

SANTA *and the* SKEPTIC

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Santa and the Skeptic

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Chapter 1

THE FESTIVAL OF THE FAIRIES

Once in every century all of the fairies and wood sprites and hobgoblins and elves, and all of the spirits that inhabit the forests and the towns the wide world over, gather together for a five-day festival.

Sometimes it is held behind the East Wind and sometimes behind the West Wind. But the festival I am telling you about was held right in the middle of a snow white cloud floating through the sky.

What a festival it was! Positively everybody was there. There were ghosts and spooks and demons (all on their very best behavior, of course), as well as friendly little brownies and timid pixies. Only the Easter Bunny was absent and that was strange because he had never before been known to miss a festival.

Father Time was there, resting himself in the very softest part of the cloud. He declared it was the nicest festival (with the best food) he had been to in the past 1,600 years.

Mrs. Santa Claus and the Queen Fairy made pies and puddings and cream puffs by the hundreds over on a little side cloud that was being used as a kitchen. And the Seven Dwarfs washed dishes and licked out all the mixing bowls.

Three Halloween witches, using their finest brooms, swept up the crumbs from beneath the banquet tables and didn't grumble a bit when Cupid dropped cigar ashes all over the cloud.

Santa Claus was the very gayest one at the party. He played tag with the littlest pixies. He borrowed a needle from Mrs. Claus and taught the spooks and ghosts how to wiggle through the needle's eye. He made all the lady fairies laugh till their sides ached when he took their Queen and danced a jig with her deep in the cloud.

Mrs. Claus told Will-of-the-Wisp she was glad Santa was having such a good time because it was the first vacation he'd had since the last festival 100 years ago.

When the sun went down at the end of the first day, the little ones went to bed without fussing at all while the grown-ups sat around gossiping and talking about old times.

No one could have imagined that in a very short while all this peace and happiness would be shattered.

But at that very moment Easter Bunny was hurrying to the cloud and he was bringing terrible news. On his way to the festival he had stopped overnight in the Kingdom of Poopo-Poona to visit with a family of moles he knew. And the moles had told him such distressing tales about certain goings-on in Poopo-Poona that Easter Bunny had had indigestion for 10 days and three nights.

When he recovered he hurried on his way and arrived at the festival at the end of the first day just as the grown-ups were yawning and thinking about turning in. Everybody was so glad to see Bunny that they got wide awake and sang songs and cheered loudly.

But Easter Bunny only stood and blew his nose in a big pocket handkerchief. "I have terrible news," he told them. But, by this time, they all had guessed that something was wrong.

A cold wind seemed to blow over the cloud and even Santa Claus shivered as the fairies and elves and all the spirits huddled closer together and waited anxiously for Easter Bunny to speak.



Chapter 2

THE TERRIBLE NEWS FROM POOPO-POONA

Easter Bunny's voice shook and there were tears in his eyes as he told the news he had brought with him to the Festival

"Down in the Kingdom of Poopo-Poona," he began, "a boy by the name of Michael Bartholomew Woffington is spreading a rumor."

The Bunny paused to blow his nose and all of the folk at the Festival held their breaths and waited to hear what rumor Michael Bartholomew Woffington could be spreading that would so upset the Bunny.

"Well, what is it?" asked Father Time finally. "Surely it is not as bad as all that."

Easter Bunny sighed heavily and continued. "He is spreading the rumor that there is no Santa Claus!"

A gasp arose from the throng of spirits. The Queen Fairy smothered a tiny scream with her hand. The Seven Dwarfs clenched their fists. Mrs. Claus burst into tears. And all of the imps and demons and brownies and elves huddled closer together and trembled.

Santa Claus alone seemed unafraid. He pulled at his whiskers and looked thoughtfully up at the stars. "No one ever will behave such a rumor," he said at last.

But the Bunny shook his head. "That is the worst of it," he related sadly. "This boy is so well thought of and has so much influence that already he has convinced most of the children in Poopo-Poona. Pretty soon there will not be one child in all the Kingdom who believes in you."

Santa Claus put his hands behind his back and walked away from his friends. All the gayety had gone from his face and he walked as though he were suddenly very tired.



"What shall we do?" What is to be done?" cried all the others when Santa had gone.

"I do not know," said the Bunny. "I only know that next they will stop believing in me."

"What about us?" cried the Queen Fairy. When such a thing begins there is no telling where it will end. Soon, perhaps, children won't believe in any single one of us. Not in wood sprites or goblins or ghosts or brownies. Not in anyone on this cloud!"

So terrible was this thought that again everyone fell silent. They all knew, you see, that fairies and Easter Bunny and Santa Claus and all other Invisible folk, exist only because little children believe in them. When children stop believing then the fairies and all the others fade away. They no longer have any reason for living and so they must die. Everyone said Michael was a skeptic, because a skeptic is a person who doesn't believe in anything.

While everyone was thinking these things and feeling sorry for poor Santa Claus, the witches were standing apart and muttering among themselves. Finally one of them came over and addressed the sorrowing crowd.

"We can punish this Michael Bartholomew Woffington," announced the witch. "We can make him regret to his dying day that he ever began such a rumor."

"How? how!" asked everyone eagerly for each was thinking not so much of punishing Michael as of stopping him before he had done more harm.

"We will cast a spell over him," explained the witch. "So that whenever he opens his mouth to speak, hot air instead of words will come out."

There was silence for a moment and then everyone burst into a cheer. "The very thing," cried Queen Fairy, "He will never be able to spread another rumor."

"And," said Easter Bunny thoughtfully, "perhaps other people will learn and forever afterwards if a man talks nonsense people will laugh at him and say he is talking hot air!"

With that, the witches began mixing strange potions in a big caldron. All the other folk stood by and watched in silence as the terrible Curse was being prepared for Michael Bartholomew Woffington.

Chapter 3

THE CURSE FALLS ON MICHAEL

It was just three weeks before the 25th of December! Miss Trum, who taught the third grade class in a little school in the Kingdom of Poopo-Poona, was telling the children in her class about the meaning of Christmas.

But when she began talking of Santa Claus, all of the little boys and girls snickered behind their hands and whispered across the aisles to each other. Miss Trum was astonished as in other years her children always had loved best to hear her tell of Santa Claus and his wonderful toy workshops in faraway Santa Land.

