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BY: MARY GRIGGS VAN VOORHIS

It was an ideal Christmas day. The sun shone brightly but the air was crisp and cold, and snow and ice lay sparkling everywhere. A light wind, the night before, had swept the blue, icebound river clean of scattering snow; and, by two o'clock in the afternoon, the broad bend near Creighton's mill was fairly alive with skaters. The girls in gay caps and scarfs, the boys in sweaters and mackinaws of every conceivable hue, with here and there a plump, matronly figure in a plush coat or a tiny fellow in scarlet, made a picture of life and brilliancy worthy of an artist's finest skill.

Tom Reynolds moved in and out among the happy throng, with swift, easy strokes, his cap on the back of his curly head, and his brown eyes shining with excitement. Now and again, he glanced down with pardonable pride, at the brand new skates that twinkled beneath his feet. "Jolly Ramblers," sure enough "Jolly Ramblers" they were! Ever since Ralph Evans had remarked, with a tantalizing toss of his handsome head, that "no game fellow would try to skate on anything but 'Jolly Ramblers,'" Tom had yearned, with an inexpressible longing, for a pair of these wonderful skates. And now they were his and the ice was fine and the Christmas sun was shining!

Tom was rounding the big bend for the fiftieth time, when he saw, skimming gracefully toward him through the merry crowd, a tall boy in a fur-trimmed coat, his handsome head proudly erect.

"That's Ralph Evans now," said Tom to himself. "Just wait till you see these skates, old boy, and maybe you won't feel so smart!" And with slow, cautious strokes, he made his way through laughing boys and girls to a place just in front of the tall skater, coming toward him down the broad white way. When Ralph was almost upon him, Tom paused and in conspicuous silence, looked down at his shining skates.

"Hullo," said Ralph good naturedly, seizing Tom's arm and swinging around. Then, taking in the situation with a careless glance, he added, "Get a new pair of skates for Christmas?"

"'Jolly Ramblers,'" said Tom impressively, "the best 'Jolly Ramblers' in the market!"

Ralph was a full half head the taller, but, as Tom delivered himself of this speech with his head held high, he felt every inch as tall as the boy before him.

If Ralph was deeply impressed he failed to show it, as he answered carelessly, "Huh, that so? Pretty good little skates they are, the 'Jolly Ramblers!'"

"You said no game fellow would use any other make," said Tom hotly.

"O but that was nearly a year ago," said Ralph. "I got a new pair of skates for Christmas, too," he added, as if it had just occurred to him, "'Club House' skates, something new in the market just this season. Just look at the curve of that skate, will you?" he added, lifting a foot for inspection, "and that clamp that you couldn't shake off if you had to! They're guaranteed for a year, too, and if anything gives out, you get a new pair for nothing. Three and a half, they cost, at Mr. Harrison's hardware store. I gave my 'Jolly Ramblers' to a kid about your size. A mighty good little skate they are!" And, with a long, graceful stroke, Ralph Evans skated away.

And it seemed to Tom Reynolds that all his Christmas joy went skimming away behind him. The sun still shone, the ice still gleamed, the skaters laughed and sang, but Tom moved slowly on, with listless, heavy strokes. The "Jolly Ramblers" still twinkled beneath his feet, but he looked down at them no more. What was the use of "Jolly Ramblers" when Ralph Evans had a pair of "Club House" skates that cost a dollar more, had a graceful curve, and a faultless clamp, and were guaranteed for a year?

It was only four o'clock when Tom slipped his new skates carelessly over his shoulder and started up the bank for home. He was slouching down the main street, head down, hands thrust deep into his pockets, when, on turning a corner, he ran plump into--a full moon! Now I know it is rather unusual for full moons to be walking about the streets by daylight; but that is the only adequate description of the round, freckled face that beamed at Tom from behind a great box, held by two sturdy arms.

"That came pretty near being a collision," said the owner of the full moon, still beaming, as he set down the box and leaned against a building to rest a moment.

"Nobody hurt, I guess," said Tom.

"Been down to the ice?" asked the boy, eagerly. "I could see the skaters from Patton's store. O, I see, you got some new skates for Christmas! Ain't they beauties, now?" And he beamed on the despised "Jolly Ramblers" with his heart in his little blue eyes.

"A pretty good little pair of skates," said Tom, in Ralph's condescending tone.

"Good! Well I should guess yes! And Christmas ice just made o' purpose!" In spite of his ill humor, Tom could not help responding to the warm interest of the shabby boy at his side. He knew him to be Harvey McGinnis, the son of a poor Irish widow, who worked at Patton's department store out of school hours. Looking at the great box with an awakening interest, he remarked, kindly, "What you been doin' with yourself on Christmas day?"

"Want to know, sure enough?" said Harvey, mysteriously, his round face beaming more brightly than ever, "Well, I've been doin' the Santy Claus act down at Patton's store.

