MADAME SANTA CLAUS

By W. A. SWEENEY

(By W. A. Sweeney)

In a street behind the Palais Royal in Paris stood the antique and curio shop of Monsieur Gilles, known to collectors all over Paris.

On a certain, cold, foggy Christmas Eve a young man called Georges Vidal was making his way slowly to the establishment of M. Gilles. He was walking slowly because he was going to work.

Georges, indeed, always walked slowly to work. It was not fatigue or old age that caused him to walk slowly, for he was a very young man, but a mental attitude produced by the thought of work. At such moments Georges reflected, longingly, on the manners and customs of fakirs and Buddhists and people like lamas who sat for years in bleak fastnesses doing nothing but ponder.

Anyone meeting Georges going to work and subsequently encountering him on his way to the cinema, say, could be excused for concluding that Georges had an unfortunate twin brother who was suffering from incipient paralysis in the legs and who worked with M. Gilles, the antiquarian.

It was Christmas eve, and though the tinsel and holly glistening and shining in the shop windows made Georges stop many a time and gaze at the display with eyes that also shone and glistened, nevertheless, he was feeling far from festive.

There were two reasons for his being out of harmony with the season, they were a lady called Kiki and the fact that Georges was broke and couldn't buy her a Christmas present.

When Georges, still plunged in a state of gloom, arrived at the antique shop, sighed and entered, M. Gilles, his employer, said:

"Well?"

The young man walked behind the counter and facing an imaginary customer placed one hand on the counter and raised the other in a general sweeping gesture.

"Monsieur," he said, addressing nobody, "we have here the most remarkable collection in Paris—I claim to say in Europe. There is nothing in this establishment, monsieur, which does not bear a history. That inkwell — Moliere used it to write Le Cid. That quite—"

"Stop!" roared M. Gilles. "Moliere didn't write Le Cid, imbecile! Did the reformatory where, undoubtedly, you received your instruction, never tell you of Racine, idiot? A thousand million times have I made you go over this and still you are capable of saying that Blaise Pascal wrote La Fontaine's fables, sacre nom de—"

"That ink-well," Georges corrected himself, "was used by Moliere to write Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme at the command of Louis XIV. That quill-pen it was Balzac's. That snuff-box has felt the touch of the cunning fingers of Cardinal Richelieu. That chair behind you—regard the chair, monsieur—creaked to the weight of Talleyrand and those boots—if monsieur will cast his eye upon the boots—were worn by Andre Chenier before he composed the Marseillaise, and—"

"Stop for the love of heaven!" groaned M. Gilles, throwing his hands skiwards. "Ah, ah, Mon Dieu! Listen to him! Andre Chenier composing the Marseillaise! Animal!" he cried, "will you never learn it? Numbskull, will you drive me to my grave with your ignorance? Am I to suffer your—"

At this point M. Gilles, much against his will, stopped, for a customer had entered the shop. Casting a murderous glance at his assistant, the enraged antiquarian stepped forward to greet the prospective buyer.

"I want to have a look around for a Christmas present," said the customer.

"We have here, monsieur, I assure you," said Gilles, throwing a glance at Georges to see if he were paying attention "the most remarkable collection of antiques and curios in Paris—I claim to say, in Europe. There is nothing in this establishment, monsieur, which has not a history. Regard that inkwell—Moliere used it to write Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme at the command of Louis XIV. That quill pen—it was Balzac's. That snuff-box has felt the touch of the cunning fingers of Cardinal Richelieu. That chair behind you—regard the chair, monsieur—creaked to the weight of Talleyrand, and those boots—" here M. Gilles glanced balefully in the direction of his assistant once more and raised his voice—"those boots were worn by Camille Desmoulins, mons'eur, on the way to the scaffold.

"That cloth of blue and gold was on the table at which Racine wrote Le Cid and Andre Chenier wore that waistcoat and, doubtless, wrote poems in it.

"If monsieur is not precisely a collector perhaps he would put himself to the trouble of stepping to the back salon, where he may find something suitable for a Christmas present. If you will follow me, monsieur . . . ."

As Monsieur Gilles and the customer departed to the back of the establishment Georges took his seat behind the counter. He was not so much occupied in antiquities (as has been already said) this particular morning as in a very modern piece of goods to be found not five minutes' walk away.

