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Merry Christmas

By Stephen Leacock
Illustrated by F. Strothmann

Christmas belongs to the children; give it to them, pleads Mr. Leacock, and hide the war from them till they can understand what its sacrifices meant to the betterment of the world.

"**M**Y dear Young Friend," said Father Time, as he laid his hand gently upon my shoulder, "you are entirely wrong."

Then I looked up over my shoulder from the table at which I was sitting and I saw him.

But I had known, or felt, for at least the last half-hour, that he was standing somewhere near me.

You have had, I do not doubt, good reader, more than once that strange, uncanny feeling that there is some one unseen standing beside you—in a darkened room, let us say, with a dying fire when the night has grown late, and the October wind sounds low outside, and when, through the thin curtain that we call Reality, the Unseen World starts for a moment clear upon our dreaming sense.

You have had it? Yes, I know you have. Never mind telling me about it. Stop! I don't want to hear about that strange presentiment you had the night your Aunt Eliza broke her leg. Don't let's bother with your experience. I want to tell mine.

"You are quite mistaken, my dear young friend," repeated Father Time, "quite wrong."

"Young friend," I said, my mind, as one's mind is apt to in such a case, running to an unimportant detail. "Why do you call me young?"

"Your pardon," he answered gently—he had a gentle way with him, had Father Time—"the fault is in my failing eyes. I took you at first sight for something under a hundred."

"Under a hundred?" I expostulated. "Well, I should think so!"

"Your pardon again," said Time, "the fault is in my failing memory. I forgot. You seldom pass that now-a-days, do you? Your life is very short of late."

I heard him breathe a wistful, hollow sigh. Very ancient and dim he seemed as he stood beside me. But I did not turn to look upon him: I had no need to. I knew his form, in the inner and clearer sight of things, as well as every human being knows by innate instinct the unseen face and form of Father Time.

I could hear him murmuring beside me: "Short—short, your life is short," till the sound of it seemed to mingle with the measured ticking of a clock somewhere in the silent house.

Then I remembered what he had said.

"How do you know that I am wrong?" I asked.

"And how can you tell what I was thinking?"

"You said it out loud," answered Father Time, "but it wouldn't have mattered anyway. You said that Christmas was all played out and done with."

"Yes," I admitted, "that's what I said."

"And what makes you think that?" he questioned, stooping, so it seemed to me, still further over my shoulder.

"Why," I answered, "the trouble is this: I've been sitting here for hours, sitting till goodness only knows how far into the night, trying to think out something to write for a Christmas story. And it won't go. It can't be done—not in these awful days."

"A Christmas story?"

"Yes; you see, Father Time," I said, glad with the foolish little vanity of my trade to be able to tell him something that I thought enlightening, "all the Christmas stuff, stories and jokes and pictures, are all done, you know, in October."

I thought it would have surprised him. But I was mi-taken.

"Dear me!" he said, "not till October! What a

rush! How well I remember in ancient Egypt—as I think you call it—seeing them getting at their Christmas things, all cut in hieroglyphics, always two or three years ahead."

"Two or three years!" I exclaimed.

"Pooh," said Time, "that was nothing. In Babylon they used to get their Christmas jokes ready—all baked in clay—a whole solar eclipse ahead of Christmas. They said, I think, that the public preferred them so."

"Egypt?" I said. "Babylon? But surely, Father Time, there was no Christmas in those days, I thought."

"My dear boy," he interrupted gravely, "don't you know that there has always been Christmas?"

I was silent. Father Time had moved across the room and stood beside the fireplace, leaning on the mantel. The little wreaths of smoke from the fading fire seemed to mingle with his shadowy outline.

"Well," he said presently, "what is it that is wrong with Christmas?"

"WHY,"

I answered, "all the romance, the joy, the beauty of it has gone, crushed

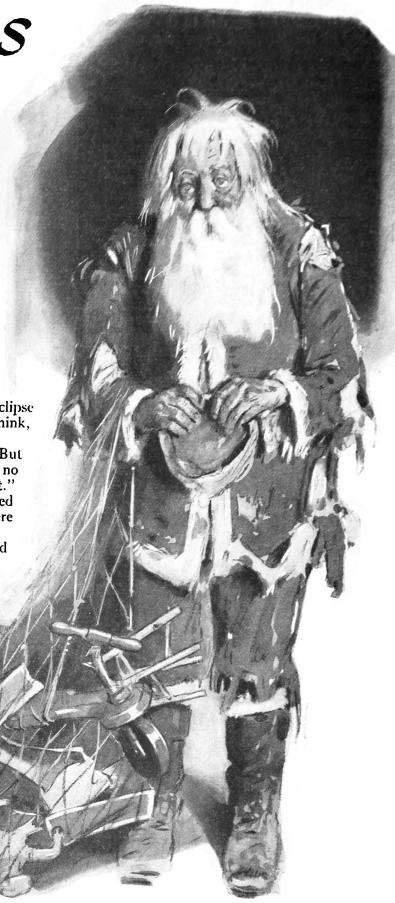
and killed by the greed of commerce and the horrors of war."