"About a week ago," he went on, leaning back easily against the tall building and thrusting his hands down deep into his well worn pockets, "about a week ago, as I was cleaning out the storeroom, I came on three big boxes with broken dolls in 'em. Beauties they were, I kin tell you, the Lady Jane in a blue silk dress, the Lady Clarabel in pink, and the Lady Matilda in shimmerin' white. Nothin' wrong with 'em either only broken rubbers that put their jints out o' whack and set their heads arollin' this way and that. 'They could be fixed in no time, I ses to myself, 'and what a prize they'd be fer the kids to be sure!' For mom and me had racked our brains considerable how we'd scrape together the money for Christmas things for the girls.

"So I went to the boss and I asked him right out what he'd charge me for the three ladies just as they wus, and he ses, 'Jimmie,' he ses (I've told him me name a dozen times, but he allus calls me 'Jimmie'), 'Jimmie,' he ses, 'if you'll come down on Christmas day and help me take down the fixin's and fix up the store for regular trade, I'll give you the dolls fer nothin',' he ses.

"So I explained to the kids that Santy'd be late to our house this year (with so many to see after it wouldn't be strange) and went down to the store early this morning and finished me work and fixed up the ladies es good es new. Would you like to be seein' 'em, now?" he added, turning to the great box with a look of pride.

"Sure, I'd like to see 'em," said Tom.

With careful, almost reverent touch, Harvey untied the string and opened the large box, disclosing three smaller boxes, one above the other. Opening the first box, he revealed a really handsome doll in a blue silk dress, with large dark eyes that opened and shut and dark, curling locks of "real hair."

"This is the Lady Jane," he said, smoothing her gay frock with gentle fingers. "We're goin' to give her to Kitty. Kitty's hair is pretty and curly, but she hates it, 'cause it's red; and she thinks black hair is the prettiest kind in the world. Ain't it funny how all of us will be wantin' what we don't have ourselves?"

Tom did not reply to this bit of philosophy; but he laid a repentant hand on the "Jolly Ramblers" as if he knew he had wronged them in his heart. "That's as handsome a doll as ever I saw and no mistake," he said.

Pleased with this praise, Harvey opened the second box and disclosed the Lady Matilda with fair golden curls and a dress of "shimmerin' white." "The Lady Matilda goes to Josephine," said Harvey. "Josephine has black hair, straight as a string, and won't she laugh, though, to see them fetchin' yellow curls?"

"She surely ought to be glad," said Tom.

The Lady Clarabel was another fair-haired lady in a gown of the brightest pink. "This here beauty's for the baby," said Harvey, his eyes glowing. "She don't care if the hair's black or yellow, but won't that stunnin' dress make her eyes pop out?"

"They'll surely believe in Santy when they see those beauties," said Tom.

"That's just what I was sayin' to mom this morning," said Harvey. "Kitty's had some doubts, (she's almost nine), but when she sees those fine ladies she'll be dead sure mom and I didn't buy 'em. If I had a Santy Claus suit, I'd dress up and hand 'em out myself."

Tom's face lighted with a bright idea. "My brother Bob's got a Santa Claus suit that he used in a show last Christmas," he said. "Say, let me dress up and play Santa for you. The girls would never guess who I was!"

"Wouldn't they stare, though!" said Harvey, delightedly. "But do you think you'd want to take time," he asked apologetically, "and you with a new pair of skates and the ice like this?"

"Of course, I want to if you'll let me," said Tom. "I'll skate down the river and meet you anywhere you say."

"Out in our back yard, then, at seven o'clock," said Harvey.

"All right, I'll be there!" and with head up, and skates clinking, Tom hurried away.

It was a flushed, excited boy who burst into the Reynolds' quiet sitting room a few minutes later, with his skates still hanging on his shoulder and his cap in his hand. "Say, mother," he cried, "can I have Bob's Santa Claus suit this evening, please? I'm going to play Santa Claus for Harvey McGinnis!"

"Play Santa Claus for Harvey McGinnis. What do you mean, child?"

"You know Mrs. McGinnis, mother, that poor woman who lives in the little house by the river. Her husband got killed on the railroad last winter, you know. Well, Harvey, her boy, has fixed up some grand looking dolls for his sisters and he wants me to come out and play Santa tonight," and Tom launched out into a long story about Harvey and his good fortune.

"He must be a splendid boy," said Mrs. Reynolds, heartily, "and I am sure I shall be glad to have you go."

"And another thing, mother," said Tom, hesitating a little, "do you think grandma would care if I spent part of that five dollars she gave me for a pair of skates for Harvey? He hasn't any skates at all, and I know he'd just love to have some!"

"It is generous of you to think of it," said his mother, much pleased, "and you would still have two and a half for that little trip down to grandma's."

"But I'd like to get him some 'Club House' skates," said Tom. "They're a new kind that cost three dollars and a half."

