



SCHOOL closed on the day before Christmas, and Tom Leslie came home with a very curious look on his face,—an expression of mingled importance, knowingness and mystery. He was the eldest of the family, being over nine years old. The others were Jim, over seven, Fanny, six, and Jumper, aged four.

After dinner Tom told Jim and Fannie to come into the library without letting any one know. When they arrived, he, having first peeped into the hall to see that there were no eaves-droppers, said in a solemn whisper, that a boy in school had laughed at him for believing in Santa Claus, had assured him there was no such person, and that only girls and small boys were so silly as to believe any such nonsense.

All this was received with open eyes and mouth by the other children.

"Now, Tom, you know better!" said Jim. "Didn't you get that lovely sled last year? So of course there must be a Sandy Claws."

"Course there's a Sandy Claw!" echoed Fannie.

Tom shook his head and looked wise.

"Well, then, who gave you the sled? Who put it there? Who gave me the monkey-on-a-stick?"

"Now children," says Tom, impressively, "promise that you'll never, never tell if I let you know."

Both children promised.

"Well Bill Flinn said that father did it!"

"Oo-oo-oo!!!" cried the children, horror-stricken.

Some further talk ensued in whispers, and then the children sneaked off one by one, as they had entered.

That evening at eight o'clock Mrs. Leslie saw the children safely tucked in bed, and so soundly asleep that Tom was even snoring.

They had hung up their stockings themselves in the front drawing-room so that it would be handy for Santa Claus, as the chimney was wider there; and their mother had charged them not to talk but to go to sleep. As soon as she was safely downstairs, Tom jumped up—the little hypocrite—and poked up Jim and Fannie. They all put on their stockings and wrapped a quilt round them, and then like Roman Senator with stately toga, or like the gentle Mohawks of whom we read in history, they stole downstairs, filed into the dark front room, and got behind the sofa. Tom arranged

the other two comfortably, so that they were soon asleep, then went to the fire-place, tied one end of a cord to the grate in such a way that no one could go there without touching it, fastened the other end to his big toe, went back to the others, shut his eyes, and was soon in the land of Nod.

Tom was just in the middle of a most delightful dream. He was at the bazaar for the "Infant's Home," and two of the young ladies were kindly insisting that he should eat one more ice cream, though he had just finished his fourth. He was about consenting, with outward reluctance but inward delight, when suddenly he felt a horrible pain in his big toe, as if a dentist were trying to haul it out. He was on the point of screaming with the pain, when he awoke.

It was Santa Claus at the chimney, and he had struck against the cord tied to Tom's big toe. But what an appalling sight was he! All the pictures and stories and legends had belied him. You could not call them even a flattering likeness. Tom had always understood, from photographs and hearsay, that Santa Claus was a short, stout, rosy-cheeked, red-nosed, blue-eyed, merry old gentleman, with white hair and beard, and a twinkle in his eye, and that he always wore a white fur coat.

Now this Santa Claus was tall, thin, ghastly, wicked looking, with no pretty red spot on the end of his nose, and he had jet-black snaky eyes, straight black hair like an Indian, a scanty black moustache and tuft on his chin, a pointed hat, a long black coat, a long black tail trailing far behind him, and very odd-looking feet. The lamp he carried gave a vivid blue-light, which made every object look still more awful. Most ominous of all, there was a distinct and unmistakable odor of brimstone pervading the room!

Tom was horror-stricken. He did not dare to waken the other two, for he felt sure they would scream with fright and blubber vigorously. The consequences of any noise at that particular moment he did not care to think of. He felt certain that those hoofs, tail, and that brimstone meant "Somebody" not to be named in polite society, and if the visitor heard any strange noises he might—awful thought!—whip the three of them under his coat and carry them off to—

But what blood-curdling sound is this? A low chuckle came from Santa Claus. Suddenly he looked round the room, sniffed, and sniffed again. Then he said in a hollow murmur, mingled with those awful chuckles, "I smell, ha! ha! I smell two little boys and one little girl!"

Tom's hair stood straight up on end, his eyes glared with fright, his heart thumped against his ribs, then stood still, then thumped louder and louder. Surely any one in the room must hear the thumping. The figure paused and muttered, "I can't be bothered with them tonight anyway; I'm in too much of a hurry." So he gave one or two more of those fiendish chuckles, poked some things into the stockings, and then he and his lamp vanished, and all was left in darkness.

