

MIRACLE ON
34th STREET

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VALENTINE DAVIES



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IF you searched every old folks' home in the country, you couldn't find anyone who looked more like Santa Claus. He was the living, breathing incarnation of the old gent—white beard, pink cheeks, fat tummy and all—and his name was Kris Kringle, too. Whether this was coincidence or design—a sort of stage name he had assumed—his friends at the Maplewood Home for the Aged never knew. Nor did they know exactly how old he was. His white whiskers made him look a good seventy-five, and yet when he laughed or walked you would swear he wasn't a day over fifty. His eyes were quick and happy, and he had a smile to match. Not only did Kris look precisely like Santa Claus, he firmly believed he *was* that jolly old gentleman.

Dr. Pierce, the physician at Maplewood, found this delusion innocent and harmless. In fact, the old man's kindly shrewdness in all other respects had

won the doctor completely. He was devoted to Kris and was his staunchest defender. He often came to visit his little room at Maplewood. It was littered with toys of all sizes and shapes, half-finished models, and catalogues. Kris spent most of his time there, smoking his pipe and whittling at his toys.

One November morning when Dr. Pierce dropped in, Kris hardly noticed him. He was reading a newspaper advertisement, and his eyes snapped with indignation as he read. A shopping service offered to make all purchases of Christmas gifts well in advance of the holiday and save the subscriber 10% in the bargain. "All you have to do is send us the names and ages of all the people you wish to remember," Kris read aloud. "We will relieve you of the irksome necessity of Christmas shopping." Angrily, Kris threw the paper on the floor.

"Is this what Christmas has degenerated into, Doctor?" he asked. "It's pure commercialism! Is there no true Christmas spirit left in the world?"

Dr. Pierce was afraid not. Christmas had certainly been commercialized. It had become "big business," and the spirit behind it seemed to be lost in the milling crowds that packed all the stores.

Kris was not prepared to believe that, in spite of outward appearances and ads like this. "No, Doctor," he said. "Underneath all the hurry and bustle people

still believe in Santa Claus and all Christmas stands for." He suddenly smiled at the Doctor and asked him what *he* wanted for Christmas.

"I'll tell you what I want," said Pierce half to himself. "An X-ray machine. We've needed one here for years."

"You shall have it," Kris said.

The Doctor smiled. "If I get an X-ray machine, I'll *know* you're Santa Claus."

"You just wait, Doctor—you'll see."

Kris picked up a toy and started to whittle away on it, cheerfully pulling at his pipe. But Dr. Pierce was worried. A frown settled over his pleasant face as he watched Kris working. There was something on his mind and he groped for the right words. Finally he forced himself to come right out with it. "Kris, you'll have to leave Maplewood."

"Why?" asked Kris in astonishment.

Well, the Doctor explained, he had been fighting the Board on this for years, but they had finally overruled him and issued a definite order. In fact, there was nothing more Pierce could do.

Kringle still didn't understand.

"Well, Kris, the laws of the State and Maplewood's charter only allow us to keep old people so long as they are in good physical *and* mental health."

"What's the matter with me?" asked Kris.

"You've told me I'm in better physical shape than 90 per cent of your patients. And mentally, well, I've passed all your tests with flying colors. Look, I still remember that last one."

Kris proceeded to go through the routine of a simple mental test; adding and subtracting, giving synonyms for words, and so forth. There was no doubt about it, he knew all the answers. Mr. Kringle, in spite of his age, was keen, alert, and exceptionally skillful.

"I know," said the Doctor quietly, "but it's this Kris Kringle business. You know—we've discussed it before."

"You mean because I'm Santa Claus?"

The Doctor nodded slowly.

"But there's nothing wrong about that," said Kris. "It happens to be the truth."

"It's not quite that simple," Pierce replied. "Unfortunately, the Board does not believe in Santa Claus, Kris. So technically you're, well, not acceptable."

"So I'm not sane because the Board of Directors doesn't believe in Santa Claus!"

"That's one way of putting it," admitted Dr. Pierce.

Kris paused and reflected for a moment. "What happens next?" he asked.

Pierce explained that Maplewood had an arrangement with the Mount Hope Sanatorium.

"That nut house?" Kris exploded. "Never!"

"But what's your alternative?" Pierce asked him. "Have you got any money?"

Kris examined a small check book which lay on his desk. He had \$34.86.

"Kris, you're pretty old," said Dr. Pierce. "It won't be easy to earn a living. And if you're unsuccessful, you will become a ward of the State. And if you're picked up because you tell somebody you're Santa Claus, you'll be sent to Mount Hope anyway, so why not go direct?"

