

Bangs John Kendrick

A Little Book of Christmas



John Bangs

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A TOAST TO SANTA CLAUS

Whene'er I find a man who don't
Believe in Santa Claus,
And spite of all remonstrance won't
Yield up to logic's laws,
And see in things that lie about
The proof by no means dim,
I straightway cut that fellow out,
And don't believe in him.

The good old Saint is everywhere
Along life's busy way.
We find him in the very air
We breathe day after day —
Where courtesy and kindness
And love are joined together,
To give to sorrow and distress
A touch of sunny weather.

We find him in the maiden's eyes
Beneath the mistletoe,
A-sparkling as the star-lit skies
All golden in their glow.
We find him in the pressure of
The hand of sympathy,
And where there's any thought of love
He's mighty sure to be.

So here's to good old Kindliheart!
The best bet of them all,
Who never fails to do his part
In life's high festival;
The worthy bearer of the crown
With which we top the Saint.
A bumper to his health, and down
With them that say he ain't!

THE CONVERSION OF HETHERINGTON

I

HETHERINGTON wasn't half a bad sort of a fellow, but he had his peculiarities, most of which were the natural defects of a lack of imagination. He didn't believe in ghosts, or Santa Claus, or any of the thousands of other things that he hadn't seen with his own eyes, and as he walked home that rather chilly afternoon just before Christmas and found nearly every corner of the highway decorated with bogus Saints, wearing the shoddy regalia of Kris-Kringle, the sight made him a trifle irritable. He had had a fairly good luncheon that day, one indeed that ought to have mellowed his disposition materially, but which somehow or other had not so resulted. In fact, Hetherington was in a state of raspy petulance that boded ill for his digestion, and when he had reached the corner of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, the constant iteration and reiteration of these shivering figures of the god of the Yule had got on his nerves to such an extent as to make him aggressively quarrelsome. He had controlled the asperities of his soul tolerably well on the way uptown, but the remark of a small child on the highway, made to a hurrying mother, as they passed a stalwart-looking replica of the idol of his Christmas dreams, banging away on a tambourine to attract attention to the iron pot before him, placed there to catch the pennies of the charitably inclined wayfarer – "Oh, mar, there's Sandy Claus now!" – was too much for him.

"Tush! Nonsense!" ejaculated Hetherington, glowering at the shivering figure in the turkey-red robe. "The idea of filling children's minds up with such balderdash! Santa Claus, indeed! There isn't a genuine Santa Claus in the whole bogus bunch."

The Saint on the corner banged his tambourine just under Hetherington's ear with just enough force to jar loose the accumulated irascibility of the well-fed gentleman.

"This is a fine job for an able-bodied man like you!" said Hetherington with a sneer. "Why don't you go to work instead of helping to perpetuate this annual fake?"

The Saint looked at him for a moment before replying.

"Speakin' to me?" he said.

"Yes. I'm speaking to you," said Hetherington. "Here's the whole country perishing for the lack of labor, and in spite of that fact this town has broken out into a veritable rash of fake Santa Clauses –"

"That'll do for you!" retorted Santa Claus. "It's easy enough for a feller with a stomach full o' victuals and plenty of warm clothes on his back to jump on a hard-workin' feller like me –"

"Hard-working?" echoed Hetherington. "I like that! You don't call loafing on a street corner this way all day long hard work, do you?"

He rather liked the man's spirit, despite his objection to his occupation.

"Suppose you try it once and find out," retorted Santa Claus, blowing on his bluish fingers in an effort to restore their clogged-up circulation. "I guess if you tried a job like this just once, standin' out in the cold from eight in the mornin' to ten at night, with nothin' but a cup o' coffee and a ham-sandwich inside o' you –"

"What's that?" cried Hetherington, aghast. "Is that all you've had to eat to-day?"

"That's all," said the Saint, as he turned to his work with the tambourine. "Try it once, mister, and maybe you won't feel so cock-sure about its not bein' work. If you're half the sport you think you are just take my place for a couple of hours."

An appeal to his sporting instinct was never lost on Hetherington.

"By George!" he cried. "I'll go you. I'll swap coats with you, and while you're filling your stomach up I'll take your place, all right."

"What'll I fill me stomach up with?" demanded the man. "I don't look like a feller with a meal-ticket in his pocket, do I?"

"I'll take care of that," said Hetherington, taking out a roll of bills and peeling off a two-dollar note from the outside. "There – you take that and blow yourself, and I'll take care of the kitty here till you come back."