“What is it, children?” she asked. “Don’t you want to hear about Santa Claus?”

The children snickered again as though they had a secret which Miss Trum couldn’t share. Roderick Benbow, a boy who sat in the back row, burst out laughing.

“Santa Claus!” He jeered. “There’s no such thing!”

Miss Trum couldn’t believe her ears. “Who ever told you such a thing?” she cried, standing up and peering down at the class.

Roderick Benbow pointed across the room and all the other children pointed, too. They were pointing at Michael Bartholomew Woffington.

Now Miss Trum really did feel badly because Michael was her favorite pupil. He was a handsome boy with dark hair and flashing blue eyes. He was smart in school and had nice manners and was always smiling and cheerful.

“Why do you say there is no Santa Claus?” asked Miss Trum, looking hard at Michael and hoping he would deny that he ever had said such a thing.

But he didn’t deny it. He looked straight at Miss Trum and said, “There just can’t be. It doesn’t make sense. How can I believe something I never have seen?”

“Well, then,” said Miss Trum, “If there is no Santa Claus who is it that decorates the streets of Poopo-Poona each Christmas time with paper streamers and colored ribbons? Who fills all our homes with candies and fruits each Christmas week? Who brings the big Christmas tree and decorates it with bright lights and raises it in the Public Square each Christmas Eve? Who –“

But Michael interrupted her. “I cannot answer all these things,” he said. “I only know that it cannot be Santa Claus.” And all the other children nodded their heads in agreement.

Then Miss Trum was very sad because she knew that Michael was not just being bad but that he had reasoned out all these things and really believed there could be no Santa Claus. And the worst of it was that all the children believed what he said.

When school was dismissed that day the story spread everywhere. “Michael told Miss Trum there was no Santa Claus, related Michael’s classmates. “And she couldn’t answer him at all. I guess that proves he is right.” And even the children who still believed there was a Santa now began to doubt.



But as Michael walked home he felt very strange. His feet were heavy and his head was spinning. When he came near his home he saw several of his school fellows standing by his gate waiting for him.

“Tell us,” they shouted when they saw him, “Tell us again why it is there can be no Santa Claus!”

Michael swung his books from his shoulder and started to tell them. But he couldn’t speak! He tried again. Still no word came out of his mouth! The children stared at him in puzzlement. He opened his mouth again and this time there was a hissing noise, like steam coming out of a tea kettle. And suddenly a cloud of smoke rushed out of Michael’s mouth, followed at once by a burst of hot air!

The witches’ curse had fallen upon him!

Chapter 4

MICHAEL RUNS AWAY

When the smoke and hot air burst from Michael's lips he was so astonished he couldn't even try to speak again. He simply stared at the smoke which was drifting slowly up over the housetops. And the children who had waited to hear him tell why there was no Santa Claus stood and stared at him.

For fully a minute not one of them moved. Then the children began slowly backing away, still keeping their eyes fastened on Michael as though afraid he might begin breathing fire any instant. Michael turned and ran into the house.

"It was nothing," he told himself fiercely. "Just the cold. Anybody breathes hot air on a cold day. I'll just warm myself here by the fire and then I'll be all right"

He stood by the open fire in the living room warming his hands and feet. Pretty soon he was warm as a mouse in a blanket and he forgot about the terrible thing that had happened. He went out into the kitchen where he smelled hot gingerbread fresh from the oven.

Abigale, the cook, was just cutting the gingerbread and when she saw Michael she winked and said, "Would you like a piece?"

Michael began to say yes but when he opened his mouth to speak the kitchen was filled with steam and smoke and the hot air simply rolled out of his mouth.

"Mercy me!" screamed Abigale. And dropping the gingerbread on the floor she ran shrieking from the room. Michael's mother, hearing the noise, came running downstairs and Abigale, weeping and trembling with terror, told her what had happened.

When his mother came into the kitchen Michael was standing there staring at his feet. "You ought to be ashamed," said his mother, "scaring Abigale like that. Now you go to your room and wait until your father comes home.

When his father came home and heard the story he was very angry. "Why do you play tricks like that?" he asked Michael. "It isn't like you."

Michael wanted to explain that it was something he couldn't help at all but when he spoke the same thing happened again. His father was furious He waved the smoke away and threatened to whip Michael if it happened again. Then he said there would be no supper for Michael that night and he went away leaving the poor boy sitting on the bed afraid to open his mouth at all.

The next morning when he awoke Michael felt much better. "Perhaps it has gone," he told himself. However, he was very careful to say nothing at breakfast and when he reached school he would talk to no one. But when Miss Trum began the geography lesson she called on Michael to tell her the name of the longest river in the world.

And when Michael began to tell her the school room suddenly was filled with smoke and hot air. All the children screamed with laughter but Miss Trum was angry. "I am going to tell your father," she said, and sent Michael home from school.

When Michael walked out of the school yard he was filled with shame. "My father will beat me and I will be sent to bed every night without supper," he thought unhappily. "But, worse than that, from now in my friends will always laugh at me."

The thought of all his classmates laughing and pointing at him and calling him names filled him with more misery than he could bear for he was very proud.

"There is only one thing for me to do," he thought wretchedly. "I must run away where no one will ever again see my shame."

And he stumbled through the streets of Poopo-Poona, out of the West Gate of the Kingdom and into a world where he never before had been.



Chapter 5

SANTA CLAUS REFUSES TO MAKE TOYS

Meanwhile, in Santa Land, no toys were being made.

Since Santa Claus returned from the Festival where he had heard the terrible news about Poopo-Poona he had simply sat in an old rocking chair beside the hearth and stared at the flames flickering up the chimney.

Mrs. Claus fussed and fussed. "Two Weeks!" she cried, pointing at the calendar hanging over the desk. "Look! Two weeks before Christmas - and what's done? You haven't put a single head on a single doll. The wagons are still without wheels. The last four batches of whistles you made don't whistle. There's a whole roomful of airplane wings - and no planes to put them on.

"What's going to happen when Christmas comes and you haven't a toy for a single boy or girl?"

But Santa just sat, rocking back and forth, before the fire. "If they do not believe in me," he murmured sadly, "How can I make them toys?"

