



The Thin Santa Claus

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by Ellis Parker Butler

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The Chicken Yard That Was a Christmas Stocking

Mrs. Gratz opened her eyes and looked out at the drizzle that made the Christmas morning gray. Her bed stood against the window, and it was easy for her to look out; all she had to do was to roll over and pull the shade aside. Having looked at the weather she rolled again on to the broad flat of her back and made herself comfortable for awhile, for there was no reason why she should get up until she felt like it.

"Such a Christmas!" she said good-naturedly to herself. "I guess such weathers is bad for Santy Claus. Mebby it is because of such weathers he don't come by my house. I don't blame him. So muddy!"

She let her eyes close indolently. Not yet was she hungry enough to imagine the tempting odour of fried bacon and eggs, and she idly slipped into sleep again. She was in no hurry. She was never in a hurry. What is the use of being in a hurry when you own a good little house and have money in the bank and are a widow? What is the use of being in a hurry, anyway? Mrs. Gratz was always placid and fat, and she always had been. What is the use of having money in the bank and a good little house if you are not placid and fat? Mrs. Gratz lay on her back and slept, placidly and fatly, with her mouth open, as if she expected Santa Claus to pass by and drop a present into it. Her dreams were pleasant.

It was no disappointment to Mrs. Gratz that Santa Claus had not come to her house. She had not expected him. She did not even believe in him.

"Yes," she had told Mrs. Flannery, next door, as she handed a little parcel of toys over the fence for the little Flannerys, "once I believes in such a Santy Claus myself, yet. I make me purty good times then. But now I'm too old. I don't believe in such things. But I make purty good times, still. I have a good little house, and money in the bank--"

Suddenly Mrs. Gratz closed her mouth and opened her eyes. She smelled imaginary bacon frying. She felt real hunger. She slid out of bed and began to dress herself, and she had just buttoned her red flannel petticoat around her wide waist when she heard a silence, and paused. For a full minute she stood, trying to realize what the silence meant. The English sparrows were chirping as usual and making enough noise, but through their bickerings the silence still annoyed Mrs. Gratz, and then, quite suddenly again, she knew. Her chickens were not making their usual morning racket.

"I bet you I know what it is, sure," she said, and continued to dress as placidly as before. When she went down she found that she had won the bet.

A week before two chickens had been stolen from her coop, and she had had a strong padlock put on the chicken house. Now the padlock was pried open, and the chicken house was empty, and nine hens and a rooster were gone. Mrs. Gratz stooped and entered the low gate and surveyed the vacant chicken yard placidly. If they were gone, they were gone.

"Such a Santy Claus!" she said good-naturedly. "I don't like such a Santy Claus--taking away and not bringing! Purty soon he don't have such a good name any more if he keeps up doing like this. People

likes the bringing Santy Claus. I guess they don't think much of the taking-away business. He gets a bad name quick enough if he does this much."

She turned to bend her head to look into the vacant chicken house and stood still. She put out her foot and touched something her eyes had lighted upon, and the thing moved. It was a purse of worn, black leather, soaked by the drizzle, but still holding the bend that comes to men's purses when worn long in a back trouser pocket. One end of the purse was muddy and pressed deep into the soft soil where a heel had tramped on it. Mrs. Gratz bent and picked it up.

There was nine hundred dollars in bills in the purse. Mrs. Gratz stood still while she counted the bills, and as she counted her hands began to tremble, and her knees shook, and she sank on the door-sill of the chicken house and laughed until the tears rolled down her face. Occasionally she stopped to wipe her eyes, and the flood of laughter gradually died away into ripples of intermittent giggles that were like sobs after sorrow. Mrs. Gratz had no great sense of humour, but she could see the fun of finding nine hundred dollars. It was enough to make her laugh, so she laughed.

"Goodness, such a Santy Claus!" she exclaimed with a final sigh of pleasure. "Such a Christmas present from Santy Claus! No wonder he is so fat yet when he eats ten chickens in one night already. But I don't kick. I like me that Santy Claus all right. I believes in him purty good after this, I bet!"

She went at once to tell Mrs. Flannery, and Mrs. Flannery was far more excited about it than Mrs. Gratz had been. She said it was the Hand of Retribution paying back the chicken thief, and the Hand of Justice repaying Mrs. Gratz for sending toys to the little Flannerys, and Pure Luck giving Mrs. Gratz what she always got, and a number of other things.

