

# Sarah and Santa Claus

—BY THEODOSIA GARRISON—

**T**HE blow had fallen upon her so suddenly that for a moment she was stunned. It was like the feeling she had the last time she had fallen down stairs—a sense of hurt and bewilderment and absolute helplessness—but for all that, she sat very still upon her own front steps, a red mittened hand upon each knee, her little circle of a face staring from its enclosure of red worsted hood full upon the bearer of awful tidings.

It never occurred to her to doubt him. In the first place, the word of an elder was infallible, and Emerson was twelve at least—a good six years older than herself. Again, he wore spectacles—the hall mark of wisdom—and, moreover, he went to school—an awesome thing to contemplate.

The news that he was going back to that very school to spend Christmas, owing to the fact that his erudite parents had planned to sail for Egypt on Christmas Eve, had led to Sarah's innocent question regarding the habits of Santa Claus in respect to boarding schools, and then the blow had fallen. Emerson had laughed long and loud. "Santa Claus? Why, haven't they told you yet there isn't any? How old are you, anyhow? I thought that every kid was on to that."

"There isn't any?" Sarah gasped. "Do you mean that he is—dead?" Her horrified face appealed to Emerson's sense of humor as a struggling kitten might. "Oh, I guess he's dead all right," he said, carelessly. "I wouldn't sit up to see him to-morrow night if I were you. Well, so long, kid."

Sarah detained him with a trembling appeal. "Are you sure?"

"Sure as you're sitting there," he said, and went on his way.

His father's house was only the door beyond her own. When he reached it he scooped a handful of snow from the steps, made it into a ball and tossed it over to Sarah, not, he said, from any malicious spirit, but simply because she was the only mark that offered itself. It fell squarely upon one of the red mittens, but she gave it no attention whatever. Her little brain was wrestling with problems—with tragedy. Stunned as she was by the tremendous fact, her mind had no inclination to reach out over the rooftops that culminated at last at her very own chimney. It was only last night that her mother had told her that Santa Claus was, no doubt, staying awake wondering whether Sarah would prefer a pink or blue bonnet, on the new doll he might bring.

They had discussed it a long time, Sarah and her mother, and her father, too; that morning at breakfast, he had played a realistic game on the tablecloth, depicting Santa Claus' approach over snowy hillocks of napkins with an accompanying jingle of spoons till he landed safely at Sarah's own oatmeal dish, which for the time being stood for her stocking.

The truth burst upon her in a flash, a paralyzing truth. They didn't know! Her parents up to this very day had no idea of the tragedy that had befallen the world. They were so happy, and it remained for her to open their eyes, to tell them that there was to be no Christmas, that that day which was the crown and glory of the year was to be like any other one. Her father would go to his office and her mother would take up her sewing, and she, Sarah, instead of the ecstatic waking, the soul-bewildering joy of new blue-eyed dolls, picture books and candies, there would be— "Oh!" Sarah gave a little sob deep in her throat. She was never coming again, the dear, dear old man that had never forgotten her one Christmas since she was born, and how she had loved him! Oh, much better now she realized than the gentleman to whom she had said her prayers dutifully every morning and whom she confused in her mind with the Sunday school superintendent, who had a black beard and a highly superior dignity.

**Christmas Eve in Wildwood Hollow.** (Pauline Francis Camp in January St. Nicholas.)

In Wildwood Hollow, 'tween eve, they had a Christmas tree—And scores of pretty presents filled the animals with glee.

Mr. Reynard smiled a foxy smile, and scarce his joy could bubble, When presented with a fine, new comb, to match his handsome "brush."

Old Bruin's wife gave him a box, to hold his many "cuties," Miss Castorpe, whose feet were cold, and a hundred warm footmuffs. The hedgehog had a bottle of ink, in which to dip his "quills," And all the birds had wallets new, in which to keep their "bills."

Miss Wildcat an umbrella had (she's often in a "squall"); Miss Peacock, books for all her "eyes," and the bat received a ball. The monkey had an interesting book of "Jungle Tales," And Mr. Alligator had a brand new set of "scales."

The buffalo, in gladsome mood, pranced gaily round and round, When his own name upon a pair of "bel-lows" he had found; In short, for each and every one, a useful gift was planned, And merry grins and roars and growls were heard on every hand.

She realized presently that she was very old. The hands in the little red mittens were almost numb. She had been thinking for hours and hours, she thought, and it seemed a strange thing when she lifted her eyes to find it quite dark, with the street lamps glittering. Instead, there was the afternoon light still; the children with whom she had come out to play were still sliding festively half way down the block, as they were when Emerson had stopped to speak with her. So they didn't know either. How could she for a moment pretend to be one of them, and she couldn't tell them—she couldn't.

