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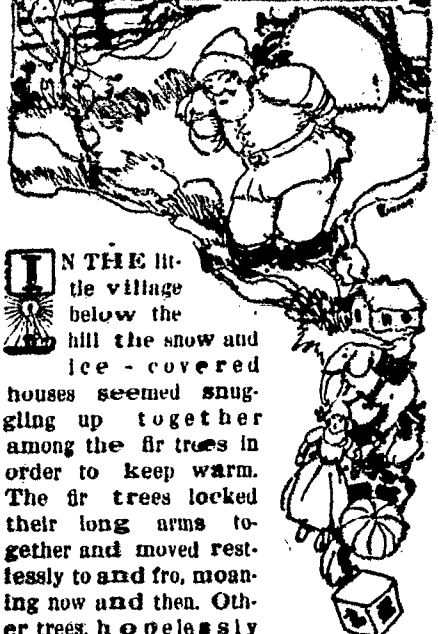
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**THE SPIRIT of CHRISTMAS**  
By SARA LOCKWOOD



IN THE little village below the hill the snow and ice-covered houses seemed snuggled up together among the fir trees in order to keep warm. The fir trees locked their long arms together and moved restlessly and fro, moaning now and then. Other trees, hopelessly bare and cold, shivered in the wind and creaked their icy branches. The beautiful Lady of the Snow with all her Snowflake Imps in attendance flitted about the village street, sliding gaily down the shop windows and flirting with the passers-by.

The Man and the Child made their way through the drifts toward the group of houses. The Child ran and danced about, eye in front, now behind the Man, shouting and laughing. She loved the white old Winter and in return Winter had commanded all his subjects to be kind to her. So the Snow Lady kissed and caressed her and the Snowflakes played about her merrily, touching her cheeks softly and making them rosy.

But the Man hated Winter and now he hurried along, giving no heed to the beauties about him, wishing only for the warm fire in his cottage. The Snow Lady tried all her charms on him, but he only pulled his muffler tighter about his throat and his cap more firmly upon his head and went on. Then the Snowflake Imps flew at him furiously. They stung his face and buried themselves inside his muffler. The North Wind tormented him, too, blowing up his sleeves and twisting his great coat about his knees until he stumbled and tottered under his breath. When the Child laughed at him and would have thrown snow in his face, he reproved her gruffly.

The Man was threshing over in his mind a question he had discussed with the Woman only the week before. They had decided to have no Christmas this year. It was foolish, very foolish to wear one's self out thinking and planning presents for all one's relatives and friends for months before, and then perhaps not be ready when Christmas came. They would not allow their child to keep her belief in the foolish Santa Claus myth which they had told her so long ago.

This was the hardest part, for both the Man and the Woman dreaded to tell the Child, and they put off the task



The Child Ran and Danced About, Shouting and Laughing.

as long as possible. Now it was Christmas Eve and the Man had promised to tell the Child as they visited the shops. But she had been so delighted with the array of toys heaped in windows and on counters, so happy in thinking Santa would bring her some of these wonderful playthings, that he could not bring himself to tell her Santa would never visit her again. And yet the must. She would soon get over the disappointment and be happier than ever, he told himself. Yes, it was the sensible thing to do, but he would wait and let the Woman tell her.

As they neared the cottages the Child threw out her arms joyously as though she would embrace the whole world of Snowflakes before she left them. And they, wild with delight, fought for a place upon her little hood and shoulders that she might carry them away with her.

"Oh, Mother, Mother, the Snowflakes have played with me and have told me the prettiest stories," cried the Child as she drew the Woman's hand across her cold, damp cheek. "And I have seen Santa Claus. He is visiting the shops now but he promised to come here tonight." She stood on her toes and clapped her hands in her excitement, and the words tumbled over one another as she tried to tell of all the beautiful toys she had seen.

The Woman sighed and looked reproachfully at the Man. So he had

not told the Child. Why did he always put it off and leave it for her to do? The long discussions on the subject, the dread of spoiling the Child's happiness and the arguments as to which should tell her, had unsettled the Woman, usually so gentle and even tempered. She was vexed. She turned to the Child wearily, a little impatiently. "She would tell her now."

"Dear, haven't you learned yet that there is no Santa Claus? You will not hang up your stockings tonight, for he isn't coming to fill them."

Then as the Child stood looking at her with wild, wondering eyes, she exclaimed, "Why do you stare at me so? Don't you see we have been playing make-believe with you all these years? There is no Santa Claus, and you are old enough now to forget such foolish stories. It is expensive and tiresome to keep up this farce and we have decided never to have Christmas again."

To the Child it was all a strange muddle. Something dreadful had happened, but as yet she could not understand what it was.

"No Santa— But I have just seen him, Mother. He talked to me this afternoon at the shops."

Wrought up as she was, the Woman's voice sounded cold and unfeeling. "Go to bed now. You will understand better in the morning."

The Child obeyed silently. All her joyousness was gone. The laughter had died out of her eyes and in its place



"I Wish We Had Never Heard of Christmas!"

there was wonder and hurt. But she could not talk about it now.

When the Woman left her in the white bed by the window, she cautiously opened it so the Snowflakes could come in. And then, with a great sob, she told them her troubles.

In the big room, with the bay window, the Man paced restlessly back and forth and the Woman sat by the table with workbasket and mending. But her hands lay listlessly in her lap and she gazed into the fire.

Once her face brightened and she murmured aloud, "But Father and Mother never forgot us, and of course they will send something for the Child."

The Man wheeled about with a scowl. "We won't receive anything from them. Do you think we would accept presents, when we are not sending any? I have written them that we are not to have any more Christmas celebrations."

"Oh," gasped the Woman. "You do not mean we must send back everything we get?"

The Man hesitated. Then, as though he were sick of the subject, "I don't know. It is all your doing. It is you who has nervous prostration at Christmas after worrying about presents."

"I do not," she denied hotly. "And you suggested this anyway. I wish we had never heard of Christmas!"

Their Christmas Eve was spent in quarrelling, and that night they dreamed of horrible plots that Santa was planning against them.

A pale moon with icicles on his whiskers watched over the little village. The Snow Lady was asleep and the Snowflake Imps had settled down to rest. One cottage gleamed colder and whiter than the others and seemed to stand apart as though not of them. The Spirit of Christmas tried the door softly.

"Why, it is barred against me!" he murmured sadly. "This will never do."

So he walked about looking for a place to get in until he came to the window where the Child slept. Tenderly he sprinkled happiness and joy upon her until her lips parted in a smile. Then he flew past her to where the Man and the Woman slept. To them he gave of all his essences.

The Woman awakened first, and with strange new feelings, she called the Man. They gazed long at each other. "Merry Christmas," whispered the Woman.

And with wonder and joy, peace and good will all mingled together, the Man took her in his arms.

"We must have Christmas, after all," he said. And the Woman nodded, her eyes beaming with happiness. "I must go to the shops and bring Santa Claus for the Child before she wakes."

"Wait," cried the Woman, and laughing, she brought from their hiding place an assortment of beautiful toys. Mother and Father got them and I just couldn't send them back."

With shining faces and happy hearts, the Man and the Woman hung stockings by the fireplace and heaped them with playthings.

"We will tell her she had a bad dream," said the Man.

"No," said the Woman softly. "We will tell her that Santa is the good Christmas fairy, who will always be welcome here."

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