The exchange of externals was not long in accomplishment. The gathering of the shadows of night made it a comparatively easy matter to arrange behind a conveniently stalled and heavily laden express wagon hard by, and in a few moments the irascible but still "sporty" Hetherington, who from childhood up to the present had never been able to take a dare, found himself banging away on a tambourine and incidentally shivering in the poor red habiliments of a fraudulent Saint. For a half-hour the novelty of his position gave him a certain thrill, and no Santa Claus in town that night fulfilled his duties more vociferously than did Hetherington; but as time passed on, and the chill of a windy corner began to penetrate his bones, to say nothing of the frosty condition of his ears, which his false cotton whiskers but indifferently protected, he began to tire of his bargain.

"Gosh!" he muttered to himself, as it began to snow, and certain passing truckmen hurled the same kind of guying comments at him as had been more or less in his mind whenever he had passed a fellow-Santa-Claus on his way up-town, "if General Sherman were here he'd find a twin-brother to War! I wish that cuss would come back."

He gazed eagerly up and down the street in the hope that the departed original would heave in sight, but in vain. A two-dollar meal evidently possessed attractions that he wished to linger over.

"Can't stand this much longer!" he muttered to himself, and then his eye caught sight of a group that filled his soul with dismay: two policemen and the struggling figure of one who appeared to have looked not wisely but too well upon the cup that cheers, the latter wearing Hetherington's overcoat and Hetherington's hat, but whose knees worked upon hinges of their own, double-back-action hinges that made his legs of no use whatsoever, either to himself or to anybody else.

"Hi there!" Hetherington cried out, as the group passed up the street on the way to the station-house. "That fellow's got my overcoat – "

But the only reply Hetherington got was a sturdy poke in the ribs from the night-stick of the passing officer.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" growled Hetherington.

II

Ten minutes later a passing taxi was hailed by a shivering gentleman carrying an iron pot full of pennies and nickels and an occasional quarter in one hand, and a turkey-red coat, trimmed with white cotton cloth, thrown over his arm. Strange to say, considering the inclemency of the night, he wore neither a hat nor an overcoat.

"Where to, sir?" queried the chauffeur.

"The police-station," said Hetherington. "I don't know where it is, but the one in this precinct is the one I want."

"Ye'll have to pay by the hour to-night, sir," said the chauffeur. "The station ain't a half-mile away, sir, but Heaven knows how long it'll take us to get there."

"Charge what you please," retorted Hetherington. "I'll buy your darned old machine if it's necessary, only get a move on."

The chauffeur, with some misgivings as to the mental integrity of his fare, started on their perilous journey, and three-quarters of an hour later drew up in front of the police-station, where Hetherington, having been compelled in self-defense to resume the habiliments of Santa Claus under penalty of freezing, alighted.

"Just wait, will you?" he said, as he alighted from the cab.

"I'll go in with you," said the chauffeur, acting with due caution. He had begun to fear that there was a fair chance of his having trouble getting his fare out of a very evident lunatic.

Utterly forgetful of his appearance in his festal array, Hetherington bustled into the station, and shortly found himself standing before the sergeant behind the desk.

"Well, Santa Claus," said the official, with an amused glance at the intruder, "what can I do for you to-night? There ain't many rooms with a bath left."

Hetherington flushed. He had intended to greet the sergeant with his most imposing manner, but this turkey-red abomination on his back had thrust dignity out in the cold.

"I have come, officer," he said, as impressively as he could under the circumstances, "to make some inquiries concerning a man who was brought here about an hour ago – I fear in a state of intoxication."

"We have known such things to happen here, Santa," said the officer, suavely. "In fact, this blotter here seems to indicate that one George W. Hetherington, of 561 Fifth Avenue –"

"Who?" roared Hetherington.

"George W. Hetherington is the name on the blotter," said the sergeant; "entered first as a D. D., but on investigation found to be suffering from –"

"But that's my name!" cried Hetherington. "You don't mean to tell me he claimed to be George W. Hetherington?"

"No," said the sergeant. "The poor devil didn't make any claims for himself at all. We found that name on a card in his hat, and a letter addressed to the same name in his overcoat pocket. Puttin' the two together we thought it was a good enough identification."

"Well, I'll have you to understand, sergeant –" bristled Hetherington, cockily.

"None o' that, Santa Claus – none o' that!" growled the sergeant, leaning over the desk and eying him coldly. "I don't know what game you're up to, but just one more peep in that tone and there'll be two George W. Hetheringtons in the cooler this night."