Her soul shrank from the sight of suffering. She was a sensitive little being, given more to picture books and fancies than most robust sports, and her thoughts sometimes were more ponderous than her vocabulary could express. Just now her soul ached for comfort, for cuddling arms and a soft breast whereon to sob out her woes, but her mother was not at home. She had helped Sarah don her hood and leggings and gone blithely on her way down town. She seemed always away chopping these days, and even if she were in her own room before the cozy fire what comfort could one who comes with evil tidings hope to gain?

Hannah was in the kitchen, but Hannah, too, for many a day had held forth on the prevailing subject in a way that had almost convinced Sarah that she had once been on intimate terms with Santa Claus, perhaps even an inmate of his household, as she was now of Sarah's. She couldn't listen to Hannah just now, knowing what she knew.

Presently she dragged her sled through the yard door and stabled it cozily in the back veranda. There was a little grip at her throat as she remembered that only the Christmas before he had brought it to her. And he was never, never coming again! She said it over to herself as she climbed the stairs to her own little room that opened into her mother's. It was warmer in her mother's room, but she didn't want to be comfortable, she wanted to sit and think, just to think.

She sat for a long time in the little chair by her own minute desk. At that very desk she had laboriously printed a letter with her own hand the week before, and her mother had addressed it to Santa Claus, Esq., North Pole, and delivered it. So that before bedtime, and her mother laid it solemnly on the hearth in the library, and in the night he had sent one of his elves for it, just as her father said he would, for, sure enough, when Sarah had gone down the next morning there was no sign of it anywhere. The terrible thing had happened since then. She sat in her little chair until the gloom thickened about her and she heard the front door opening. There was the sound, too, of her father's laugh and her mother's voice calling her, and her mother was laughing, too. So that she had heard yet another who had heard could ever laugh again, surely.

She went down stairs into the lighted hall with a weight of misery on her heart. Her mother and father seemed suddenly like aliens, with whom she had nothing in common.

It was plain to see that of all the household she was the only one that knew this dreadful thing and suddenly, even as her father was teasing her in the air and her radiant young mother was smiling beside him, she realized that she could not tell them, she could not. Why, once when her father was playing with her her head had come violently in contact with the arm of his chair and she remembered his distress and half reproaches. His "Oh! have I hurt my little girl?" had been more soothing than the strains that promptly made its appearance. How could she hurt him now, and mother. Once a long time ago when father had been very ill she had heard mother crying in the night, very softly, and she had not gotten up and gone to her because of a strange soul elyness that had fallen upon her, but her baby heart had almost broken with love and sympathy and now was she to make mother cry again. "They are so happy," Sarah said to her strange, little heart, "I can't tell them, I can't."

There was a big bowl of holly on the dining table. Sarah tried to keep her eyes from it. She was a silent little thing at her happiest—one of those quaintly good children whose samplers, had she lived a hundred years before, would have pointed to with pride. Her father and mother adored her, but the secret soul of a child is sometimes too hidden for love itself to find.

The fact that Sarah ate her baked apple and bread and butter sandwich in silence was not uncommon. They had no knowledge of the truth that Sarah was shielding them, protecting them, even from herself.

For a wonder there was little talk of Christmas at the table that night. Father and mother were going to a theatre party, it appeared, and Hannah was to put Sarah to bed and wait up in mother's room until they came back. "And she'll tell you how Santa Claus comes to little girls in Ireland," her mother said as she kissed Sarah good-bye. "Just think, Honey, at this time to-morrow night your stocking will be hung up and somebody will be coming quick, quick all the way from the North Pole. Think of it when you go to sleep to-night." And beneath this torture Sarah had managed to smile. Her mother mustn't know—not to-night, when she was so pretty and light hearted. Perhaps she would find out at the theatre. Perhaps when she went there all the lights would

be out, and when her father asked what the matter was some one would turn to him and say "Haven't you heard?" and then the blight would fall on them.

Sarah had been to the theatre once. She tried to think of it when she lay at last in her little white bed; tried to think of the fairies Hannah had told her about that danced like white light on the bog (she had successfully manoeuvred to keep Christmas from the conversation, much to the honest handmaid's surprise), but the effort was hopeless. Oh, if it only hadn't been true. If it only were not true. Suddenly an inspiration seized her. Not to doubt Emerson's word (that possibility never remotely occurred to her), but to clutch the thin hope that he might have been mistaken. That he, even he, might have been misled by false reports, and there was a way to find out, a certain way. She made her way cautiously from her

parently the theatre had not been darkened the night before.

