

Santa Claus and Little Billee

By John Kendrick Bangs

He was only a little bit of a chap, and so, when for the first time in his life he came into close contact with the endless current of human things, it was as hard for him to "stay put" as for some wayward little atom of flotsam and jetsam to keep from tossing about in the surging tides of the sea.

His mother had left him there in the big toy shop, with instructions not to move until she came back, while she went off to do some mysterious errand. She thought, no doubt, that with so many beautiful things on every side to delight his eye and hold his attention, strict obedience to her commands would not be hard. But, alas, the good lady reckoned not upon the magnetic power of attraction of all those lovely objects in detail. She saw them only as a mass of wonders which, in all probability, would so dazzle his vision as to leave him incapable of movement; but Little Billee was not so indifferent as all that.

When a phonograph at the other end of the shop began to rattle off melodious tunes and funny jokes, in spite of the instructions he had received, off he pattered as fast as his little legs would carry him to investigate. After that, forgetful of everything else, finding himself caught in the constantly moving stream of Christmas shoppers, he was borne along in the resistless current until he found himself at last out upon the street—alone, free, and independent.

It was great fun, at first. By and by, however, the afternoon waned; the sun, as if anxious to hurry along the dawn of Christmas Day, sank early to bed; and the electric lights along the darkening highway began to pop out here and there, like so many merry stars come down to earth to celebrate the gladdest time of all the year. Little Billee began to grow tired; and then he thought of his mama, and tried to find the shop where he had promised to remain quiet until her return. Up and down the street he wandered until his little legs grew weary; but there was no sign of the shop, nor of the beloved face he was seeking.

Once again, and yet once again after that, did the little fellow traverse that crowded highway, his tears getting harder and harder to keep back, and then—joy of joys—whom should he see walking slowly along the sidewalk but Santa Claus himself! The saint was strangely decorated with two queer-looking boards, with big red letters on them, hung over his back and chest; but there was still that same kindly, gray-bearded face, the red cloak with the fur trimmings, and the same dear old cap that the children's friend had always worn in the pictures of him that Little Billee had seen.

With a glad cry of happiness, Little Billee ran to meet the old fellow, and put his hand gently into that of the saint. He thought it very strange that Santa Claus's hand should be so red and cold and rough, and so chapped; but he was not in any mood to be critical. He had been face to face with a very disagreeable situation. Then, when things had seemed blackest to him, everything had come right again; and he was too glad to take more than passing notice of anything strange and odd.

Santa Claus, of course, would recognize him at once, and would know just how to take him back to his mama at home—wherever that might be. Little Billee had never thought to inquire just where home was. All he knew was that it was a big gray stone house on a long street somewhere, with a tall iron railing in front of it, not far from the park.

"Howdidoo, Mr. Santa Claus?" said Little Billee, as the other's hand unconsciously tightened over his own.

"Why, howdidoo, kiddie?" replied the old fellow, glancing down at his new-found friend, with surprise gleaming from his deep-set eyes. "Where did you drop from?"

"Oh, I'm out," said Little Billee bravely. "My mama left me a little

while ago while she went off about something, and I guess I got losted."

"Very likely," returned the old saint with a smile. "Little two-by-four fellers are apt to get losted when they start in on their own hook, specially days like these, with such crowds hustlin' around."

"But it's all right now," suggested Little Billee hopefully. "I'm found again, ain't I?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, you're found all right, kiddie," Santa Claus agreed.

"And pretty soon you'll take me home again, won't you?" said the child.

"Surest thing you know!" answered Santa Claus, looking down upon the

hundred and fifty times as many, kiddie. Fact is, you're all right—'way up among the good boys; though once or twice last summer, you know—"

"Yes, I know," said Little Billee meekly, "but I didn't mean to be naughty."

"That's just what I said to the book-keeper," said Santa Claus, "and so we gave you a gray mark—half white and half black—that doesn't count either way, for or against you."

"Thank you, sir," said Little Billee, much comforted.

"Don't mention it; you are very welcome, kiddie," said Santa Claus, giving the youngster's hand a gentle squeeze.



"Howdidoo, Mr. Santa Claus?"

bright but tired little face with a comforting smile. "What might your address be?"

"My what?" asked Little Billee.

"Your address," repeated Santa Claus. "Where do you live?"

The answer was a ringing peal of childish laughter.

"As if you didn't know that!" cried Little Billee, giggling.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Santa Claus.