I am not, as you thought I was, a hundred years old, but I can conjure up, as anybody can, a picture of Christmas in the good old days of a hundred years ago—the quaint old-fashioned houses, standing deep among the evergreens, with the lights twinkling from the windows on the snow—the warmth and comfort within—the great fire roaring on the hearth—the merry guests grouped about its blaze and the little children with their eyes dancing in the Christmas firelight, waiting for Father Christmas in his fine mummery of red and white and cotton wool to hand the presents from the Yule-tide tree. I can see it," I added, "as if it were yesterday."

"It was but yesterday," said Father Time, and his voice seemed to soften with the memory of bygone years. "I remember it well."

"Ah," I continued, "that was Christmas indeed. Give me back such days as those, with the old good cheer, the old stage-coaches and the gabled inns and the warm red wine, the snap-dragon and the Christmas tree, and I'll believe again in Christmas, yes, in Father Christmas himself!"

"Believe in him?" said Time quietly, "you may well do that. He happens to be standing outside in the street at this moment."



"Shall I come in?" appealed Father Christmas, all dragged, as if no house had sheltered him these three years of war. "Or has the world forgotten?" Apprehensive and apologetic, his face had such a look as is stamped by the world upon its outcasts.

"Outside!" I exclaimed. "Why won't he come in?"

"He's afraid to," said Father Time. "He's frightened and he daren't come in unless you ask him. May I call him in?"

I signified assent, and Father Time went to the window for a moment and beckoned into the darkened street. Then I heard footsteps, clumsy and hesitant they seemed, upon the stairway. And in a moment a figure stood framed in the doorway—the figure of Father Christmas. He stood shuffling his feet, a timid, apologetic look upon his face.

How changed he was!

I had known in my mind's eye from childhood the face and form of Father Christmas as well as that of Old Time himself. Everybody knows, once knew him—a jolly little rounded man, with a great muffler wound about him, a packet of toys upon his back, and with such merry, twinkling eyes and rosy cheeks as are only given by the touch of the driving snow and the rude fun of the North Wind. Why, there was once a time, not yet so long ago, when the very sound of his sleigh-bells sent the blood running warm to the heart.

But now how changed!

All dragged with the mud and rain he stood, as if no house had sheltered him these three years past. His old red jersey

was tattered in a dozen places, his muffler frayed and raveled.

The bundle of toys that he dragged with him in a net seemed wet and worn till the cardboard boxes gaped asunder. There were boxes among them, I vow, that had must have been carrying these three years past.

But most of all I noted the change that had come over the face of Father Christmas. The old brave look of cheery confidence was gone. The smile that had beamed responsive to the laughing eyes of countless children around unnumbered Christmas trees was there no more. And in the place of it there showed a look of timid apology, of apprehensiveness, as of one who has asked in vain the warmth and shelter of a human home—such a look as the harsh cruelty of this world has stamped upon the faces of its outcasts.

So stood Father Christmas shuffling upon the threshold, fumbling his poor tattered hat in his hand.

"Shall I come in?" he said, his eyes appealingly on Father Time.

"Come," said Time, and added as he turned to speak to me, "your room is dark. Turn up the lights. He's used to light, bright light, and plenty of it. The dark has frightened him these three years past."

I turned up the lights and the bright glare revealed all the more cruelly the tattered figure before us.

Father Christmas advanced a timid step across the floor. Then he paused, as if in sudden fear.

"Is this floor minded?" he said.

"No, no," said Time soothingly. And to me he added in a murmured whisper—"He's afraid. He was blown up in a mine in No Man's Land between the trenches at Christmas time in 1914. It broke his nerve."

"May I put my toys on that machine-gun?" asked Father Christmas timidly; "it will help to keep them dry."

"It is not a machine-gun," said Time gently. "See, it is only a pile of books upon the sofa"—and to me he whispered—"they turned a machine-

gun on him in the streets of Warsaw. He thinks he sees them everywhere since then."

