claus and the Simpsons and the Hopkinses should forget the day of the month, they would all be there at waking-up time to-morrow morning.

"Jane," said Grandmother Vrooman, that afternoon, to her daughter, Mrs. Hardy, who lived with her—"Jane, I've got 'em all fixed now just where they're going to sleep, and I've made up a bed on the floor in the store-room."

"Why, mother, who's that for?"

"You wait and see, and then they get here, and we've counted 'em."

"Anyhow, there's cookies enough, and doughnuts."

"And the pies, Jane?"

"And I'm glad Liph gathered such piles of butternuts."

"Oh, mother," exclaimed little Sue, "I gathered as many as he did, and beech-nuts, and hickory-nuts, and—"

"So you did, Sue; but I wonder if two turkeys 'll go round, with only two pair of chickens?"

"Mother," said Mrs. Hardy, "the plum-pudding?"

"Yes, but all those children! I do hope they'll get here to-night in time for me to know where I'm going to put 'em."

At the very minute, away up the north road, two miles nearer town, there was a sort of dot on the white road. If you were far enough away from it, it looked like a black dot, and did not seem to move. The nearer you came to it the funnier it looked, and the more it seemed to be trudging along with an immense amount of small energy. Very small, indeed, for anybody close up to it would have seen that it was a 5-year old boy in a queer little suit of gray, trimmed with red. He had on a warm gray cap, and right in the middle of the front of it were worked a pair of letters—"O. A."—but there was nobody with the gray dot to explain that those two letters stood for "Orphan Asylum." No, nor to tell

how easy it was for a boy of 5 years old, with all the head under his gray cap full of Christmas ideas, to turn the wrong corner where the roads crossed, south of the great Orphan Asylum Building. That was what he had done, and he had walked on and on, wondering why the big building did not come in sight, until his small legs were getting tired, and his brave, bright little black eyes were all but ready for a crying spell.

Just as he got thoroughly discouraged he came to the edge of the woods, where there stood a wood sleigh with two horses in front of it, drawn close to the road-side, and heaped with great green boughs and branches.

"The sleigh's pretty nigh full, grandfather," sang out a clear, boyish voice beyond the fence, and a very much older one seemed to go right on talking.

"Your grandmother, Liph, she always did make the best mince pies, and she can stuff a turkey better'n any one I know."

"Grandfather, do you s'pose they'll all come?"

"Guess they will. That there spruce 'll do for the Christmas tree. Your grandmother said we must fetch a big one."

"That's a whopper. But will Joe Simpson and Bob Hopkins be bigger'n they were last summer?"

"Guess they've grown a little. They'll grow this time, if they eat all their grandmother 'll want 'em to. Hello, Liph, who's that out there in the road?"

"Guess it's a boy."

"I declare if it isn't one of them little gray mites from the 'sylum. Way out here! I say, bub."

"I'm Bijah."

There was a scared look in the black eyes, for they had never seen anything quite like Grandfather Vrooman, when he pushed his face out between the branches.

The trees all looked as if they had beards of snow, but none had a longer or whiter one than Liph's grandfather.

"Bijah," said he, "did you know Christmas was coming?"

"Be here to-morrow," piped the dot in gray, "and we're going to have turkey."

"You don't say! Just you wait until I cut a tree down, and I'll come out and hear all about it."

"Is your name Santa Claus?"