"Well," argued Mrs. Claus, "Perhaps some of them still do believe. Just because one boy spread a tale doesn't mean everyone is spreading tales."

Over on Santa's desk was a magic glass through which those in Santa Land could see what went on in the world. Now Santa motioned towards the glass. "See for yourself," he told Mrs. Claus.

She picked up the glass and looked through it, holding her hand over one eye. What she saw saddened her and she knew then why Santa had no hope.

For although Michael Bartholomew Woffington had been cursed by the witches and had run away from Poopo-Poona, it was too late. The evil he had done grew and grew after he left, the way a forest fire will grow after you've set fire to one tiny twig.

The children of Poopo-Poona were singing no carols as they had in other years. Neither were they going to the woods for Christmas trees. Nor were they filling baskets with food for the poor.

"There is no Santa Claus," they told one another. "So why bother to be good?"

Mrs. Claus couldn't bear to look any longer through the glass. She put it away and went out in the kitchen to make Santa a chocolate cream puff - his very favorite dessert. But when she made it and brought it to him he left it untouched on the table. The same thing had happened yesterday when she made him ginger snaps. And the day before when she made an orange layer cake with coconut frosting.

Santa just nibbled at all his food and he had lost 17 pounds since the Festival. His red suit hung on him like a potato sack and Mrs. Claus had to punch three holes in his belt so it would hold up his trousers.

Out in the workshops cobwebs covered the unfinished toys and all the tools grew rusty because they weren't being used. The dwarfs and elves and fairies who helped Santa make Christmas toys could do no work. They sat at their benches and gazed at the floor. They knew how to make the toys but their little hearts were too swollen with sorrow for work.

"What will happen?" they asked, "If Santa doesn't start working soon? What will happen if he doesn't get well at all?"

And Patrick Tweedleknives, the oldest dwarf in Santa Land answered, "The children in Poopo-Poona will find out too late what they have done and there will be no Christmas this year or any year ever again."



Chapter 6

MICHAEL WANDERS FAR AND WIDE

When Michael ran away from Poopo-Poona he carried no food nor money and the only clothes he had were the ones he wore. He didn't have even an overcoat for he had forgotten it when Miss Trum sent him home from school.

The wind blew very cold on the highway leading away from Poopo-Poona and Michael walked all day without coming to a single house. Late in the afternoon the highway ended and there was only narrow dirt path winding through the thick forests. Michael was very tired and hungry by this time and his nose and the tips of his ears were quite blue with cold. He just about had given up hope of ever finding a house where he could ask for food and shelter when suddenly he saw wisps of smoke curling high above the tree tops. Leaving the path he hurried through the woods seeking the fire which made the smoke.

Before very long he was overjoyed to see a little white farmhouse in a clearing among the woods. A farmer was just coming up from the barn and when he saw Michael he waved and called:

"Welcome, son! It has been many weeks since we've had a traveler in these parts!"

Michael could have shouted with joy he was so glad to hear a friendly voice. The farmer led him into the house and began firing questions at him, wanting to know where Michael had come from and where he was going. But, just then, the farmer's good wife came out from the kitchen carrying a platter of steaming hot pecan buns in one hand and a big pitcher of milk in the other.

"Let the child eat before you question him," she said to her husband. "Can't you see he's starving?"

The sight and smell of the food set Michael's legs to trembling. His mouth watered as he eagerly sat in the chair the good woman placed for him at the table.

"There now," she said kindly. "You have only to say a tiny grace and then you may eat all you can hold."

Michael stopped with his hands already reaching for a bun. He gazed up at the lady, pleading with his eyes that she not make him speak. But she didn't understand. "Just say, 'God bless this food,'" she told him gently.

Michael swallowed hard. And then, clenching his fists, he said, obediently. "God bless this food." But instead of words there was only a cloud of smoke from his mouth and a rush of hot air that burned the farmer's cheeks.

The farmer and his wife stared at Michael in alarm. "The Lord have mercy on us!" cried the farmer at last. "The boy is cursed! He has the demon in him for sure." At these words the farmer's wife buried her head in her apron.

"We cannot have you in this house," went on the farmer to Michael. "We cannot feed one who is bewitched." And opening the door he motioned for Michael to leave.

The boy got up from the food he had never touched and slowly went out of the house. It was dark now and colder than

ever. Michael wandered blindly through the woods not knowing or caring where he went.

After that, wherever he found people who might feed or shelter him it was always the same. When he spoke they thought he was bewitched or playing tricks and they sent him from their doors. If he didn't speak they thought he was rude and would have nothing to do with him.

Finally, after three days and three nights, he threw himself down in a big forest and burst into tears. "If only there were someone," he sobbed brokenly. "If only there were someone somewhere who could help me!"

And would you believe it? There was someone who could help him! It was Humphrey Humperdinck, the woodsprite who was sitting on a toadstool right by Michael's ear.

"I wish you would stop crying," said Humphrey irritably. "You're getting the ground under my toadstool soaking wet. What're you crying for anyway?"



Chapter 7

HUMPHREY OFFERS TO HELP MICHAEL

When Michael heard Humphrey Humperdinck speak he was so astonished he sat right up and stopped crying at once. He looked around but he couldn't anyone anywhere. Just then he sneezed very hard.

"Ouch!" said Humphrey in a disgusted voice. "Isn't it cold enough already without your sneezing on me?"

Michael looked down and there sitting on a toadstool by his hand was Humphrey Humperdinck, the woodsprite. Humphrey was not very pretty to look at. He had big ears for one thing and big feet. The rest of him was very small - about as small as half a banana.

Michael was so interested that he forgot for a minute all his wretchedness.

"Who are you anyway?" asked Humphrey, who was getting very tired of being stared at. "What are you doing way off here alone in the woods?"

Then Michael remembered who he was and why he was alone in the woods. He sat back on his heels and stopped staring at Humphrey.

"Speak up!" ordered Humphrey. "Haven't you any manners?" But Michael only sat there. He was afraid to open his mouth for then he knew the woodsprite would go away and leave him all alone again.

But Humphrey was going anyway. "If you don't care to talk," he said stiffly, "I'll be going along." And he began to climb down from the toadstool.