"It's all right, Father Christmas," I said, speaking as cheerily as I could, while I rose and stirred the fire into a blaze, "there are no machine-guns here and there are no mines. This is but the house of a poor writer."

"Ah," said Father Christmas, lowering his tattered hat still further and attempting something of a humble bow, "a writer? Are you Hans Andersen, perhaps?"

"Not quite," I answered.

"But a great writer, I do not doubt," said the old man, with a humble courtesy that he had learned, well may be, centuries ago in the Yule-tide season of his northern home. "The world owes much to its great books. I carry some of the greatest with me always. I have them here—"

He began fumbling among the limp and tattered packages that he carried. "Look! The House that Jack Built—a marvelous deep thing, sir—and this, The Babes in the Wood. Will you take it, sir? A poor present, but a present still—not so long ago I gave them in thousands every Christmas time. None seem to want them now."

He looked appealingly toward Father Time, as the weak may look toward the strong for help and guidance.

"None want them now," he repeated, and I could see the tears start in his eyes. "Why is it so? Has the world forgotten its sympathy with the lost children wandering in the wood?"

"All the world," I heard Time murmur with a sigh, "is wandering in the wood." But out loud he spoke to Father Christmas in cheery admonition: "Tut, tut, good Christmas," he said, "you must cheer up. Here, sit in this chair—the biggest one—so—beside the fire—let us stir it to a blaze—more wood—that's better—and listen, good old friend, to the wind outside—almost a Christmas wind, is it not? Merry and boisterous enough for all the evil times it stirs among."

Old Christmas seated himself beside the fire, his hands outstretched toward the flames. Something of his old-time cheeriness seemed to flicker

across his features as he warmed himself at the blaze.

"That's better," he murmured. "I was cold, sir, cold, chilled to the bone: of old I never felt it so; no matter what the wind, the world seemed warm about me. Why is it not so now?"

"You see?" said Time, speaking low in a whisper for my ear alone, "you see how sunk and broken he is? Will you not help?"

"Gladly," I answered, "if I can."

"All can," said Father Time, "every one of us." Meantime Christmas had turned toward me a questioning eye, in which, however, there seemed to revive some little gleam of merriment.

"Have you, perhaps," he asked, half-timidly, "schnapps?"

"Schnapps?" I repeated.

"Aye, schnapps. A glass of it to drink your health might warm my heart again, I think."

"Ah!" I said, "something to drink?"

"His one failing," whispered Time, "if it is one. Forgive it him. He was used to it for centuries. Give it him if you have it."

"I keep a little in the house," I said, reluctantly perhaps, "in case of illness."

"Tut, tut," said Father Time, as something as near as could be to a smile passed over his shadowy face. "...in case of illness!" They used to say that in ancient Babylon. Here, let me pour it for him. Drink, Father Christmas, drink!"

Marvelous it was to see the old man smack his lips as he drank his glass of liquor neat after the fashion of old Norway.

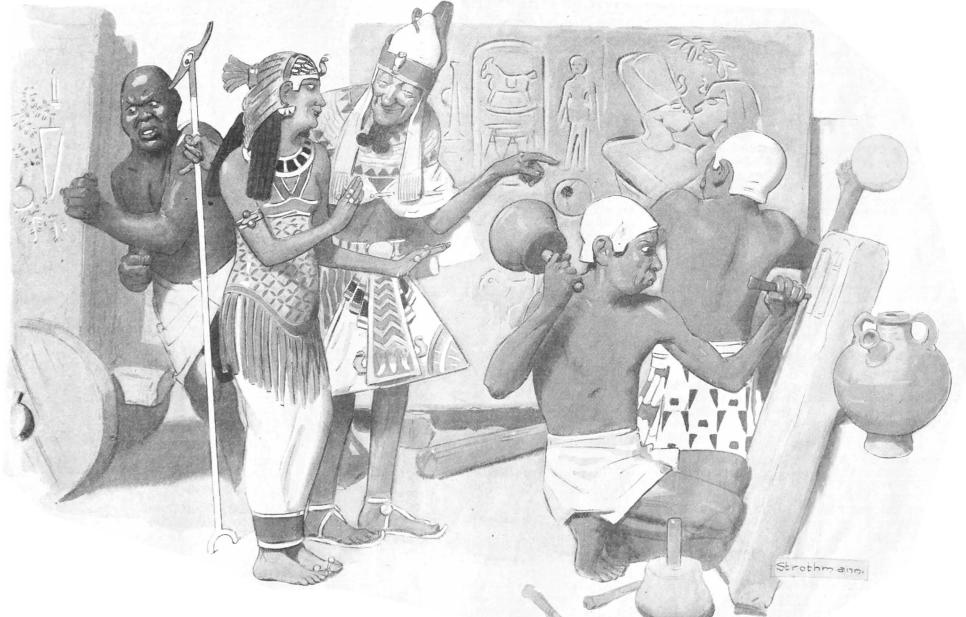
Marvelous, too, to see the way in which, with the warmth of the fire and the generous glow of the spirits, his face changed and brightened till the old-time cheerfulness beamed again upon it.

