

UP WITH THE LARK.

BY KATHERINE [SIC] OSLER.

(Continued from page 131.)

MR. AND MRS. SANTA CLAUS "AT HOME."

One morning I received by post the following invitation:—

MR. SKITTLES.

MR. AND MRS. SANTA CLAUS

"AT HOME,"

Dec. 22nd, 18—, 7-11.

Display of Christmas Presents.

North Pole,

Arctic Regions.

[R.S.V.P.]

Don't ask me how the journey to the North Pole was performed, because I don't know; but at seven o'clock on the evening stated I found myself in a fine, large room, with stalls round it draped with "Arctic" muslin, and loaded with all sorts of pretty things, while at one end was a splendid refreshment table—in fact, it looked just like a large bazaar.

I was welcomed with much cordiality by Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus and their son, and I was pleased to see among the guests my recent acquaintances, King and Queen Winter.

[p 139]

More guests soon began to arrive, but I noticed there were no children among them—this was evidently quite a grown-up party. Presently Santa Claus said to me, "Now, Mr. Skittles, I will show you the presents, if you care to see them, before the room gets crowded. First let me explain my method. The parents, grand-parents, aunts, and so on, come and tell me what the children would like, and I take care that the things are supplied. Now you, for instance, do you want anything for anybody?"

"Yes, lots of things," I said, and selected a regular heap of presents, but you need not expect me to tell you what they were, or who they are for. I could not see anything for myself, which rather alarmed me, until Santa Claus told me that people were not allowed to see their own presents beforehand.

"My plan is this," said Santa Claus. "Every year, just before Christmas, I take a census of every child in Christendom, and prepare a present for each one."

"But do you find that a successful plan?" I asked, "for I know that some children get a great number of Christmas presents, and many get none at all."

"Yes," said Santa Claus, sadly, "but that is because there are so many children who have no one to give them presents, and so many whose parents do not care enough about them to do so, hence there are lots of things left over every year for those whose relations and friends think they cannot do too much for them."

“Look here,” he continued, pausing before one of the stalls, “look at all these things that will not be wanted, just because nobody cares for the dear little people for whom I have prepared them.”

“I know,” I said, “but can nothing be done? Nay, much is done, I know, to find and provide for these uncared-for children.”

“Yes, much is done,” answered Santa Claus, “but much more might be done. Take one little way in which children might help. If every child, to whom I shall bring many presents this Christmas, were to give one of those to some child who will have none, it might lead to much besides the added happiness to each child, from the actual receiving and *giving* of the present; but we must talk of this another time.

[p 140]

Come, now, and see more of my presents; look at this motor-car, to go by real steam, and this model switchback with cars big enough for these waxen ladies to ride in. Are they not wonderful? Do you think me very babyish for taking such an interest in children’s toys?”

“Not at all. Which are your favourites, Santa Claus?”

“Well, of course, the mechanical toys are very amusing for the first time or two of working, and a rocking-horse is splendid fun, and for exercise for both boys and girls there is nothing to beat a good old-fashioned ball, if properly used; but if you ask for my prime favourites” —

“Yes?” I said, politely.

“Well, don’t betray me to any up-to-date little girls, as I fear they would despise me for it; but I think my favourites of all are the *dolls*. Now, don’t betray my confidence, for I know dolls are quite out of favour with modern girls, who prefer bicycles, bats, books, animals, or almost anything you like to mention, and are constantly sending word, ‘no more dolls, please,’ or ‘not a doll, please, they’re so stupid, I’m tired of them’; so I send them something else, but keep a soft corner in my own heart for the dolls. Here they are, babies in cradles, brides, court ladies, dancers, Scotch laddies, Welsh women, Italian flower-girls, Girton girls, Punches, wooden Dutch dolls, dolls of all sizes, all sorts, all nations.”

We then passed to the soldiers, and a gay show they made, arranged in regiments, among toy drums, guns, swords, and trumpets.

The next stall was devoted to different representations of dear old Noah’s Ark, varying in value from sixpence to about two guineas. I was inclined to linger here, but fearing to keep Santa Claus too long from his other guests, I passed on humming—

“The animals came in two by two,
Hurrah! Hurrah!” etc.

