

Johnston Annie Fellows

Miss Santa Claus of the Pullman



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CHAPTER I

THE last half hour had seemed endless to Will'm, almost as long as the whole four years of his life. With his stubby little shoes drawn up under him, and his soft bobbed hair flapping over his ears every time the rockers tilted forward, he sat all alone in the sitting-room behind the shop, waiting and rocking.

It seemed as if everybody at the Junction wanted something that afternoon; thread or buttons or yarn, or the home-made doughnuts which helped out the slim stock of goods in the little notion store which had once been the parlor. And it seemed as if Grandma Neal never would finish waiting on the customers and come back to tell the rest of the story about the Camels and the Star; for no sooner did one person go out than another one came in. He knew by the tinkling of the bell over the front door, every time it opened or shut.

The door between the shop and sitting-room being closed, Will'm could not hear much that was said, but several times he caught the word "Christmas," and once somebody said "*Santa*

Claus," in such a loud happy-sounding voice that he slipped down from the chair and ran across the room to open the door a crack. It was only lately that he had begun to hear much about Santa Claus. Not until Libby started to school that fall did they know that there is such a wonderful person in the world. Of course they had heard his name, as they had heard Jack Frost's, and had seen his picture in story-books and advertisements, but they hadn't known that he is really true till the other children told Libby. Now nearly every day she came home with something new she had learned about him.

Will'm must have known always about Christmas though, for he still had a piece of a rubber dog which his father had sent him on his first one, and – a Teddy Bear on his second. And while he couldn't recall anything about those first two festivals except what Libby told him, he could remember the last one perfectly. There had been a sled, and a fire-engine that wound up with a key, and Grandma Neal had made him some cooky soldiers with red cinnamon-drop buttons on their coats.

She wasn't his own grandmother, but she had taken the place of one to Libby and him, all the years he had been in the world. Their father paid their board, to be sure, and sent them presents and came to see them at long intervals when he could get away from his work, but that was so seldom that Will'm did not feel very well acquainted with him; not so well as Libby did. She was three years older, and could even remember a little bit about their mother before she went off to heaven to get well. Mrs. Neal

wasn't like a real grandmother in many ways. She was almost too young, for one thing. She was always very brisk and very busy, and, as she frequently remarked, she meant what she said and *she would be minded*.

That is why Will'm turned the knob so softly that no one noticed for a moment that the door was ajar. A black-bearded man in a rough overcoat was examining a row of dolls which dangled by their necks from a line above the show case. He was saying jokingly:

"Well, Mrs. Neal, I'll have to be buying some of these jimcracks before long. If this mud keeps up, no reindeer living could get out to my place, and it wouldn't do for the young'uns to be disappointed Christmas morning."

Then he caught sight of a section of a small boy peeping through the door, for all that showed of Will'm through the crack was a narrow strip of blue overalls which covered him from neck to ankles, a round pink cheek and one solemn eye peering out from under his thatch of straight flaxen hair like a little Skye terrier's. When the man saw that eye he hurried to say: "Of course mud oughtn't to make any difference to *Santy's* reindeer. They take the *Sky Road*, right over the house tops and all."

The crack widened till two eyes peeped in, shining with interest, and both stubby shoes ventured over the threshold. A familiar sniffle made Grandma Neal turn around.

"Go back to the fire, William," she said briskly. "It isn't warm enough in here for you with that cold of yours."

The order was obeyed as promptly as it was given, but with a bang of the door so rebellious and unexpected that the man laughed. There was an amused expression on the woman's face, too, as she glanced up from the package she was tying, to explain with an indulgent smile.

"That wasn't all temper, Mr. Woods. It was part embarrassment that made him slam the door. Usually he doesn't mind strangers, but he takes spells like that sometimes."

"That's only natural," was the drawling answer. "But it isn't everybody who knows how to manage children, Mrs. Neal. I hope now that his stepmother when he gets her, will understand him as well as you do. My wife tells me that the poor little kids are going to have one soon. How do they take to the notion?"