"'Tis the luck of ye, Mrs. Gratz, ma'am," she said, "and often I do be sayin' it is the Dutch for luck, meanin' no disrespect to ye, and the fatter the luckier, as I often told me old man, rest his soul, and him so thin! And Christmas mornin' at that, ma'am, which is nothin' at all but th' judgment of hivin on th' dirty chicken thief, pickin' such a day for his thievin', when there's plenty other days in th' year for him. Keep th' money, ma'am, for 't is yours by good rights, and I knew there would some good come till ye th' minute ye handed me th' prisints for the kids. The good folks sure all gits ther reward in this world, only some don't, an' I'm only sorry mine is a pig instid of chickens, but not wishin' ye hadn't th' money yersilf, at all, but who would come to steal a pig, and them such loud squealers? And who do you suspicion it was, Mrs. Gratz, ma'am?"

"I think mebbly I got me a present from Santy Claus, yes?" said Mrs. Gratz.

"And hear th' woman!" said Mrs. Flannery. "Do ye hear that now? Well, true for ye, ma'am, and stick to it, for there's no tellin' who'll be claimin' th' money, and if ever Santy Claus brought a thing to a mortal soul 't was him brought ye that. And 't was only yesterday ye was sayin' ye had no belief in him!"

"Yesterday I don't have no beliefs in him," said Mrs. Gratz. "To-day I have plenty of beliefs in him. I like him plenty. I don't care if he comes every year."

"Sure not," said Mrs. Flannery, "and you with th' nine hundred dollars in yer pocket. I'd be glad of the chanst. I'd believe in him, mesilf, for four hundred and fifty."

That afternoon Mrs. Flannery, whose excitement had not abated in the least, went over to Mrs. Gratz's to spend the afternoon talking to her about the money. She felt that it was good to be that near it, at any rate, and when one can make a whole afternoon's conversation out of what Mrs. Casey said to Mrs. O'Reilly about Mrs. McNally, it is a shame to miss a chance to talk about nine hundred dollars. Mrs. Flannery was rocking violently and talking rapidly, and Mrs. Gratz was slowly moving her rocker and answering in monosyllables, when some one knocked at the door. Mrs. Gratz answered the knock.

Her visitor was a tall, thin man, and he had a slouch hat, which he held in his hands as he talked. He seemed nervous, and his face wore a worried look--extremely worried. He looked like a man who had lost nine hundred dollars, but he did not look like Santa Claus. He was thinner and not so jolly-looking. At first Mrs. Gratz had no idea that Santa Claus was standing before her, for he did not have a sleigh-bell about him, and he had left his red cotton coat with the white batting trimming at home. He stood in the door playing with his hat, unable to speak. He seemed to have some delicacy about beginning.

"Well, what it is?" said Mrs. Gratz.

Her visitor pulled himself together with an effort.

"Well, ma'am, I'll tell you," he said frankly. "I'm a chicken buyer. I buy chickens. That's my business--dealin' in poultry--so I came out to-day to buy some chickens--"

"On Christmas Day?" asked Mrs. Gratz.

"Well," said the man, moving uneasily from one foot to the other, "I did come on Christmas Day, didn't I? I don't deny that, ma'am. I did come on Christmas Day. I'd like to go out and have a look at your chickens--"

"It ain't so usual for buyers to come buying chickens on Christmas Day, is it?" interposed Mrs. Gratz, good-naturedly.

"Well, no, it ain't, and that's a fact," said the man uneasily. "But I always do. The people I buy chickens for is just as apt to want to eat chicken one day as another day--and more so. Turkey on Christmas Day, and chicken the next, for a change--that's what they always tell me. So I have to buy chickens every day. I hate to, but I have to, and if I could just go out and look around your chicken yard--"

It was right there that Mrs. Gratz had a suspicion that Santa Claus stood before her.

"But I don't sell such a chicken yard, yet," she said. The man wiped his forehead.

"Sure not," he said nervously. "I was goin' to say look around your chicken yard and see the chickens. I can't buy chickens without I see them, can I? Some folks might, but I can't with the kind of customers I've got. I've got mighty particular customers, and I pay extra prices so as to get the best for them, and when I go out and look around the chicken yard--"

"How much you pay for such nice, big, fat chickens, mebby?" asked Mrs. Gratz.

"Well, I'll tell you," said the man. "Seven cents a pound is regular, ain't it? Well, I pay twelve. I'll give you twelve cents, and pay you right now, and take all the chickens you've got. That's my rule. But, if you want to let me go out and see the chickens first, and pick out the kind my regular customers like, I pay twenty cents a pound. But I won't pay twenty cents without I can see the chickens first."

"Sure," said Mrs. Gratz. "I wouldn't do it, too. Mebby I go out and bring in a couple such chickens for you to look at? Yes?"

"No, don't!" said the man impulsively. "Don't do it! It wouldn't be no good. I've got to see the chickens on the hoof, as I might say."

"On the hoofs?" said Mrs. Gratz. "Such poultry don't have no hoofs."

