

A TRIP IN SANTA CLAUS'S SLEIGH.

ROSTILY clear and cold, the Christmas stars twinkled overhead. Joyfully pealed the Christmas chimes from many a steeple, while "peace, good will to men" beamed from each face of the hurrying, bustling crowd, which thronged the busy streets in the gleam of the brilliant electric lights.

The Quentin family, like the rest of New York, were all out on a shopping expedition, making their last purchases for the great holiday, all except Karl who, a few days before, had slipped on the ice and sprained his ankle, so he was obliged to spend his Christmas eve at home, snug and warm by the bright coal fire, with a new and entertaining book of travels for company.

Karl was fond of reading about other lands, but gradually even this interesting employment failed and he found himself "nid, nid, nodding" over the pages, while he thought dreamily: "How jolly it would be to take a peep at all these countries to-night and see how the different nations are keeping their Christmas."

The idea had scarcely flashed through his brain when he heard a strange voice calling, "Karl! Karl Quentin!" and started up wide awake in an instant, while, a moment later, to his intense surprise, a curious little man wrapped in furs suddenly appeared on the hearth, and, doffing his cap politely, said, "I am Santa Claus, St. Nicholas, Kris Kringle or whatever you please to call me, and am at your service, sir."

"Very glad to see you, I am sure," stammered Karl, somewhat dazed.

"Thank you; I overheard your thoughts just now, and, as I like to please good boys at this season, I have come to invite you to visit with me some of the Christian lands where I am welcome on Christmas Eve. You must make up your mind quickly, however, for I have far to travel to-night, and my sleigh is waiting on the roof above. Will you go?"

"Of course I will," cried Karl, overjoyed at the idea, and forgetting all about his ankle, he jumped up and had on his overcoat and sealskin cap in a twinkling, when, with a "Presto! Change!" Santa Claus transported him to the roof and tucked him up well in his snug little sledge. Five minutes later they were flying over housetops, behind the jolliest team the boy had ever dreamed of, for each steed was a winged reindeer, as fleet and agile as a creature well could be.

"It is bitter cold crossing the Atlantic," remarked Santa Claus, as a fierce sea blast struck them, "but we must look first after our little English cousins, who, by the way, call me Father Christmas instead of Santa Claus, as you Americans do; but you, I suppose, get the name from the good Dutch Knickerbockers. Fine old fellows they were, too! But there are the lights of London in the distance now."

Eagerly Karl leaned forward and gazed down upon the streets that were even more crowded than those of New York. In every shop shone the glossy green leaves and scarlet berries of the English holly, and groups of schoolboys home for the holidays, thronged the pavement, half wild with delight; while as they sped out into the country, sweet carols greeted their ears, sung by parties of choristers, going from house to house, while Tom, Emily and Gladys ran to the windows, crying, "The waits! The waits!" when suddenly

"All was hushed,
Save footfalls on the snow."

Whilst Santa Claus was engaged with his generous task of stocking filling, Karl caught glimpses of happy parties of young and old kissing beneath the mistletoe, playing at "Blind Man's Buff," "Hunt the Slipper," and "Magic Music," or gathered about the "Flaming Bowl of Snap Dragon," the blue light making fresh rosy faces look green and ghastly as they snatched at the burning figs and raisins.

It did not take long, however, to furnish the little Johnny Bulls with enough sweets to make them sick for a week, and then away they flew across the channel to the pleasant land of France.

"I generally give Paris a wide berth," said Santa Claus, "for the gay Parisians care more for their New Year gifts than for Christmas presents. Burgundy is my stronghold in this country," and they were soon among the modest cottages of

that province, and, themselves invisible, peered through the tiny window panes, and watched the little, sallow, black-eyed Maries and Victors as they knelt before the great *Souche* or Yule log, which blazed merrily in the wide chimneys and set forth their rude wooden shoes on the hearth, while the mothers patted each dark head, saying, "Be good, *mes enfants*, and Noel will ring down sugar plums in the night."

"And yet we will give them plenty, will we not?" said Karl, as he helped the good Saint untie the huge bonbon bag, which filled up all the back of the sleigh.

Away, then, from the little French brunettes to the fair-haired blondes of the Fatherland, and what a happy, merry set they seem, from rosy-checked Katrina, who still is not too old to enjoy the grandmother's fairy tales of *Pelzmantel*, *Rubezahl*, Santa Claus, and Frau Holle, which make

"The children's eyes grow round and bright,"
While they shout aloud with all their might,
Hurrah! 'Tis Christmas Eve to-night,"

down to Baby Max, wrapped up like a little white mummy, in



"I AM SANTA CLAUS."

his long, narrow pillow, tied with bands of sky blue ribbon. The fun grows louder as the time draws near for the revealing of the Christmas tree which our genial saint helps the parents prepare, carefully consulting each *Wunsch Zettel*, or list of desired presents, written out by the young folks themselves. The would-be soldier, Gustav, must have a miniature castle with moat and drawbridges, and regiments of wooden soldiers drawn up in martial array; Hilda, the little house-wife, a tin kitchen and an old doll that has been made over as good a new, by the doll doctor, while six-year-old Fritz, who next month leaves the kindergarten for the school, shall be treated to a hair satchel bearing his initials in bright, brass letters, and containing a slate and pencil, copy-book and sponge-box.