Hetherington almost tore the Santa Claus garb from his shoulders, and revealed himself as a personage of fine raiment underneath, whatever he might have appeared at a superficial glance. As he did so a crumpled piece of paper fell to the floor from the pocket of the turkey-red coat.

"I don't mean to do anything but what is right, sergeant," he said, controlling his wrath, "but what I do want is to impress it upon your mind that *I* am George W. Hetherington, and that having my name spread on the blotter of a police court isn't going to do me any good. I loaned that fellow my hat and coat to get a square meal, while I took his place –"

The officer grinned broadly, but with no assurance in his smile that he believed.

"Oh, you may not believe it," said Hetherington, "but it's true, and if this thing gets into the papers to-morrow morning –"

"Say, Larry," said the sergeant, addressing an officer off duty, "did the reporters copy that letter we found in Hetherington's pocket?"

"Reporters?" gasped Hetherington. "Good Lord, man – yuh-you don't mum-mean to say yuh-you let the reporters –"

"No, chief," replied Larry. "They ain't been in yet – I t'ink ye shoved it inter yer desk."

"So I did, so I did," grinned the sergeant. Here he opened the drawer in front of him and extracted a pretty little blue envelope which Hetherington immediately recognized as a particularly private and confidential communication from – well, somebody. This is not a *cherchez la femme* story, so we will leave the lady's name out of it altogether. It must be noted, however, that a sight of that dainty missive in the great red fist of the sergeant gave Hetherington a heart action that fifty packages of cigarettes a day could hardly inflict upon a less healthy man.

"That's the proof –" cried Hetherington, excitedly. "If that don't prove it's my overcoat nothing will."

"Right you are, Santa Claus," said the sergeant, opening the envelope and taking out the delicately scented sheet of paper within. "I'll give you two guesses at the name signed to this, and if you get it right once I'll give you the coat, and Mr. Hetherington Number One in our evening's consignment of Hetheringtons gets re-christened."

"Anita!" growled Hetherington.

"You win!" said the sergeant, handing over the letter.

Hetherington drew a long sigh of relief.

"I guess this is worth cigars for the house, sergeant," he said. "I'll send 'em round to-morrow – meanwhile, how about – how about the other?"

"He's gone to the hospital," said the sergeant, grimly. "The doctor says he wasn't drunk – just another case of freezing starvation."

"Starvation? And I guyed him! Great God!" muttered Hetherington to himself.

III

"Narrow escape, Mr. Hetherington," said the sergeant. "Ought to be a lesson to you sports. What was your game, anyhow?"

"Oh, it wasn't any game – " began Hetherington.

"Huh! Just a case of too much lunch, eh?" said the officer. "You'd had as much too much as the other feller'd had too little – that it?"

"No," said Hetherington. "Just a general lack of confidence in my fellow-men, plus a cussed habit of butting into matters that aren't any of my business; but I'm glad I butted in, just the same, if I can be of any earthly use to that poor devil of a Santa Claus. Do you suppose there's any way to find out who he is?"

"Well, we've made a good start, anyhow," said the sergeant. "We've found out who he isn't. When he comes to in the mornin', if he does, maybe he'll be able to help us identify him."

"To-morrow!" murmured Hetherington. "And who knows but he's got a family waiting for him somewhere right now, and as badly off as he is."

"Ye dropped this, sir," said Larry, the officer off duty. "It come out of the red coat – mebbe it'll help – "

He handed Hetherington the crumpled piece of paper that had fallen to the floor when he tore Santa Claus's cloak from his back. It was sadly dirty, but on one side of it was a childish scrawl in pencil. Hetherington ran over it rapidly, and gulped.

"Read that, sergeant!" he said, huskily.

The sergeant read the following:

""DEAR SANDY CLORS: – my Popper says hell hand you this here leter when he sees you to ast you not to fergit me and jimmy like you did last yeer. you aint been to see me an jimmy since popper lost his Jobb and he says its becoz you lost our adres so ime ritin to tell you weve moved since you come the lass time and am now livin now on the Topp flor of fore 69 varrick streete noo york which youd ort not to find it hard to git down the chimbley bein on the topp flor closte to the roofe so i thort ide rite and tell you what me and jimmyd like to hav you bring us wenn you come. I nede some noo shues and a hatt and my lasst dol babys all wore out and sum candy if you can work it in sumhow, not havin had much since popper lost his jobb, and jimmies only gott one mitt left and his shues is wore throo like mine is only a little worser, and a baseball batt and hed like sum candy to. if there wass anything lefft ovvur for us from lass crissmis wich you didnt kno ware to find us to giv it to us we wuddent mind havin that two but you needent mind about that if its misslayde

we can git along all rite all rite on whot ive sed alreddy. ime leven and jimmies nine
and we hope youl hav a mery crissmiss like wede hav if youd come to see us.

