

A Rented Santa Claus

By MADGE MACBETH

KATHLEEN PALMER sat in her lavender-tinted morning room and reflectively sucked the end of a small silver pencil. She was both enjoying and chafing under the responsibilities that her return from a five year's sojourn upon the European continent had thrust on her.

She timed her home coming with the Christmas holidays and planned to burst into the place she had left, with all the brilliancy her wealth and position warranted. She also had romantic ideas of being a Lady Bountiful to the inhabitants of the neighbouring town of Selby, as well as the tenants of the "Melton" estate, and she could think of no better way to accomplish both ends than by giving a huge Christmas party. Upon the details of this project she was bending her thoughts, but receiving scant inspiration from the little silver pencil, Kathleen touched a bell at her elbow. When its summons was answered, she sent for Miss Lampton.

"I don't seem to get on very well with the details for the party," she complained as the older woman sat down. "I have only thirty names here, and I should have at least fifty to make the thing a go; the truth is that I have forgotten the people I used to know."

"It is a pity that your aunt happens to be in Egypt just now," murmured Miss Lampton. "She could have taken hold of everything with no trouble at all. Couldn't you wait until she gets back?"

"Mercy, no!" cried the girl sharply. "Live here for two or three months with only the Society Column of the paper as an amusement! I may be frivolous-minded and all that, but I want to go to balls, and suppers, and house parties—I want to know people my own age, and have an ad-ripping good time!"

Kathleen checked herself none too soon. She had nearly said an "adventure," but not quite! Never in all her continental experience had she known an adventure; Miss Lampton, practical and conscientious to a degree, was not a conducive medium. She felt that if she could keep her charge out of entanglements her reward would be greater than if she sentimentally neglected her duty. And Kathleen had not seemed to notice this until they were actually back in New York. Then she saw Him! He had evidently come to meet his mother who had been shockingly ill on the voyage—too ill to make any acquaintances. He noticed her just enough to make her wish He would go a little further. Her trunks were examined first, and He and his mother stood near waiting their turn. The customs officer seemed inclined to be lenient at first, but when he had striven futilely to push his hand into the largest trunk, which was packed with the heaviest things after the manner of a conjuror's box, he lost his good humour and began to search for "tricks."

"What is this in the bottom?" he asked, purple in the face from his exertions. "Liquor?"

"Certainly not!" cried Kathleen, indignantly.

"Oh, you can't fool me!" replied the officer, tugging away at the article in question. He was bent into the shape of a crooked horse-shoe, and except for being angry, Kathleen would have laughed. "I feel the bottles."

"I have no bottles," denied the girl.

"We'll see," snapped the man, piling suits, shoes, books and boxes on the floor.

Kathleen looked at Him, and meeting his eyes a deep blush overspread her face. She loathed herself for being obliged to stand meekly by and be bullied by this insolent official. She hated the contents of her trunk as she saw them exposed to His eyes and was conscious of wishing it had been one of the trunks containing her fine clothes. His mother offered a few words of sympathy and he echoed them even while a tiny smile of amusement flickered about his lips. She felt that he was the sort of man who bowed to the inevitable gracefully, and one upon whom to rely. The officer's perspiring efforts were rewarded, and he presently brought to light a pair of Indian clubs.

"I told you so," volunteered Miss Lampton, who was feminine, if not sentimental.

After that He talked to Kathleen while the other

trunks were opened, and when everything was examined his mother asked them to have lunch with her, but Miss Lampton's rigid sense of propriety was outraged and her refusal left no room for further parley. From force of long habit the girl obediently followed her companion—who had lately been governess—into a taxi which He had summoned, and their leave taking was as formal as even she could wish. They had never discussed Him since, for Miss Lampton's rigorous conscience had warped her sentimentality and imagination, to say nothing of poetic expression, and she would have been wholly shocked and unsympathetic had Kathleen confessed that she had fallen in love with a chance stranger—a man who had compellingly, yet tender eyes, a firm but smiling mouth, a powerful but supple figure, and a low, caressing voice. She flushed hotly, thinking how strongly and tenderly he could hold a girl in his arms, and she tried hard not to allow such unmaidenly conjectures to intrude upon her day's routine. But the fact remained that she hoped constantly that he might be some one's brother, or a visiting cousin or the like, for the



Old Saint Nick burst into the brilliantly lighted room.