"Can't fool you, can I? It would be funny if, after keeping an eye on you all these years since you was a baby, I didn't know where you lived, eh?"

"Awful funny," agreed Little Billee.

"But tell me, Mr. Santa Claus, what sort of a boy do you think I have been?" he added with a shade of anxiety in his voice.

"Pretty good—pretty good," Santa Claus answered, turning in his steps and walking back again along the path he had just traveled—which Little Billee thought was rather a strange thing to do. "You've got more white marks than black ones—a good many more—a

"Why do you call me 'kiddie' when you know my name is Little Billee?" asked the boy.

"Oh, that's what I call all good boys," explained Santa Claus. "You see, we divide them up into two kinds—the good boys and the naughty boys—and the good boys we call kiddies, and the naughty boys we call caddies, and there you are."

Just then Little Billee noticed for the first time the square boards that Santa Claus was wearing.

"What are you wearing those boards for, Mr. Santa Claus?" he asked.

If the lad had looked closely enough, he would have seen a very unhappy look come into the old man's face; but there was nothing of it in his answer.

"Oh, those are my new-fangled back-and-chest protectors, my lad," he replied. "Sometimes we have bitter winds blowing at Christmas, and I have to be ready for them. It wouldn't do for Santa Claus to come down with the sneezes at Christmas-time, you know—no, sirree! This board in front keeps

the wind off my chest, and the one behind keeps me from getting rheumatism in my back. They are a great protection against the weather."

"I'll have to tell my papa about them," said Little Billee, much impressed by the simplicity of this arrangement. "We have a glass board on the front of our ortymobile to keep the wind off Henry—he's our shuffler—but papa wears a fur coat, and sometimes he says the wind goes right thru that. He'll be glad to know about these boards."

"I shouldn't wonder," smiled Santa Claus. "They aren't very becoming, but they are mighty useful. You might save up your pennies and give your papa a pair like 'em for his next Christmas."

Santa Claus laughed as he spoke; but there was a catch in his voice which Little Billee was too young to notice.

"You've got letters printed there," said the boy, peering around in front of his companion. "What do they spell? You know I haven't learned to read yet."

"And why should you know how to read at your age?" said Santa Claus. "You're not more than—"

"Five last month," said Little Billee proudly. "It was such a great age!"

"My, as old as that?" cried Santa Claus. "Well, you are growing fast! Why, it don't seem more than yesterday that you was a pink cheeked baby and here you are big enough to be out alone! That's more than my little boy is able to do."

Santa Claus shivered slightly, and Little Billee was surprised to see a tear glistening in his eye.

"Why, have you got a little boy?" he asked.

"Yes, Little Billee," said the saint. "A poor white-faced little chap, about a year older than you, who—well, never mind, kiddie—he's a kiddie, too—let's talk about something else, or I'll have icicles in my eyes."

"You didn't tell me what those letters on the boards spell," said Little Billee.

"Merry Christmas to Everybody!" said Santa Claus. "I have the words printed there so that everybody can see them; and if I miss wishing anybody a merry Christmas, he'll know I meant it just the same."

"You're awful kind, aren't you?" said Little Billee, squeezing his friend's hand affectionately. "It must make you very happy to be able to be so kind to everybody!"

II.

Santa Claus made no reply to this remark, beyond giving a very deep sigh, which Little Billee chose to believe was evidence of a great inward content. They walked on now in silence, for Little Billee was beginning to feel almost too tired to talk, and Santa Claus seemed to be thinking of something else. Finally, however, the little fellow spoke.

"I guess I'd like to go home now, Mr. Santa Claus," he said. "I'm tired, and I'm afraid my mama will be wondering where I've gone to."

"That's so, my little man," said Santa Claus, stopping short in his walk up and down the block. "Your mother will be worried, for a fact; and your father, too—I know how I'd feel if my little boy got losted and hadn't come home at dinner-time. I don't believe you know where you live, though—now, honest! Come! Fess up, Billee, you don't know where you live, do you?"

"Why, yes, I do," said Little Billee.

"It's in the big gray stone house with the iron fence in front of it, near the park."

"Oh, that's easy enough!" laughed Santa Claus nervously. "Anybody could say he lived in a gray stone house with a fence around it; near the park; but you don't know what street it's on, nor the number, either. I'll bet fourteen wooden giraffes against a monkey on a stick!"

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