The surname of this precious object of art was Duclos—Kiki Duclos, and Georges would have gladly exchanged the boots of Camille Desmoulins and all the waistcoats and entire wardrobes of all the poets of the last 10 centuries for one of her bootlaces or a bit of her garter.

Kiki Duclos lived in a top room in the Place des Petits Peres, where stands the famous church of Our Lady of Victories. Kiki's room was probably the cheapest in the world (it ought to have been), but at the moment she could not pay the rent—and it was Christmas time. She was out of work.

Walking gently to the door Kiki opened it and looked out. The coast was clear. She closed the door softly behind her and went down the steep stone stairs. Nearing the floor below she turned swiftly and made her way back to her room again.

The concierge was mounting laboriously. Kiki sighed. She detested the concierge, for all decent human beings detest concierges. The latter lady entered the room and stood with folded arms regarding Kiki pulling on a pair of worn gloves.

"Eh, bien," said the concierge, "what about the rent?"

Kiki did not reply at once, she continued to fiddle about with her gloves. She did not like the concierge's conversational style; it lacked something. Had the concierge (who went by the totally misleading name of Angele) been talking to a rich prospective client she would have indulged in rhetoric in requesting him to put himself to the suffering and misery of sitting down and thereby enchant her beyond measure.

". . . what about the rent?"

With the occupant of the top room, however, her cherry chit-chat these days was generally confined to "Eh, bien, vous evez des cous pour moi?") Brief, lucid, virile in style.

"I hope to fix up something today," replied Kiki, coldly.

From where do you intend to get the rent? It is six weeks overdue."

Kiki seemed to be having some difficulty with one of her gloves. "I shall make arrangement this afternoon, no doubt," she said, freezingly (and this was not difficult for she had no fire in her room). She would have given her best hat to be in a position to smack this woman across the face and then drop her eight storeys from the window.

Angele laughed harshly. "So you said before," she said. "Well, all I have to say is either you find the rent to-morrow or I get a tenant who will pay." With this womanly and festive message delivered she left the room, slammed the door.

Kiki looked at the closed door for a while and then, ejaculating the word "Crapaud!" walked down the stairs and out.

"And to-morrow's Christmas Day," she murmured, with a sigh.

As she entered the curiosity shop Georges smiled when he saw her.

"Cherie," he said, by way of opening the conversation. "I adore you!"

"I know," she replied, "but the old one—is he in?"

"He is said Georges, "at the back."

"Georges," murmured Kiki next. "I am hungry."

"Mon Dieu," whispered the wretched young man, an expression of anguish sweeping across his face. His hand dived into his trouser pocket and produced two two-franc pieces and a franc. It was all he had, five francs.

Kiki shook her head decisively.

"No, cheri, you are generous, but I am not going to take all you have. Give me two francs. You must have lunch."

"I have a stock of food in my room," protested Georges, lyingly, "that is going bad, I assure you. Take all this; I get paid to-night."

"But your pay is mortgaged."

Finally, after much argument, she was prevailed upon to accept three francs.

"Listen, Coco," said Kiki, "when is he going to give you a rise?"

"He has promised it for next month. So far," went on Georges, gloomily, "about all he gives me is information about the socks worn by Marshal Ney at the storming of the Bastille, or whatever it was he did, intermingled, by way of variety with knowledge of the words used by Rabelais when he wrote Voltaire, or whatever it was he wrote. Now, what did that rattlesnake, your concierge, say to-day, dearest?"

Before Kiki had time to reply, M. Gilles and his customer emerged from the back.

"Well," said Kiki in a loud voice, "I shall probably call again with my fiancee. Thank you for showing me your most interesting collecttion, monsieur. It is a great pity, however, about those ancient candlesticks, but if you haven't got them you haven't got them."

"We would be enchanted if madame would honour us by looking round the premises at any time," said Georges, bowing solemnly from the waist.

"Merci, monsieur," said Kiki, and trying to look as opulent as possible in the cheap little frock she and made herself six months before, she winked gravely at Georges and sailed majestically through the door.

When the other customer had departed, M. Gilles regarded his assistant with an eye filled with legitimate mistrust and doubt.

"What ancient candlesticks?" he demanded.

"Oh, she was looking for some candlesticks used by—by an Egyptian princess," replied Georges, airily. I told her she had better try Egypt."

