

pointment. In the dim light of a tallow candle, flaring and spluttering in the draught on the hearthstone, stood a lurid figure. It had white, gleaming teeth, and its eyes seemed to roll restlessly as their glance fell on the scared little figure standing in the doorway.

'Heh?' said the black figure, huskily.

'You are Santa Claus, ain't you?' asked poor Tommy in a quivering voice. 'I only wanted to thank you, that's all.'

There was certainly something very uncanny about the grin which revealed more of those shining white teeth; but Tommy's courage was coming back with his color.

'I've been so wanting to see you; you are a nice man!' he went on, his teeth chattering with fear; could this be the fresh-faced, kindly, white-haired old man of his Christmas imagination? And yet, there he stood, in the chimney!

Santa Claus rubbed his sleeve across his cheek, thereby leaving a grey streak in the surrounding blackness. He cleared his throat uneasily.

'You won't be angry with me for wanting to see you, will you, Santa Claus, dear,' pleaded Tommy, advancing with trembling little legs a step further into the room. 'I only wanted to tell you it's so awfully good of you to give us all those lovely things you do every Christmas!'

Santa Claus opened his mouth to speak; and Tommy thought he must hear how his teeth were chattering. It was such an awful countenance to look upon!

'Look yere, little chap,' said Santa Claus, in unmistakable village accents; 'don't you go fancyin' I'm good, nor yet kind, nor yet one as gives you, nor nobody else neither, lovely things.'

At this moment nurse, in what she subsequently described as 'dish-shabble,' appeared on the scene. Santa Claus vanished into darkness of the chimney.

'Master Tommy, you naughty boy! Catching your death of cold on them bare boards, in your bare feet, with nothing on!'

So Tommy had to go back to bed, with the mystery more involved than ever. And as he lay there shivering, he became more and more confused. Had he angered Santa Claus, and driven him away for ever? Or, was that black and fearful figure only Peter Fisher, 'come at last,' as nurse had said, with mingled anger and relief in her voice?

And as he got warmer, Tommy's ideas became still more confused, and he fell asleep at last, and dreamed that Santa Claus, who was wonderfully like that black figure, with the addition of a snow-white beard and a crown of holly, was telling him, that coming down the chimney and getting black, was his own way of keeping people in the dark.

The nursery chimney must have needed sweeping badly; for the soot, or something else, kept choking Peter Fisher, and obliged him to clear his throat a good many times.

'Good and kind to 'em, bringing of 'em lovely things, bless my soul alive!' he muttered to himself; vigorous bumps of his brush emphasizing each phrase.

And then Tommy's Santa Claus tried to laugh. But the laugh wouldn't come.

It was about the same time that morning that Tommy was giving his 'pretty Aunt Ella' the hug which went so far towards making up to her for the non-arrival of a particular letter, that Peter Fisher

came in sight of number one Prospect Cottages. In the clear, cold air, he could hear his children's voices distinctly, as they played in the snow behind a heap of bricks, which a sanguine builder had thrown down in readiness for number two Prospect Cottages, a mansion as yet dimly outlined in spectral fireplaces on the farther wall of their home. That heap of bricks was a source of never-ending occupation to the little Peter Fishers, and of sighing to their mother, a tall, thin, woman, who lived in a perennial state of 'cleaning.'

They were all playing on it that morning, as noisily and happily as if it were not Christmas time; when there was no knowing how father might come home! True, Christmas might bring some halpence for sweets; according as things went, or went not, in the direction of the 'Black Boy.' But there was no reckoning on it; and woe to him who built castles in the air, on however solid a foundation of 'rock' or 'bull's eyes.' These might certainly be expected to come crashing about his ears!

They were far from expecting anything that Christmas. Why, therefore, Tommy, the smallest boy, should have taken it into his 'stoopid little 'ead' that Santa Claus, or anyone else, was going to give him a present, no one could tell.

'He've read it on the paper,' said one of them; Tommy's love of literature being a standing joke.

'Ah, the little stoopid,' cried the eldest of the family, a lean, grimy boy, who had begun to accompany his father on his rounds, 'who'd believe a pack o' printed lies!'

