

A RENTED SANTA CLAUS

(Continued from page 6.)

"At Melton; Miss Kathleen Palmer is to give an entertainment—"

"You don't mean to say that the little Palmer girl has grown large enough to give a party!" the young man mused more to himself than to the older one. Indeed, he quite forgot himself.

When Peter Caswell arrived at the Palmer mansion he dressed quickly, and was taken by a servant to see Miss Palmer.

"Miss Palmer is in there," announced the man rapping gently at a large glass door.

Peter turned the handle and entered, but before he had time to see the woman he was to serve, the lights flared up and then went out leaving the house in total darkness.

With a little cry of annoyance the girl came forward.

"Are you the Santa Claus?" she asked, standing quite close to him.

"Yes, Miss Palmer."

"Very well, then listen. I must hurry down and see that the children are not frightened—you are to go outside, through the gun room, and on your left you will find a ladder which will take you to the top of the big chimney I had built off the library. This has, also, a ladder inside it, and when you are sufficiently far down to be within easy reach of the entrance, I want you to wait for my signal. I will clap my hands and cry 'Hush! What noise is that in the chimney?'"

"You must slide down then, and make a sensational entrance. Make a little speech to the children, first, and distribute their presents as you see fit. They will be on a large table just beside you. After we have finished with the children and they have gone home, you are to give the grown people their mementoes. Try to make them appropriate—don't give a man a thimble and a girl a razor, you know!"

With a soft, fragrant swish she was gone, the memory of her voice bringing a strange sense of familiarity to Peter Caswell.

The lights' sudden glare brought him to a recollection of his work, and he crept stealthily down stairs where the faithful parkins piloted him through the gun room and out to the base of the ladder.

With creditable agility Santa climbed up one and down the other as far as he dared, and awaited his signal. To ease his position slightly he kept his feet on the ladder, and letting go with his hands wedged his big, padded body against the outer wall of the box chimney. Suddenly, a voice sounded in his ear, startling him so, that for a second he could scarcely realize that he was alone in his cage. The sound was hushed but distinct, and the speaker was without doubt occupying the same position outside as that held by Peter, inside. This was possible if he lay flat on the roof over the library verandah. Intently, Peter listened while the man whispered. He was answered by a second and their conversation was more than ordinarily interesting.

A regular stampede below announced the children's arrival in the library. The two voices resolved themselves into heavy shuffling, a creak or two, then silence, and, presently, Caswell heard his signal.

Chuckling merrily, as befitted his part, old Saint Nick slid down, and burst into the brilliantly lighted room.

There was an awe-struck silence, a backing from the place where he stood and suspicious whimpers. Many of the hundred children had never seen even a shop Santa Claus! In an instant, however, he had thrust his hand into the mysterious pack and brought forth a dozen shining pennies which he held for them to take. They crowded near with big, round, greedy eyes, and a little tot of three so far overcome her fright as to stroke his beard. "Snow," she said solemnly.

"Bless you, yes, baby," assented the red-coated fellow, "but not the sort of snow I had to travel through to get to you!" Lifting the child to his shoulder, Santa Claus then began the thrilling story of his journey from

Brownie Land to "Melton"; he told them of the regiment of little people who worked for him that they might be made happy, he took them over snowy plains where the white and frosty elves waited upon him and drew the ice bergs like ferries, he took them through deep, dark tunnels where the gnomes went on ahead with sputtering torches, he made them fly from peak to peak behind his faithful reindeer, Dunder and Blitzen. He made them friends of Red Riding Hood, Jack the Giant Killer and Cinderella, and he likened Miss Palmer to the beautiful, good fairies, whereat every one cheered. And when the littlest ones began to grow restless and the parents were all distributed, he steered them—hanging on his back, to his belt, or about his fur-topped boots to the dining-room.

There, he allowed himself to sigh with relief; that much was successfully accomplished, and now he must turn his mind to the other thing. But all his wits were driven from him as he saw a slim figure in white come toward him. His face grew hot under the heavy white beard and he dreaded lest it should not be an adequate disguise.

"You are perfectly splendid!" she said to him, smiling. "I had to pinch myself every minute to make myself realize that it was only you. I should like to believe, always, in fairies!"

Peter muttered something as she moved away. "Only you," she had said. Did those words hold any suspicion? he asked himself.

A peculiar silence had fallen in the dining-room—only the grown people talked. From various causes the little folks were unable to make sounds other than those forbidden at a gentleman's table, and seeing every one engrossed Santa Claus slipped unnoticed through the hallway, into the gun room, where he selected an old revolver and bullets for it, then, after loading it, he tip-toed to the first floor toward the parlour.

Each switch as he passed, he turned, and when the hall was in darkness he collected several rugs and piled them in front of the stairs. Then cocking the old revolver he pushed open a door, devoutly hoping it might be the right one, stepped quickly inside and stood with his back against the wall.

It was all over in a minute, but such a painful minute! Two shadows, forms were silhouetted against the brilliance of the lights on the driveway; they were working at a small combination safe in the wall. All at once he heard a sound behind him—he felt a presence in the doorway and turned, sharply. The two men saw him, and rushed toward him; he raised his arm and fired. There was a loud report, a shower of sparks, a nauseating pain in his arm, his breath was struck from his body, and he only struck feebly at the man who rushed at him. Just before he went down a woman's scream seemed to pierce his very soul and then all was still.

He opened his eyes and looked in, to Jim Henley's face. His right arm lay limply on his chest, and his breathing was very painful. Nearby stood a basin, some cotton dressings and various bottles.

"Peter, you old fool," said Dr. Henley, affectionately, "what the deuce does this all mean?"

"Mad idea of Woodward's—thirst for adventure—receipt for eternal youth—and all the rest of his assinine theories! Six of us applied to old Blackmore and rented ourselves for the evening; there is a thousand dollar kitty for the one with the most thrilling adventure. Will you recommend me?"

Henley whistled softly. "But what about those men?" he asked.

"While I was in my chimney corner I overheard these delightfully grateful thugs—fathers of half a dozen kiddies who were benefitting by the generosity of Miss Palmer—planning a raid on the family heirlooms, so I tried to head them off. The gun exploded, didn't it?"

"Rather!"

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By order of the Board.

STUART STRATHY,

General Manager.

Toronto, November 3rd, 1911.

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