"But I thought you said the 'Jolly Ramblers' were the best skates made?" Mrs. Reynolds looked somewhat hurt as she glanced from Tom to the skates on his shoulder and back to Tom again.

"They are, mother, they're just dandies!" said Tom blushing with shame that he could ever have despised his mother's gift. "But these 'Club House' skates are just the kind for Harvey. You see, Harvey's shoes are old and worn, and these 'Club House' skates have clamps that you can't shake loose if you have to. Then, if anything happens to them before the year's up, you get a new pair free; and Harvey, you know, wouldn't have any money to be fixing skates."

"Well, do as you like," said Mrs. Reynolds, pleased with Tom's eagerness, for such a spell of generosity was something new in her selfish younger son. "But remember, you will have to wait a while for your visit to grandma."

"All right, and thank you, mother," said Tom. "You can buy the skates down at Harrison's and I'm going over and ask Mr. Harrison if he won't open up the store and get a pair for me for a special time like this. I'm most sure he will!" and away he flew.

That evening, at seven, as the moon was rising over the eastern hills, a short, portly Santa Claus stepped out of the dry reeds by the river bank and walked with wonderfully nimble feet, right into the McGinnis' little back yard. As he neared the small back porch, a dark figure rose to greet him, one hand held up in warning, the other holding at arm's length, a bulky grain sack, full to the brim.

"Here's yer pack, Santy," he whispered, gleefully. "They're all waitin' in the front room yonder. I'll slip in the back way, whilst you go round and give a good thump at the front door and mom'll let you in."

Trembling with eagerness, Tom tiptoed round the house, managing to slip an oblong package into the capacious depths of the big sack as he did so. Thump, thump! how his knock reëchoed in the frosty air! The door swung wide, and Mrs. McGinnis' gaunt figure stood before him.

"Good evenin', Santy, come right in," she said.

Tom had always thought what a homely woman Harvey's mother was when he happened to meet her at the grocery, with her thin red hair drawn severely back from her gaunt face, and a black shawl over her head. But as he looked up into her big, kind face, so full of Christmas sunshine, he wondered he could ever have thought her anything but lovely. The room was small and bare, but wonderfully gay with pine and bits of red and green crepe paper, saved from the 'fixins' at the store. And on a large bed in the corner sat the three little girls, Kitty with her bright curls bobbing, Josephine with her black braids sticking straight out, and the baby with tiny blue eyes that twinkled and shone like Harvey's.

The fine speech that Tom had been saying over to himself for the past two hours seemed to vanish into thin air before this excited little audience. But in faltering, stammering tones, which everyone was too excited to notice, he managed to say something about "Merry Christmas" and "good children" and then

proceeded to open the magic sack. "Miss Kitty McGinnis!" he called, in deep, gruff tones. Kitty took the box he offered with shy embarrassment, slowly drew back the lid and gave a cry of amazement and delight. "A doll, O the loveliest doll that ever was!" she cried. Then turning to her brother, she whispered as softly as excitement would permit, "O Harvey, I'm afeard ye paid too much!"

"Aw, go on!" said Harvey, his face more like a full moon than ever. "Don't ye know that Santy kin do whatever he wants to?"

The other dolls were received with raptures, Josephine stroking the golden curls of the Lady Matilda with wondering fingers, and the baby dancing round and round, waving the pink-robed Lady Clarabel above her head.

"Mr. Harvey McGinnis!" came the gruff tones of Santa Claus; and Harvey smiled over to his mother as he drew out a pair of stout cloth gloves. "Mrs. McGinnis!" And that good lady smiled back, as she shook out a dainty white apron with a coarse embroidery ruffle.

"I reckon Santy wanted you to wear that of a Sunday afternoon," said Harvey, awkwardly.

"And I'll be proud to do it!" said his mother.

Little sacks of candy were next produced and everyone settled down to enjoy it, thinking that the bottom of the big sack must be reached, when Santa called out in tones that trembled beneath the gruffness, "Another package for Mr. Harvey McGinnis!"

"Fer me--why--what--" said Harvey, taking the heavy oblong bundle; then, as the sparkling "Club House" skates met his view, his face lit up with a glory that Tom never forgot. The glory lasted but a moment, then he turned a troubled face toward the bulky old saint.

"You never ought to a done it," he said. "These must have cost a lot!"

"Aw, go on," was the reply in a distinctly boyish tone, "don't you know that Santy can do whatever he wants to?" and, with a prodigious bow, old Santa was gone.

A few minutes later, a slender boy with a bundle under his arm, was skating swiftly down the shining river in the moonlight. As he rounded the bend, a tall figure in a fur-trimmed coat came skimming slowly toward him, and a voice called out in Ralph Evans' condescending tones, "Well, how are the 'Jolly Ramblers' doing tonight?"

But the answer, this time, was clear and glad and triumphant. "The best in the world," said Tom, "and isn't this the glorious night for skating?"

THE END

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