Mrs. Neal stiffened a little at the question, although he was an old friend, and his interest was natural under the circumstances. There was a slight pause, then she said:

"I haven't mentioned the subject to them yet. No use to make them cross their bridge before they get to it. I've no doubt Molly will be good to them. She was a nice little thing when she used to go to school here at the Junction."

"It's queer," mused the man, "how she and Bill Branfield used to think so much of each other, from their First Reader days till both families moved away from here, and then that they should come across each other after all these years, from different states, too."

Instinctively they had lowered their voices, but Will'm on the

other side of the closed door was making too much noise of his own to hear anything they were saying. Lying full length on the rug in front of the fire, he battered his heels up and down on the floor and pouted. His cold made him miserable, and being sent out of the shop made him cross. If he had been allowed to stay there's no telling what he might have heard about those reindeer to repeat to Libby when she came home from school.

Suddenly Will'm remembered the last bit of information which she had brought home to him, and, scrambling hastily up from the floor, he climbed into the rocking chair as if something were after him:

"Santa Claus is apt to be looking down the chimney any minute to see how you're behaving. And no matter if your lips don't show it outside, he knows when you're all puckered up with crossness and pouting on the inside!"

At that terrible thought Will'm began to rock violently back and forth and sing. It was a choky, sniffing little tune that he sang. His voice sounded thin and far away even to his own ears, because his cold was so bad. But the thought that Santa might be listening, and would write him down as a good little boy, kept him valiantly at it for several minutes. Then because he had a way of chanting his thoughts out loud sometimes, instead of thinking them to himself, he went on, half chanting, half talking the story of the Camels and the Star, which he was waiting for Grandma Neal to come back and finish. He knew it as well as she did, because she had told it to him so often in the last week.

"An' the wise men rode through the night, an' they rode an' they rode, an' the bells on the bridles went ting-a-ling! just like the bell on Dranma's shop door. An' the drate big Star shined down on 'em and went ahead to show 'em the way. An' the drate big reindeer runned along the Sky Road" – he was mixing Grandma Neal's story now with what he had heard through the crack in the door, and he found the mixture much more thrilling than the original recital. "An' they runned an' they runned an' the sleighbells went ting-a-ling! just like the bell on Dranma's shop door. An' after a long time they all comed to the house where the baby king was at. Nen the wise men jumped off their camels and knelt down and opened all their boxes of pretty things for Him to play with. An' the reindeer knelt down on the roof where the drate big shining star stood still, so Santy could empty all his pack down the baby king's chimney."

It was a queer procession which wandered through Will'm's sniffing, sing-song account. To the camels, sages and herald angels, to the shepherds and the little woolly white lambs of the Judean hills, were added not only Bo Peep and her flock, but Baa the black sheep, and the reindeer team of an unscriptural Saint Nicholas. But it was all Holy Writ to Will'm. Presently the mere thought of angels and stars and silver bells gave him such a big warm feeling inside, that he was brimming over with good-will to everybody.

When Libby came home from school a few minutes later, he was in the midst of his favorite game, one which he played

at intervals all through the day. The game was Railroad Train, suggested naturally enough by the constant switching of cars and snorting of engines which went on all day and night at this busy Junction. It was one in which he could be a star performer in each part, as he personated fireman, engineer, conductor and passenger in turn. At the moment Libby came in he was the engine itself, backing, puffing and whistling, his arms going like piston-rods, and his pursed up little mouth giving a very fair imitation of "letting off steam."

"Look out!" he called warningly. "You'll get runned over."

But instead of heeding his warning, Libby planted herself directly in the path of the oncoming engine, ignoring so completely the part he was playing that he stopped short in surprise. Ordinarily she would have fallen in with the game, but now she seemed blind and deaf to the fact that he was playing anything at all. Usually, coming in the back way, she left her muddy overshoes on the latticed porch, her lunch basket on the kitchen table, her wraps on their particular hook in the entry. She was an orderly little soul. But to-day she came in, her coat half off, her hood trailing down her back by its strings, and her thin little tails of tightly braided hair fuzzy and untied, from running bare-headed all the way home to tell the exciting news. She told it in gasps.

