

How Santa Clause Was Born

“Dashing through the snow, in a one-horse open sleigh... Ho, ho, ho. Merry Christmas!”

From inside the cab located diagonally behind and beneath the singer, a plaintive voice responded: “Hey, Nicky, can ya cut down on the melodials a little? I can’t hear myself countin’ the loot back here.”

The voice cut off abruptly as the cab hit the umpteenth pothole in a few-miles stretch and was launched into the air. Then it began again in an even more aggrieved tone. “I know we gotta steer off the main highways a little, but ya don’t haveta hit every rut around, do ya? Mind you, maybe I could do with a few more lumps and bumps on my head. Make me look taller.”

Up in the driving position, reigns firmly held in expensively gloved hands, Nicholas Saint-Andrew Klaus chuckled again, a deep-throated “Ho, ho, ho” that flew off into the icy wind that whipped around his neatly-bearded chin. As the wind caught his clothing, it briefly drew aside his cloak. A broad scarlet waistcoat, evidence of a more than ample girth beneath, flashed into the darkness – the one indulgence Nicholas insisted on to keep up his sartorial standards, in amongst his jet-black burgling clothes. Then he resumed his singing: “O’er the bumps we go, laughing all the way...”

Another muffled oath caused him to “Ho, ho, ho” again, and the voice from inside the cab resumed. “I don’t recall me doin’ much laughin’ this journey. Anyways, what is that you’re warblin’ there?”

Nicholas gazed around the deep-and-crisp-and-even scene that their gallop was driving them through. “Well, my small Brooklyn-American friend,” he replied, “’tis merely a ditty I’m working upon. ’Tis my hobby, you know – writing melodies for common persons to sing, to help lift their lives from the general hum-drum.”

The owner of the Brooklyn-American voice seemed to contemplate this a moment. “Nah, it’ll never catch on,” he dismissed the song eventually. “For a start-off, this ain’t a one-horse open sleigh we got here, it’s a one-horse hansom cab. And for the other...”

What the other was never became apparent. Another thud cut the voice off mid-sentence.

By now the cab, not as seriously inconvenienced by the potholes as its occupant, was nearing its destination. Ruts and contusions gave way to relatively smooth gravel, indicating a private, well-maintained driveway had been reached. “Quiet now, Jeremiah Elphick,” Nicholas warned. At the same time he slowed the horse to a mere jog-trot. “The occupants should be out at their Christmas party, and the governess and children safely abed. But, one never knows. So, take care, little man.”

Pulling gently on the reins, he eased the cab to a halt beneath a large, over-hanging oak. The horse snorted, glad to be momentarily free from the strain at its back. Its breath and

sweat-lined flanks sent steam rising. It pawed the ground, crunching the virgin snow beneath. "Quiet now, Bess," he cautioned again, dropping somewhat ponderously, but otherwise safely, to the ground.

An urgent whisper came from inside the cab. "Let us out Nicky. I can't reach the handle from here."

Nicholas hastened to oblige and, as he pulled open the cab's door, a precariously-balanced sack dislodged itself from inside and spilled its contents into the moonlight. Fabulous jewels glinted, pearls shone lustrously, and copper coins gleamed. "Damn," came the voice from inside the cab and, next second, one of the smallest human beings that could ever have lived leapt out into the snow and landed alongside his taller, portly English friend. Taken together, it was as if a mature azalea bush had somehow linked up with a baby petunia.

The petunia looked around at the fallen loot. "Knew that'd happen," he commented. "We gotta make this one the last for tonight, Nicky. Cab's just about full t' burstin'."

Nicholas helped his friend to pick up the valuables and stash them carefully back inside the sack. "Agreed," he muttered. "With luck, this one will provide us with enough for a while anyway. No point in taking unnecessary risks."

Treasure stowed, he picked up the sack and swung it over his shoulder. "There should just be enough room in this one for all that we'll find here," he said.

He and Elphick turned towards the large dwelling they knew was awaiting their attentions in the middle distance. A blazing gas-lamp illuminated an expensive-looking front entranceway. Apart from that, the darkness that surrounded them could have penetrated every corner and window of the house, for all the detail they could make out. "Back right-hand corner," Elphick said, consulting a crudely-drawn plan of the building he'd pulled from the inside of his jacket. "That's where we figured'd be easiest."

Together, the two crept cautiously towards the place, ensuring they kept to the areas where they knew that lawn lay beneath the snow. Although it crunched softly beneath their feet, the gravelled driveway, had they stepped onto it accidentally, would have caused them more alarm.

Once round the back of the property, they located the window Elphick had decided on. Laying the sack down, Nicholas took a leather pouch from under his cloak. A roll of metallic tools gleamed briefly in the moonlight. He selected one, and slid it expertly under the window sash. A slight struggle, and then a click was heard. He smiled in satisfaction.