Michael leaned forward in alarm. Before he had time to think he cried "Oh, please don't go!" And, of course, no words came out of his mouth. But a great puff of smoke did. And a rush of hot air that swept down and covered Humphrey Humperdinck.

Michael bowed his head in shame and waited for Humphrey to get angry as all the others had. But Humphrey wasn't angry.

"Well," he said in a pleased voice. "That's the first time my ears and feet have been warm this winter! Can you do that again?"

"Oh, yes!" cried Michael, happy for the first time since the curse had fallen on him. "I can do it every time I speak."

And, indeed, every word was a gush of hot air that warmed Humphrey Humperdinck's ears and feet. The woodsprite was tickled silly and for quite a while the two of them sat there, Michael breathing hot air and smoke and Humphrey warming himself.

Finally, however, Humphrey raised a hand and signaled Michael to stop talking. "I've just figured out who you must be," said Humphrey. "You're Michael Bartholomew Woffington, the boy the witches cursed at the Festival."

Michael's eyes widened. "Then I am cursed!" he thought. "But why? What did I do to have the witches curse me?"

Now Humphrey's ears were so big he could sometimes hear people's thoughts. And right now Michael's thoughts were so loud and so urgent that Humphrey could hear them very clearly.

"Why," he said in a surprised voice. "Naturally, you are being punished for spreading the story that there is no Santa Claus. What a tale for you to have started! And YOU don't look like a bad boy at all."

"But," thought Michael wildly. "I didn't know there was a Santa Claus. I had never SEEN him."

"What nonsense," replied Humphrey. "You didn't know there was such a thing as Humphrey Humperdinck. You had never seen me. Yet I've been here all along."

"That's true," thought Michael. "And I didn't believe in witches, either. Yet there certainly must be witches for they have cursed me! But it's too late to find out all this now. I shall never be well again."

"I wouldn't say that," interrupted Humphrey. "Perhaps Santa will be good enough to remove the curse if he sees you are sorry. But it's a long, long journey to Santa Land and the journey requires lots of courage. Perhaps you wouldn't like to try it."

"Oh, show me! Show me the way!" cried Michael's thoughts. "There's nothing I wouldn't do to show him I believe in him now!"



"I DIDN'T KNOW THERE WAS A SANTA CLAUS."

Chapter 8

MICHAEL GOES TO SANTA LAND

Humphrey Humberdinck could see very plainly that Michael really had learned his lesson and was sorry for having said there was no Santa Claus.

“Michael is really a good boy,” said Humphrey to himself. “Unless something is done for him he will soon starve or freeze to death. And I’m quite sure that is more than the witches intended when they cursed him at the Festival.”

“Come with me,” he said aloud to Michael. “I will draw you a map to Santa Land.” The two of them went over to a big birch tree and Humphrey tore off a large strip of bark. Then taking a small stick he began drawing a map on the back of the bark. Michael watched over the woodsprite’s shoulder and when the map was done he put it in his pocket. Next Humphrey gave Michael two great handfuls of nuts and berries to eat and told him how he could gather them for himself in any forest.

“Good-bye and thank you from the bottom of my heart,” cried Michael, forgetting that he could not speak. But Humphrey merely waved away the smoke that came out of Michael’s mouth and showed by his smile that he understood what the boy wanted to say.

The journey to Santa Land was indeed very long and filled with hardships. With only Humphrey’s map to guide him, Michael trudged many weary miles through lands he had never seen even dreamed existed.

He got lost on the Moors of Semarang and was rescued by a “Will-o’-the-Wisp” who led him as far as the hills. There he fell among a band of robbers who at first planned to hold him for ransom but changed their minds when they saw how thin and scrawny he was.

The hills were filled with Goons, too, who made loud moan-noises at night causing Michael to tremble with fright.

Finally he came to the Great Sea of Oche Ota and his map showed him that not many miles beyond the sea was Santa Land. But the sea was wide and deep and there was no way for him to cross.

Poor Michael! He had come so far and endured so much and now it looked as if he would never be able to get to Santa Claus to have the witches’ curse removed.

Suddenly a very large eagle swooped down from the sky and attacked the boy as he stood on the beach. Michael was terrified for he knew how strong and fierce an eagle is but he realized that if he conquered the bird he might still get to Santa Land.

For four hours he fought with the eagle. Finally, when it seemed Michael was about to lose the battle, the bird swooped down once more, his beak wide open for the kill. Then Michael picked up a huge rock and hurled it into the eagle’s beak. The eagle could neither swallow the rock nor open his beak wider to spit it out. He came to a rest on the beach and showed by his drooping wings that Michael had won the battle.

Quickly Michael took his belt from his trousers and, knocking the rock from the eagle’s beak, put the belt in its place drawing the ends back like reins. Then, climbing on the big bird’s back, he snapped the reins and the bird and boy rose into the air and headed across the Oche Ota Sea.

“At last!” cried Michael joyously. “At last I am almost there.” In just a little while the curse will be removed for surely Santa will see that I have been punished enough.”



Chapter 9

SANTA IS DYING

Soon after crossing the Oche Ota Sea, Michael saw that the land below him was covered with ice and snow. He watched carefully and when he saw a big house surrounded by stables and many tiny houses he knew that he had come to Santa Land.

Pulling sharply on the rein he brought the eagle to earth. Using his belt, he tied the bird's leg to a fence post. He didn't want to free the eagle yet because he didn't know for sure whether he might have to use him again.

He was very surprised to find Santa Land so quiet. He knew it was just a few days before Christmas and he had expected to find Santa and all his workers busy hammering and sawing on Christmas toys. Instead, there was not a sound - except that of the wind as it swept across the fields, sometimes bringing bursts of hail stones.

Michael hurried towards the big house but when he knocked at the door there was no answer. Finally he tried turning the knob and finding the door unlocked he pushed it open and walked into Santa's house.

As soon as he stood in the hall he heard the most terrible sound. It was the sound of a woman weeping! This frightened Michael terribly because he could not imagine how anyone could weep in Santa Claus's house. He was surprised, too, to find on looking around, that the house was really in bad shape. There was dust all over the hall table and all around on the floor were little "kittens" which is what Michael's mother always called dust when it gathered into small furry balls.