"You can write letters to Santa Claus – for whatever you want – and put them up the chimney – and he gets them – and whatever you ask for he'll bring you – if you're good!"

Instantly the engine was a little boy again all a-tingle with this new delicious mystery of Christmastide. He climbed up into the rocking chair and listened, the rapt look on his face deepening. In proof of what she told, Libby had a letter all written and addressed, ready to send. One of the older girls had helped her with it at noon, and she had spent the entire afternoon recess copying it. Because she was just learning to write, she made so many mistakes that it had to be copied several times. She read it aloud to Will'm.

"Dear Santa Claus: – Please bring me a little shiny gold ring like the one that Maudie Peters wears. Yours truly,
Libby Branfield."

"Now you watch, and you'll see me send it up the chimney when I get my muddy overshoes off and my hands washed. This might be one of the times when he'd be looking down, and it'd be better for me to be all clean and tidy."

Breathlessly Will'm waited till she came back from the kitchen, her hands and face shining from the scrubbing she had given them with yellow laundry soap, her hair brushed primly back on each side of its parting and her hair ribbons freshly tied. Then she knelt on the rug, the fateful missive in her hand.

"Maudie is going to ask for 'most a dozen presents," she said. "But as long as this will be Santy's first visit to this house I'm not going to ask for more than one thing, and you mustn't either. It wouldn't be polite."

"But we can ask him to bring a ring to Dranma," Will'm

suggested, his face beaming at the thought. The answer was positive and terrible out of her wisdom newly gained at both church and school.

"No, we can't! He only brings things to people who *bleeve* in him. It's the same way it is about going to Heaven. Only those who *bleeve* will be saved and get in."

"Dranma and Uncle Neal will go to Heaven," insisted Will'm loyally, and in a tone which suggested his willingness to hurt her if she contradicted him. Uncle Neal was "Dranma's" husband.

"Oh, of course, they'll go to *Heaven* all right," was Libby's impatient answer. "They've got faith in the Bible and the minister and the heathen and such things. But they won't get anything in their stockings because they aren't sure about there even *being* a Santa Claus! So there!"

"Well, if Santa Claus won't put anything in my Dranma Neal's stocking, he's a mean old thing, and I don't want him to put anything in mine," began Will'm defiantly, but was silenced by the sight of Libby's horrified face.

"Oh, brother! *Hush!*" she cried, darting a frightened glance over her shoulder towards the chimney. Then in a shocked whisper which scared Will'm worse than a loud yell would have done, she said impressively, "Oh, I *hope* he hasn't heard you! He never would come to this house as long as he lives! And I couldn't *bear* for us to find just empty stockings Christmas morning."

There was a tense silence. And then, still on her knees, her hands still clasped over the letter, she moved a few inches nearer

the fireplace. The next instant Will'm heard her call imploringly up the chimney, "Oh, dear Santa Claus, if you're up there looking down, *please* don't mind what Will'm said. He's so little he doesn't know any better. *Please* forgive him and send us what we ask for, for Jesus' sake, Amen!"

Fascinated, Will'm watched the letter flutter up past the flames, drawn by the strong draught of the flue. Then suddenly shamed by the thought that he had been publicly prayed for, *out loud and in the daytime*, he ran to cast himself on the old lounge, face downward among the cushions.

Libby herself felt a trifle constrained after her unusual performance, and to cover her embarrassment seized the hearth broom and vigorously swept up the scraps of half-dried mud which she had tracked in a little while before. Then she stood and drummed on the window pane a long time, looking out into the dusk which always came so surprisingly fast these short winter days, almost the very moment after the sun dropped down behind the cedar trees.

