

OL' SANDY CLOZE.

Written for the Western Home Monthly.

I.

It was all a joke. Or, rather, if the joker had not done his part there would have been no story at all, for the pathos of it is eternal and therefore commonplace; and the sentiment is commonplace, too, because it is as old and as new as the Christ love that came into the world so long ago, that is reborn each year on Christmas Day. The setting, too, is old and commonplace, for where is the spirit of Christmas more needed than among the little children whom Christ loved, among the little children of the very poor.

The city, as you know it, is one of the vast herding-grounds of the world. It stands like a gorgeous jewel in a tawdry, tarnished setting; stretched through its centre are the dwellings of the rich, and, on all sides, round about it, lie the tenements of the poor—and they huddle closer to the homes of the mighty than the hasps that hold the jewel. To the east and to the west these tenements lie, but the east knows little of the west, and the west cares little for the east, for along the streets that zone the jewelled centre there is no chance for the squalid traffic of the poor.

Bibs lived on the East Side in a tiny room high in a dirty tenement. He was not alone. In many ways it seemed as though it would have been far better for him if he had been alone. For the mother who lay on the bed in the corner was being dragged slowly out of this life by the creeping, crawling fingers of the white plague that haunts those tenements by day and by night. And Nanny, the little sister? Well, Bibs knew that if it were not for Nanny he could go out into the world and try to earn money to pay for the things that the doctor said would save his mother's life. Some of the things he could buy if he had only a little money, but some of them he did not believe were in the world. He had never seen them, he had never felt them, and Bibs was sceptical about things he had never seen and never felt.

And yet, crouched in the corner where the light from the air shaft fell, Bibs was writing a letter to someone he had never seen, to someone whose very existence he doubted. But if there was any chance that the things he had heard were true, he knew that he must take advantage of them.

He had been planning the letter for a long time, but he had only just found a piece of paper for it, and he had begged the pencil with which he was writing from Tony at the corner. Tony had told him that he could have the pencil for just half an hour, and his little stiff grimy fingers were struggling to print the letters on the paper that grew grimmer and grimmer under his touch. It was not a very long letter for Bibs had been told that he would only have to write his name and address and the list of things that he wanted. So he had commenced his letter with the number and name of his street and his own name; in a great straggling line they filled nearly half the page. Neither was his list very long; some medicine, some soup and some wine, a doll for Nanny, a higher pillow and a blanket and some green fields and country air—these were the things that Bibs had never heard of, and even Santa Claus could hardly have known from the spelling just what they were—and, perhaps, a knife. That was all.

He folded the paper twice, and on the outside wrote "Ol' Sandy Cloze." Then he hesitated. He asked his mother where Santa Claus lived, but the woman's voice was choked by a sudden cough. Bibs waited, but the light was going fast.

"I guess they'll know if I just put 'some'ers' on it," he said, and added that for an address.

Then he raced to the corner with the pencil for Tony and dropped his letter into the mail-box.

II.

In a West-Side hovel, a hovel that had been the back-house of a canal-boat, a hovel that still retained the stale, unsavoury odour of its long sojourn on the river, lived Ol' Clo'es, the miser. At night, and all night long he sat in his room, in his mind, visions of gold came after another. One was a

golden-haired woman whose eyes were as blue as the forget-me-nots of his native land. That was always short, and after it were the golden curls of a blue-eyed baby. Then came visions of gold that rattled and clinked in bags, for all the money that came in to Ol' Clo'es was changed to the gold of that native land. The baby's yellow curls were growing more and more golden. There was a vision, too, before which Ol' Clo'es shrank, over which his yellow teeth chattered. And this vision was of a night when a golden-haired girl bent over a table on which were piles of yellow gold. She had come upon him unawares when he gloated over his treasure, and he had raised his chair high in the air and crashed it down upon the golden head. For twenty years he had not seen the golden-haired girl, for twenty years he had not known whether he had killed his child or not, for he had gathered his

fit. He's sandy enough and he's called Ol' Clo'es, and he's been asking for a letter ever since I've been on the street. It'll be a kind of a joke to give him this and see what he does."

So it was Uncle Sam, through one of his minions, who perpetrated the joke.

IV.

It was the day before Christmas, late in the afternoon, so late that the city gleamed with the jewelled lights that hone through holly-wreathed windows out into the darkening streets. Winter had decked the city in her whitest robes, and had hung it with glittering gems that held and reflected the lights that lined the streets. On the long straight avenue, two steady streams of sleighs passed up and down, filling the sharp air with silver merriment. In the sleighs were animate bundles of fur and lace covered with jewels, and all hovered the perfume of violets, hot-house blossoms reared for just that little half hour in the snowy Christmas air.

On the western curb of the avenue stood an old man with white face and gleaming eyes and straggling sandy locks. So tattered, so ragged, so forlorn he was that one of the jewelled occupants of a

her warm, to keep himself warm. On the bed the mother dosed and coughed and coughed and dosed. The only light in the room came through the open door from the dingy hall, and its faint rays flickered across the faded yellow hair on the pillow, on the golden-haired child in Bibs' arms.

