

SANTA CLAUS.

THEY wandered along the New City Road hand in hand. They had come down from their back street in search of change, change of scene, not of money. A toy-shop window attracted them. There they stood, their little noses flattened against the frosted pane. As befitted Christmas time, the night was cold. But the window with its bright lights, and streamers and fairy lamps was warm and inviting. Such things in it too—dolls, dishes, bells, guns, prams, trains, teddy-bears, lambs, horses, everything. In the centre of all was a figure of Santa Claus.

The noses of Betty and Jean slid along and up and down the window pane, as their eyes eagerly devoured the articles on show.

“Aw, Betty, look at that bonnie wee sheep!” said Jean. “I wish I had a penny; I wad buy it.”

“Ye’re a silly wee thing,” replied Betty, “it’ll be far dearer than a penny; it’ll be sixpence onywey.”

Betty, a child of ten, was the elder of the two sisters. Wise for her years, she knew much that was unknown to Jean. She knew that every penny was needed at home for food and shelter, and that speculation as to the costs of unattainable things was vain. Even if she earned a copper by running messages, as she sometimes did, it would never occur to her to spend it. It was not the first time that a pennyworth of chips had kept their little household from starvation. Their father was dead. Neither she nor Jean remembered him at all. Their mother was a vestmaker when

there were vests to make. At other and less favoured times she went out cleaning. Many a time Betty had sat up with her into the small hours giving a hand at sewing on buttons; often she had seen tears in her mother's eyes. In such a school of adversity it was not surprising that Betty grew intelligent beyond her years. The ordinary school does not provide for a problem like "Betty." The things taught there she did not really learn. Sometimes indeed she went to sleep at her lessons, and for this she was punished. They failed to see that, in that little body of hers, the brain and the heart were being used up on issues of domestic economy undreamt of in the schools. And so it came that Jean the younger did most of the talking at that toy-shop window.

"If I had a sixpence," she went on, "I would buy that teddy-bear."

"No' me," said Betty, the spirit of adventure stirring within her, "I wad buy that doll, the one wi' the fair hair and blue eyes."

"An' whit wad ye buy if ye had a shullin'?" enquired Jean.

Betty pondered. She surveyed the window: "Naw, no' that, nor that, nor that—here, Jean, see that wee doll's hoose! I wad buy that."

"No' me," said Jean promptly, "I wad buy a barrow, an' gie me teddy hurls in it." Her appetite was insatiable. "Here, Betty, if ye had two shullin's wad ye buy a Noah's ark?"

Two shillings! Unthinkable wealth! It was what her mother got for finishing a vest. Betty knew quite well what she would do if she had two shillings. But she wanted to please Jean. Her eye lighted on a pram.

It was marked two and six. "I wonder if the man wad gie us it for twa shullin's" she said.

"Chaps me for a scooter if I had twa shullin's," replied the enterprising Jean. She was becoming extravagant. She rattled on: "an' if I had a pound I wad buy Santy Claus. Betty! whit wey does Santy Claus never pit onything in oor stockin's?"

It was an awkward question. "There's nae Santy Claus at a'," replied Betty finally. "It's just a lot of fibs." Jean was not convinced. She expressed doubt, not by the spoken word, but by the droop of her lip. Her school chum, Cissy Broon, had got a doll in her stocking last year. It had eyes that could open and shut too, and it had a frock and knickers. She reminded Betty of this.

"It wasna Santy Claus at a'; it was her Maw," said Betty.

But Jean still doubted.

"He's just like that," she said, pointing to the figure in the window: "an' he comes doon the lum when everybody's sleepin'."

"Cissy's a richt wee fibber," replied Betty; "if oor Maw had money she wad pit things in oor stockin's tae; she telt me that hersel'; I'll slap Cissy Broon's lug when I see her, so I wull."

"Well, I don't care; I'm gaun to cry up the lum the nicht onywey," said Jean.

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Someone was standing beside them at the window. They looked up. He was an elderly man, very well dressed, and he had a white beard and kind eyes. They were afraid. They stopped talking. Betty took Jean by the hand and made to draw her away.

"Don't go away," the gentleman said, "I saw you looking at the things in the window and I gathered that you want a doll for your Christmas."

The sisters looked to the ground, Jean drawing closer to Betty. He held out two half-crowns. Jean started to cry. They both wanted to take to their heels.

Very gently the stranger drew them to his side. "Don't cry, little ones," he said. He put the coins in their hands and closed their fingers over them; then, touching their cheeks he continued in the kindest voice: "And may you have a Merry Christmas!"

The sisters looked at each other. They did not speak although they may have spoken with their eyes; no one can tell. They did not even glance into the window again, nor did they enter the shop door. In a moment, as if by magic, they were gone; their little feet pattering along the busy thoroughfare, and up side streets, and through wide pends, not stopping even for breath until they reached home. Up the stairs they scampered, and along the lobby. No need to knock at the door; it had only a sneek. Their mother was sitting at a spent fire, asleep, her hands on her lap. Betty put her half-crown in one hand; Jean put hers in the other; and then with a great hullabaloo they shouted: "Maw, Maw, we've seen Santy Claus!"

They had fish and chips that night, and a fire as well; and in the morning two wee dolls, a dark one and a fair, looked gaily from the mouths of two wee stockings hanging from the mantleshelf.

"I telt ye," said Jean, sitting up in bed.