It was a relief to both children when Grandma Neal came in with a lighted lamp. Her cheerful call to know who was going to help her set the supper table, gave Will'm an excuse to spring up from the lounge cushions and face his little world once more in a natural and matter-of-course way. He felt safer out in the bright warm kitchen. No stern displeased eye could possibly peer at him around the bend of that black shining stove-pipe. There was comfort in the savory steam puffing out from under the lid

of the stew-pan on the stove. There was reassurance in the clatter of the knives and forks and dishes which he and Libby put noisily in place on the table. But when Grandma Neal started where she had left off, to finish the story of the Camels and the Star, he interrupted quickly to ask instead for the tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. The Christmas Spirit had gone out of him. He could not listen to the story of the Star. It lighted the way not only of the camel caravan, but of the Sky Road too, and he didn't want to be reminded of that Sky Road now. He was fearful that a cold displeasure might be filling the throat of the sitting-room chimney. If Santa Claus *had* happened to be listening when he called him a mean old thing, then had he ruined not only his own chances, but Libby's too. That fear followed him all evening. It made him vaguely uncomfortable. Even when they sat down to supper it did something to his appetite, for the dumpling stew did not taste as good as usual.

CHAPTER II

IT was several days before Will'm lost that haunting fear of having displeased the great power up the chimney past all forgiveness. It began to leave him gradually as Libby grew more and more sure of her own state of favor. She was so good in school now that even the teacher said nobody could be better, no matter how hard he tried. She stayed every day to help clean the blackboards and collect the pencils. She never missed a syllable nor stepped off the line in spelling class, nor asked for a drink in lesson time. And she and Maudie Peters had made it up between them not to whisper a single word until after Christmas. She was sure now that even if Santa Claus had overheard Will'm, her explanation that he was too little to know any better had made it all right.

It is probable, too, that Will'm's state of body helped his state of mind, for about this time his cold was well enough for him to play out of doors, and the thought of stars and angels and silver bells began to be agreeable again. They gave him that big, warm feeling inside again; the Christmas feeling of good-will to everybody.

One morning he was sitting up on a post of the side yard fence, when the passenger train Number Four came rushing in to the station, and was switched back on a side track right across the road from him. It was behind time and had to wait there

for orders or till the Western Flyer passed it, or for some such reason. It was a happy morning for Will'm. There was nothing he enjoyed so much as having one of these long Pullman trains stop where he could watch it. Night after night he and Libby had flattened their faces against the sitting-room window to watch the seven o'clock limited pass by. Through its brilliantly lighted windows they loved to see the passengers at dinner. The white tables with their gleam of glass and shine of silver and glow of shaded lights seemed wonderful to them. More wonderful still was it to be eating as unconcernedly as if one were at home, with the train jiggling the tables while it leaped across the country at its highest speed. The people who could do such things must be wonderful too.

There were times when passengers flattening *their* faces against the glass to see why the train had stopped, caught the gleam of a cheerful home window across the road, and holding shielding hands at either side of their eyes, as they peered through the darkness, smiled to discover those two eager little watchers, who counted the stopping of the Pullman at this Junction as the greatest event of the day.

Will'm and Libby knew nearly every engineer and conductor on the road by sight, and had their own names for them. The engineer on this morning train they called Mr. Smiley, because he always had a cheerful grin for them, and sometimes a wave of his big grimy hand. This time Mr. Smiley was too busy and too provoked by the delay to pay any attention to the small boy

perched on the fence post. Some of the passengers finding that they might have to wait half an hour or more began to climb out and walk up and down the road past him. Several of them attracted by the wares in the window of the little notion shop which had once been a parlor, sauntered in and came out again, eating some of Grandma Neal's doughnuts. Presently Will'm noticed that everybody who passed a certain sleeping coach, stooped down and looked under it. He felt impelled to look under it himself and discover why. So he climbed down from the post and trudged along the road, kicking the rocks out of his way with stubby little shoes already scuffed from much previous kicking. At the same moment the steward of the dining-car stepped down from the vestibuled platform, and strolled towards him, with his hands in his trousers' pockets.

