

Santa Claus' Twin

BY JESSIE NILES BURNES

CHRISTMAS party in July, daughter, how could that happen?"

"That's just what I said, mother, when Bess first spoke of it, and she said, 'Well, it's this way. You know my birthday comes the day after Christmas. All the rest have birthdays in the summer. May's is in May, of course, and both the boys' are in September. They always have birthday parties, and lots of fun beforehand planning and preparing, but mine comes too soon after the Great Birthday. One time I spoke of this when we were up here at the farm for vacation, and Aunt Bess said 'How would it do for us to have a party up here some day in July, if you like, and call it your birthday party?' and just then Uncle Warren came along and we asked him what he thought, and he didn't say, only began sort of chanting—
Oh, what a blessing 'twould 'a' been
If Santa had been born a twin.
We'd had two Christmases a year,
And p'raps one brudder'd settled here."

"That gave us the idea of making it a Christmas party. Uncle had found the verse in an old magazine, and had set it to music. So we always sing it at my party. That was three years ago, and we've had one each year since, and you don't know what fun it is!"

"And it is, mother. I'll just begin at the beginning and tell you all about it. You remember you thought the country life this vacation would help me to grow strong and well, and when Aunt Bess asked me to come out with Bess and the children, I didn't want to go, but you coaxed me. I was afraid, for she wasn't my really, truly Auntie, and I never like to be away from you—but I never had such a jolly time in my life, and I shall never be afraid again. Lonesome? Why, from the time they met us at the train until I got back home I don't believe there has been a single minute I haven't been doing something I wanted to do, and you couldn't get lonesome out there if you tried."

"For two weeks before the party we were busy as bees making gifts and planning surprises, just as we do for Christmas, and Uncle Warren would say, 'mystery, mystery; who's got the mystery,' but he was the worst of the lot, because we found out he had helped Bess plan nearly everything."

"When the day came and we had that dining room ready I wish you could have seen it. Bess set a small table for the dolls. We used a big box for a platform to raise it as high as our own table. Each doll had a chair and their table had flowers and favors and candles and baskets of fruit and boxes of candies, and in the center Bess' birthday cake with 14 candles. Christmas wreaths and greens were everywhere and the boys had found a lot of scarlet berries that grow on vines close to the ground—kinnikinnick, Rolph said the Indians called it—and we used it like holly with the cedar and spruce and fir."

"Another table in another corner held the gifts. Packages of all sorts and shapes and sizes were on it. One of the rules is that each gift shall be the unaided work of each giver. Auntie says there's plenty of time during vacation, and the worth of a gift is the love and thought we weave into it. You just wait, mother, my love, till you see the wonder box I have brought home. It will make you proud of me. I'm proud of myself. There are candle shades made of real pressed flowers between waxed paper, and when the light shines through they look like fresh blooms. And there are two balsam pillows; they take quite a lot of time, and some pillows of roseleaves—you know there are such loads and loads of roses there, always. Then there are quite a lot of the funniest hickory nut and clothes-pin dollies. They are fascinating to make, and soon as you get one done you want to do another. The hickory nut dolls we dressed in corn husks, perfectly gorgeous raiment of different shades of brown. I call one of them my Creole queen. You will think I worked hard every minute when you see what I have done, all my own self, but I didn't. Aunt Bess says this life is too short and too full of pleasant things to do ever to keep at one till we are weary, and it seemed like she made us stop each time at the place in our work when we would be crazy to continue. Maybe that was what made us rush at it again so eagerly and gladly when the chance came. She never said 'Stop!' Instead she would say, 'What little girl wants to go with me, or 'Whose duty is it?' And, of course, it was always something we wanted to do. I had a horseback ride nearly every single day and they taught me how to hitch a horse to a buggy and—but that isn't about the party."