In the dining room she heard her mother singing as she hung holly wreaths in the window. In the kitchen amid a fine odor of baking things, Hannah was chaffing the butcher boy, their talk was all of sweethearts and Christmas gifts. Before her father went to his office he had held Sarah on his knee, and graphically described the packing of Santa Claus' pack. When she had hidden her face on his shoulder and trembled he translated the grip of her little fingers as signifying ecstatic joy. Oh, it was terrible, terrible, that in all the house, in all the world, apparently, only she and Emerson knew the truth. Conflict was raging in her heart. She yearned for sympathy, for consolation, for warmth and cuddling, but she shrank from inflicting the thrust that would give her all. A very sickness of soul fell upon her when she thought of speech.

She brought out her paper dolls and sat staring at them listlessly. Presently her mother came in and she began to play with them almost furiously. "That's right, Chickabiddy," her mother said. "I shouldn't wonder if Santa Claus knew what a good little girl my daughter is and intends to bring her a doll, a link bonnet and a blue bonnet too."

Sarah laid her hand on her mother's dress. "Would you care, very much, if he didn't?" she faltered—"if he didn't come?"

"I'd cry my eyes out," said her mother. "Oh!" gasped Sarah, "Oh!"

Her mother laughed tenderly. "Don't worry, Honey," she said, and dropped a quick kiss on Sarah's blond curls as she went on her busy way.

She was very busy indeed that day. Early in the afternoon she explained to Sarah very gravely that she had letters to write, and that Sarah must on no account disturb her. It was also intimated that Hannah would eagerly accept Sarah's help at sewing, raising, Sarah seemed raised obediently for an hour or more, but the joy of this, which at any other time would have thrilled her, failed to stir her to-day.

While Sarah's mother was joyfully making a small pink bonnet to match a blue one and packing them delicately in a miniature trunk that contained the wardrobe of the doll, Sarah herself was sitting, a little nervous heap, on the hearth rug beside the library fire. Her thoughts had gone to to-morrow morning. How terrible it would be! In this very room that every other Christmas morning contained the very joy of joys, the tree itself, the burden of white-eyed dolls, babies and new, delightfully smelling books, would be nothing, nothing but the old commonplace chairs and tables and an empty white stocking gaping horribly from the mantelpiece! Sarah's heart broke as she pictured it. The amazement, the consternation, the questioning, and finally, the acceptance of this hideous thing. Beyond that to-morrow all seemed chaos. Her tender soul ached with an almost physical pain when she thought of all the children in all the world to-morrow morning. And to-day—how happy they probably were to-day! How happy she herself would have been to-day if she had known!

She fell asleep presently before the fire and when she awoke it was to find herself in the midst of laughing grown-ups—her father and mother and the two very old aunts who came to spend every Christmas with Sarah. And evidently the news of the disaster had not reached the far-away town whence they came any more than it had penetrated that place known vaguely as "The Office," where father spent his days.

The talk was all of to-morrow's joy. Sarah was handed from one lap to another while the conversation went merrily on, a conversation made obviously for Sarah's benefit, and with awful knowledge biting at her heart, she smiled politely, as was expected of her. Presently, however, her lack to take fire, as it were, from the surrounding enthusiasm aroused comment—anxious and affectionate.

"Why, dearie, aren't you glad that Christmas is almost here? Just think of that stocking to-morrow, Sarah!"

"When to-morrow comes!"

"When you wake up in the morning." Oh, that morning—that terrible to-morrow!

Just then Sarah was having her little dinner, and her spoon dropped softly into her plate. She did not howl as another child would have done. Even then repression held her like a hand, but her face worked pitifully and her tears made a winding way down her round face.

Instantly all was amazement and consternation. To all queries Sarah shook her head, while she wept silently against her father's shoulder. Never had it seemed so impossible to tell as now, when sympathy came to her like a garment. Presently the very old aunt dominated the situation. "The truth is that we've talked Christmas until the child is so excited and nervous that she is hysterical. If you take my advice you'll put her quietly to bed. Nonsense, Robert, she isn't at all feverish and she isn't coming down with anything. Leave her to me."

According Sarah was tucked into bed, her brow bathed with cologne and something warm and comforting placed at her feet. But, oh, even more soothing than these was the consciousness that she was spared that awful ordeal of hanging the white stocking that was never, never to be filled. Presently, after a deep sob or two, the tense little body relaxed. She was so tired! Sleep

**CHRISTMAS BELLS.** O Christmas bells! through coming years, We hear in your glad sending The message still of peace, good will—All jarring discords blending.