"Hullo, son!" he remarked good-humoredly in passing, giving an amused glance at the solemn child stuffed into a gray sweater and blue mittens, with a toboggan cap pulled down over his soft bobbed hair. Usually Will'm responded to such greetings. So many people came into the shop that he was not often abashed by strangers. But this time he was so busy looking at something that dangled from the steward's vest pocket that he failed to say "Hullo" back at him. It was what seemed to be the smallest gold watch he had ever seen, and it impressed him as very queer that the man should wear it on the outside of his pocket instead of the inside. He stopped still in the road and stared at it until the man passed him, then he turned and followed him slowly at a distance.

A few rods further on, the steward stooped and looked under the coach, and spoke to a man who was out of sight, but who was hammering on the other side. A voice called back something about a hot-box and cutting out that coach, and reminded of his original purpose, Will'm followed on and looked, likewise. Although he squatted down and looked for a long time he couldn't see a single box, only the legs of the man who was hammering on the other side. But just as he straightened up again he caught the gleam of something round and shinningly golden, something no bigger than a quarter, lying almost between his feet. It was a tiny baby watch like the one that swung from the steward's vest pocket.

Thrilled by the discovery, Will'm picked it up and fondled it with both little blue mittens. It didn't tick when he held it to his ear, and he couldn't open it, but he was sure that Uncle Neal could open it and start it to going, and he was sure that it was the littlest watch in the world. It never occurred to him that finding it hadn't made it his own to have and to carry home, just like the rainbow-lined mussel shells that he sometimes picked up on the creek bank, or the silver dime he had once found in a wagon rut.

Then he looked up to see the steward strolling back towards him again, his hands still in his trousers' pockets. But this time no fascinating baby watch bobbed back and forth against his vest as he walked, and Will'm knew with a sudden stab of disappointment that was as bad as earache, that the watch he was fondling could never be his to carry home and show proudly to

Uncle Neal. It belonged to the man.

"Here!" he said, holding it out in the blue mitten.

"Well, I vow!" exclaimed the steward, looking down at his watchfob, and then snatching the little disk of gold from the outstretched hand. "I wouldn't have lost that for hardly anything. It must have come loose when I stooped to look under the car. I think more of that than almost anything I've got. See?"

And then Will'm saw that it was not a watch, but a little locket made to hang from a bar that was fastened to a wide black ribbon fob. The man pulled out the fob, and there on the other end, where it had been in his pocket all the time, was a big watch, as big as Will'm's fist. The locket flew open when he touched a spring, and there were two pictures inside. One of a lady and one of a jolly, fat-cheeked baby.

"Well, little man!" exclaimed the steward, with a hearty clap on the shoulder that nearly upset him. "You don't know how big a favor you've done me by finding that locket. You're just about the nicest boy I've come across yet. I'll have to tell Santa Claus about you. What's your name?"

Will'm told him and pointed across to the shop, when asked where he lived. At the steward's high praise Will'm was ready to take the Sky Road himself, when he heard that he was to be reported to the Master of the Reindeer as the nicest boy the steward had come across. His disappointment vanished so quickly that he even forgot that he had been disappointed, and when the steward caught him under the arms and swung him

up the steps, saying something about finding an orange, he was thrilled with a wild brave sense of adventure.

Discovering that Will'm had never been on a Pullman since he could remember, the steward took him through the diner to the kitchen, showing him all the sights and explaining all the mysteries. It was as good as a show to watch the child's face. He had never dreamed that such roasting and broiling went on in the narrow space of the car kitchen, or that such quantities of eatables were stored away in the mammoth refrigerators which stood almost touching the red hot ranges. Big shining fish from far-off waters, such as the Junction had never heard of, lay blocked in ice in one compartment. Ripe red strawberries lay in another, although it was mid December, and in Will'm's part of the world strawberries were not to be thought of before the first of June. There were more eggs than all the hens at the Junction could lay in a week, and a white-capped, white-jacketed colored-man was beating up a dozen or so into a white mountain of meringue, which the passengers would eat by and by in the shape of some strange, delicious dessert, sitting at those fascinating tables he had passed on his way in.