He looked about him, as it were, with a new and kindling interest.

"A pleasant room," he said, "and what better, sir, than the wind without and a brave fire within!"

Then his eye fell upon the mantelpiece, where lay among the litter of books and pipes a little toy horse.

(Concluded on page 503)



"How well I remember in ancient Egypt," said Father Time, "seeing them getting out their Christmas things, all cut in hieroglyphics, always two or three years ahead!"

Merry Christmas

(Concluded from page 479)

"Ah!" said Father Christmas, almost
gaily, "children in the house?"
"One," I answered, "the sweetest boy in
all the world!"

"I'll be bound he is!" said Father Christ-
mas, and he broke now into a merry laugh
that did one's heart good to hear. "They
all are! Lord bless me! The number that I
have seen, and each and every one—and
quite right, too—the sweetest child in all the
world! What could do you say? Two and
a half all but two months except a week?
The very sweetest age of all, I'll bet you say,
eh what? They all do!"

And the old man broke again into such a
jolly chuckling of laughter that his snow-
white locks shook upon his head.

"But stop a bit," I added. "This horse
is broken—tut, tut,—a hind leg nearly off.
This will do!"

I had the toy in his lap in a moment,
mending it. It was wonderful to see, for all
his age, how deft his fingers were.

"Time," he said, and it was amusing to
note that his voice had assumed almost an
authoritative tone, "reach me that piece of
string. That's right. Here, hold your finger
across the knot. There! Now, then, a bit
of beeswax. What? No beeswax? Tut,
tut, how supplied you houses are to-day.
How can you mend toys, sir, without bees-
wax? Still, it will stand up now."

I tried to murmur my best thanks. But
Father Christmas waved my gratitude aside.

"Nonsense," he said, "that's nothing.
That's my life. Perhaps the little boy would
like a book, too. I have them here in the
packet. Here, sir, Jack and the Beanstalk, a
most profound thing. I read it to myself
often still. How damp it is! Pray, sir, will
you give me one book before you leave?"

"Only too willingly," I said. "How wet
and torn they are!"

He stood bowed over his little books, his
hands trembling as he turned the pages.
Then he looked up, the old fear upon his face
again.

"That sound! he said. "Listen! It is
given—I hear them now."

"No, no," I said, "it is nothing. Only a
car passing in the street below."

"Listen," he said. "Hear that again—
voices crying!"

"No, no," I answered, "not voices, only
the night wind among the trees."

"My children's voices!" he exclaimed. "I
hear them everywhere—they come to me in
every wind—and I see them as I wander in
the night and stand by my children—born and
dying in the trenches—buried in the
ground—I hear them crying from the hos-
pitals—each one to me, still, as I knew him
once, a little child. 'Time, Time,' he cried,
reaching out his arms in appeal, 'give me
back my children!'

"You see?" said Time. "His heart is
breaking, and will you not help him if you
can?"

"Only too gladly," I replied. "But what
is there to do?"

"This," said Father Time, "listen." He
stood before me, grave and solemn, a
shadowy figure but half seen though he was
close beside me. The firelight had died
down, and through the curtained windows
there came already the first streaks of dawn.

"The world that once you knew," said
Father Time, "seems broken and destroyed
about you. You have lost them—
the children. The cruelty and the horror and
the hate that racks the world to-day—keep
it from them. Some day he will know"—
here Time pointed to the kneeling form of
Father Christmas—"that his children, that
once were, have not died in vain: that from
their sacrifice shall come a nobler, better
world for all to live in, a world where countless
hundreds of children will live on in their
memory forever. But for the children of
to-day, save and spare them all you can from
the evil, hate and horror of the war. Later
they will know and understand. Not yet.
Give them back their Merry Christmas and its
kind thoughts, and its Christmas charity,
till later on there shall be with it again
Peace upon Earth, Good Will toward Men."

His voice died away, and I could not vanish, as
it were, in the sighing of the wind.

I looked up. Father Time and Christmas
had vanished from the room. The fire was
low and the day was breaking visibly outside.

"Let us begin," I murmured. "I will
mend this broken horse."