"Goodness," thought Michael, "I should think Mrs. Claus would keep her house cleaner than this!"

And then he realized that the woman he heard crying must be Mrs. Claus herself, for what other woman could it be? Softly, on tip-toe, Michael crept down the hall and peeped into the big living room. There, sure enough, was Mrs. Claus, sitting in a rocker by the hearth, her head buried in her apron, crying as

though her heart would break.

Michael recognized her at once, because she looked just like Santa. Claus's wife ought to look - except that she was crying.

Michael was just wondering where Santa could be when he heard a step on the stairs behind him. Quickly the boy hid himself behind the living room door and peered through the crack. In another second a tiny dwarf, wearing spectacles and carrying a little black bag, came into the living room.

Mrs. Claus looked up eagerly as the dwarf came over and stood by the hearth. "How is he, Doc Littlejohn?" she cried. "Is he any better?"

Then Michael knew that Mrs. Claus had been crying because Santa was ill and that the little dwarf was the Santa Land doctor. "Good heavens!" thought Michael. "What a terrible time for Santa to be ill - nine days before Christmas! But perhaps it's only a headache and he will be well very soon."

But Doc Littlejohn looked very sad. "I guess it's just as well the workers have stopped making in the shops," he said wearily.

"You mean -" began Mrs. Claus and her hand flew to her mouth as though she couldn't bear to say what she was thinking.

"Santa is dying," said Doc Littlejohn. "He has only nine days to live. He will die on Christmas day."

Mrs. Claus was too stricken to speak. Doc Littlejohn blew his nose hard. And over behind the door little Michael stood twisting his cap around and around in his hands.



Chapter 10

MICHAEL WORKS IN THE SHOP

When Michael heard old Doc Littlejohn tell Mrs. Claus that Santa would die on Christmas day he forgot that the only reason he had made the long journey to Santa Land was to have the witches' Curse removed. Now all he cared about in the world was having Santa get well. He gladly would have endured ten thousand Curses if he could just hear the sound of toys being made in the Santa Land workshop and know that Christmas was coming again.

Suddenly Michael thought, "It might help him get well if he knew the toys were being made in the workshops just as if he were there!"

So watching his chance, Michael stole from behind the door and crept out of the house. He ran across the snow covered ground and went into the first shop he came to. There he found all the Christmas elves and fairies sitting around looking gloomy. Not a bit of work was being done!

No one seemed surprised to see Michael. In fact, no one paid him any attention at all. For a minute the boy just stood there. "If only I could speak!" he thought. "If only I could tell them how much it might mean to Santa to know that the toys were being finished!" But he couldn't tell them - not in words.

But, without speaking at all, he went straight up to one of the work tables and picked up a little armless doll baby. The arms were there, too, covered with cobwebs. Michael brushed away the cobwebs and began fitting the arms on the doll.

He picked up a hammer and began banging away with it—making such a racket that all the Idle workers looked up in astonishment. When Michael went right on hammering the fairies gathered around and watched him curiously.

"Bang! Bang! bang!" went Michael's hammer, slamming away at the poor doll. In truth, Michael had not the slightest idea how to go about putting on a doll's arms but he wanted the fairies to see that at least somebody thought some work ought to be done.

At last Patrick Tweedleknees, the oldest worker in Santa Land, stepped up to Michael's side. "What's the big idea?" he asked. "Nobody works here anymore. There isn't going to be any Christmas. Haven't you heard?"

Michael went right on hammering, paying no attention to Patrick Tweedleknees. "Anyway," exclaimed Patrick very crossly, "that's no way to put a doll's arms on. You're putting the- right arm where the left should be and the left where the right should be. And doing a very bad job of it into the bargain!"

And snatching the doll from Michael's hands, Patrick changed the arms about and had them attached to the doll in a twinkling. Then, because Patrick, like all Santa Land workers, really loved making toys, he kept right on finishing other dolls.

Picking up a can of yellow paint and a brush Michael began painting little wagons. Right away some of the fairies stopped him. "These wagons are supposed to be red," they told him

irritably. And they got out some red paint and began doing the job themselves.

Michael started looking at some little cooking stoves but the fairies shoved him away "You do everything wrong," they said. "We'll finish these stoves ourselves. What can a terrible worker like you be doing here anyhow?"

"It must be because Santa is getting well!" said one fairy suddenly. "That is why the boy is here - trying to finish the toys in time for Christmas!"

"Santa getting well?" cried the other fairies. "Then we'll finish the toys ourselves?"

And suddenly everyone in the shop was hard at work. The word quickly spread to the other - shops and very soon Santa Land came alive. There was such a banging and singing and shouting that the clatter could easily be heard a half a mile.

Michael ran back to Santa's house. "Surely this will make Santa well," he thought happily and he could hardly wait to get into the house.

Chapter 11

MICHAEL RETURNS TO POOPO-POONA

When Michael returned to Santa's house he found that Santa had come downstairs and was talking with Mrs. Claus and Doc Littlejohn.

"It did help!" thought Michael excitedly. "Just hearing the workers in the toyshops has made Santa well enough to come downstairs!"

The boy stood at the door of the living room but the others were too busy talking to notice him. Mrs. Claus was holding Santa's hands. "Do you see," she cried. "If the workers feel like making the toys - surely you can take them to the children on Christmas Day!"

But Santa shook his head. "I cannot," he said sadly. "I cannot take toys to children who do not believe in me. If children do not care for Christmas then there will be no Christmas."

And gently pulling his hands away from Mrs. Claus he sat down heavily in his rocker by the hearth. He was so thin and tired looking - he did really look as though death were not far away.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" cried Mrs. Claus to Doc Littlejohn.

"Perhaps," said Doc Littlejohn. "Perhaps one thing. If the lad could be found who started this thing."

When Michael heard this he did not for a moment dream they were speaking of him. "Who can the lad be?" he thought. "I will find him and bring him here myself!"

Just then Doc Littlejohn called his name. He said, "Yes, if Michael Bartholomew Woffington could say he believes in Santa now - perhaps all would be well."

Michael was stunned with surprise. For a minute he couldn't move at all. Then he remembered how he once had not believed there was such a thing as Santa Claus and how he had spread the story through all of Poopo-Poona and how he had been cursed for his deed.