A quarter of an hour later when Will'm found himself on the ground again, gazing after the departing train, he was a trifle dazed with all he had seen and heard. But three things were clear in his mind. That he held in one hand a great yellow orange, in the other a box of prize pop-corn, and in his heart the precious assurance that Santa Claus would be told by one in high authority

that he was a good boy.

So elated was he by this last fact, that he decided on the way home to send a letter up the chimney on his own account, especially as he knew now exactly what to ask for. He had been a bit hazy on the question before. Now he knew beyond all doubt that what he wanted more than anything in the wide world, was *a ride on a Pullman car*. He wanted to sit at one of those tables, and eat things that had been cooked in that mysterious kitchen, at the same time that he was flying along through the night on the wings of a mighty dragon breathing out smoke and fire as it flew.

He went in to the house by way of the shop so that he might make the bell go ting-a-ling. It was so delightfully like the bells on the camels, also like the bells on the sleigh which would be coming before so very long to bring him what he wanted.

Miss Sally Watts was sitting behind the counter, crocheting. To his question of "Where's Dranna?" she answered without looking up.

"She and Mr. Neal have driven over to Westfield. They have some business at the court house. She said you're not to go off the place again till she gets back. I was to tell you when you came in. She looked everywhere to find you before she left, because she's going to be gone till late in the afternoon. Where you been, anyhow?"

Will'm told her. Miss Sally was a neighbor who often helped in the shop at times like this, and he was always glad when such times came. It was easy to tell Miss Sally things, and presently

when a few direct questions disclosed the fact that Miss Sally "bleeved" as he did, he asked her another question, which had been puzzling him ever since he had decided to ask for a ride on the train.

"How can Santa put a *ride* in a *stocking*?"

"I don't know," answered Miss Sally, still intent on her crocheting. "But then I don't really see how he can put anything in; sleds or dolls or anything of the sort. He's a mighty mysterious man to me. But then, probably he wouldn't try to put the *ride* in a stocking. He'd send the ticket or the money to buy it with. And he *might* give it to you beforehand, and not wait for stocking-hanging time, knowing how much you want it."

All this from Miss Sally because Mrs. Neal had just told her that the children were to be sent to their father the day before Christmas, and that they were to go on a Pullman car, because the ordinary coaches did not go straight through. The children were too small to risk changing cars, and he was too busy to come for them.

Will'm stayed in the shop the rest of the morning, for Miss Sally echoing the sentiment of everybody at the Junction, felt sorry for the poor little fellow who was soon to be sent away to a stepmother, and felt that it was her duty to do what she could toward making his world as pleasant as possible for him, while she had the opportunity.

Together they ate the lunch which had been left on the pantry shelves for them. Will'm helped set it out on the table. Then

he went back into the shop with Miss Sally. But his endless questions "got on her nerves" after awhile, she said, and she suddenly ceased to be the good company that she had been all morning. She mended the fire in the sitting-room and told Will'm he'd better play in there till Libby came home. It was an endless afternoon, so long that after he had done everything that he could think of to pass the time, he decided he'd write his own letter and send it up the chimney himself. He couldn't possibly wait for Libby to come home and do it. He'd write a picture letter. It was easier to read pictures than print, anyhow. At least for him. He slipped back into the shop long enough to get paper and a pencil from the old secretary in the corner, and then lying on his stomach on the hearth-rug with his heels in the air, he began drawing his favorite sketch, a train of cars.

All that can be said of the picture is that one could recognize what it was meant for. The wheels were wobbly and no two of the same size, the windows zigzagged in uneven lines and were of varied shapes. The cow-catcher looked as if it could toss anything it might pick up high enough to join the cow that jumped over the moon. But it was unmistakably a train, and the long line of smoke pouring back over it from the tipsy smoke-stack showed that it was going at the top of its speed. Despite the straggling scratchy lines any art critic must acknowledge that it had in it that intangible quality known as life and "go."

It puzzled Will'm at first to know how to introduce himself into the picture so as to show that he was the one wanting a ride.