"Runnin' around," explained the visitor. "Runnin' around in the coop. I can tell if a chicken has got any disease that my trade wouldn't like, if I see it runnin' around in the coop. There's a lot in the way a chicken runs. In the way it h'ists up its leg, for instance. That's what the trade calls 'on the hoof.' So I'll just go out and have a look around the coop--"

"For twenty cents a pound anybody could let buyers see their chickens on the hoof, I guess," said Mrs. Gratz.

"Now, that's the way to talk!" exclaimed the man.

"Only but I ain't got any such chickens," said Mrs. Gratz. "So it ain't of use to look how they walk. So good-bye."

"Now, say--" said the man, but Mrs. Gratz closed the door in his face.

"I guess such a Santy Claus came back yet," said Mrs. Gratz when she went into the room where Mrs. Flannery was sitting. "But it ain't any use. He don't leave many more such presents."

"Th' impidence of him!" exclaimed Mrs. Flannery.

"For nine hundred dollars I could be impudent, too," said Mrs. Gratz calmly. "But I don't like such nowadays Santy Clauses, coming back all the time. Once, when I believes in Santy Clauses, they don't come back so much."

The thin Santa Claus had not gone far. He had crossed the street and stood gazing at Mrs. Gratz's door, and now he crossed again and knocked. Mrs. Gratz arose and went to the door.

"I believe he comes back once yet," she said to Mrs. Flannery, and opened the door. He had, indeed, come back.

"Now see here," he said briskly, "ain't your name Mrs. Gratz? Well, I knowed it was, and I knowed you was a widow lady, and that's why I said I was a chicken buyer. I didn't want to frighten you. But I ain't no chicken buyer."

"No?" asked Mrs. Gratz.

"No, I ain't. I just said that so I could get a look at your chicken yard. I've got to see it. What I am is chicken-house inspector for the Ninth Ward, and the Mayor sent me up here to inspect your chicken house, and I've got to do it before I go away, or lose my job. I'll go right out now, and it'll be all over in a minute--"

"I guess it ain't some use," said Mrs. Gratz. "I guess I don't keep any more chickens. They go too easy. Yesterday I have plenty, and to-day I haven't any."

"That's it!" said the thin Santa Claus. "That's just it! That's the way toober-chlosis bugs act--quick like that. They're a bad epidemic--toober-chlosis bugs is. You see how they act--yesterday you have chickens, and last night the toober-chlosis bugs gets at them, and this morning they've eat them all up."

"Goodness!" exclaimed Mrs. Gratz without emotion. "With the fedders and the bones, too?"

"Sure," said the thin Santa Claus. "Why, them toober-chlosis bugs is perfectly ravenous. Once they git started they eat feathers and bones and feet and all--a chicken hasn't no chance at all. That's why the Mayor sent me up here. He heard all your chickens was gone, and gone quick, and he says to me, 'Toober-chlosis bugs!' That's what he says, and he says, 'You ain't doing your duty. You ain't inspected Mrs. Gratz's chicken coop. You go and do it, or you're fired, see?' He says that, and he says, 'You inspect Mrs. Gratz's coop, and you kill off them bugs before they git into her house and eat her all up--bones and all.'"

"And fedders?" asked Mrs. Gratz calmly.

"No, he didn't say feathers. This ain't nothing to fool about. It's serious. So I'll go right out and have a look--"

"I guess such bugs ain't been in my coop last night," said Mrs. Gratz carelessly. "I aint afraid of such bugs in winter time."

"Well, that's where you make your mistake," said the thin Santa Claus. "Winter is just the bad time for them bugs. The more a toober-chlosis bug freezes up the more dangerous it is. In summer they ain't so bad--they're soft like and squash up when a chicken gits them, but in winter they freeze up hard and git brittle. Then a chicken comes along and grabs one, and it busts into a thousand pieces, and each piece turns into a new toober-chlosis bug and busts into a thousand pieces, and so on, and the chicken gits all filled full of toober-chlosis bugs before it knows it. When a chicken snaps up one toober-chlosis bug it has a million in it inside of half an hour and that chicken don't last long, and when the bugs make for the house--What's that on your dress there now?"

Mrs. Gratz looked at her arm indifferently.

"Nothing," she said.

"I thought mebby it was a toober-chlosis bug had got on you already," said the thin Santa Claus. "If it was you would be all eat up inside of half an hour. Them bugs is awful rapacious."

"Yes?" inquired Mrs. Gratz with interest. "Such strong bugs, too, is it not?"

"You bet they are strong--" began the stranger.

"I should think so," interrupted Mrs. Gratz, "to smash up padlocks on such chicken houses. You make me afraid of such bugs. I don't dare let you go out there to get your bones and feet all eat up by them. I guess not!"

