

## HALF-PAST SEVEN STORIES



### 13. When the Door Opened

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And of course Tomorrow came, as it always does—only to become Today.

Jehosophat didn't climb on the chair that morning. There was no need of making black marks with his pencil, when that red number, 25, stood out above all the others, so bright in its scarlet splendor.

As a matter of fact, the children never looked at the calendar at all. They were too busy with their stockings. Now, ordinarily; stockings either hang limp on the line or else fit very evenly on smooth little legs. But the three which hung by the fireplace were stiff and queerly shaped, each full of knobs and bumps.

The children rose very early in the morning to get them, and were taking out the oranges, and apples, and tops, and nuts, and raisins, and marbles, and hair-ribbon (for Hepzebiah, of course) and the mouth-organs, tin wagons and candy-canes, when a voice called, "Merry Christmas," and Mother's face beamed in the doorway—then Father's. Soon there was a stamping of feet on the kitchen porch, and the Toyman came in from his milking and called, "Merry Christmas," too. And he and Mother and Father seemed to get more fun out of those stockings than the children themselves, or as much, which is saying a very great deal.

It was hard to dress properly that morning—and particularly hard to wash behind one's ears. Jehosophat put on one stocking inside out; Marmaduke his union suit outside in; and one of his shoes was button and the other lace. But they were all covered up, anyway, and Ole Northwind couldn't nip their flesh, and the Constable couldn't arrest them, so it was sufficient, I suppose.

How they did it, I don't know, but they managed to get through breakfast somehow. Then there was a glorious spinning of tops, and playing of mouth-organs, and blowing of trumpets, throughout the morning. Meantime the whole house was fragrant with the smells of cooking turkey, and sweet potatoes, and boiled onions, and chili sauce, and homemade chow chow, and doughnuts, and pumpkin pie, and plum pudding, and pound cake, and caramel cake, and jumbles (all cut in fancy shapes) and—but there, the list is long enough to make any one's mouth water, and that isn't fair. Needless to say, the children didn't try all of the list, though they would have been quite willing, but Mother made rather a good selection for them. Anyway, the smells and tastes of that fine dinner seemed to go very nicely with the wreaths in the window and the bright red berries. But where was the Tree? It had vanished—probably in the parlor.

They couldn't go in—oh, no—not yet. And after Mother had washed all the thousand and one dishes, helped by Black-eyed Susan—not Black-eyed Susan who lived in the pasture, but the one who lived in the cabin on the canal—she entered the parlor, closing the door very carefully so they couldn't get even a glimpse of what was inside. It was funny how Mother found time to do all the things she did that day—yes, and all the week and month

### 13. When the Door Opened

---

before it. Her hands, Marmaduke said, were like the magic hands in the “Arabian Nights,” and he was right. At least the Toyman said,—

“You can bet your bottom dollar on that, my son.”

All of which was very strange, when Marmaduke didn’t have any pennies even, in his bank, bottom or top, having spent them on surprises for Mother and all the rest of the folks. Nice surprises they were, too. In fact, it was really nicer planning them out, and getting them with the money he had earned, than dreaming about what he would get himself.

The parlor door was kept carefully locked all that long afternoon. The children tried to play with the things that had come in their stockings, but somehow these didn’t seem as interesting as what they guessed was going on behind the closed door. So they kept their eyes glued there, as Marmaduke’s story-book said, though he thought that was funny, when they hadn’t put any mucilage on them.

Once in a while Mother would come out of the parlor to look in the big closet, then she would journey back very quickly, holding the mysterious parcel tight under her apron or shawl so that they couldn’t see it. She would open the door, too, only the tiniest crack, to slip in sideways like a slender fairy. And though a radiance and splendor would shine through—like Heaven it was—they could never see what made it, and before they could say “Jack Robinson,” the door would be shut—tight shut—and—that was all.

“Oh, oh,” it was so hard to wait!

At last—about four in the afternoon—the signal was given. The Toyman made them all form in line in the dining-room, Mother leading, to show them the way, though they hardly needed a guide; poor little Mrs. Cricket next, for it wouldn’t be Christmas unless they made someone outside their own family happy; then Jehosophat, Marmaduke, and Hepzebiah—no, that is wrong, Hepzebiah ahead, as the boys had decided on “ladies first”; then Father and the Toyman, carrying little lame Johnny Cricket on his shoulder; and Black-eyed Susan bringing up the rear—a very big rear she was, Father said, for Susan weighed considerably more than her heaviest clothes-basket.