Now the knowledge that it was he himself who was causing Santa to die was much more terrible to bear than the witches' curse had ever been.

When he recovered from his shock he ran into the living room and threw himself weeping at Santa's knees.

"I believe in you! Oh, I believe in you!" he cried.

But only smoke and hot air came from his mouth! When Santa and Mrs. Claus and Doc Littlejohn saw the smoke and felt the hot air they knew at once who he was for they well remembered the curse the witches had made at the Festival.

"It is the boy!" cried Doc Littlejohn. "It's Michael himself!"

And Mrs. Claus, hope shining in her eyes, said. "And he does believe! See how he weeps! And why would he have come here anyway if it wasn't to tell Santa that he believes?"

Santa was looking sorrowfully down at Michael's bowed head. The boy suddenly raised his eyes and cried, 'Punish me!



Punish me anyway you like but please get well. Please let there always be a Christmas every year."

And again all that came from his lips was smoke and hot air. But, Santa understood, just as he understands practically everything little boys and girls are thinking. Just as he understood that Michael had never been truly bad but just thoughtless.

Now he laid his thin hand on Michael's shoulder and sighed. "I'm afraid it's too late, son," he said sadly. "Even though you believe in me your story has spread everywhere and there is not another child anywhere who believes."

Michael sprang to his feet. "I will go back," he thought. "I will go back and tell them all how wrong I was. Then they will believe."

But Santa, knowing what was in Michael's mind, said again, "It's too late my boy. It's seven days until Christmas and I shall die before you have convinced anyone." And getting up from his chair Santa went slowly from the room and back to his bed.

As soon as he had gone Michael ran out of the house and untied the eagle he had left hitched to the fence. When he had climbed on the eagle's back, the bird rose into the air and sped southward towards the Kingdom of Poopo-Poona.

POOPO-POONA LAUGHS AT MICHAEL

So swift was the eagle that by noon of the next day he had brought Michael to the Gates of Poopo-Poona. Immediately the boy set free the bird and ran into the Kingdom.

What a strange and different place it was! The streets were dirty, filled with trash flung there by careless children. The store windows were dark and gloomy. There was not a single Christmas gift on display nor any colored paper strung across the streets. All the grownups wore sad faces and carried no bundles in their arms.

And although it was a school day there were many children to be seen on the streets. They were dirty and fought and bickered among themselves and didn't mind their parents at all. But, strangely enough, they didn't seem a bit happy doing just as they liked. They were cross and irritable and looked as though they loved no one, not even, themselves.

As Michael observed all this in astonishment, he overheard two elderly shopkeepers talking together on a street corner.

"It is what happen," said the gloomily, "when children stop believing in Santa Claus."

"Yes," agreed the other. "The world is an ugly place in which to live unless you keep dreaming of wonderful and beautiful things. The children of Poopo-Poona will never be happy again for they have given up their dreams."

"Not yet! not yet!" cried Michael to himself. "It is not yet too late." And hurrying on his way he soon came to the school house where he first had started the terrible story that there was no Santa Claus. It was recess time but only about half the children were at school. The other just hadn't bothered to come at all. Michael saw Roderick Benbow, one of his old school mates, and rushed up to him.

Roderick said "Well, Michael, where have you been? You've been missing a lot of fun, I can tell you. We just do as we please since we found there was no Santa Claus."

But Michael could see that Roderick wasn't really having fun, but was just pretending to. He caught Roderick's arm and cried, "There Is a Santa Claus, Roderick! I was wrong and you've GOT to believe me!"

But alas! all the time he was trying to talk great clouds of smoke were pouring from his mouth and the school yard was filled with hot air. The other children gathered around poor Michael and began hooting with laughter, pointing their fingers at him and sticking out their tongues.

"Michael Bartholomew Woffington just talks hot air," they roared. "He's a Bag of Wind! He's a lot of hot air!"

"How can I tell them?" thought Michael desperately. "When I can't say anything at all!" Then suddenly, he got an idea - an idea so simple that it I was amazing he had never thought of it before.

Snatching up a stick he began scratching letters in the soft snow on the ground. If he couldn't speak, he could at least write!

When he finished scratching the children leaned over and read what he had written.

"I have seen Santa Claus," said the words in the snow. "You've got to believe in him or there will never be another Christmas and we never will be happy again."

The children read but when they looked up Michael saw they still didn't believe.

"Why?" wrote Michael with his stick. "Why don't you believe me?"

Roderick Benbow said, "Maybe there once was a Santa but there isn't any more. It is six days until Christmas and always before the streets have been covered with colored paper and ribbons by this time. This year the streets are bare. Surely if there was a Santa it wouldn't be so!"

All the children nodded agreement and ran off and left Michael holding his stick and looking after them.



MICHAEL DECORATES THE STREETS

When Michael saw that no one believed him he was terribly sad. "Santa was right," he thought. "I never shall be able to convince anyone by Christmas Day and by that time it will be too late for Santa will have died."

As he walked slowly away from the schoolhouse he noticed how bare and ugly the streets were and he thought, "It is all my fault that there are no ribbons and colored paper decorating the streets this year." And then he stopped, for a wonderful plan had come to him.

"I will decorate the streets!" he cried to himself. "I will string colored paper from every lamp post and when the children see it they will think that Santa did it and they will believe!"

Sure now that all would be well, Michael hunted in the dirty gutters until he found a scrap of old paper and a stub of a pencil. He wrote on the paper, "I AM THE RAG MAN." Then he went from door to door along the streets and showed what he had written to the people who answered his knock.

It wasn't any time at all before he had stuffed his pockets and shirt and loaded down both arms with scraps of paper and bits of rags for housewives were glad to be able to throw away the trash that had gathered in their closets and attics. And besides, they were amused at the little Rag Man who couldn't talk but who looked at them so hopefully when he showed them his note.

Before long Michael had such a load he had to run down and hide it behind an old paint and dye factory. There were large tubs of paint and dye which stood outside the factory day and night and it was by these tubs that he hid his paper and rags.

All the afternoon and late into the evening he collected trash. As each load became too heavy to carry he took it to the paint factory. Finally it was past midnight and Michael decided that

he must have collected every rag and paper in Poopo-Poona - so huge was the pile he had gathered.

