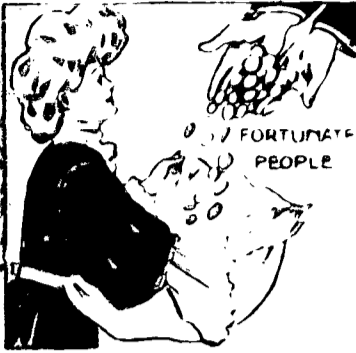


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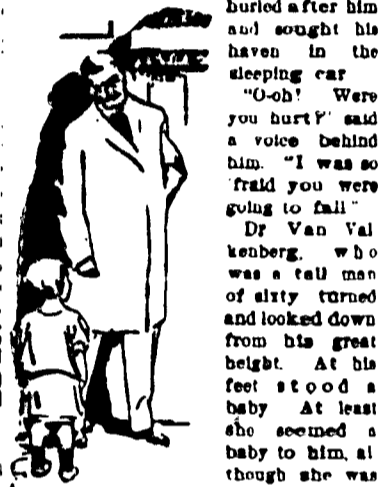
Three Cheers For Dear Old, Queer Old Santa Claus



Santa Claus on "The Limited"

By FRANK H. SWEET.

THE Chicago Limited was pulling out of the Grand Central station in New York as Dr. Henry Van Valkenberg submitted his ticket to the gateman. He dashed through pushing that indignant official to one side, made a leap for the railing of the last car of the train and a friendly brakeman dragged him "on board." Dr. Van Valkenberg smiled a little ruefully as he thanked the man and rubbed the aching surface of his hand. Then he pulled himself together, picked up his books and newspapers he had dropped and which the bystanders had enthusiastically buried after him, and sought his haven in the sleeping car.



"WERE YOU HURT?" she asked, looking up at him with dark brown eyes and was so delicious in her almost maternal solicitude that she smiled impressively. "Why, no, thank you," he said. "I am not hurt. Didn't you see the kind man help me on to the car?" "I'm very glad," she said with dignity. "It was 'frail he hurt you' she turned as she spoke and toddled into the section opposite his, where a plain but kindly faced elderly woman sat.

"Won't you come over and visit me?" he asked. "I am very lonely, and I have no one to take care of me." She slid off the seat at once, with great alacrity. "I'd like to," she said, "but I must ask Nana. I must always ask Nana now," she added, with dutiful emphasis. "I fore I do anything."

"She laid her hand on the gloved fingers of the nurse as she spoke, and the woman opened her eyes, shot a quick glance at the man and nodded. She had not been asleep. Dr. Van Valkenberg rose and lifted his visitor to the seat beside him, where her short legs stuck out in unbecoming rigidity. "I can take care of you," she said brightly. "I took care of mamma a great deal, and I gave her her medicine."

"Very well," he said, with the smile women loved; "if you really are going to take care of me I must know your name. You see," he explained, "I might need you in the night to get me a glass of water or something. Just think how disappointing it would be if I should call you by the wrong name and some other little girl came!" "You say funny things," she said contentedly. "But there isn't any other little girl in the car. I looked soon as I came in, 'cos I wanted one to play with. I like little girls. I like little boys, too," she added, with innocent expansiveness.



she grew up and became a young lady, and well, she went away from me, and I never had another little girl." "Did she go to heaven?" asked the little girl softly. "Oh, dear!" answered the doctor with brisk cheerfulness. "Then why didn't she keep on being your little girl always?" The doctor hesitated a moment. He was making the discovery that after many years old wounds can reopen and throb. No one had ever been brave enough to broach to him the subject of this single love affair which he was now discussing.

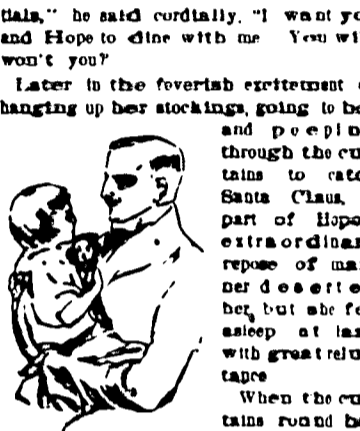
"Well, you see," he explained, "other boys liked her too. And when she became a young lady other men liked her. So finally—some of them took her away from me." He uttered the last words wearily, and the sensitive atom at his side seemed to understand why. Her little hand slipped into his. "Why didn't you ask her to please stay with you?" she persisted pitiably.