How long Tom waited he never knew. Silently, silently his hair came down to its normal position, as does the fur on an indignant cat after her excitement is over. Silently, silently, the perspiration dried on his face, leaving a feeling as if it had been varnished. Silently, silently, his eyes lost their glare of affright. Silently, silently, his heart beat now, and Tom began to think of getting the children upstairs. He shook them, clapping his hand over the mouth of each when they awoke, to prevent unnecessary and disastrous noise, and soon they were all in bed.

On the way up they asked him if he had seen Santa Claus. He admitted that he had, but sternly hushed them when they wanted to know more, telling them that they would wake up the house with their noise. They were too sleepy to care much, and the moment their heads touched the pillow they were off to sleep.

Not so poor Tom. He tossed and turned, and turned and tossed. He resolved to give Bill Flinn a good sound

thrashing the very first time he caught him alone. Indeed, he suspected that Bill had sent that dreadful visitor. He knew Bill to be a very wicked boy, and taking that fact in connection with the hymn,

"And Satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do,"

it was all too plain. So he became afraid to go to asleep till he said his prayers over again, and he made up his mind that in the spring he would not coax his mother to give them all some "brimstone and molasses," as he had done the year before—not he. He had had enough brimstone to last him for some time. He was just considering whether he would ever be able to eat taffy or molasses without thinking of brimstone, when he fell into a troubled slumber.

Morning broke, and later than usual the children awoke. Jim and Fannie made Tom go downstairs with them to see what was in the stockings. Tom did not want to go, but durst not tell them why. Then a bright thought struck him. Maybe he had only dreamed last night's horrors. But the moment he got out of bed he knew better, for his toe was very, very sore and much swollen, and he had to limp. Besides, they found a stocking and a quilt on the stairs, left there by sleepy Fannie on the way up.

When they took down the stockings they found them filled with ashes, old potatoes and other rubbish; the only difference being that Fannie's had some worm-candy, Jim's a box of sugar-coated pills, and Tom's a large lump of brimstone. The younger children burst out into wails of woe, for well they knew that this was a judgment on them for the day that Fannie had stolen some worm-candy, and Jim some sugar-coated pills, which delicacies they had eaten, and as a consequence had nearly died. Tom did not cry. He was again seized with horror. He, and he alone, knew the meaning of that brimstone. He kept his knowledge to himself, but mentally gave Bill Flinn one more kick, and that was a comfort.

The little procession toiled upstairs.

"It was a solemn cavalcade and slow
That came with stockings. Never had the house,
Save when a kitten died, such pomp of woe beheld."

Jim and Fannie went sniffling to their mother's door, but she told them to wipe their noses and go back to bed, or they would get their death of cold. Little did she know of their nocturnal adventure, or she would have been almost distracted for fear of croup, or pip, or gapes, or some such fell disease.

The children did not get a chance to tell the story of their afflictions till breakfast time. Then they had for an audience their father, mother and Uncle John, a young man rather given to practical jokes. Jim and Fannie recounted the way in which they had been prowling round, the going downstairs, the sleeping behind the sofa, the midnight awakening by Tom, the slinking back to bed. Then they told the story of the morning's woe, interspersing the narrative with mournful howls. Jim wanted to know what made his mother so mean as to tell Santa Claus about the worm-candy and the sugar-coated pills; and Fannie demanded that Tom should tell them how Santa Claus looked and behaved.

Their mother opened her eyes in utter bewilderment. At last she gasped:

"Children, there is some wretched mistake; I have reason to know that Santa Claus put your presents in the library. Go and look!"

Jim, Fannie and Jumper ran off, but Tom sat still. Ah! he knew better than that; woe was the day!

"Tom," asked Mrs. Leslie, "why don't you go?" Tom got red in the face, and looked appealingly at his Uncle John. Then, I regret to say, Uncle John slowly and emphatically winked at Tom, gave a hollow, awful chuckle, winked again, and finally threw back his head, and laughed till the tears ran out of his eyes.

Tom started, jumped up, but then sat down speechless. There was a solemn silence. Tom tried to look unconcerned and to eat some breakfast, but he could not. Every