Finally on top of one of the cars he drew a figure supposed to represent a boy, and after long thought, drew one just like it, except that the second figure wore a skirt. He didn't want to take the ride alone. He'd be almost afraid to go without Libby, and he knew very well that she'd like to go. She'd often played "S'posen" they were riding away off to the other side of the world on one of those trains which they watched nightly pass the sitting-room window.

He wished he could spell his name and hers. He knew only the letters with which each began, and he wasn't sure of either unless he could see the picture on the other side of the building block on which it was printed. The box of blocks was in the sitting-room closet. He brought it out, emptied it on the rug and searched until he found the block bearing the picture of a lion. That was the king of beasts, and the L on the other side which stood for Lion, stood also for Libby. Very slowly and painstakingly he copied the letter on his drawing, placing it directly across the girl's skirt so that there could be no mistake. Then he pawed over the blocks till he found the one with the picture of a whale. That was the king of fishes, and the W on the other side which stood for Whale, stood also for William. He tried putting the W across the boy, but as each leg was represented by one straight line only, bent at right angles at the bottom to make a foot, the result was confusing. He rubbed out the legs, made them anew, and put the W over the boy's head, drawing a thin line from the end of the W to the crossed scratches representing fingers. That plainly showed that

the Boy and the W were one and the same, although it gave to the unenlightened the idea that the picture had something to do with flying a kite. Then he rubbed out the L on Libby's skirt and placed it over her head, likewise connecting her letter with her fingers.

The rubbing-out process gave a smudgy effect. Will'm was not satisfied with the result, and like a true artist who counts all labor as naught, which helps him towards that perfection which is his ideal, he laid aside the drawing as unworthy and began another.

The second was better. He accomplished it with a more certain touch and with no smudges, and filled with the joy of a creator, sat and looked at it a few minutes before starting it on its flight up the flue towards the Sky Road.

The great moment was over. He had just drawn back from watching it start when Libby came in. She came primly and quietly this time. She had waited to leave her overshoes on the porch, her lunch basket in the kitchen, her wraps in the entry. The white ruffled apron which she had worn all day was scarcely mussed. The bows on her narrow braids stuck out stiffly and properly. Her shoes were tied and the laces tucked in. She walked on tiptoe, and every movement showed that she was keeping up the reputation she had earned of being "so good that nobody could be any better, no matter how hard he tried." She had been that good for over a week.

Will'm ran to get the orange which had been given him that morning. He had been saving it for this moment of division. He

had already opened the pop-corn box and found the prize, a little china cup no larger than a thimble, and had used it at lunch, dipping a sip at a time from his glass of milk.

The interest with which she listened to his account of finding the locket and being taken aboard the train made him feel like a hero. He hastened to increase her respect.

"Nen the man said that I was about the nicest little boy he ever saw and he would tell Santa Claus so. An' I knew everything was all right so I've just sended a letter up to tell him to please give me a ride on the Pullman train."

Libby smiled in an amused, big-sister sort of way, asking how Will'm supposed anybody could read his letters. He couldn't write anything but scratches.

"But it was a picture letter!" Will'm explained triumphantly. "Anybody can read picture letters." Then he proceeded to tell what he had made and how he had marked it with the initials of the Lion and the Whale.

To his intense surprise Libby looked first startled, then troubled, then despairing. His heart seemed to drop down into his shoes when she exclaimed in a tragic tone:

"Well, Will'm Branfield! If you haven't gone and done it! I don't know what ever *is* going to happen to us *now*!"

Then she explained. *She* had already written a letter for him, with Susie Peters's help, asking in writing what she had asked before by word of mouth, that he be forgiven, and requesting that he might not find his stocking empty on Christmas morning. As

to what should be in it, she had left that to Santa's generosity, because Will'm had never said what he wanted.

"And now," she added reproachfully, "I've *told* you that we oughtn't to ask for more than one thing apiece, 'cause this is the first time he's ever been to this house, and it doesn't seem polite to ask for so much from a stranger."

Will'm defended himself, his chin tilted at an angle that should have been a warning to one who could read such danger signals.

"I only asked for one thing for me and one for you."

"Yes, but don't you see, *I*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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