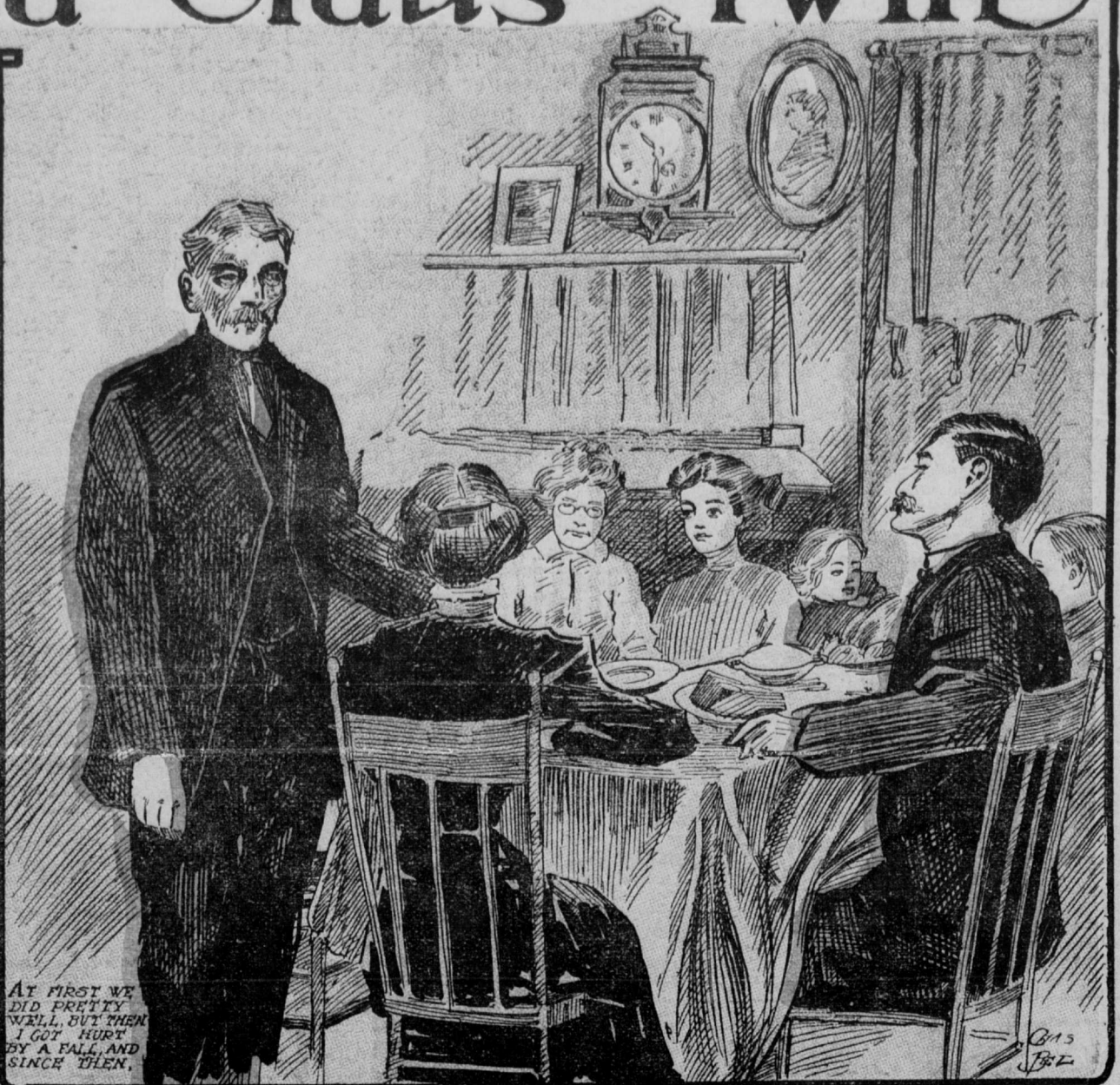
"In my wonder box you will find toys and baskets and racks and ever so many things made out of reeds. The

way that happened, auntie said she would give her copy of 'Little Women,' that she has had since she was a little girl, to the one who would contrive the most unique things out of the reeds, and when you see how many I have you will wonder I didn't win, but Bess did. Then auntie came around to each of us, after giving Bess 'Little Women,' and she said that consolation prizes were certainly due to each of us, so I was to have 'Under the Lilacs' and Olive should have 'Faith Gartney's Girlhood,' and each of the boys had some book off that same shelf in the library. She said she wanted us to see what old fashioned stories were like, and she hoped we would be good to the books, because she had had them so long; that she gave them to us because she loved us so well she wanted to share with us the things she cared for most. This happened, of course, while we were making ready for the party."

"To get to back to the day itself. The big dining table, pulled out just as long as it could be, was set in the middle of the dining room, and in the center was the most beautiful little fir tree, trimmed with the smallest candles we could get, and all the other things—tinsel and trinkets. There wasn't room on that table for any other decorations, because there were so many of us, 11 children and the grownups. And such a feast! They put everything on at once, old time fashion."

"At each end there was a huge platter with a roast turkey, surrounded by little roast turkeys. They were really truly quail, that the boys had gone hunting for the day before. And there was baked ham, cold, and roast venison, hot, and vegetables and pies and cakes and cookies and pickles and jellies, and, in fact, I don't believe I ever saw so much to eat all in sight at one time in my life, but it seemed a kind of jolly way. Auntie said it was the country custom from the time turkey became the national bird, not of freedom but of fun. I wondered what we could do with all that would be left, but after dinner auntie and Bess whisked out a lot of boxes and paper napkins and set us all to packing 'part of the party' (she called it) for all the neighbors, for another rule at this twin Christmas is that you must think only of giving, not of getting. Of course you get, just the same, but auntie kept talking so much about the blessedness of giving that truly, mother, dear, I was sort of surprised when uncle handed me my first package, and then more and more of them. Just wait till you see! There's the loveliest rug made from an Angora kid skin, and Bess knit me slippers that Baby May calls 'mitten shoes,' and Rolph made me a pen rack of some small deer horns, and oh—you just wait."