About eleven o'clock his employer went out to the cafe across the way and Georges fell again to pondering on Kiki's affairs. The position was serious. He would give her half his pay until she found a job—not that that was much—but though he could manage on a meal a day of bread and saucisson the flaw in the plan was that Kiki would refuse blankly to listen to such an arrangement.

And it was Christmas eve and he hadn't even a present to give her and she would probably be put out of her room to-morrow ....

He sighed miserably, and at that moment the shop door opened.

At a glance Georges could tell that the woman who entered with the man was an American and the man an interpreter. He was right. She was a Mrs. Elijah Digby, whose husband, in a place called Gunlever City, Texas, made money by the hundredweight from a system of reselling scrap-iron for twenty-five times the price he paid for it.

After the interpreter explained something to her in English Georges cleared his throat.

"We have here, madam," he said, while the interpreter translated at the end of every sentence, "the most remarkable collection of antiques in Paris—I claim to say in Europe. That ink-well—Moliere used it to write the Marseillaise."

As the interpreter was gazing at him in wild-eyed sort of manner, Georges added hastily, "I mean to write Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme at the command of Louis XIV. That quill pen—Balzac's. Those boots—if madam will kindly cast her eye upon the boots—were worn by Cardinal Richelieu on the way to the scaff—" Georges paused, conscious that something was wrong again. He seemed doomed to trip up on those accursed boots. And then to his relief the interpreter said.

"Madame is interested in this chain, evidently."

The American woman was handling a fine gold chain she had picked up.

"That, madam," began Georges, "belonged to the Baron Haussman, the man who made the Paris of to-day." Luckily she had picked up something of whose history he was sure. Then she laid it down again and his heart sank a little. She would be sure now to lift some object whose history he couldn't, for the life of him, remember . . . .

If only she would take the boots. Or the waistcoat. Whose waistcoat was it, again, anyway? . . . . It was either—

"Madame wishes to know the history of the comb," said the interpreter.

Ah! Saved! Here he was on safe ground. The comb, a little tortoiseshell comb, was something Georges knew all about, for it had come in only the day before. Monsieur Gilles had spent an hour the previous evening telling him all about it and its price.

"That comb, madam," he said, "is one of the latest acquisitions of the house. Of course, madam understands we are in constant touch with the greatest and most renowned collectors of Europe. That comb belonged to the late Empress Eugenie and has recently come from England."

He was about to add something about her long and prosperous reign on the English throne, but thought it wiser not to risk anything.

"It is quite beautiful," said the American woman. She had the vaguest idea of who the Empress Eugenie was, but it sounded all right, anyway, and the stuff in this shop, she had been told was authentic and guaranteed. "And it belonged to the Empress Eugenie, you say. Well, I think that's just a dandy souvenir to show the folks at home. Ask the young man the price of it," she said to the interpreter.

"It is an object of rare value, madam," pronounced Georges, heavily, "and the price is three thousand francs."

The lady had already opened her bag comb bearing a small crown worked in very tiney brilliants—the comb of the Empress Eugenie. He rushed to the three thousand francs.

* * *

That Christmas Eve at lunch time as they walked in the Tuileries Gardens in the cold and fog they talked it over.