"I did," he told her. "But, you see, she liked the other man better." "Oh-h-h!" The word came out long drawn and breathless. "I don't see how she possibly could!" There were such sorrow for the victim and scorn for the offender in the tone that, combined with the one too subtle compliment, it was too much for Dr. Van Valkenberg's self control. He threw back his gray head and burst into an almost boyish shout of laughter, which effectually cleared the atmosphere of sentimental memories.

"Where are you going to hang up your stockings to night?" he asked. "I can't hang them up," she answered soberly. "Santa Claus doesn't travel on trains. Nana says." "Nana is always right," said the doctor oracularly. "and of course you must do exactly as she says. But I heard that Santa Claus was going to get on the train tonight at Buffalo, and I believe that if he found a pair of small black stockings hanging from that section he'd fill them."

Her eyes sparkled. "Then I'll ask Nana," she said. "And if she says I may hang them I will. But one," she added conscientiously. "has a teeny, weeny hole in the toe. Do you think he would mind that?" He reassured her on this point and turned to the nurse. "I beg your pardon," he said. "I've taken a great fancy to your little charge, and I want your help to carry out a plan of mine. I have suggested to Hope that she hang up her stockings tonight. I have every reason to believe that Santa Claus will get on this train at Buffalo. In fact," he added, "I mean to telegraph him."

The nurse hesitated a moment. He drew his cardcase from his pocket and handed her one of the bits of paste-board it contained. "I have no evil designs," he added cheerfully. "If you are a New Yorker, you may possibly know who I am." The woman's face lit up as she read the name. She turned toward him impulsively, with a very pleasant smile. "Indeed I do, doctor," she said. "Who does not? Dr. Abbey sent for you last week," she added, "for a consultation over the last case I had—this child's mother. But you were out of town. We were all so disappointed." "Patient died?" asked the physician, with professional brevity. "Yes, doctor." He rose from his seat. "Now that you have my creden-



tailed," he said cordially. "I want you and Hope to dine with me. You will won't you?" Later in the feverish excitement of hanging up her stockings, going to bed and peeping through the curtains to catch Santa Claus, a part of Hope's extraordinary repose of manner deserted her, but she fell asleep at last, with great reluctance. When the curtains round her berth had ceased to tremble a most unusual procession wound its silent way toward Dr. Van Valkenberg's section. In some occult manner the news had gone from one end to the other of the "limited" that a little girl in section 9 car Florida, had hung up her stockings for Santa Claus. The hearts of fathers, mothers and doing uncles responded at once. Dressing cases were unlocked, great valises were opened, mysterious bundles were unwrapped and from all these sources came gifts of surprising fitness.

A succession of long drawn ecstatic breathes and happy gurgles woke the passengers on the car Florida at an unseasonably hour (Christmas morning, and a small white figure, clad informally in a single garment, danced up and down the aisle, dragging carts and woolly lambs behind it. Occasionally there was the squeak of a talking doll, and always there were the patter of small feet and soft cooing of a child's laughter. Down was just approaching, and the lamps, still burning, flared pale in the gray light. But in the length of that car there was no soul so base as to long for silence and the pillow (rubbed old faces looked out between the curtains and smiled. Eyes long unused to tears felt a sudden, strange moisture.

Throughout the day the snow still fell, and the outside world seemed far away and dreamlike to Dr. Van Valkenberg. The real things were this train, cutting its way through the snow, and this little child, growing deeper into his heart with each moment that passed. The situation was unique, but easy enough to understand, he told himself. He had merely gone back twenty-five years to that other child whom he had petted in infancy and loved and lost in womanhood. He had been very lonely—how lonely he had only recently begun to realize—and he was becoming an old man whose life lay behind him. He crossed the aisle suddenly and sat down beside the nurse, leaving Hope stinging her doll to sleep in his section.