Drawn by A. Lismer.

Christmas party would not be a success without Him.

"Thank goodness I have the children all arranged for," said Kathleen. "Parkins has seen to the inviting of them—a hundred! They will come at six, play games, and see the tree—which means getting their presents. Then they will have supper and be sent home in the big busses. The grown-ups are asked especially to amuse them."

"Who will give the presents?" asked practical Miss Lampton.

"Why, Santa Claus, of course."

"And whom have you selected for Santa Claus?"

"That is just the trouble," sighed the philanthropist. "There is no one amongst all the guests who fits the part I want him to play. I have even thought of the servants! Here is where a brother or a second cousin or a lover would come in," she exclaimed. "Every other girl has some one but me!"

And for the life of her, Miss Lampton could see no reason for the burning blush which dyed Kathleen's face; she had forgotten all about Him. She made a second suggestion, however, and thereby hangs this tale.

"What about Blackmore's?" she inquired.

Those who do not grasp the entire significance of this question are worse than ignorant, they are

senile. Blackmore's, the Universal Provider, the World's Carry-all, the Palatial What-not! Blackmore's, the Colossal Emporium, where a demand has never been refused; where a live, white elephant with trappings was provided on six hours notice; where a whole Maori village was imported to please the passing whim of a Duchess; where Botocudo warriors, Turkish dancers, Yogi, where marmosets and trained crocodiles are to be bought or rented!

Why not a Santa Claus?

A telegram was immediately dispatched to Blackmore's:

Can you provide a Santa Claus on Christmas Eve at six o'clock? Must be refined, good at repartee and fond of children. Also conversant with Nursery Rhymes and Fairy Tales. Wire.

K. PALMER.

And within the shortest possible time this answer was received:

Order filled. Satisfaction guaranteed. Santa Claus arrives on the 5.55 Xmas Eve.

R. BLACKMORE.

After that, preparations for the coming festivities seemed to go with delightful smoothness. A huge chimney, looking like a giant's coffin standing on end, was built so that Santa might make a sensational entrance in the approved manner near the great tree in the library. Shopping expeditions to town were daily affairs, toy shops were depleted, caterers interviewed and musicians engaged.

But Reginald Blackmore, who took a personal interest in filling the young heiress's order was nonplussed to find that he had no suitable Santa Claus in the People To Rent Department. Such a calamity was unrecorded in the history of the establishment. There was Mr. O'Mara, but he was engaged for a holiday burlesque in which he was to impersonate "Tay Pay"—and he did it very well, too! Old Parsons was busily conning over volumes of New Thought, the Lake School and Swedenborgism preparatory to taking part in a serious debate to be given in the coming week. Count Moreni, the star linguist of the Emporium was bespoken for a cosmopolitan dinner to be given by a forceful woman who beat upon Society's door with a bludgeon. There were many more but none who were disengaged or suitable in Reginald Blackmore's opinion for Miss Palmer's party.

At last, on the 23rd of December, when the proprietor of the Palatial What-not had almost decided to make a personal tour amongst the numerous departments in order that he might pick out a floor walker or a particularly pleasing salesman for the role, he was informed that six male applicants had presented themselves at the People To Rent Department. With hopeful steps, Mr. R. Blackmore walked quickly through the half mile of lingerie; instantly he spotted his man—a little too tall for the part, perhaps, but ideal in every other way. He had a low, clear voice which sounded hearty enough, he was certainly well bred, his eyes were

at once twinkling and serious, and he seemed anxious for a position. Mr. Blackmore waved him into a private office.

"Are you at all clever?" he asked with embarrassing frankness.

"No," answered the young man with equal candour, "but I don't confess it to every one. Modesty forbids my saying more."

"Have you ever taken part in private theatricals?"

"Undoubtedly my best trick," was the prompt answer. "Is there a part for me?"

"Yes, an original part. You are wanted for a Santa Claus, who must be a gentleman, good at repartee, fond of children—"

"My word," laughed the young man. "I am sure that the lady had just me in view!"

"—conversant with Nursery Rhymes and Fairy Tales," continued Mr. Blackmore, severely. "You are expected to make suitable speeches for both children and grown people at a party. Can you do it?"

"I will do my best," declared the young man, "one can not do more. May I know where this masquerade is to take place?"

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