By the light of the moon he set about tearing into strips, all the rags and papers. He dumped these strips into the different tubs of paint and dye and when he had finished he had a beautiful assortment of gaily colored ribbons and paper streamers. Some were red, some were green, some yellow, and some were just like spun silver.

He took the streamers into the streets and fastened them to lamp posts and stretched them from tree to tree. He strung them from shop windows and flung them across porches. When everything that could be decorated had been he tore the rest of the streamers into bits and scattered them in the streets like confetti.

The sun had begun to come up before he had finished. By that time he was so weary he could hardly keep his eyes open, so he went down to the paint factory and climbed into an empty barrel and fell asleep.

When he awoke it was past noon. Quickly he ran through the streets to see what had happened. How gay everything looked! The colored streamers fluttered in the breeze and looked very Christmassy indeed. And the people in the streets really seemed happier and more cheerful than they had in weeks.

Michael, his heart beating with joy, ran to the school house where he found all his school mates discussing what, had happened. Some were saying it must prove after all that there was a Santa for who else could have done such a wonderful thing. But most of them still shook their heads and wouldn't believe.

"For," said Roderick Benbow, "it is three days until Christmas and. always before the Kingdom has been filled with candies and fruit by this time This year there are no goodies of any kind. Surely if there were a Santa he would have brought us sweets by now."

The children listened and agreed and Michael turned away in disappointment.



MICHAEL FINDS GOODIES

Michael walked through the gaily decorated streets without seeing any of the wonderful work he had done the night before. He was thinking, "I worked until my fingers were stiff with tiredness but it wasn't enough. Now it is just three days to Christmas and still no one believes that there is truly a Santa Claus."

Then he remembered how sad and tired looking Santa had been when he had seen him in Santa Land. And he thought, "He mustn't die! I myself will fill the Kingdom with goodies and then surely everyone will think that Santa did it and they will believe in him again."

Quickly he ran towards his own home. When he arrived he found both his mother and father sitting in the living room. Neither parent had been able to work since Michael had gone away, for their grief had been very hard to bear.

When they saw Michael they were filled with joy and covered him with hugs and kisses. Abigale, the cook, came in from the kitchen and kissed him, too. "How thin you are," she said. "I shall make you all the gingerbread you can eat!"

Michael went over to his father's desk and began writing something while his parents and Abigale read over his shoulder.

He told them on paper about how he had been cursed and couldn't speak. He told them how he had been to Santa Land and how he must make the children believe in Santa or else Santa would die and there never would be Christmas again. And then he asked them if they would help him make enough goodies to fill the Kingdom of Poopo-Poona before sun-up the next day.

Of course both his mother and father said they would be glad to help. Abigale went straight to the kitchen and began looking up candy recipes in her cook book. Michael's mother went down to the store and bought 15 great bags sugar and eggs and milk and chocolate and nuts and all things goodies are made of. Michael's father went to the fruit store and astonished the cleric by saying, "I'll take every orange, apple, and banana you have in the shop!"

Before long the Woffington kitchen was filled with delicious smells. Everyone in the family was hard at work, mixing, stirring, and beating cakes and candies. By bed time the tables and chairs and shelves were loaded with molasses popcorn balls, nut kisses, tutti-frutti gumdrops, frosted fruit, chocolate fudge, coconut squares, and ginger bars. The dining room was overflowing with lemon wafers, spice cup cakes, hermits, and oatmeal cookies. And the hall was seven feet deep with fruit!

After midnight, Michael went to every home in Poopo-Poona and left a bundle of candies and cookies and fruits at each door.

At sun-up every sweet was gone and Michael fell into bed exhausted. When he awoke and went down town he found everyone talking about the wonderful thing that had happened. And in the school yard Michael could see the littlest children did believe there must be a Santa after all.



But Roderick Benbow and the older children still shook their heads and wouldn't believe.

"It is indeed wonderful," said Roderick, "that the streets have been decorated and the houses filled with sweets. But it doesn't yet prove there is a Santa Claus. For it is two days till Christmas and always before a great tree has been raised in the Great Public Square. Surely if there were a Santa the tree would have been raised by now."

And the children hearing agreed, nodding their heads. And poor Michael turned away, his heart heavy with sorrow.

Chapter 15

MICHAEL FINDS A CHRISTMAS TREE

Now things really seemed hopeless to Michael. He had worked night and day and done everything he could think of but still the children did not believe there was a Santa Claus.

Somehow he must get a great tree and bring it to the Public Square and cover it with colored lights. "But," he thought, "what is the use? Even then they will not believe. They will think of some other proof that is needed and by then it will be Christmas and Santa will have died."

Poor Michael! He was so thin and so very tired from all his journeys and all the work he had done since returning to Poopo-Poona. And to make matters worse there was no one he could talk to for the witches curse was still upon him and every word he uttered turned to smoke and hot air before it left his lips.

But wretched as he was he refused to give up. Taking an ax and some rope from his house he went through the streets of Poopo-Poona and out of the Gates and into the great snow covered forests beyond. All afternoon he hunted until at last he came upon a mighty fir tree standing alone on a hill top.

What a beautiful fir it was! And what a perfect Christmas tree it would be when raised in the Public Square and decorated with shining silver stars and twinkling lights!

Taking off his jacket Michael set to work chopping down the tree. But it was hard work for the trunk was wide and the boy was tired.

It was night time before the great fir finally fell crashing to the ground. Quickly tying his rope around the trunk and fastening the end of the rope across his small chest, Michael began dragging the tree down the hillside.

At first all went well for it was quite easy going downhill. But when he came to the bottom and started up the next hill, the boy pulled and pulled with all his strength but was unable to budge the great tree.

He took the rope from his chest and tried pushing the tree but it was no use. Once more Michael took his ax and began chopping down small saplings that grew around him. It was so dark he could scarcely see what he was doing and his hands were so blistered he wanted to scream with pain every time he swung the ax.

When he had cut down half a dozen small trees and stripped them of their branches he laid them under the great fir and rolled the Christmas tree over them. Inch by inch he struggled up the hill using the small trees under the big one like wheels under a wagon.

