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Charles Dickens

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*Mysterious
Christmas Stories*



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THE KID HANGS UP HIS STOCKING



The clock in the West Side Boys' Lodging house ticked out the seconds of Christmas Eve as slowly and methodically as if six fat turkeys were not sizzling in the basement kitchen against the morrow's spread, and as if two-score boys were not racking their brains to guess what kind of pies would go with them. Out on the avenue the shopkeepers were barring doors and windows, and shouting "Merry Christmas!" to one another across the street as they hurried to get home. The drays ran over the pavement with muffled sounds; winter had set in with a heavy snowstorm. In the big hall the monotonous click of checkers on the board kept step with the clock. The smothered exclamations of the boys at some unexpected, bold stroke, and the scratching of a little fellow's pencil on a slate, trying to figure out how long it was yet till the big dinner, were the only sounds that broke the quiet of the room. The superintendent dozed behind his desk.

A door at the end of the hall creaked, and a head with a shock of weather-beaten hair was stuck cautiously through the opening.

"Tom!" it said in a stage whisper. "Hi, Tom! Come up an' git on ter de lay of de Kid."

A bigger boy in a jumper, who had been lounging on two chairs by the group of checker players, sat up and looked toward the door. Something in the energetic toss of the head there aroused his instant curiosity, and he started across the room. After a brief whispered conference the door closed upon the two, and silence fell once more on the hall.

They had been gone but a little while when they came back in haste. The big boy shut the door softly behind him and set his back against it.

"Fellers," he said, "what d'ye t'ink? I'm blamed if de Kid ain't gone an' hung up his sock fer Chris'mas!"

The checkers dropped, and the pencil ceased scratching on the slate, in breathless suspense.

"Come up an' see," said Tom, briefly, and led the way.

The whole band followed on tiptoe. At the foot of the stairs their leader halted.

"Yer don't make no noise," he said, with a menacing gesture. "You, Savoy!"—to one in a patched shirt and with a mischievous twinkle,— "you don't come none o' yer monkeyshines. If you scare de Kid you'll get it in de neck, see!"

With this admonition they stole upstairs. In the last cot of the double tier of bunks a boy much smaller than the rest slept, snugly tucked in the blankets. A tangled curl of yellow hair strayed over his baby face. Hitched to the bedpost was a poor, worn little stocking, arranged with much care so that Santa Claus should have as little trouble in filling it as possible. The edge of a hole in the knee had been drawn together and tied with a string to prevent anything falling out. The boys looked on in amazed silence. Even Savoy was dumb.

Little Willie, or, as he was affectionately dubbed by the boys, "the Kid," was a waif who had drifted in among them some months before. Except that his mother was in the hospital, nothing was known about

him, which was regular and according to the rule of the house. Not as much was known about most of its patrons; few of them knew more themselves, or cared to remember. Santa Claus had never been anything to them but a fake to make the colored supplements sell. The revelation of the Kid's simple faith struck them with a kind of awe. They sneaked quietly downstairs.

"Fellers," said Tom, when they were all together again in the big room,—by virtue of his length, which had given him the nickname of "Stretch," he was the speaker on all important occasions,—"ye seen it yerself. Santy Claus is a-comin' to this here joint tonight. I wouldn't 'a' believed it. I ain't never had no dealin's wid de ole guy. He kinder forgot I was around, I guess. But de Kid says he is a-comin' tonight, an' what de Kid says goes."

Then he looked round expectantly. Two of the boys, "Gimpy" and Lem, were conferring aside in an undertone. Presently Gimpy, who limped, as his name indicated, spoke up.

"Lem says, says he—"

"Gimpy, you chump! you'll address de chairman," interrupted Tom, with severe dignity, "or you'll get yer jaw broke, if yer leg is short, see!"

"Cut it out, Stretch," was Gimpy's irreverent answer. "This here ain't no regular meetin', an' we ain't goin' to have none o' yer rot. Lem, he says, says he, let's break de bank an' fill de Kid's sock. He won't know but it wuz ole Santy done it."

A yell of approval greeted the suggestion. The chairman, bound to exercise the functions of office in season and out of season, while they lasted, thumped the table.

"It is regular motioned an' carried," he announced, "that we break de bank fer de Kid's Chris'mas. Come on, boys!"

The bank was run by the house, with the superintendent as paying teller. He had to be consulted, particularly as it was past banking hours;



IS THERE A SANTA CLAUS?



“Dear Mr. Riis:

“A little chap of six on the Western frontier writes to us:

“Will you please tell me if there is a Santa Claus? Papa says not.’

“Won’t you answer him?”

That was the message that came to me from an editor last December just as I was going on a journey. Why he sent it to me I don’t know. Perhaps it was because, when I was a little chap, my home was way up toward that white north where even the little boys ride in sleds behind reindeer, as they are the only horses they have. Perhaps it was because when I was a young lad I knew Hans Christian Andersen, who surely ought to know, and spoke his tongue. Perhaps it was both. I will ask the editor when I see him. Meanwhile, here was his letter, with Christmas right at the door, and, as I said, I was going on a journey.

I buttoned it up in my greatcoat along with a lot of other letters I didn’t have time to read, and I thought as I went to the depot what a pity it was that my little friend’s papa should have forgotten about Santa Claus. We big people do forget the strangest way, and then we haven’t got a bit of a good time any more.

No Santa Claus! If you had asked that car full of people I would have liked to hear the answers they would have given you. No Santa Claus! Why, there was scarce a man in the lot who didn't carry a bundle that looked as if it had just tumbled out of his sleigh. I felt of one slyly, and it was a boy's sled—a "flexible flyer," I know, because he left one at our house the Christmas before; and I distinctly heard the rattling of a pair of skates in that box in the next seat. They were all good-natured, every one, though the train was behind time—that is a sure sign of Christmas. The brakeman wore a piece of mistletoe in his cap and a broad grin on his face, and he said "Merry Christmas" in a way to make a man feel good all the rest of the day. No Santa Claus, is there? You just ask him!

And then the train rolled into the city under the big gray dome to which George Washington gave his name, and by-and-by I went through a doorway which all American boys would rather see than go to school a whole week, though they love their teacher dearly. It is true that last winter my own little lad told the kind man whose house it is that he would rather ride up and down in the elevator at the hotel, but that was because he was so very little at the time and didn't know things rightly, and, besides, it was his first experience with an elevator.

As I was saying, I went through the door into a beautiful white hall with lofty pillars, between which there were regular banks of holly with the red berries shining through, just as if it were out in the woods! And from behind one of them there came the merriest laugh you could ever think of. Do you think, now, it was that letter in my pocket that gave that guilty little throb against my heart when I heard it, or what could it have been? I hadn't even time to ask myself the question, for there stood my host all framed in holly, and with the heartiest handclasp.

"Come in," he said, and drew me after. "The coffee is waiting." And he beamed upon the table with the most Christmas face as he poured



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