"Well, you see--you see--" said the thin Santa Claus, puzzled, and then he cheered up. "You see, I ain't afraid of them. I've been fumigated against them. Fumigated and antiskep--antiskeptized. I've been vaccinated against them by the Board of Health. I'll show you the mark on my arm, if you want to see it."

"No, don't," said Mrs. Gratz. "I let you go and look in that chicken coop if you want to, but it ain't no use. There ain't nothing there."

The thin Santa Claus paused and looked at Mrs. Gratz with suspicion.

"Why? Did you find it?" he asked.

"Find what?" asked Mrs. Gratz innocently, and the thin Santa Claus sighed and walked around to the back of the house. Mrs. Gratz went with him.

As Mrs. Gratz watched the thin man search the chicken yard for toober-chlosis bugs all doubt that he was her Santa Claus left her mind. He made a most minute investigation, but he did it more as a man might search for a lost purse than as a health officer would search for germs. He even got down on his hands and knees and poked under the chicken house with a stick, and, when he had combed the chicken yard thoroughly and had looked all through the chicken house, he even searched the denuded vegetable garden in the back yard, and looked over the fence into Mrs. Flannery's yard. Evidently he was not pleased with his investigation, for he did not even say good-bye to Mrs. Gratz, but went away looking mad and cross.

When Mrs. Gratz went into her house she took her seat in her rocking-chair and began rocking herself calmly and slowly.

"T was him done it, sure," said Mrs. Flannery.

"I don't like such come-agains, much," said Mrs. Gratz placidly. "I try me to believe in such a Santy Claus, but I like not such come-agains. In Germany did not Santy Claus come back so much. I don't like a Santy Claus should be so anxious. Still I believes in him, but, if he has too many such come-agains, I don't believe in him much."

"I would be settin' th' police on him, Santy Claus or no Santy Claus," said Mrs. Flannery vindictively; "th' mean chicken thief!"

"Oh," said Mrs. Gratz easily, "I guess I don't care much should a nine-hundred-dollar Santy Claus steal some chickens. I ain't mad."

But she was a little provoked when another knock came at the door a few minutes later, and when, on opening it, she saw the thin Santa Claus before her again.

"So!" she said, "Santy Claus is back yet once!"

"What's that?" asked the man suspiciously.

"I say, what it is you want?" said Mrs. Gratz.

"Oh!" said the man. "Well, I ain't a-goin' to fool with you no longer, Mrs. Gratz. I'm a-goin' to tell you right out what I am and who I am. I'm a detective of the police, and I'm looking up a mighty bad character."

"I guess I know right where you find one," said Mrs. Gratz politely.

"Now, don't be funny," said the thin Santa Claus peevishly. "Mebby you noticed I didn't say nothing when you spoke about that padlock being busted? Mebby you noticed how careful I looked over your chicken coop, and how I looked over the fence into the next yard? Well, I won't fool you. I ain't no chicken-yard inspector, and I ain't no chicken buyer--them was just my detective disguises. I'm out detecting a chicken thief--just a plain, ordinary chicken thief--and what I come for is clues."

"Yes?" said Mrs. Gratz. "And what is it, such cloos? I haven't any clooses."

The thin Santa Claus seemed provoked.

"Now, look here!" he said. "You may think this is funny, but it isn't. I have got to catch that chicken thief or I'll lose my job, and I can't catch him unless I have some clues to catch him with. Now, didn't you have some chickens stolen last night?"

"Chickens?" asked Mrs. Gratz. "No, I didn't have chickens stolen. Such toober-chlosis bugs eat them. With fedders, too. And bones. Right off the hoofs, ain't it a pity?"

It may have been a blush of shame, but it was more like a flush of anger, that overspread the face of the thin Santa Claus. He stared hard at the placid German face of Mrs. Gratz, and decided she was too stupid to mean it--that she was not teasing him.

"You don't catch on," he said. "You see, there ain't any such things as toober-chlosis bugs. I just made that up as a sort of detective disguise. Them chickens wasn't eat by no bugs at all--they was stole. See? A chicken thief come right into the coop and stole them. Do you think any kind of a bug could pry off a padlock?"

Mrs. Gratz seemed to let this sink into her mind and to revolve there, and get to feeling at home, before she answered.

"No," she said at length, "I guess not. But Santy Claus could do it. Such a big, fat man. Sure he could do it."

"Why, you--" began the thin man crossly, and then changed his tone. "There ain't no such thing as Santy Claus," he said as one might speak to a child--but even a chicken thief would not tell a child such a thing, I hope.

"No?" queried Mrs. Gratz sadly. "No Santy Claus? And I was scared of it, myself, with such toober-chloosis bugs around. He should not to have gone into such a chicken coop with so many bugs busting up all over. He had a right to have fumigated himself, once. And now he ain't. He's all eat up, on the hoof, bones, and feet and all. And such a kind man, too."