When he came to the top of the hill he pulled the fir quickly down the other side and then began the work of going up the next hill all over again.

All night long he worked and when it was almost dawn he still had not gone more than half the distance to the Gates of the Kingdom. He could go no further. Every time he took a step he stumbled and fell and at last he had not the strength to get back on his feet.

"Even if I had managed to drag the tree to the Great Square," he thought, "how could I have decorated it? Where could I have gotten the silver stars and the colored lights?"

Then he wept quietly, his face against the snow. "It is over," he told himself. "I have failed. There will be no Christmas ever again."

Saying this he fell asleep beside the fir tree. And, as he slept, a strange thing happened.

A band of fairies and elves came out of the forest and carried Michael's fir tree away. And before they went they covered Michael's sleeping body with twigs and leaves to keep him warm.



Chapter 16

CHRISTMAS EVE IN POOPO_POONA

All day long Michael slept under the coverlet of twigs and leaves. When he awoke he was not surprised to find the big fir tree had disappeared.

He thought, "Some woodsman dragged it off to chop into fire wood." And he was very grateful to the woodsman for covering him with leaves to keep him warm. "I should have frozen to death otherwise," said Michael to himself and then he thought, "Perhaps it would have been best if I had died."

For he remembered how he had failed to get the tree to the Public Square and how his failing meant that Santa would die and Christmas would never come again.

Slowly, with bowed head, he walked back to the Kingdom of Poopo-Poona. It was quite dark and for a long while he had only the stars to guide him. But suddenly, as he neared the Gates of the Kingdom, the way became much brighter and, looking up, he saw that the Kingdom was all alight. Great bonfires burned on every hilltop and from the Public Square there rose such a glow that it could be seen for miles around.

"What can it be?" wondered Michael, quickening his steps. "It is way past the time when everyone in Poopo-Poona usually goes to bed. Perhaps the whole Kingdom is on fire!"

He rushed into the Kingdom Gates and immediately he found himself in the midst of a throng of people who were singing and cheering and running towards the Public Square. Michael was pushed along with them.

"What is it? What's it all about?" he wanted to ask. But of course he could say nothing, and, even if he had, he would not have been heard for the shouting and singing drowned out all other sounds.

At last the throng rushed into the Square where great crowds of other people were already standing. And there, right in the center of the Square was the giant fir tree Michael had chopped down!

It towered far above the rooftops and there were so many colored lights and silver stars on its branches that it lighted the whole Square. Michael stared at it in astonishment. Then he realized that people were singing Christmas Carols and with joined hands were dancing around the tree.

Never had such a Christmas Eve celebration been seen before in Poopo-Poona! There was joy on every face. Everyone was sharing fruits and candies with his neighbor and even the naughtiest children were behaving themselves and taking care of their little brothers and sisters.

"What has happened?" wondered Michael in astonishment.

Just then someone slapped him on the back and shouted: "Sing, lad, sing! For Christmas has come to Poopo-Poona!"

But Michael could not sing for he couldn't even speak. Instead, he stole out of the Square and went alone towards his own home.

"I suppose it was the woods man who covered me with leaves who carried my tree to the Square and decorated it for all the people," he thought. "But that doesn't mean Christmas has really come for I failed Santa and he will die tomorrow."

And he went into his house and got undressed and went to bed in the dark.



Chapter 17

MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL

For a long time Michael lay in his bed listening to the sound of shouting and singing in the Public Square many blocks away. But he could not sleep because he was worrying about Santa Claus.

It was past midnight and early Christmas morning when Michael heard the clatter outside of his window.

“Michael!” called a voice. “Michael Bartholomew Woffington!”

Michael sprang out of bed and ran to the window and there, right in his own back yard, was a wonderful sight.

There was a big sleigh drawn by eight grand reindeer. The sleigh was packed full with bags of toys and standing under Michael’s window was Santa himself! But how different he looked than when Michael had seen him in Santa Land! Now he was smiling and full of laughter. His voice was rich and hearty and jollier than any voice Michael had ever heard.

Trembling with excitement, Michael pulled on his shoes and trousers and ran out into the yard. He was so happy that Santa was well and had come to Poopo-Poona that a great big lump filled his throat and he couldn’t even try to speak.

But Santa was doing all the talking anyway. He said, “I watched you from Santa Land. I watched you decorate the streets with colored paper. I watched you fill every house with good things to eat. I watched you cut down the fir tree and saw you fall beside it when you could drag it no further.”

Michael hung his head because he was ashamed for having failed.

“But you didn’t fail,” said Santa gently. “I decided that if there was only one child in all the world who believed in me, if he believed hard enough to do all the things you have done to keep Christmas on earth, then I could never die.

“It doesn’t matter how many children believe. So long as just one child believes in me with all his heart there will always be a Christmas.”

And then Santa chuckled. “So,” he said, “I sent my fairies to take your fir tree to the square. And I filled my sleigh with all the toys the elves could finish. And now I must be off for there is much work ahead of me this night.”

But just before he climbed back in his sleigh he handed Michael a magnificent silver horn. “Here’s your Christmas present, lad.” said Santa. “I made it especially for you.”

It was a beautiful horn - the most beautiful one Michael had ever seen. But he held it behind him and didn’t blow it at all.

Santa climbed in his sleigh and said, “Blow your horn.”

But Michael just stood there. “Santa has forgotten that I cannot speak,” he thought. “And when I blow the horn and only smoke and hot air come out it will make him feel very badly.”

Santa said again, ‘Blow your horn Michael.’ But he had to say it twice more before Michael finally raised the horn to his lips.

He blew ever so softly so there wouldn’t be too much smoke. But, instead of smoke and hot air, the horn gave a wonderful silvery blast!

“Oh!” cried Michael in amazement.

Santa burst into laughter for Michael had really said “Oh!” and not just hot air.

“Merry Christmas, Michael!” cried Santa, driving his reindeer into the sky’ “Merry Christmas!”

The boy blew one more silvery blast on his horn and waved at Santa who was now high in the sky.

Then, his heart bursting with joy. Michael ran madly towards the Great Public Square.

“Merry Christmas!” he shouted when he saw the crowds. “Merry Christmas to all!”

And his voice was louder and happier than all the rest.

THE END



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