"yure efexinite frend mary muligan.

"p. s dont fergit the adres topp flor 469 varrick strete noo york. take back
chimbley middel floo."

"I'm sorry to say, Mr. Hetherington," said the sergeant, clearing his throat with vociferous unction, "that the town's full of Mary and Jimmie Mulligans – but, anyhow, I guess this is good enough evidence for me to scratch out your name and enter the record under James Mulligan."

"Thank you, sergeant," said Hetherington, gratefully. "And it's good enough evidence for me that this town needs a Santa Claus a blooming sight more than I thought it did. What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty," replied the sergeant.

"Good!" said Hetherington. "Shops don't close till ten – I guess I've got time. Good night – see you first thing in the morning. Come along, chauffeur, I'll need you for some time yet."

"Good night, Mr. Hetherington," said the sergeant. "Where are you bound in case I need you any time?"

"Me?" said Hetherington with a grin, "why, my address is 561 Fifth Avenue, but just now I'm off to do my Christmas shopping early."

And resuming possession of his own hat and overcoat, and taking the Santa Claus costume under his arm, Hetherington passed out, the chauffeur following.

"These New York sports is a queer bunch!" said the sergeant as Hetherington disappeared.

IV

At half-past nine down-town was pretty well deserted, which made it easy for the chauffeur of a certain red taxi-cab to make fairly good time down Broadway; and when at nine-forty-five the panting mechanism drew up before the grim walls of a brick tenement, numbered 469 Varick Street, the man on the box was commendably proud of his record.

"That was goin' some, sir," he said, with a broad grin on his face. "I don't believe it's ever been done quicker outside o' the fire department."

"I don't believe it has, old man," said Hetherington as he alighted. "Now if you'll help me upstairs with these packages and that basket there, we'll bring this affair to a grand-stand finish."

The two men toiled slowly up the stairs, Hetherington puffing somewhat with the long climb; and when finally they had reached the top floor he arrayed himself in the once despised garb of Santa Claus again. Then he knocked at the door. The answer was immediate. A white-faced woman opened the door.

"Jim!" she cried. "Is it you?"

"No, madam," replied Hetherington. "It's a friend of Jim's. Fact is, Mrs. Mulligan, Jim has –"

"There's nothin' happened to Jim, has there?" she interrupted.

"Nothing at all, madam, nothing at all," said Hetherington. "The work was a little too much for him to-day – that's all – and he keeled over. He's safe, and comfortable in the – well, they took him to the hospital, but don't you worry – he'll be all right in a day or two, and meanwhile I'm going to look after you and the kiddies."

The chauffeur placed the basket inside the door.

"You'll find a small turkey, and some – er – some fixings in it, Mrs. Mulligan," said Hetherington. "Whatever ought to go with a turkey should be there, and – er – have the kiddies gone to bed?"

"Poor little souls, they have," said the woman.

"Well, just you tell 'em for me," said Hetherington, "that Santa Claus received little Mary's letter, will you, please? And – er – and if they don't mind a very late call like this, why I'd like to see them."

The woman looked anxiously into Hetherington's eyes for a moment, and then she tottered and sat down.

"You're sure there's nothin' the matter with Jim, sir?" she asked.

"Absolutely, Mrs. Mulligan," Hetherington answered. "It's exactly as I have told you. The cold and hunger were too much for him, but he's all right, and I'll guarantee to have him back here inside of forty-eight hours."

"I'll call the childer," said Mrs. Mulligan.

Two wide-eyed youngsters shortly stood in awed wonder before their strange visitor, never doubting for a moment that he was Santa Claus himself.

"How do you do, Miss Mulligan?" said Hetherington, with a courtly bow to the little tot of a girl. "I received your letter this afternoon, and was mighty glad to hear from you again, but I've been too busy all day to write you in return, so I thought I'd call and tell you that it's all right about those shoes, and the hat, and the new doll-baby, and the things for Jimmie. Fact is, I've brought 'em with me. Reginald," he added, turning to the chauffeur, who stood grinning in the doorway, "just unfasten that bundle of shoes, will you, while I get Jimmie's new mitts and the base-ball bat?"

"Yes, sir," said the chauffeur, suiting his action to the orders, and with a right good will that was pleasant to see.