The thin Santa Claus frowned. He had half an idea that Mrs. Gratz was fooling with him, and when he spoke it was crisply.

"Now, see here," he said, "last night somebody broke into your chicken coop and stole all your chickens. I know that. And he's been stealing chickens all around this town, and all around this part of the country, too, and I know that. And this stealing has got to stop. I've got to catch that thief. And to catch him I've got to have a clue. A clue is something he has left around, or dropped, where he was stealing. Now, did that chicken thief drop any clues in your chicken yard? That's what I want to know--did he drop any clues?"

"Mebby, if he dropped some cloos, those toober-chloosis bugs eat them up," suggested Mrs. Gratz. "They eats bones and fadders; mebby they eats cloos, too."

"Now, ain't that smart?" sneered the thin Santa Claus. "Don't you think you're funny? But I'll tell you the clue I'm looking for. Did that thief drop a pocketbook, or anything like that?"

"Oh, a pocketbook!" said Mrs. Gratz. "How much should be in such a pocketbook, mebby?"

"Nine hundred dollars," said the thin Santa Claus promptly.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Mrs. Gratz. "So much money all in one cloos! Come out to the chicken yard once; I'll help hunt for cloos, too."

The thin Santa Claus stood a minute looking doubtfully at Mrs. Gratz. Her face was large and placid and unemotional.

"Well," he said with a sigh, "it ain't much use, but I'll try it again."

When he had gone, after another close search of the chicken yard and coop, Mrs. Gratz returned to her friend, Mrs. Flannery.

"Purty soon I don't belief any more in Santy Claus at all," she said. "Purty soon I have more beliefs in chicken thieves than in Santy Claus. Yet a while I beliefs in him, but, one more of those come-agains, and I don't."

"He'll not be comin' back any more," said Mrs. Flannery positively. "I'm wonderin' he came at all, and the jail so handy. All ye have t' do is t' call a cop."

"Sure!" said Mrs. Gratz. "But it is not nice I should put Santy Claus in jail. Such a liberal Santy Claus, too."

"Have it yer own way, ma'am," said Mrs. Flannery. "I'll own 'tis some different whin chickens is stole. 'Tis hard to expind th' affections on a bunch of chickens, but, if any one was t' steal my pig, t' jail he would go, Santy Claus or no Santy Claus. Not but what ye have a kind heart anyway, ma'am, not

wantin' t' put th' poor fellow in jail whin he has already lost nine hundred dollars, which, goodness knows, ye might have t' hand back, was th' law t' take a hand in it."

"So!" said Mrs. Gratz. "Such is the law, yet? All right, I don't belief in chicken thieves, no matter how much he comes again. I stick me to Santy Claus. Always will I belief in Santy Claus. Chicken thieves gives, and wants to take away again, but Santy Claus is always giving and never taking."

"Ye 're fergettin' th' chickens that was took," suggested Mrs. Flannery.

"Took?" said Mrs. Gratz.

"Tooken," Mrs. Flannery corrected.

"Tooked?" said Mrs. Gratz. "I beliefs me not in Santy Claus that way. I beliefs he is a good old man. For givings I beliefs in Santy Claus, but for takings I beliefs in toober-chlosis bugs."

"An' th' busted padlock, then?" asked Mrs. Flannery.

"Ach!" exclaimed Mrs. Gratz. "Them reindeers is so frisky, yet. They have a right to kick up and bust it, mebby."

Mrs. Flannery sighed.

"T is a grand thing t' have faith, ma'am," she said.

"Y-e-s," said Mrs. Gratz indolently, "that's nice. And it is nice to have nine hundred dollars more in the bank, ain't it?"



A Hint for Next Christmas

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by A.A. Milne

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There has been some talk lately of the standardization of golf balls, but a more urgent reform is the standardization of Christmas presents. It is no good putting this matter off; let us take it in hand now, so that we shall be in time for next Christmas.

My crusade is on behalf of those who spend their Christmas away from home. Last year I returned (with great difficulty) from such an adventure and I am more convinced than ever that Christmas presents should conform to a certain standard of size. My own little offerings were thoughtfully chosen. A match-box, a lace handkerchief or two, a cigarette-holder, a pencil and note-book, Gems from Wilcox, and so on; such gifts not only bring pleasure (let us hope) to the recipient, but take up a negligible amount of room in one's bag, and add hardly anything to the weight of it. Of course, if your fellow-visitor says to you, "How sweet of you to give me such a darling little handkerchief--it's just what I wanted--how ever did you think of it?" you do not reply, "Well, it was a choice between that and a hundredweight of coal, and I'll give you two guesses why I chose the handkerchief." No; you smile modestly and say, "As soon as I saw it, I felt somehow that it was yours"; after which you are almost in a position to ask your host casually where he keeps the mistletoe.