Drawing up the window, he climbed through. Elphick passed him the sack and, laying it carefully down on the floor beside him, Nicholas helped his small American friend inside. They turned from the window, and felt their way to where they knew the door was set into the wall. "My lady's bedroom," Elphick whispered. "Up the stairs, third door on the right."

With utmost care they crept out of the room and up the staircase. Turning in the requisite direction, they felt their way to the door in question. Both holding their breath, they depressed the handle slowly, and stole inside.

As expected, the bedroom was black as night, and empty. "Window's over there," whispered Elphick. "I'll get the curtains, then you get the light. One lamp only."

He negotiated his way by touch around the bed, and tugged at the thick, expensive curtains until he was certain not a glimmer of light could escape. Then he whispered "Okay", and Nicholas drew a tinderbox and lit a gas-lamp he located against one wall. Once light had been cast, they gazed around the room in satisfaction. Nodding at each other, they set to work.

Not many thieves in the history of burglary could strip a room of its portable contents as quickly as Nicholas Saint-Andrew Klaus and "Jerry" Jeremiah Elphick. Even so, they were only half-way done when they became aware, quite suddenly, of a small coughing noise coming from the region of the doorway. "Ahem, ahem," it said. Slowly, they ceased their nefarious activity and turned to face the entrance.

"This is a shotgun," a young, but well-modulated voice informed them. "And my daddy's taught me very well how to use it."

The youngster standing in the doorway could not have been more than about six or seven. The rifle in his hands was older, and in fact bigger – but the hands that held it were as steady as a rock. And the eyes a few inches above the line of the barrel were unblinking and looked totally unafraid. Nicholas and Elphick quickly decided that prudence dictated they stood their ground.

The eyes looked from one to the other of them. "Now," the boy said, "be so kind as to tell me who you are and what you are doing – before I call Nanny and get her to send for the constable, of course."

There was a long pause whilst Nicholas's brain whirred into overtime thinking up an explanation. Across the other side of the bed he knew his friend's mind was similarly working frantically. "Well," he spluttered – then, "Ho, ho, ho," he decided to declare. "Merry Christmas!"

The boy gazed at him steadily. "I beg your pardon?" he enquired.

Nicholas knew he had to follow up convincingly. "I am – I am," he stuttered. Then, "Saint Nicholas," he blurted, just as Elphick yelled "Saint A Klaus" at the same time. In his rush, the tiny American had garbled the first two words into "Santa", and changed the pronunciation of the Englishman's surname from "ouse" to "aws", but Nicholas felt he could forgive him anything at the moment if it got them out of trouble. Unfortunately, that didn't seem likely on first evidence.

The boy swung his gaze between them again. "Which?" he asked, obviously not convinced by either answer.

“Um – both!” Nicholas ad-libbed desperately. “To some I am Saint Nicholas. To others, I am known as Santa Claus. The terms are interchangeable. Depending on your point of view,” he ended, rather lamely he decided as an afterthought.

The youngster’s eyebrows raised a fraction. “And this,” Nicholas continued, indicating Elphick: “This is, er...”

“Elf,” the American jumped in quickly. “Er, that’s it. I’m elf. That is,” he amended on a sudden inspiration, “*an* elf. There’s lots of us. All over the place. All around the house, in fact. All waiting for us two to come out. All ready to come in and find us if we don’t come out soon.” He petered out, aware that anything further would probably start coming out as even more nonsense than he suddenly decided he was already speaking.

The boy seemed to disregard the threat of hoards of “elves” trampling over his parents’ property trying to locate their absent fellows. “I rather think,” he said to Elphick, “that last month I recall you calling by casually in order to offer to clean Mummy and Daddy’s windows for them. And taking particular interest in the windows of this room whilst you were doing it. I was watching you.”

It was Nicholas’s turn to be inspired. “Ah, yes,” he broke in quickly. “You see, my little helpers – the, er, elves – go out to all the houses in the world when it’s nearing Christmas time. That is so they can report back to me whether all the boys and girls – and, er, the mummies and daddies, of course – are behaving well. So that, er. So that, er...”

“So that Santa can deliver his presents to all the ones that have been good,” Elphick broke in, relieved to make what he felt to be a sensible contribution.

“Presents?” the boy enquired.

Nicholas looked at his suddenly-a-little-helper. “Presents?” he echoed.

Elphick looked at him desperately. “You know,” he hissed desperately. Presents!”

Nicholas stared back, then plunged in head-first. “Um, yes, presents. You see, in this sack...” He indicated the sack, which by now bore obvious traces of their activities of the previous fifteen minutes: “...in this sack are presents, which, on Christmas Eve – as, indeed it is tonight – I take out on my, my...”

“Sleigh,” said Elphick, remembering Nicholas’s song from earlier.