"Reginald is my assistant," said Santa Claus. "Couldn't get along without Reginald these days – very busy days they are – so many new kiddies in the world, you know. There, Jimmie – there's your bat. May you score many a home-run with it. Here's a ball, too – good thing to have a ball to practise with. Some day you'll be a Giant, perhaps, and help win the pennant. Incidentally, James, old boy, there's a box of tin soldiers in this package, a bag of marbles, a select assortment of tops, and a fur coat; just try that cap on, and see if you can tell yourself from a Brownie."

The children's eyes gleamed with joy, and Jimmie let out a cheer that would have aroused the envy of a college man.

"You didn't mention it in your note, Mary, dear," continued Santa Claus, turning to the little girl, "but I thought you might like to cook a few meals for this brand-new doll-baby of yours, so I brought along a little stove, with a few pots and pans and kettles and things, with a small china tea-set thrown in. This ought to enable you to set her up in housekeeping; and then when you go to school I have an idea you'll find this little red-riding-hood cloak rather nice – only it's navy blue instead of red, and it looks warm."

Hetherington placed the little cloak with its beautiful brass buttons and its warm hood over the little girl's shoulders, while she stood with her eyes popping out of her head, too delightedly entranced to be able to say a word of thanks.

"Don't forget this, sir," said the chauffeur, handing Hetherington a package tied up in blue ribbons.

"And finally," said Hetherington, after thanking Reginald for the reminder, "here is a box of candy for everybody in the place. One for Mary, one for Jimmie, one for mother, and one for popper when he comes home."

"Oh thank you, thank you, thank you!" cried the little girl, throwing herself into Hetherington's arms. "I knowed you'd come – I did, I did, I did!"

"You believed in old Santa Claus, did you, babe?" said Hetherington, huskily, as the little girl's warm cheek pressed against his own.

"Yes, I did – always," said the little girl, "though Jimmie didn't."

"I did so!" retorted Jimmie, squatting on the floor and shooting a glass agate at a bunch of miggles across the room. "I swatted Petey Halloran on the eye on'y yesterday for sayin' they wasn't no such person."

"And you did well, my son," said Hetherington. "The man or boy that says there isn't any Santa Claus is a – is a – well, never you mind, but he is one just the same."

And bidding his little friends good night, Hetherington, with the chauffeur close behind him, left them to the joys of the moment, with a cheerier dawn than they had known for many weary days to follow.

V

"Good night, sir," said the chauffeur, as Hetherington paid him off and added a good-sized tip into the bargain. "I didn't useter believe in Santa Claus, sir, but I do now."

"So do I," said Hetherington, as he bade the other good night and lightly mounted the steps to his house.

A MERRY CHRISTMAS PIE

Take a quart of pure Good Will,
Flavor well with Sympathy;
Boil it on the fire till
It is full of bubbling Glee.
Season with a dash of Cheer,
Mixed with Love and Tenderness;
Cool off in an atmosphere
That is mostly Kindliness.

Stick a dozen raisins in
Made of grapes from Laughter's vine,
And such fruits as you may win
In a purely Jocund line.
Make a batter from the cream
Of Good Spirits running high,
And you'll have a perfect dream
Of a Merry Christmas pie!

THE CHILD WHO HAD EVERYTHING BUT —

I

I KNEW it was coming long before it got there. Every symptom was in sight. I had grown fidgety, and sat fearful of something overpoweringly impending. Strange noises filled the house. Things generally, according to their nature, severally creaked, soughed and moaned. There was a ghost on the way. That was perfectly clear to an expert in uncanny visitations of my wide experience, and I heartily wished it were not. There was a time when I welcomed such visitors with open arms, because there was a decided demand for them in the literary market, and I had been able to turn a great variety of spooks into anywhere from three thousand to five thousand words apiece at five cents a word, but now the age had grown too sceptical to swallow ghostly reminiscence with any degree of satisfaction. People had grown tired of hearing about Visions, and desired that their tales should reek with the scent of gasoline, quiver with the superfervid fever of tangential loves, and crash with moral thunderbolts aimed against malefactors of great achievement and high social and commercial standing. Wherefore it seemed an egregious waste of time for me to dally with a spook, or with anything else, for that matter, that had no strictly utilitarian value to one so professionally pressed as I was, and especially at a moment like that – it was Christmas morning and the hour was twenty-eight minutes after two – when I was so busy preparing my Ode to June, and trying to work out the details of a midsummer romance in time for the market for such productions early in the coming January.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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