But it is almost a certainty that the presents you receive will not have been chosen with such care. Probably the young son of the house has been going in for carpentry lately, and in return for your tie-pin he gives you a wardrobe of his own manufacture. You thank him heartily, you praise its figure, but all the time you are wishing that it had chosen some other occasion. Your host gives you a statuette or a large engraving; somebody else turns up with a large brass candle-stick. It is all very gratifying, but you have got to get back to London somehow, and, thankful though you are not to have received the boarhound or parrot-in-cage which seemed at one time to be threatening, you cannot help wishing that the limits of size for a Christmas present had been decreed by some authority who was familiar with the look of your dressing-case.

Obviously, too, there should be a standard value for a certain type of Christmas present. One may give what one will to one's own family or particular friends; that is all right. But in a Christmas house-party there is a pleasant interchange of parcels, of which the string and the brown paper and the kindly thought are the really important ingredients, and the gift inside is nothing more than an excuse for these things. It is embarrassing for you if Jones has apologized for his brown paper with a hundred cigars, and you have only excused yourself with twenty-five cigarettes; perhaps still more embarrassing if it is you who have lost so heavily on the exchange. An understanding that the contents were to be worth five shillings exactly would avoid this embarrassment.

And now I am reminded of the ingenuity of a friend of mine, William by name, who arrived at a large country house for Christmas without any present in his bag. He had expected neither to give nor to receive anything, but to his horror he discovered on the 24th that everybody was preparing a Christmas present for him, and that it was taken for granted that he would require a little privacy and brown paper on Christmas Eve for the purpose of addressing his own offerings to others. He had wild thoughts of telegraphing to London for something to be sent down, and spoke to other members of the house-party in order to discover what sort of presents would be suitable.

“What are you giving our host P” he asked one of them.

“Mary and I are giving him a book,” said John, referring to his wife.

William then approached the youngest son of the house, and discovered that he and his next brother Dick were sharing in this, that, and the other. When he had heard this, William retired to his room and thought profoundly. He was the first down to breakfast on Christmas morning. All the places at the table were piled high with presents. He looked at John’s place. The top parcel said, “To John and Mary from Charles.” William took out his fountain-pen and added a couple of words to the inscription. It then read, “To John and Mary from Charles and William,” and in William’s opinion looked just as effective as before. He moved on to the next place. “To Angela from Father,” said the top parcel. “And William,” wrote William. At his hostess’ place he hesitated for a moment. The first present there was for “Darling Mother, from her loving children.” It did not seem that an “and William” was quite suitable. But his hostess was not to be deprived of William’s kindly thought; twenty seconds later the handkerchiefs “from John and Mary and William” expressed all the nice things which he was feeling for her. He passed on to the next place....

It is, of course, impossible to thank every donor of a joint gift; one simply thanks the first person whose eye one happens to catch. Sometimes William’s eye was caught, sometimes not. But he was spared all embarrassment; and I can recommend his solution of the problem with perfect confidence to those who may be in a similar predicament next Christmas.

There is a minor sort of Christmas present about which also a few words must be said; I refer to the Christmas card.

The Christmas card habit is a very pleasant one, but it, too, needs to be disciplined. I doubt if many people understand its proper function. This is partly the result of our bringing up; as children we were allowed (quite rightly) to run wild in the Christmas card shop, with one of two results. Either we still run wild, or else the reaction has set in and we avoid the Christmas card shop altogether. We convey our printed wishes for a happy Christmas to everybody or to nobody. This is a mistake. In our middle-age we should discriminate.

The child does not need to discriminate. It has two shillings in the hand and about twenty-four relations. Even in my time two shillings did not go far among twenty-four people. But though presents were out of the question, one could get twenty-four really beautiful Christmas cards for the money, and if some of them were ha’penny ones, then one could afford real snow on a threepenny one for the most important uncle, meaning by “most important,” perhaps (but I have forgotten now), the one most likely to be generous in return. Of the fun of choosing those twenty-four cards I need not now speak, nor of the best method of seeing to it that somebody else paid for the necessary twenty-four stamps. But certainly one took more trouble in suiting the tastes of those who were to receive the cards than the richest and most leisured grown-up would take in selecting a diamond necklace for his wife’s stocking or motor-cars for his sons-in-law. It was not only a question of snow, but also of the words in which the old, old wish was expressed. If the aunt who was known to be fond of poetry did not get something suitable from Eliza Cook, one might regard her Christmas as ruined. How could one grudge the trouble necessary to make her Christmas really happy for her? One might even explore the fourpenny box.