And so the doors opened!

“Glory be!” sang out Susan, and in that she expressed the feelings of every one in the long procession that entered the parlor. It was “glory”—that light, that shining, that radiance! Wreaths in the window, festoons overhead, presents heaped up in the corner and on the floor—and the Tree, the Tree!

It was covered with golden ornaments, and red and silver and blue, and it was draped with strings of popcorn and festoons of red cranberries, flung so gracefully over it, and everywhere, between the green twigs of the spruce and the red, and the gold, and the blue, and the silver of the ornaments and festoons, scores of little candles were shining brightly, twinkling like the stars—like very Heaven come down to earth before their eyes.

Life has many happy moments and many happy times to offer, but nothing more wonderful than a beautiful shining tree bursting on the sight after one has waited all day, no—really for weeks and months.

For ten minutes they all stood and gazed at that tree. Mother and Father were smiling

### 13. When the Door Opened

---

happily; Susan clasped her hands and very properly said “Glory” again; the children danced; Mrs. Cricket wiped the corners of her eyes with her rusty-black shawl; and little Johnny Cricket just sat there in delight.

But where was the Toyman now? He had disappeared as mysteriously as had the tree after they brought it home. He must have forgotten something important, for he couldn’t want to do chores when there was that tree to look at.

However, the boys were eager enough, both yelling:

“Now for the presents!”

“Wait a minute, laddies,” said their father, “somebody’s calling.”

Now there was a telephone in the White House with the Green Blinds by the Side of the Road, a funny old-fashioned instrument, but a very useful one, nevertheless.

It was tinkling. Father went to it, and this is what they heard him say,—

“Hello! hello!” Then,—

“Why, is that you —”

He turned around to the folks in the room:

“Hush!” he warned them, “it’s Santa Claus.”

Then he turned to the telephone again, very surprised to be talking to so important a person.

“I’m certainly glad to hear from you. How are you?” said Father.

And he whispered to the boys:—

“He says he’s very well, “—then into the ‘phone:—

“That’s fine—we’re very glad to hear it.”

There was a pause, and Father’s voice exclaimed,—

“What! You’re not actually coming here? Well, I should say that’s the best news I’ve heard in a long time!”

And, smiling, he told this good news to the folks in the room.

“Doesn’t it beat all!” he said, “Santa Claus is coming here to pay us a visit.”

He spoke into the ‘phone again.

“How soon can you make it?—Fifteen minutes?”

He looked at his watch.

“Of course—we’ll wait for you.”

Then he hung up the receiver.

“As long as Santy will be here so soon, we’d better wait till he comes, and let him distribute the presents, don’t you think?”

He paused a minute, trying to remember.

“Let me see—when was it I last saw him?—yes, yes—it’s all of forty years. I was just a little shaver then. I wonder if he’s changed much, or grown much older.”

As for the children, they could hardly think, much less talk. They sat there, almost in a daze, blinking and looking at the little candles, which seemed to wink back at them as if they had been in the jolly secret all the time.

The youngsters had hardly gotten over their wonder and bewilderment, when they heard

### 13. When the Door Opened

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sleighbells, and a loud “Whoa—whoa—you old reindeer, whoa when I tell you!” Then there was a stamping on the porch and the old brass knocker was lifted—it fell—“clack, clack”; the door opened, and in walked the welcome guest.

Have you yourself ever seen Santa Claus, or only pictures of him? Well, he really looks like his pictures, only more human—like people you know and love, though of course more magnificent.

In the first place, he wasn’t so fat—he was plump in the stomach, but not so really round all over as in the old pictures of him. But perhaps that is because when they were taken there weren’t so many children in the world to make things for, and he has grown just a little thinner since then, being so busy, you know.

However, he had on the same red coat trimmed with white fur, the long beard falling down over his chest, and the belt, and the rubber boots, and the red woolen cap on his head. But his face had lost a little flesh, and it wasn’t all red as you see in the pictures, but brown and red,—like—like—the Toyman’s; and his eyes didn’t pop out of his head either, but were just like ordinary people’s eyes, only kinder, like the Toyman’s, and these, the children said, were the kindest in the world.

Marmaduke wished the Toyman would come back, so that he might meet Santa, for he was a year-round Santa himself, always making things and doing things for little boys.

But Santa was talking:

“Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!” he said, then he added,— “to one and all.”

