

Santa Claus and Little Billee

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"No, I don't," said Little Billee frankly; "but I know the number of our ortymobile. It's—N. Y."

"Fine!" laughed Santa Claus. "If you really were lost, it would be a great help to know that; but not being lost, as you ain't, why, of course, we can get along without it. It's queer you don't know your last name, though."

"I do, too, know my last name!" blurted Little Billee. "It's Billee. That's the last one they gave me, anyhow."

Santa Claus reflected for a moment, eyeing the child anxiously.

"I don't believe you even know your papa's name," he said.

"Yes, I do," said Little Billee indignantly. "His name is Mr. Harrison."

"Well, you are a smart little chap," cried Santa Claus gleefully. "You got it right the very first time, didn't you? I really didn't think you knew. But I don't believe you know where your papa keeps his bake-shop, where he makes all those nice cakes and cookies you eat."

Billee began to laugh again. "You can't fool me, Mr. Santa Claus," he said. "I know my papa don't keep a bake-shop just as well as you do. My papa owns a bank."

"Splendid! Made of tin, I suppose, with a nice little hole at the top to drop pennies into?" said Santa Claus.

"No, it ain't, either!" retorted Little Billee. "It's made of stone, and has more than a million windows in it. I went down there with my mama to papa's office the other day, so I guess I ought to know."

"Well, I should say so," said Santa Claus. "Nobody better. By the way, Billee, what does your mama call your papa?" "Billee," like you?" he added.

"Oh, no, indeed," returned Little Billee. "She calls him papa, except once in a while when he's going away, and then she says, 'Good-by, Tom.'"

"Fine again!" said Santa Claus, blowing upon his fingers, for, now that the sun had completely disappeared over in the west, it was getting very cold. "Thomas Harrison, banker," he muttered to himself. "What with the telephone-book and the city directory, I guess we can find our way home with Little Billee."

"Do you think we can go now, Mr. Santa Claus?" asked Little Billee, for the cold was beginning to cut thru his little coat, and the sandman had started to scatter the sleepy-seeds all around.

"Yes, sirree!" returned Santa Claus promptly. "Right away off now instantly at once! I'm afraid I can't get my reindeer here in time to take us up to the house, but we can go in the cars—hum! I don't know whether we can or not, come to think of it. Ah, do you happen to have ten cents in your pocket?" Santa added with an embarrassed air. "You see, I've left my pocketbook in the sleigh with my toy-pack; and, besides, mine is only toy-money, and they won't take that on the cars."

"I got twenty-five cents," said Little Billee proudly, as he dug his way down into his pocket and brought the shining silver piece to light. "You can have it, if you want it."

"Thank you," said Santa Claus, taking the proffered coin. "We'll start home right away; only come in here first, while I telephone to Santaville, telling the folks where I am."

He led the little fellow into a public telephone station, where he eagerly scanned the names in the book. At last it was found—"Thomas Harrison, seven-six-five-four Plaza." And then, in the seclusion of the telephone-booth, Santa Claus sent the gladdest of all Christmas messages over the wire to two distracted parents:

"I have found your boy wandering in the street. He is safe, and I will bring him home right away."

III.

Fifteen minutes later, there might have been seen the strange spectacle of a foot sore Santa Claus leading a sleepy little boy up Fifth Avenue to a cross-street, which shall be nameless. The boy vainly endeavored to persuade his companion to "come in and meet mama."

"No, Billee," the old man replied

sadly, "I must hurry back. You see, kiddie, this is my busy day. Besides, I never go into a house except thru the chimney. I wouldn't know how to be have, going in at a front door."

But it was not to be as Santa Claus willed, for Little Billee's papa, and his mama, and his brothers and sisters, and the butler and the housemaids, and two or three policemen, were waiting at the front door when they arrived.

"Aha!" said one of the police, seizing Santa Claus roughly by the arm. "We've landed you, all right! Where have you been with this boy?"

"You let him alone!" cried Little Billee, with more courage than he had ever expected to show in the presence of a policeman. "He's a friend of mine."