"How lovely it is," murmured Karl, as he gazed at the kindly German house-mother arranging plates of cakes for each member of the family, but Santa Claus whispered, "Hush! the *Christ-Kindchen* passes by!" and glancing up, the lad caught a vision of a childish form, with white robes and a fair little flaxen head that flitted by the windows, swinging a sweet toned, silver bell.

"What country is this?" asked Karl as, after a short drive, they stopped suddenly in a quaint appearing village, and he found himself surrounded by fantastically dressed girls and boys, the former with embroidered bodices, red skirt and

buckled shoes, and the latter in baggy trousers, jackets trimmed with coins, and small felt hats, all of whom sang loudly:

"Look! the morn shines through the trees
Children cease your noisy play,
The joyous moment has arrived,
St. Nicholas's happy, happy day,
With beating hearts we wait to see,
Who gets the cake, and whose the rod will be."

"This is Belgium, and you perceive I am expected," replied the Saint, pointing to a number of well polished shoes, which had been set out filled with hay and oats for the refreshment of the reindeers, and which they seemed thoroughly to enjoy, while their master replaced the contents with sweetmeats for the good and rods for the bad. "Queer youngsters are these too," continued Santa Claus, "for they like to receive their gifts in odd disguises, so I have hidden them in these cabbages, turnips and potatoes and even in bundles of hay." Briskly he then set to work, sometimes handing these vegetables in for the children himself, sometimes hanging switches over doors, and again setting on some doorstep a funny little figure, with bulged-out pockets filled to overflowing with cakes and goodies. A sounding rap proclaimed that St. Nicholas was without, but as the children dashed to the windows he disappeared in a shower of bonbons.

"Ha, ha! That was a first-rate scramble," laughed the Christmas Fairy, as he mounted into his sleigh once more and gathered up the reins. "The young folks of Holland had most of their presents on St. Nicholas's Day, so we will now skip over to Austria and Hungary, above all to the out-of-the-way province of Croatia, where they have some of the most unusual Christmas customs I know of."

"All right!" responded Karl, and he was deeply interested, as, wrapped in a corner of Santa Claus's mantle of invisibility, he watched a Croatian family at a peculiar home ceremony. With merry shouts the boys dragged in a huge log, sprinkled it with wine and thrust it into the great stove, while their sisters spread the table and set forth two loaves of fine white bread, signifying the Old and New Testaments, dishes of fruit and honey and tankards of wine, while in the center were placed three home candles and a cup filled with wheat, barley, and oats. Suddenly, a church bell near by rang forth a merry peal, and at the signal the whole family, headed by the grandparents, came trooping into the dwelling-room. Reverently the father lighted one taper and taking it in his hand, said, "Christ is born," while the others echoed in chorus, "Is born, really born!" In turn, each child took the candle and, standing on a bench by the stove, repeated three times, "Praised be the Lord! Christ is born!" to which all the rest responded, "Praise the name of the Lord forever, and may He grant thee life and health;" after which ceremony the supper was eaten with great zest and rejoicing.

"But Meinheer, are you not going to leave them any gifts?" asked Karl of his friend.

"It is not much the fashion here," replied Santa Claus, "though I have tucked a few

dried pears, apples and nuts away in sly corners, while you have been absorbed in watching them. They are really a good people here but superstitious, and to-morrow, Christmas Day, the second taper will be lighted. The father, saying a short prayer, will dip it into the cup of grain and whichever kind sticks to the candle he believes will yield the best crop next year. The third taper will be burned on New Year's day."

It seems odd that I can understand all the languages," remarked Karl, "but it is very convenient;" at which St. Nicholas smiled a knowing smile but said nothing.

A flying trip was next made into Italy, where Karl saw the good people of Naples feasting on the *Capitone*, a large variety of eel which is the chief dish at the Christmas Eve supper. Karl also saw the daily decorated *presepio* or manger which is erected in every church as well as in every well-to-do house, and about which are clustered groups of wax figures representing the Holy Family, and listened with delight to the wild, weird strains played by the *Zampagnari*, or mountain shepherds, who at this time come down to perambulate the city streets in picturesque attire, and perform upon their bagpipes. There Santa Claus left bushels of hard honey candy, called *Torone*, and a delicious mass of plums, citron, almonds, sugar pine-seeds and pistachio nuts known as *pangiallo*, for the light