"Will you tell me all you know about the child?" he asked. "She appeals to me very strongly, probably because she's so much like some one I used to know." The nurse closed her book and looked at him curiously. She had heard much of him, but nothing would explain this interest in a strange child. He himself could not have explained it. He knew only that he felt it powerfully and compellingly. "Her name is Hope Armitage," she said. "Her mother, who has just died, was a widow, Mrs. Katharine Armitage. She had saved a little, enough to pay most of her expenses at the hospital. We all loved the woman. She was very unusual and patient and charming. All the nurses who had any thing to do with her cried when she died. We felt that she might have been saved if she had come in time, but she was worked out. She had earned her living by sewing after her



husband's death three years ago and she kept at it day and night. She was so sweet, so brave, yet so desperately miserable over leaving her little girl alone in the world." Dr. Van Valkenberg sat silent. It was true, then. This was Katharine's child. He had not known of the death of Armitage nor of the subsequent poverty of his widow, but he had known Katharine's baby, he now told himself, the moment he saw her. "Well," the nurse resumed, "after she died we raised a small fund to buy some clothes for Hope and take her to Chicago to her new home Mrs. Armitage has a cousin there who has agreed to take her in. None of the relatives came to the funeral. There are not many of them, and the Chicago people haven't much money, I fancy."

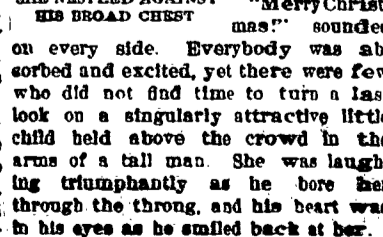
Dr. Van Valkenberg was hardly surprised. Life was full of extraordinary situations, and his profession had brought him face to face with many of them. Nevertheless a deep solemnity filled him, and a strange peace settled over him. "I want her," he said briefly. "Her mother and father were old friends of mine, and this thing looks like fate. Will they give her to me—these Chicago people—do you think?" Tears filled the woman's eyes. "Indeed they will," she said, "and gladly. There was some talk of sending her to an institution before they finally decided to take her. Dear little Hope! How happy she will be with you!"

He left her and went back to the seat where Hope sat crooning to the doll. Sitting down he gathered them both up in his arms, and a thrill shot through him as he looked at the yellow curls resting against his breast. Her child—her little, helpless baby—now his child to love and care for! He was not a religious man. Nevertheless a prayer rose spontaneously in his heart.

"Hope," he said gently, "once long ago I asked a little girl to come and live with me, and she would not come. Now I want to ask you to come and stay with me always and be my own little girl and let me take care of you and make you happy. Will you come?" The radiance of June sunshine broke out upon her face and shone in the brown eyes upturned to him. How well he knew that look! Hope did not turn toward Nana, and that significant omission touched him deeply. She seemed to feel that there was a question she alone must decide. She drew a long breath as she looked up at him. "Really, truly?" she asked. Then, as he nodded without speaking, she saw something in his face that was new to her. It was nothing to frighten a little girl, for it was very sweet and tender, but for one second she thought her new friend was going to cry. She put both arms around his neck and replied softly, with the exquisite maternal cadences her voice had taken on in her first words to him when she entered the car: "I'll be your own little girl, and I'll take care of you too. You know, you said I could."

Dr. Van Valkenberg turned to the nurse. "I shall go with you to her cousin's from the train," he announced. "I'm ready to give them all the proofs they need that I'm a suitable guardian for the child, but," he added, with a touch of the boyishness that had never left him, "I want this matter settled now." The long train pounded its way into the station at Chicago, and Dr. Van Valkenberg summoned a porter. "Take care of these things," he said, indicating both sets of possessions with a sweep of his arm. "I shall have my hands full with my little daughter." He gathered her into his arms as he spoke, and she nestled against his broad chest with a child's unconscious satisfaction in the strength and firmness of his clasp.

"Merry Christmas!" sounded on every side. Everybody was absorbed and excited, yet there were few who did not find time to turn a last look on a singularly attractive little child held above the crowd in the arms of a tall man. She was laughing triumphantly as he bore her through the throng, and his heart was in his eyes as he smiled back at her.



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