

# Back to the Future

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upon our eaves, I believed sundry noises of the night to be the pawing of tiny chargers on the roof. When recently I asked a small person of six whether he still believed in Santa Claus and he answered me in withering good English, 'I never believed in Santa Claus; I always thought it was parents,' I felt quenched and dejected beyond reason."

I'd recently put the same question to my own "small person of six," and received a somewhat more heartening answer. "Even though a lot of my friends say there's no such thing as Santa Claus," my undaunted child had sweetly replied, "I think that even the Santa in Midtown is the real one."

What about the sleighload of work still in progress at the North Pole? I'd asked stealthily, trying as hard as I could to appear nonchalant, so as not to let the cat out of the bag. "Elves," had come the forthright reply.

Yes, Virginia, I sigh ... and all good conspiratorial parents know the remainder of the line. Just let Mrs. Harrison hang onto her happy illusions up in heaven, and we'll all sleep better on Christmas Eve, hoofprints or no hoofprints.

I realize with a start that I've got my timelines exactly reversed. The aforementioned Mrs. Harrison is no doubt in her kerchief in perfect health, just settling her brains for a long winter's nap. I'm the one who isn't getting any rest here, and I haven't the foggiest notion what I'm going to do about it.

Gabriel, for one, doesn't appear to be losing any sleep over the matter. The Santa Claus he must be waiting for in this blasted century probably bears a close resemblance to Thomas Nast's "Jolly Good Fellow," the 1874 oil painting we last saw in 1985, hanging in the lobby of Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum. Only last (?) weekend, I'd taken Gabe to Strong to see the new display, "Saint Nicholas Changes to Santa Claus," and catch a glimpse of the Jolly Good Fellow "in person," portrayed by a museum employee.

The exhibit of Santa illustrations (which first appeared as postcards, trade cards, and magazine advertisements between 1860 and 1920) adorn one long, curving wall of the museum, an enduring monument to Victoriana, American style. These pictures, the very latest thing in the period in which we now find ourselves mysteriously ensconced, reveal how the European "Saint Nicholas" of even longer ago was gradually transformed into the American "Santa Claus" of the 19th and 20th centuries.

"The long, red bishop's robe seen in early drawings of Saint Nicholas changed over the years into a two-piece suit with a nightcap," I had read on one museum exhibit placard. "A Santa dressed like an active grandfather instead of a Catholic saint appealed to middle-class Americans, most of whom were Protestant."

Further down the wall, I had seen another placard describing how St. Nick/Santa looked. "Tall, thin Saint Nicholas changed in 1822 when Clement Moore wrote in *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, 'He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf.' In 1866, the American cartoonist Thomas Nast drew this small fellow and called him Santa Claus instead of Saint Nicholas. By 1879, Nast drew Santa as a full-size man — a plump, gentle and generous friend to children."

To add insult to injury, Thomas Nast grew nastier still in the museum's lobby. "Why Is Santa Claus Dressed in Brown?" said the placard beside "The Jolly Good Fellow." Nast's Santa, it appears, "is derived from the Anglo-German version of a figure traceable to Saint Nicholas, a fourth-century Roman Catholic bishop. Nast, whose political cartoons in Harper's Weekly frequently

attacked Catholic leaders in New York City, probably chose brown to distinguish the 'Jolly Good Fellow' from the traditionally red-clad saint. Despite the painter's efforts, Americans preferred a red Santa."

For Catholics who take umbrage at such humbuggery on the part of an artist who had a greater influence on the 20th-century conception of Santa Claus than any other, the December 12, 1896, Catholic Journal engraving of a very Nast-y looking Santa should provide "suitable" revenge. A small person of six or so is pictured taking the jolly old elf hostage with a pop-gun.

Perhaps I'd do better to read Gabe *The Tailor of Gloucester* for a Christmas Eve bedtime story, and put Clement Moore on the nightstand for awhile, I chuckle, and then almost lose my train of thought as I happen to glance up at a calendar on the office wall. It's December, 1898, I learn, to my chagrin — and Beatrix Potter hasn't yet written her famous tale of animals that talk and embroider the lappets of waistcoats "in the night between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in the morning." Gabriel won't be able to listen to the adventures of Simpkin, the tailor's cantankerous cat, until Christmas, 1901, unless I can somehow manage to speed up the process.