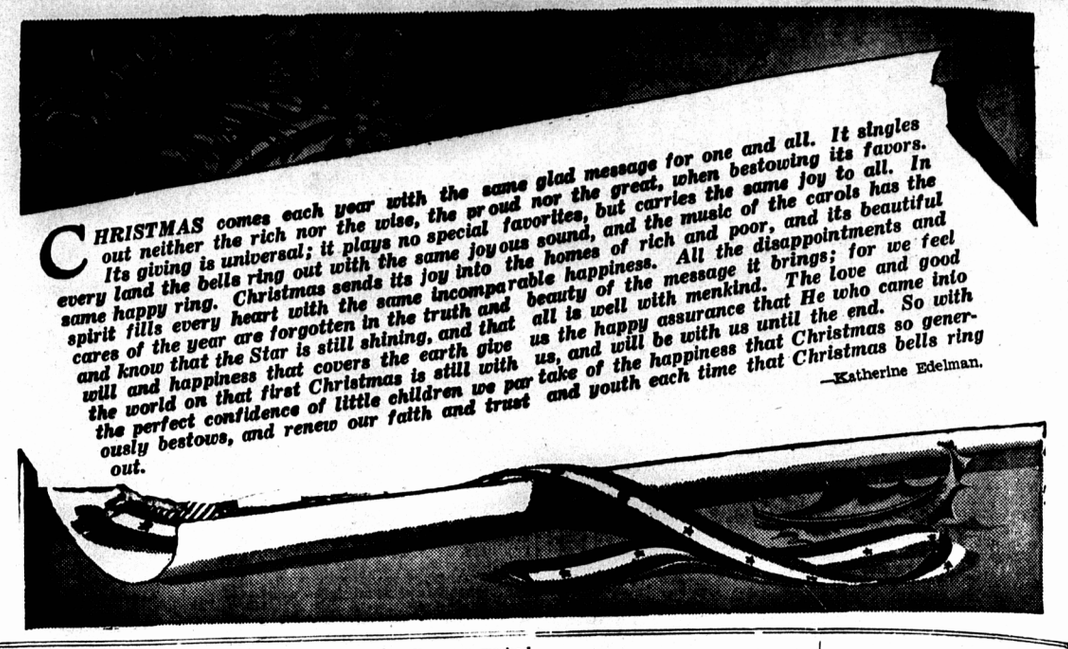
Kiki argued that it could not be helped now anyway and, besides, her comb was nice enough to have belonged to an Empress. And who would know the difference in America?

Moreover, if only the good woman (who must really have been Madame Santa Claus) knew that her three thousand francs were going to enable Kiki to marry her boy whom she loved—oh, so much!—despite his hopeless outlook in the antiques business (at which Georges interrupted by muttering "Not so hopeless after that bit of salesmanship to-day") she would have been glad to let them have it as a Christmas present.

Furthermore, she would put that concierge in her place to-morrow, they would have Christmas dinner in their own particular restaurant in the Rue de la Pompe and she had seen that very day a room to let in the Rue Lecurbe, big enough for two and etc., etc., etc.

Well, you know the kind of thing she would say.

(The End)



CHRISTMAS comes each year with the same glad message for one and all. It singles out neither the rich nor the wise, the proud nor the great, when bestowing its favors. Its giving is universal; it plays no special favorites, but carries the same joy to all. In every land the bells ring out with the same joyous sound, and the music of the carols has the same happy ring. Christmas sends its joy into the homes of rich and poor, and its beautiful spirit fills every heart with the same incomparable happiness. All the disappointments and cares of the year are forgotten in the truth and beauty of the message it brings; for we feel and know that the Star is still shining, and that all is well with menkind. The love and good will and happiness that covers the earth give us the happy assurance that He who came into the world on that first Christmas is still with us, and will be with us until the end. So with the perfect confidence of little children we partake of the happiness that Christmas so generously bestows, and renew our faith and trust and youth each time that Christmas bells ring out.

—Katherine Edelman.

SNOW FLAKES

Silently and steadily
The snow flakes fall to earth,
The sleigh bells jingle
And sweetly mingle
With children's joyous mirth.

Lovingly, caressingly,
The tiny flakes descend,
Small gems of art
Playing their part
Right to the very end.

Slowly and unceasingly
From Heaven itself they come,
So pure and white,
Like angels bright,
From their eternal home.

I love the Christmas-tide and yet,
I notice this, each year I live;
I always like the gifts I get,
But how I love the gifts I give!
(A Thought, Carolyn Wells.)

Evergreens are syonymous with Christmas, but if you would comply with tradition you should not put them in place before Christmas Eve. It should be a part of the children's Christmas duties to bring them in and hang them in the designated places. They should be left in place until January 6 (Tweifth Night,) when every leaf must be burned. Tradition maintains that even one leaf left to wither will encourage witches and spirits.

Holly protects your home from evil spirits. In ancient times Christians hung holly wreaths to invite the spirit of the Christ child to come and spend the holidays with them. The Christmas candle is symbolic of the Star of Bethlehem. Holly is supposed to be particularly lucky for men.

Many gardeners know that there is a male and female species of holly— the male holly has sharp, prickly-edged leaves, and the female variety smooth-edged, glossy leaves. There is an old Christmas tradition, originating in the English Midlands, that if you bring in he-holly, the husband will rule during the coming year. On the other hand, if you select she-holly, your wife will have the upper hand. It is best to play safe and bring in a little of each.