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"When everything was ready uncle had disappeared and Aunt Bess said, 'I guess he's gone down to the barn; scamper after him and bring him in a hurry,' and we all rushed down to the barn, but he wasn't there, so we all rushed back and told her, and she said, 'Well, we'll not wait; come into the dining room, he is sure to be along.' And she opened the door, and I wish you could have seen that dining room. Of course, sending us to the barn was just a trick, and while we were out they had drawn the shades and lit the candles and started the music box in the other room to playing 'Holy Night,' and by the table of gifts stood uncle in a white suit that glistened and sparkled like frost."

"He began to speak before we had caught our breath. He said he had been appointed a deputy for St. Nicholas, and before distributing the packages he had a message for us from headquarters. Father Christmas was much pleased at our invitation to visit us at a leisure time and regretted it would be impossible to accept. He regarded the occasion as a sort of rehearsal for the real Christmas play and was sure we would all be benefited and would play our parts much better for it. That it had given him pleasure to confer all necessary authority for directing the festivities to Uncle Warren, who he felt sure would prove a capable deputy."

"Then uncle distributed the packages, and it was just like Christmas eve, oh-ing, and ah-ing, and laughing, and then pretty soon we all sat down to dinner, and right in the midst of it came the adventure. A knock came on the kitchen door, and Rolph went out and opened it. Then he came and called Uncle Warren. Uncle must have forgotten how funny his spangled suit would look to anybody that didn't know what was going on. The man sort of mumbled—I couldn't hear what he said—but uncle spoke up so hearty you couldn't help hearing: 'Of course! come right in! We're glad to have you. We're at dinner now.'"

"Aunt Bess seemed to know, the first word uncle spoke, what would be needed, and had a place almost fixed by the time they reached the dining room door."

"She said some welcoming word, but the man didn't seem to hear and began to get whiter and whiter, and finally sort of fell into a chair. Uncle thought he was fainting, but the man said, 'No, no, no, no,' over and over, just like that, and he put his head on his arm and began to cry. It was pretty awful for a minute, I tell you. I never saw a grown man cry or sob before."

"Then auntie said: 'It must be seeing so many children. Have you, perhaps, lost one of your own?'"

"The man lifted up his head, then he stood up, looking just fighting mad, but

auntie said afterwards it was just a fight for self-control."

"Lost one! I've lost four! Oh, fool, fool, fool that I have been, but, God willing, I can find them again. It wasn't so much the sight of the children, but that table of dolls that knocked me silly. I've one little tad, that with one rag doll kept courage in us when we needed it pretty bad. She was just 3 at the time, and whatever she overheard she would later on explain to 'Minnie,' so we just had to keep up a brave front, or hear her telling 'Nen papa scolded, and mamma kyed.'"

"The way I happen to be here is shameful enough, but till this minute I never thought about it that way. I couldn't get work, and we were worse than starving. I thought the little woman and the babies could accept help and no shame to them, if I disappeared, and that their condition would become known through search for me, so I lit out without saying a word, but I mailed a letter before I left town, saying I'd gone to find work and she needn't expect to hear from me till I found it. I've been tramping over four months. I'd get an odd job here and there so I've not had to beg or go hungry. I've slept out under the stars (I like that part of it), and harvest time is coming so maybe I can get something steady, but I'm not much account at anything but my trade. I'm a stonemason, and strong enough, but farm work has to be learned like any other trade, I suppose, before a man is much good, and it seems like every time I touch a tool I break it, but I'm learning; at least, I've learned that I don't know much about it; that helps. But it doesn't look much like a steady job, with a living in it for six, does it? The only one of my babies that knows much about Christmas is Vera. She is 8. At first we did pretty well, but then I got hurt by a fall, and since then, though I've worked hard when I could, we've never been out of debt, not once."

"He stopped with a sort of gasp, and even uncle and Aunt Bess looked kind of helpless, but Baby May spoke up just then, 'We want you come-a-dinner; here's your place; there's mince pie, and pumpkin pie.' That made everybody laugh, and uncle got the man into his place and served him, and everybody began talking at once. I guess there never was exactly such a Christmas party, but it ended beautifully. Uncle knew just the place for the man, and they had it all planned before dinner was over to send for the family and everything. Then, as uncle rose from the table he said, 'Oh, what a blessing—everybody sing,' and began beating time with a knife, and we all joined in singing."

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