“...Sleigh, indeed. And I distribute them to all the boys and girls...”

“And mummies and daddies – we’re in the kid’s mother’s bedroom remember,” hissed Elphick.

“...and mummies and daddies...”

“As long as they’ve been good,” Elphick finished triumphantly.

Nicholas gave a surreptitious smile to his friend. “Very good,” he mouthed silently.

The child contemplated this a moment. The felonious pair were utterly unprepared for what he said next. "Go on, then."

Nicholas stared, unsure for a second what the boy meant. "Go on?" he said. "Go on what?"

The shotgun barrel trained itself even more firmly onto his midriff. "Go on," the child repeated. "Distribute the presents."

Nicholas could see Elphick's jaw drop, and knew that his own had fallen substantially nearer to the floor. "Um, well..." he began, frantically trying to think of some excuse to take what they'd already managed to steal and get the hell out of there.

To his horror, the shotgun barrel swivelled from its focus on his stomach and came to rest steadily in the direction of his friend. "Does your elf need the use of its head?" the youngster enquired.

The next few seconds were a frenzy of activity as Nicholas distributed around the room not only what he and Elphick had already taken, but quite a few other items for good measure. Under the prompting of the gun, the bedrooms of the boy's father, governess and younger sister were also visited and various items deposited in those also. The governess and the sister were sound asleep. "All those I visit need to be asleep before I can leave their presents," Nicholas whispered to the boy, hoping wildly he might take the hint. The boy nodded pleasantly, then ushered them into his own room.

"And what would you like for Christmas, little boy?" Nicholas asked, feeling the role he'd fallen into required it.

The boy indicated the sack which, despite everything, still contained items amounting to a substantial value. "Just leave the lot," he answered.

Nicholas shrugged, and dropped the sack where he was. No use causing trouble now – after all, there was still plenty more goodies in the hansom. "My goodness me, is that the time?" he exclaimed, making a great show of taking his watch from his waistcoat pocket and examining it closely. "Well, well, we must be hurrying along – lots of other houses to be visiting, don't you know? Ho, ho, ho. Merry Christmas!" At the moment, he wasn't feeling very Christmassy.

The shotgun didn't stir an inch from its aim. "I take it that all my school friends' houses are on your way?" the boy enquired.

Nicholas's jaw dropped again. "I'm sorry?" he spluttered.

The boy sauntered over to his bedside table. "My school friends," he repeated. "I have a list of their addresses here, just in case you might have mislaid them."

"Now look here!" Nicholas exploded, feeling that really this was just a little too much. "Just suppose I was to tell you that your friends and their families had not been good little boys and girls, and mummies and whatnot, and couldn't have any presents?"

Once again, the shotgun was aimed straight at the American. "You'd better hope for the sake of your elf – who'll be staying with me, locked in my bedroom cupboard here until I go back to school in January and can check with them – that they have been," the boy said simply.

Nicholas and Elphick exchanged horrified glances. All at once they tasted defeat. Nicholas turned resignedly to go.

"By the way," the boy enquired, "how precisely did you get in? I merely ask so that in future years we can make the way easier for you. So that you can leave the presents, you understand."

Nicholas thought swiftly. No use telling the youngster the whole truth, he decided. He'd given away too much already – the details of their access methods could surely remain secret.

Unfortunately, there was only one reply he could think of. Swallowing hard, and not even quite believing himself what he was saying, he said, "Er – down the chimney?"

The child raised an eyebrow. "Very well," he said. "The chimney it is." He smiled what seemed to Nicholas a very cruel smile. "I'm suddenly very much looking forward to seeing you leave."

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Come January, the story swiftly passed round the child's school, confirmed by all, of the mysterious stranger – a rather sweaty and soot-stained stranger, it had to be said – replete in black cloak and patchily-scarlet waistcoat, who'd visited their houses and left substantial gifts for them and their families. The following year, as Christmas arrived and no benevolent visitor came calling, the children's parents, swallowing their own disappointment, decided that in order to alleviate that of their offspring, they should sacrifice some of their treasured possessions in the form of presents of their own. The mysterious "Santa Claus", or "Saint Nicholas", became lauded more and more. And in time, as these children grew, and married, and had children of their own, the story spread, and developed. The stranger became older, his neat-trimmed beard a long white one. His scarlet waistcoat became a bright, red suit. His sleigh became drawn by eight strong reindeer. Flying reindeer, to add even further to the mystery.

But in common with that first ever Christmas visitation, as the story travelled all over the world, in every version he had sacks full of presents for those who had been good. In every version he manifested himself down the chimney – even, later, in houses where there was none. In every version he was assisted by tiny helpers called "elves". And in every version, as he went about his merry way, he could be heard proclaiming to the world at large, "Ho, ho, ho. Merry Christmas!"