There was a fumbling, stumbling step on the stairs, but it was too early for Santa Claus, so Bibs gave the sound no thought. On each landing there was a little pause. On Bibs' landing it was longer than it had been before. Then a shadow fell across the floor. Bibs' heart stood still. Was it Santa Claus, after all? The boy turned and looked at the man and then the steady heart moved on. This stranger was no saint. He was only a man, poorer, more ragged even, than the other tenants in the house.

But now the man who had stood so long on the threshold of the little room entered slowly.

"Nan!" It was a weak old voice, quavering and harsh, but the sick woman heard it. She tried to rise. She lifted her weak arms, but she spoke only one word, "Father!"

"I knew it was you," Ol' Clo'es whispered, his arms clasped about his daughter, "I knew it must be you."

Bibs had not moved. He still cuddled the sleeping child in his arms. He still waited for the Santa Claus who would come at midnight, perhaps, and would bring the soup and the wine and the medicines, the doll and the knife. His dreams were too bright to be tarnished by this shabby old man. And then, on his brain were marked the words that drove the dream away, that told him that his letter had never reached the Christmas saint.

"And it had your old nickname, Bibs, at the top, and then it spoke of Nanny, and I was so sure, oh so sure that it was you. And"—the old man's voice quavered and flickered like a wind-blown flame—"and, Nanny, girl, I've got the gold; you remember the gold? The money's all for you, child. It will make you well. Surely, it can make you well."

It was here that the sick woman stretched her hand towards Bibs. She motioned him to come, to bring the baby nearer. She told him to lay it in the old man's arms.

The sleeping child stirred, then woke suddenly and opened her eyes, that were as blue as the forget-me-nots of the old man's boyhood home. She looked in wonder at the old face bending over her; she laid one hand caressingly on the old lips, and murmured, happily and drowsily:

"Sandy Cloze! Bibs's Sandy Cloze!"

VI.

There were no more days in the lonely hovel on the West Side. There were only a few more days in the grimy tenement on the East Side. Then the new life began. The old man was never again alone, but only a few of his golden visions stayed with him. One was a golden-haired woman, who daily grew stronger and stronger, and another was a golden-haired baby with forget-me-not eyes. The visions of the gold that rattled, of the gold in bags, were gone; the gold itself was gone. It had been spread out over green fields; it had been transformed into country air, and sometimes it whispered to him saying "father," sometimes "grandfather," and sometimes, when little Nanny spoke, it said "Sandy Cloze," for Nanny could only believe that the old man who had come on Christmas eve was no one else save Bibs's Sandy Cloze.

Christmas in Switzerland is, of course, cold but jolly. One may purchase a Christmas tree and everything to put on it at any of the snow-covered booths and they are to be found at every turn. Away up in the Alps at the Monastery of St. Bernard visitors join the monks at mass and at their feast, although at that season of the year there are few travellers. In the Austrian salt mines under the Alps and Carpathian Mountains, among caverns and pillars of glistening crystals, unique Christmas festivities are held. Here miners and their families live in excavated homes and many of them never see the light of day. But upon the arrival of Christmas their homes and streets are brilliantly lighted. Here, too, the Christ child comes distributing gifts to good children; and St. Nicholas, followed by hobgoblins, frightens the naughty ones.



"SAINT CECILIA," from the Painting by Lionel Royer.

treasure up and fled with it from his home. But four times a day he left his hovel when he heard the postman's shrill whistle on the street that edged the river. Was there a letter for him? Of course no letter ever came, and he always returned to his rags and to his visions.

III.

It was almost Christmas, and the clerks at the post-office were taking a moment's rest, an instant's breathe, forgetting, just for a second, that they were merely machines.

"Same old game," yawned one, stretching his numbed arms. "Boxes all filled up with kids' letters to Santa Claus."

A dozen childish missives to the old saint were greeted with jests and laughter. One was addressed to Greenland, another to Iceland, one to the north pole, another to the moon. On one was a note to Uncle Sam asking him to find the Christmas saint, and then came Bib's letter addressed to "Old Sandy Cloze, Some'ers."

"Say, I guess it won't be robbing the mails for me to take that letter," drawled a voice. "I got a customer that it'll just

passing sleigh turned shuddering from a glimpse of him. Her Christmas wish was not for the peace that is good will to all men, but for the peace that is forgetfulness of all men's sorrows.

A dozen times the old man quavered forward. A dozen he staggered back confused by the gliding sleighs, the prancing horses, the silver music, and the gleaming lights. At last a friendly hand was slipped into his, a chummy voice said:

"Say, d'ye wantter cross, Ol' Clo'es? I'll tow yer over. Jes stop when I says stop and go when I says go."

It was only a newsboy as tattered as he was, but, yielding himself to the friendly convoy, he crossed in safety.

V.

In the tiny room, high in the dirty tenement, Bibs was waiting, doubtfully, sceptically. He had just been out to ask when old Santa Claus was likely to come and bring the things. Now he knew that he might have to wait until midnight or even later than that. He had cuddled Nanny to sleep with a story of Santa Claus and the doll he might bring, and he still held her in his arms to keep