At the sound of his voice the children forgot their wonder and awe, and hurried to him and clasped his knees, and little Johnny Cricket tried to reach for his crutches, but Santa just picked him up in his arms and kissed him and little Hepzebiah too.

Now Father stood up.

“Mr. Santa Claus,” he began, but Santy interrupted him,—

“No Mister for me,” he told Father, “we’re among friends. I’ve known you all ever since you were born. Ho! Ho!” and he laughed, and his laugh seemed very jolly.

“Very well,” replied Father, “pardon my mistake—Friend Santy, then. Would you be so good as to distribute the presents?”

“Deelighted!” said Santy with a bow, “Marmaduke, you hand ‘em to me and I’ll read off the names.”

So Marmaduke got down on his knees near the pile of presents and picked out one. It was one of his own—not one for him but one he had bought—for Mother. He couldn’t wait to see that look he knew would come in her eyes.

She opened it. It was a nice work-basket.

“And my little boy bought it all with the pennies he saved.—I know that,” she cried in delight, and that look he had waited for shone in her face.

Then came a big long box which Santy handed to Hepzebiah. Santy himself helped her to tear off the wrappings; and lo and behold! it was a great big doll with blue eyes and flaxen hair.

So back and forth the procession of presents passed,—a pipe for Father, and one for

### 13. When the Door Opened

---

the Toyman, who wasn't there to get it, a football for Marmaduke, a pair of skates for Jehosophat, and oh, so many things!

Then Marmaduke heard a whisper in his ear. He started, for the voice sounded like the Toyman's, but it couldn't have been, for the Toyman was still nowhere to be seen.

"Can't you find something in that heap o' things for little Johnny Cricket?" the voice asked.

Marmaduke turned round, to discover Santy whispering in his ear. And he looked hard, and, sure enough, over in the corner was a great big parcel, marked, "Johnny with a merry Christmas." Santy undid it, and revealed a wagon with handles that could be worked by the arms. It looked very much like the Toyman's invention. And it was just the thing for Johnny, who was so lame.

When he saw it he just clasped his hands, and this time the tears did really come, and they ran from the corners of his eyes and down his cheeks. But they were very happy tears.

"You're all so good to me," was all he said.

Marmaduke didn't need Santy to remind him now, and he hunted hard again and found something for "Mrs. Cricket from her friends in the White House,"—a fine alpaca dress. There was something for Black-eyed Susan too. And all under that roof and around that tree were very happy. It was too bad the Toyman wasn't there to enjoy it.

Now Santy stood up and looked at his watch. It was a great big one with a ship on its face and an anchor on the chain. It resembled the Toyman's, and the children thought it odd that there were two such watches anywhere in the world.

"It's getting late," Santa was saying, "I've got a lot of places to visit, but before I go, I want you to sing a song—every man Jack."

So together they sang "Peaceful Night, Holy Night," and it sounded very sweet and pretty and made them all think of what Christmas meant, besides just the giving and receiving of presents.

"Now the youngest ones—all together now!" and Jehosophat, Marmaduke, Hepzebiah, and little Johnny Cricket sang, without the grownup people this time:

"Alone in the manger,  
No crib for a bed,  
The little Lord Jesus  
Lay down his soft head."

And that song sounded even prettier and sweeter than the other, with those little voices singing it around the tree and all its candles.

When they had finished, Santa said "Goodbye," and, "Merry Christmas to one and all," bowed, closed the door behind him, stamped his feet, and whistled to his reindeer. Then the sleighbells sounded, growing fainter until they faded quite away.

About ten minutes after he had gone, the Toyman appeared. It certainly was a shame he had to just miss him like that.

Marmaduke called,—

"Oh, Toyman, you missed him—Santy was here."

### 13. When the Door Opened

---

“He was, was he?” the Toyman replied, “I am sorry, for I’d like to have paid my respects to the old fellow.”

The funny thing about it was that he didn’t seem half as disappointed as the children—that is, Marmaduke and Hepzebiah, particularly Hepzebiah. Jehosophat just smiled in a sort of superior way and said nothing, but perhaps that was because he was getting older and had lost some of his enthusiasm. As for Marmaduke, he hadn’t been so enthusiastic about seeing Santa Claus ever since Reddy Toms had told him something, but now, after seeing Santa alive and before him—why, he didn’t care what any “ole Reddy Toms” said.

He had seen Santy—and had shaken him by the hand.