I almost jump out of my chair as I turn to the issue of December 11, 1897, to learn that "One of our bright dailies the other day perpetrated this: If Father Kiernan goes to St. Mary's, Father Thomas F. Hickey will succeed him as rector of the cathedral and 'coadjutor' to Bishop McQuaid. This will be news to all concerned, especially Father Hickey and the bishop."

Only two or three days ago in 1985, I'd found the same passage in the microfilm files of the Courier-Journal, and asked our own Bishop Dennis W. Hickey if there was any remote correlation, to himself or anything else of note. The Catholic Journal, it turns out, was premature in its assessment of the situation. Father Hickey did in fact succeed Father Kiernan as rector, and eventually succeeded Bishop McQuaid as well, becoming second bishop of Rochester in 1909. Even more to the point, this same Bishop T. Hickey confirmed our present Auxiliary Bishop

D. Hickey when the latter was a fifth-grade pupil of St. Patrick's, then in Dansville. "At the reception following the confirmation, he got me in a corner and asked me a couple of questions," Bishop D.H. relates. When the questioning was over, the current bishop adds, "he declared that we weren't related."

I find myself wishing I could locate either one of them now to ask directions home, with midnight fast approaching and our sojourn into Christmas Past rapidly becoming tiresome. "The Meteor rose is the favorite flower to go with holly, as its red is of much the same tint as that of the holly berry," I read in "today's" edition, dated December 24, 1898. If only Gabe and I could hitch a ride on one, or perhaps on a falling star. "The stars are angel's eyes," jokes the headline of another story about dihard superstitions, "and one must not point at them."

I make a mental promise not to, if only I could click the heels of my ruby slippers three times and wake up in Kansas, Washington Square Park, or even better, my own cozy room.

Without warning, *this* room begins to spin, and metal letters ricochet off the walls as we're enveloped by a theatrical cloud of blue, swirling smoke. Through the haze, I can barely discern the black-robed figure of GeVa's Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, most rudely pointing out our pathway back to the future.

Gabe and I wake up with a jarring thump, to find ourselves deposited unceremoniously on the front steps of GeVa, where we left off approximately two hours before, Eastern Standard Time, 1985. It must be midnight, since the bells of St. Mary's are tolling the joyous commencement of Midnight Mass.

Still rubbing his angelic eyes in bewilderment, Gabriel reaches into his jacket pocket as we cross the square on our way to the church. "Look, Mom!" he exclaims, pulling out a little present from the Ghost of Christmas Past. "A tin soldier!"

We still have six hours to go until Christmas Day in the morning, and the animals may yet make some passing comment on our strange journey.

Greater miracles have been known to happen.

## Don'ts for Christmas

What to give and what not to give your friends.

Don't give more for the Christmas tree than you can for the fruit.

Don't send your grandma a gold toothpick. She may have false teeth.

Don't send your pastor embroidered slippers. To thank the priest and serve your parish is his duty.

Don't send your daughter a present and your wife a whip. If you receive the order you will do justice to both.

Don't let your expectations of a Christmas get too high. You may have to put your foot in your stocking to find anything in it.

Don't send your friend a present and be disappointed because he doesn't give you something. Perhaps you have surprised him.

Don't give presents to people not quite

so prosperous as yourself and tell them not to reciprocate because they can't afford to make presents.

Be just before you are generous. Day your debts before you buy presents. Your creditors may consider that they have received an unexpected gift.

Don't give your boy a drum and forbid him playing it for your daughter a horse and order her not to take it out of the stable without your permission.

Above all things don't have the bad taste to be forever harping on what you would like to have for a Christmas gift. Your friends may be attacked with nausea and get you nothing.

Don't make your wife a gift of something she has needed for an entire year, for then it looks as if you made a virtue of necessity and cheated your wife out of a real

Christmas present.

There is a generally tacit field for the exercise of charity within a block of your own home. Save your flannels for your needy neighbors. The heathen in South Africa would find them too warm.

The beauty of making Christmas gifts is to leave the recipient convinced that the present is an expression of friendship and love. Don't make it appear as a formality, an obligation, or because it was expected.

Make the gift a heart offering or don't make it at all. Be it never so small an object, inexpensive and of little value, if it is given in the spirit of sincere friendship it will be prized far beyond diamonds bestowed in compliance with the custom of the season, or because you feel that you have an obligation to discharge.

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