O bells of God! ring on our souls, To grander action serving, Till all our days are Christmas days Of loving and of serving!

came to her mercifully, as it comes sometimes to souls in the grip of tragedy itself.

And when she awoke it was Christmas Day. The first, gray light of morning filled the room. Last year there had been only a second between her awakening and that ecstatic rush down stairs to the library. To-day she only covered down in bed again. She was not wretchedly miserable, as she had been yesterday. She seemed only crushed and spiritless.

Presently she heard a sound in the next room—her father's voice and her mother's hushed laughter.

Well, in a little while now they would know, too! She wondered how long it would take for her mother to cry her eyes out. She trembled a little as they came blithely into her room, and down stairs in the library was the gaping stocking and emptiness.

"Merry Christmas, Sarah! Merry Christmas, little girl! What, awake and not downstairs, Sarah! Why? What? The moment had come. They must be told, and from her own lips after all. She faced them valiantly. "There is nothing there," she faltered. "There is nothing downstairs at all. Please don't be sorry—but there isn't anything there."

They stared at her anxiously for a moment. Was it really more than simple nervousness that ailed her last night. Suddenly her father smiled. "Why she's been dreaming. Bless her," he said. "Come along, little girl, and we'll see if Santa Claus has forgotten the best child in seven States."

He cuddled her on his shoulder and went joyously down stairs. Her mother and the two old aunts came behind in a very gala of Christmas mirth and enjoyment. And in a moment, just a moment, they would be at the library door. Her father put her down upon the threshold. "There!" he cried.

She closed her eyes for a moment. The picture of the empty room had impressed itself so vividly on her brain that she seemed to be actually beholding it now. How still every one was. Of course now they knew. What was there to do but to be still!

She opened her eyes, miserably, and instantly her heart seemed to leap hotly, like a flame. "Oh!" cried Sarah, "oh!"

The library was transfigured. It was green and red with holly and hung with evergreens. Everything was there—books, packages, games. A blue-eyed doll in a blue bonnet smiled from her seat on the top of a tiny trunk. A knobby, distorted white stocking hung from the mantelpiece, and in the centre of all, beautiful, fruitful, with a pasteboard angel balancing itself on one leg on the very tiptop, was the tree itself. Outside the window the world was white with snow and gold with sun, and somewhere bells were clashing gloriously. Sarah's soul expanded and blossomed like a flower. Her little body quivered with the pure, blessed rapture of relief. "Oh!" she sobbed, "He isn't dead! He isn't dead!"

But when she had been questioned and petted and her elders had exclaimed and pitied and wondered over the unspoken letter and when each and every one had yearned in his secret heart to do instant execution on the cheering Emerson, despite the fact that Sarah dwelt only on the fact that that oracle had "been mistaken," her mother put a last question to the radiant Sarah. "But, dearest, why didn't you tell mother? Why did you keep it all to your self for one whole day?"

"You were so happy," said Sarah. Over Sarah's head her father made a cryptic sign to the two aunts and Sarah's mother that meant, "Haven't we better tell her?" He was slightly amused at the fierce negotiation that presented itself. "Another year," said his wife to him later. "She'll be bigger and harder in another year. This Christmas she's spoiled for her at any rate."

Sarah sat at the foot of her tree, with the blue-eyed doll in her arms. She was so happy that her joy seemed to hold in it something of the exaltation of the inspired and that mysterious thing that is the secret heart of a little child sang in her breast the rapturous song her life could never say.

**The Bells of Yule.** (By Austin Dobson.)

The bells of Yule ring loud and clear Across the threshold of the year; The quiet moon is rising slow Beyond the margin of the snow; The white glint sparkles far and near.

How long have those old sounds been dear? How long have we been used to hear Re-herd their rippling carols flow— The bells of Yule!

Old days return; old dreams appear; Old conflicts rise of Hope and Fear; And yet, with all, 'tis good to know Despite life's change of time and blow, We still thank God to hear once more The bells of Yule!

**POOR MRS. SANTA CLAUS.** It must keep Mrs. Santa Claus busy all the time, Working on toys, because They are so very fine!

And such a lot of different ways The dolls are all dressed In blue, red and blue and grey— But I like pink the best.

And then each toy she has to pack By Christmas Eve, you know, All tightly in the great big sack, With Santa Claus to go.

Oh dear, it seems an awful thing To have so much to do— I really think her head must ring, I pity her—don't you?