But in middle-age--by which I mean anything over twenty and under ninety--one knows too many people. One cannot give them a Christmas card each; there is not enough powdered glass to go round. One has to discriminate, and the way in which most of us discriminate is either to send no cards to anybody or else to send them to the first twenty or fifty or hundred of our friends (according to our income and energy) whose names come into our minds. Such cards are meaningless; but if we sent our Christmas cards to the right people, we could make the simple words upon them mean something

very much more than a mere wish that the recipient's Christmas shall be "merry" (which it will be anyhow, if he likes merriness) and his New Year "bright" (which, let us hope, it will not be).

"A merry Christmas," with an old church in the background and a robin in the foreground, surrounded by a wreath of holly-leaves. It might mean so much. What I feel that it ought to mean is something like this:--

"You live at Potters Bar and I live at Petersham. Of course, if we did happen to meet at the Marble Arch one day, it would be awfully jolly, and we could go and have lunch together somewhere, and talk about old times. But our lives have drifted apart since those old days. It is partly the fault of the train-service, no doubt. Glad as I should be to see you, I don't like to ask you to come all the way to Petersham to dinner, and if you asked me to Potters Bar--well, I should come, but it would be something of a struggle, and I thank you for not asking me. Besides, we have made different friends now, and our tastes are different. After we had talked about the old days, I doubt if we should have much to say to each other. Each of us would think the other a bit of a bore, and our wives would wonder why we had ever been friends at Liverpool. But don't think I have forgotten you. I just send this card to let you know that I am still alive, still at the same address, and that I still remember you. No need, if we ever do meet, or if we ever want each other's help, to begin by saying: 'I suppose you have quite forgotten those old days at Liverpool.' We have neither of us forgotten; and so let us send to each other, once a year, a sign that we have not forgotten, and that once upon a time we were friends. 'A merry Christmas to you.'"

That is what a Christmas card should say. It is absurd to say this to a man or woman whom one is perpetually ringing up on the telephone; to somebody whom one met last week or with whom one is dining the week after; to a man whom one may run across at the club on almost any day, or a woman whom one knows to shop daily at the same stores as oneself. It is absurd to say it to a correspondent to whom one often writes. Let us reserve our cards for the old friends who have dropped out of our lives, and let them reserve their cards for us.

But, of course, we must have kept their addresses; otherwise we have to print our cards publicly--as I am doing now. "Old friends will please accept this, the only intimation."

The Christmas Present



<https://americanliterature.com/author/richmal-crompton/short-story/the-christmas-present>

by Richmal Crompton

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Mary Clay looked out of the window of the old farmhouse. The view was dreary enough—hill and field and woodland, bare, colourless, mist-covered—with no other house in sight. She had never been a woman to crave for company. She liked sewing. She was passionately fond of reading. She was not fond of talking. Probably she could have been very happy at Cromb Farm—alone. Before her marriage she had looked forward to the long evenings with her sewing and reading. She knew that she would be busy enough in the day, for the farmhouse was old and rambling, and she was to have no help in the housework. But she looked forward to quiet, peaceful, lamplit evenings; and only lately, after ten years of married life, had she reluctantly given up the hope of them. For peace was far enough from the old farm kitchen in the evening. It was driven away by John Clay's loud voice, raised always in orders or complaints, or in the stumbling, incoherent reading aloud of his newspaper.

Mary was a silent woman herself and a lover of silence. But John liked to hear the sound of his voice; he liked to shout at her; to call for her from one room to another; above all, he liked to hear his voice reading the paper out loud to her in the evening. She dreaded that most of all. It had lately seemed to jar on her nerves till she felt she must scream aloud. His voice going on and on, raucous and sing-song, became unspeakably irritating. His "Mary!" summoning her from her household work to wherever he happened to be, his "Get my slippers," or "Bring me my pipe," exasperated her almost to the point of rebellion. "Get your own slippers" had trembled on her lips, but had never passed them, for she was a woman who could not bear anger. Noise of any kind appalled her.

She had borne it for ten years, so surely she could go on with it. Yet today, as she gazed hopelessly at the wintry country side, she became acutely conscious that she could not go on with it. Something must happen. Yet what was there that could happen?

It was Christmas next week. She smiled ironically at the thought. Then she noticed the figure of her husband coming up the road. He came in at the gate and round to the side-door.

"Mary!"

She went slowly in answer to the summons. He held a letter in his hand.

"Met the postman," he said. "From your aunt."

She opened the letter and read it in silence. Both of them knew quite well what it contained.

"She wants us to go over for Christmas again," said Mary.

He began to grumble.

"She's as deaf as a post. She's 'most as deaf as her mother was. She ought to know better than to ask folks over when she can't hear a word any one says."

Mary said nothing. He always grumbled about the invitation at first, but really he wanted to go. He liked to talk with her uncle. He liked the change of going down to the village for a few days and hearing all its gossip. He could quite well leave the farm to the "hands" for that time.