The book-stall, too, was dreadfully hard to pass, and I will not begin to describe it or I should give too much time to its delights.

As we passed the doll’s-house and doll’s furniture stall, I accidentally knocked down a little piano. I apologised profusely; but Santa Claus, after examining it, said, “Oh,

[p 141]

it’s none the worse; how pleased Violet will be when she gets it! She is a little girl with no brothers and sisters, and, like many other children, she has so many toys it is difficult to think of

new presents to give her. However, one of her great interests is her beautiful doll's-house, and she said to her mother one day, she did 'wish Santa Claus would bring her a piano for the drawing-room.'"

"You must hear and see some very interesting things on your rounds," I said.

"Yes, I could fill volumes of story-books if I had time, but I have to leave that work to others. However, I could tell you a few of my experiences if you would care to hear them."

Of course I said I should, and Santa Claus led me to a stall on which was a curious medley of things, some of them quite shabby, and very different from the new bright toys I had just been admiring.

"Every article on this stall has a history," began Santa Claus, taking in his hand a beautiful and expensive-looking toy. "I keep this in remembrance of a very dear little boy, whose present it was to have been. The year before I took some beautiful things to his home for him and for his brothers and sisters. They had some aunts and uncles, and many little cousins to spend Christmas with them. All was so gay and merry, I thought the children would never be got to bed in time for me to put the things into their stockings. My little favourite kept talking about me, and wondering what I should bring for himself and the others. The next year I heard this toy was what he wanted, so I came as usual on Christmas Eve, but when I drew near how different was the present look of his home. A year ago every window had been lighted up, bright faces could be seen peeping behind the blinds, lively music could be heard. Now all was silent, there were few lights, noiseless figures moved to and fro, and in one room a shaded lamp burnt steadily. With a heavy heart I looked into that room, and saw my little friend lying there with flushed cheeks and bright eyes, while his father and mother watched sorrowfully by the bed. I crept away with my present; *it was not needed*, and I keep it still in remembrance of my little friend."

"That was a story with a bright beginning and a sad ending; now I will tell you one that begins badly, but ends

[p 142]

well," said the old gentleman, taking up a number of funny little figures cut out of writing paper; figures of race-horses, with jockeys that could be put on the horses, figures of dogs, dolls, soldiers, ships, and all wonderfully clever. "These were made by a poor lady for her little child, and in doing them she lost some of her own anxious care. The mother was the wife of a sea-captain, and had hitherto always lived in comfort. Every Christmas until now she had had money to buy presents for her little daughter as Christmas-time drew near. But one year she heard nothing of her husband for many months, and was beginning to be very uneasy, when at last the ship was reported to be lost, and all the crew drowned. The wife, though almost heart-broken, roused herself from her grief for the sake of duty and right. She tried earnestly to find some means of earning her living, but this was no easy task, and poverty soon stared her in face. Not a penny must be spent but such as was actually necessary, and as Christmas drew near she feared her child could have nothing from Santa Claus. She was, however, very clever at cutting out paper figures, and, thinking she might by a set of new ones, give the child some little surprise and amusement on Christmas Day, she put her early to bed on Christmas Eve and then set to work with her scissors and paper, but, remembering an errand she ought to have done, she left her poor lodgings for a short time to do it. The town was busy, and she was kept out longer than she liked, but when she returned, what was her surprise to find that Santa Claus

had been in her absence and filled both of her little daughter's stockings, and that a tempting meal was spread on the table, and going to the door to make enquiries of her landlady, she was taken in a pair of strong arms, and looked up with unspeakable thankfulness into the face of her husband, who had not been drowned after all! In the happiness which followed the poor little paper figures were forgotten, so I carried them away with me, to put among my curiosities."

We now stood before the refreshment table, and Santa Claus insisted on my having some supper, after which I felt obliged to give place to the other people who wanted to talk to him, and after another look round the stalls, I found out Mrs. Santa Claus, wished her good-night and a happy

[p 143]

Christmas, and after thanking her for her delightful entertainment, I returned home.