'It is true, though,' cried Tommy, thus challenged, in a shrill voice. 'Teacher said so! She said as how Santa Claus come down the chimbley to people as 'anged up their stocking for 'im, and put things into 'em.'

'There ain't no such thing as Santa Claus, and you may tell teacher I said so,' retorted the grimy boy. 'Whoever comes down chimbleys but the sweep, and I'd like to know what he'd bring you, ye sillies. Think o' father bringing us anythink!'

At this they all laughed so heartily, that the grimy boy, who was standing in a perilous position on one leg, toppled over, and rolled down into the snow.

That laugh was not pleasing in Peter Fisher's ears; and the choke came into his throat.

'Well, there's no 'arm in trying,' said Tommy doggedly; 'I means to, I can tell ye.'

'Right you are, my boy,' said a well-known voice from the other side of the brick-heap; and Peter Fisher's black figure appeared above it. The children started up, and Tommy began to cry.

'I'd 'ang 'em up, I would, if I was you, childer, as sure as I'm Santa Claus!' And Peter Fisher drew his sleeve across his cheek, for his eyes were dim, and that choke was troubling him again.

And Mrs. Peter Fisher within, cleaning, saw and heard it all, and trembled. What had come to father that Christmas? What was he going to do next?

Chapter IV.

Quite a different kind of noise roused Tommy in his warm bed at Myrtle Grove on Christmas morning. Not nurse in a

dish-shabble,' but his father's brown face was bending over him; while his mother, no longer pale, and sad-eyed, hung on his arm, all smiles and roses. And when, in answer to his questions as to how he had come, Colonel Lindsay suggested Santa Claus and the chimney, Tommy believed every word of it. More than one difficult thing was to be cleared up that Christmas day in Otterbrook.

There was no peace for Toby opposite, that day. Colonel Lindsay's early arrival had put all his former experiences on the road into confusion. It was, therefore, some seconds before he became aware of the near neighborhood of a traveller, carrying a large yellow Gladstone bag, who rang the bell at Myrtle Grove, later in the day. And in his fury at the event, it was some seconds before the traveller could make nurse, who, in a moment of enthusiasm, had so far forgotten 'her place' as to answer the door, understand whom he had come to see. Jane, in her new cap and apron, could not have rivalled the dignity with which she announced—

'Captain Borthwick, to see Miss Ella.'

It is the unexpected that happens, as we, unthankful mortals that we are, say, when a good thing comes to pass.

The neighbors had had actual proof of this, when on Christmas Eve, Peter Fisher and his wife had sallied forth, with a capacious basket to do Christmas shopping. But the little Peter Fishers were to prove it by their own joyful, and noisy experience on Christmas morning, as they contemplated those stockings, which, in obedience to little Tommy's directions, they had hung up on the previous night.

Mrs. Peter Fisher's head was 'splitting,' as her husband kissed her under the mistletoe that night; and pretended, amidst yells of delight from the children, to look for Christmas roses in those pale thin cheeks. Their eyes met; and that odd kind of choke came into Peter's throat. Mrs. Peter smiled, a 'wintry' smile, it is true; but there was not a bit of frost in it.

For underneath the snow of those sad, bare years lay sleeping, not dead, the fair roses of hope and joy, which the kiss of Tommy's Santa Claus had made to stir once more.

Tom's Christmas Novelties.

(Judith Spencer, in the New York 'Observer'.)

'Mother,' said Tom, 'I see all the other stores have their windows fixed up fine with novelties and things. I tell you, folks won't come and buy of us if we don't have things as good as our neighbors'. If we want to succeed we've got to make our show window pretty enough to tempt the people so they'll come in and buy. I'd like a handsome big figure of Santa Claus to put in it, for one thing!'

Mrs. Temple looked admiringly at her crippled boy as he sat lunched up at the table before her keen-eyed and eager, with his chin resting in his wizened hands. It was a hard struggle for this poor widow to get along, and Tom tried hard to help her.

'But, Tom, my dear,' she ventured mildly, 'we haven't any money to put into novelties these hard times. I know it is just as you say, but I don't see my way clear to go into anything new—this year, anyway.'

'Mother,' cried Tom after a thoughtful