The Crewe deafness was proverbial. Mary's great-grandmother had gone stone deaf at the age of thirty-five; her daughter had inherited the affliction and her grand-daughter, the aunt with whom Mary had spent her childhood, had inherited it also at exactly the same age.

"All right," he said at last, grudgingly, as though in answer to her silence, "we'd better go. Write and say we'll go."

* * * * *

It was Christmas Eve. They were in the kitchen of her uncle's farmhouse. The deaf old woman sat in her chair by the fire knitting. Upon her sunken face there was a curious sardonic smile that was her habitual expression. The two men stood in the doorway. Mary sat at the table looking aimlessly out of the window. Outside, the snow fell in blinding showers. Inside, the fire gleamed on to the copper pots and pans, the crockery on the old oak dresser, the hams hanging from the ceiling.

Suddenly James turned.

"Jane!" he said.

The deaf woman never stirred.

"Jane!"

Still there was no response upon the enigmatic old face by the fireside.

"Jane!"

She turned slightly towards the voice.

"Get them photos from upstairs to show John," he bawled.

"What about boats?" she said.

"Photos!" roared her husband.

"Coats?" she quavered.

Mary looked from one to the other. The man made a gesture of irritation and went from the room.

He came back with a pile of picture postcards in his hand.

"It's quicker to do a thing oneself," he grumbled. "They're what my brother sent from Switzerland, where he's working now. It's a fine land, to judge from the views of it."

John took them from his hand. "She gets worse?" he said nodding towards the old woman.

She was sitting gazing at the fire, her lips curved into the curious smile.

Her husband shrugged his shoulders. "Aye. She's nigh as bad as her mother was."

"And her grandmother."

"Aye. It takes longer to tell her to do something than to do it myself. And deaf folks get a bit stupid, too. Can't see what you mean. They're best let alone."

The other man nodded and lit his pipe. Then James opened the door.

"The snow's stopped," he said. "Shall we go to the end of the village and back?"

The other nodded, and took his cap from behind the door. A gust of cold air filled the room as they went out.

Mary took a paper-backed book from the table and came over to the fireplace.

"Mary!"

She started. It was not the sharp, querulous voice of the deaf old woman, it was more like the voice of the young aunt whom Mary remembered in childhood. The old woman was leaning forward, looking at her intently.

"Mary! A happy Christmas to 'ee."

And, as if in spite of herself, Mary answered in her ordinary low tones.

"The same to you, auntie."

"Thank 'ee. Thank 'ee."

Mary gasped.

"Aunt! Can you hear me speaking like this?"

The old woman laughed, silently, rocking to and fro in her chair as if with pent-up merriment of years.

"Yes, I can hear 'ee, child. I've allus heard 'ee."

Mary clasped her hand eagerly.

"Then—you're cured, Aunt—"

"Ay. I'm cured as far as there was ever anything to be cured."

"You—?"

"I was never deaf, child, nor never will be, please God. I've took you all in fine."

Mary stood up in bewilderment.

"You? Never deaf?"

The old woman chuckled again.

"No, nor my mother—nor her mother neither."

Mary shrank back from her.

"I—I don't know what you mean," she said, unsteadily. "Have you been—pretending?"

"I'll make you a Christmas present of it, dearie," said the old woman. "My mother made me a Christmas present of it when I was your age, and her mother made her one. I haven't a lass of my own to give it to, so I give it to you. It can come on quite sudden like, if you want it, and then you can hear what you choose and not hear what you choose. Do you see?" She leant nearer and whispered, "You're shut out of it all—of having to fetch and carry for 'em, answer their daft questions and run their errands like a dog. I've watched you, my lass. You don't get much peace, do you?"

Mary was trembling.

"Oh, I don't know what to think," she said. "I—I couldn't do it."

"Do what you like," said the old woman. "Take it as a present, anyways—the Crewe deafness for a Christmas present," she chuckled. "Use it or not as you like. You'll find it main amusin', anyways."

And into the old face there came again that curious smile as if she carried in her heart some jest fit for the gods on Olympus.

The door opened suddenly with another gust of cold air, and the two men came in again, covered with fine snow.

"I—I'll not do it," whispered Mary, trembling.

"We didn't get far. It's coming on again," remarked John, hanging up his cap.

The old woman rose and began to lay the supper, silently and deftly, moving from cupboard to table without looking up. Mary sat by the fire, motionless and speechless, her eyes fixed on the glowing coals.

"Any signs o' the deafness in her?" whispered James, looking towards Mary. "It come on my wife jus' when she was that age." "Aye. So I've heered."

Then he said loudly, "Mary!"

A faint pink colour came into her cheeks, but she did not show by look or movement that she had heard. James looked significantly at her husband.

The old woman stood still for a minute with a cup in each hand and smiled her slow, subtle smile.