SOLUTIONS

(Continued from page 3, Col 4)

AN ANIMAL TEASER

ANSWER

TIGER, HORSE, WEASEL, BADGER, OTTOR, BEAVER.

OPPOSITES (Illustrated)

1 — 1 MART — TRAM
2 — 2 PINS — SNIP
3 — 3 NUTS — STUN
4 — 4 STOP — POTS

ORANGES

3 for 2d
(Working)

63 oranges at 3 for 2d. = 42 pence.
42 oranges at 3 for 2d. = 2s. 4d.

A FISHY ONE

SOLUTION

CONDEMNED
SOLITAIRE
CANDIDATE
LONGITUDE
CONDENSED
TAILORING
REPRESENT
UNIVERSAL

A POETIC POSER

ANSWER

LIPS

A WORD LANTERN

SOLUTION

ICE
ACHES
CHARADE
CONTINUED
KISSING
MOTOR
IMP
TRAIN
CONSENT
GREETINGS
MERRILY
BREAD
BED

A RE-SHUFFLE

SOLUTION

These are the moves:—
(1 and 5) (8 and 2) (5 and 6) and (2 and 3)

A SEASONABLE ANAGRAM

SOLUTION

"A MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR"

A TRAVEL PROBLEM

ANSWER

BEDALE IS 34 MILES FROM ELLERTON
A-18-B-6-C-20-D-8-E-22-F
TOTAL 74

A RING OF WORDS

SOLUTION

TON — TONE — ONE — NEAR —EAR — ARE — AREA — REAP — APES — PEST — STONE.
Two words: SEPARATE — ONE.

TANGLED TITLES

SOLUTION

1. NICHOLAS NICKLEBY
2. BARNABY RUDGE.
3. DAVID COPPERFIELD.
4. THE PICKWICK PAPERS.
5. A CHRISTMAS CAROL.
6. THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP.

A SEASONABLE MESSAGE

SOLUTION

"THE WORLD'S DESIRE — PEACE ON EARTH TO MEN OF GOOD WILL."

A ROUND ROBIN

SOLUTION

ENOCH, CHEST, STONE, NEIGH, GHOST, STRAP, APPLE, LEACH, CHAIR, IRATE, TEETH, HOLE, (A. Howlock), LEMON, ONION, ONSET, ETHER, ERASE, SEVEN. CAN YOU COUNT? 60

ORNITHOLOGY

SOLUTION

1 CANARY, 2 CROW, 3, WREN, 4, OWL, 5 PARROT, 6 DUCK, 7 HEN, 8 GULL, 9 LARK, 10 SPARROW, 11 PEEWIT, 12 CRANE.

Young Whisker's Christmas Party
Was held in Wainscot Hall.
An invitation hearty
He sent to one and all,
And piebald mice and brown mice,
Albino, black and grey,
And country mice and town mice
Turned up on Christmas Day.

You should have heard the squeakings,
The happy, laughing din,
The merry Christmas greetings,
As all the guests trooped in.
The walls were hung with holly—
Red berries all a-glow—
And oh, the scenes of folly
Beneath the mistletoe!

The Lady Mice came rustling
In all their party best,
In satin, lace and muslin,
In silk and velvet dressed.

You should have seen their Escorts,
The smart, be-whiskered males,
Arrayed in fancy waistcoats,
In dancing pumps . . . *and* tails.

And how they frisked the measure
They heard the fiddlers play . . .
("Now, may I have the pleasure?...
"Yes, Mr. Mouse, you may!")

Old grandmammas and grandpas
Left crutches by the wall
And joined the Barn Dance Scampers
At Whisker's Christmas Ball.

And Supper! What a spread! Ah . . .
What cheeses round and rare!—
Dutch, Gorgonzola, Cheddar,
And Cheshire and Grupere!
Spiced bacon, pork and duckling,
Red apples by the score . . .
("Miss Twinkletoes, some crackling?"
"Well...just one *nibble* more!")

The candle ends had guttered,
The sun was in the sky
Before the first guests muttered
They *ought* to squeak Good-bye.
And how they all thanked Whisker
And chorused one and all,
"We've spent a *gorgeous* Christmas
At Whisker's Christmas Ball!"

For Christmas comes but once a year,
Aye, then shall they be merry.

* * * * *

Though other's purses be more flat,
Why should we pine or grieve at that?
Hang sorrow! care will kill a cat,
And therefore let's be merry.

—Wither.