"That's right, officer," said Little Billee's father; "let him alone—I haven't entered any complaint against this man."

"But you want to look out for these fellers, Mr. Harrison," returned the officer. "First thing you know they'll be makin' a trade of this sort of thing."

"I'm no grafter!" retorted Santa Claus indignantly. "I found the little chap wandering along the street, and, as soon as I was able to locate where he lived, I brought him home. That's all there is to it."

"He knew where I lived all along," laughed Little Billee, "only he pretended he didn't, just to see if I knew."

"You see, sir," said the officer, "it won't do him any harm to let him cool his heels—"

"It is far better that he should warm them, officer," said Mr. Harrison kindly. "And he can do that here. Come in, my man," he added, turning to Santa Claus with a grateful smile. "Just for a minute, anyhow. Mrs. Harrison will wish to thank you for bringing our boy back to us. We have had a terrible afternoon."

"That's all right, sir," said Santa Claus modestly. "It wasn't anything, sir. I didn't really find him—it was him as found me, sir. He took me for the real thing, I guess."

Nevertheless, Santa Claus, led by Little Billee's persistent father, went into the house. Now that the boy could see him in the full glare of many electric lights, his furs did not seem the most gorgeous things in the world. When the flapping front of his red jacket flew open, the child was surprised to see how ragged was the thin gray coat it covered; and as for the good old saint's comfortable stomach—strange to say, it was not!

"I—I wish you all a merry Christmas," faltered Santa Claus; "but I really must be going, sir—"

"Nonsense!" cried Mr. Harrison. "Not until you have got rid of this chill, and—"

"I can't stay, sir," said Santa. "I'll lose my job if I do."

"Well, what if you do? I'll give you a better one," said the banker.

"I can't—I can't!" faltered the man. "I—I—I've got a Little Billee of my own at home waitin' for me, sir. If I hadn't," he added fiercely, "do you suppose I'd be doin' this?" he pointed at the painted boards, and shuddered.

"It's him as has kept me from—from the river!" he muttered hoarsely; and then this dispenser of happiness to so many millions of people all the world over sank into a chair, and, covering his face with his hands, wept like a child.

"I guess Santa Claus is tired, papa," said Little Billee, snuggling up closely to the old fellow and taking hold of his hand sympathetically. "He's been walkin' a lot today."

"Yes, my son," said Mr. Harrison gravely. "These are very busy times for Santa Claus, and I guess that, as he still has a hard night ahead of him, James had better ring up Henry and tell him to bring the car around right away, so that we may take him back—to his little boy. We'll have to lend him a fur coat to keep the wind off, too, for it is a bitter night."

"Oh," said Little Billee, "I haven't told you about these boards he wears. He has 'em to keep the wind off, and they're fine, papa!" Little Billee pointed to the two sign-boards which Santa Claus had leaned against the wall. "He says he uses 'em on cold nights," the lad went on. "They have writing on 'em, too. Do you know what it says?"

"Yes," said Mr. Harrison, glancing at the boards. "It says 'If You Want

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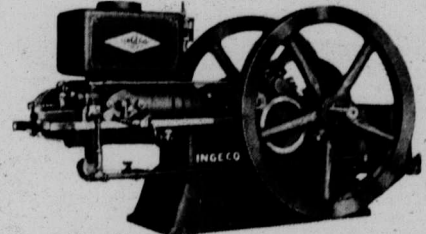
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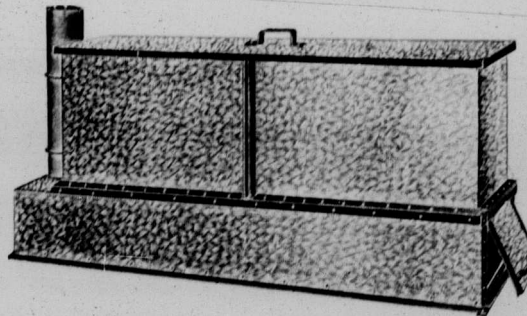
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