But Kris was adamant. There was nothing wrong with him and he'd be damned if he was going to an asylum. Dr. Pierce finally conceded that it was really up to Kris. If he left Maplewood, nobody would bother him. That would end the case as far as they were concerned. But what could Kris do? How could he fend for himself? He didn't have much money—where would he stay?

"The zoo keeper in Central Park is a friend of mine. I'll stay with him," Kris answered.

Dr. Pierce urged him to reconsider and accept the transfer philosophically. "You'll have time to think it over. We'll talk about it again," he said as he moved toward the door.

Kris nodded silently, but there was a look of determination on the old man's face. The moment the Doctor had gone, he hauled out a large suitcase from his closet and briskly began to pack.

THE Central Park Zoo was nearly deserted at this early hour. In one of the enclosures a keeper was tidying up in anticipation of a busy day. As the white-bearded figure approached, the keeper greeted him eagerly with a wave of his shovel.

“How are you, Kris?” he called.

“Fine, Jim! Never better,” said the old man heartily. “And how are the boys?”

“Gettin’ fat and lazy,” Jim told him, smiling, “and it’s mostly your fault!”

Kris laughed and gave a whistle. From within the shed a reindeer’s head peered shyly out, then another. The old man called again and held out a handful of carrots. In a few minutes half a dozen reindeer were eating out of his hand.

Jim stood silently by and watched this performance, smiling. Kris sure had an uncanny way with animals! Jim had fed and fussed over these critters

for a dozen years and he couldn't get near them. But even the timid does would eat right out of Kris' hand. Jim had never ceased to be amazed at this. It was a bond between him and Kris.

"Jim, I may need a place to stay. Could you put me up for a while?" asked Kris.

"Why, certainly, Kris, as long as you want. There's plenty of room," Jim assured him.

Fully satisfied that all was well, Kris started on his way again, swinging along with his exuberant, youthful gait. He had no special destination, but he loved being outdoors in this crisp cold air. If only there were snow on the ground, he thought, this would be a perfect day. As the old gentleman approached the western limits of the park, he suddenly stopped and cocked his head to one side, listening. His keen ears had picked up an exciting sound. It was faint but unmistakable. Somewhere in the distance a band was playing *Jingle Bells*. It seemed to be coming from just outside the park. Kris turned and made for the nearest exit.

Central Park West and especially the side streets leading into it were filled with color and confusion as Kris arrived upon the scene. For the Macy Parade was about to start amid indescribable excitement. Sponsored annually by the R. H. Macy Department Store, it was every child's dream of a Christ-

mas Parade, or as near as mere adults could make it. A sharp wind was blowing the huge inflated figures every which way. A Pilgrim Father; Jack the Giant Killer; a Panda; and an enormous ice cream cone careened crazily about, towering two or three stories into the air. The costumed men who held the guide ropes seemed like frantic Lilliputians. Sleepy, Grumpy, Dopey, and the other dwarfs, scampered about and climbed aboard their floats. So did a myriad of other famous characters. A dozen bands in fancy uniforms were loudly tuning up.

The person who seemed to be in charge of the whole business was a handsome, well-dressed, businesslike young woman. She was checking off various people on a list. Kris heard them address her as "Mrs. Walker." Assisting her was a spectacled, bald-headed and very much harried gentleman named Mr. Shellhammer.

The thing which really fascinated Kris was the last float in the Parade—Santa Claus in his sleigh, pulled by eight wooden but very realistic reindeer. The Santa Claus was practicing with his whip in a wild and lurching manner as Kris sauntered up. Kris stood watching as long as he could. Then he stepped up and with a polite "Allow me, sir," took the whip from his hand. With a single expert flip of the wrist he flicked the long whip. The end

crackled smartly one inch over the farthest reindeer's ear.

"You see, it's all in the wrist," he said. But Macy's Santa wasn't impressed. One whiff of his breath told Kris the reason. The man grabbed for a pint bottle, not too well hidden beneath his blanket, taking more and more frequent nips.

Kris was shocked and horrified. The idea of a drunk depicting Santa Claus to thousands of impressionable children infuriated him. He started toward Mrs. Walker to register an outraged protest. But the young lady was suddenly standing next to him, beckoning for the float to move ahead. Before Kris could speak, it suddenly lurched forward and the saturated Santa nearly toppled off the float.

It didn't take Mrs. Walker long to size up the situation. This man was really drunk and she was responsible for all personnel. She fired him on the spot.

"Just think if Mr. Macy had seen him," said Mr. Shellhammer in a horrified tone.

"Just think if Mr. *Gimbel* had seen him!" said Mrs. Walker in even greater horror.

Now the whole parade was ready to start, and they had no Santa Claus. Mrs. Walker and Shellhammer saw Kris at the same time. They pounced upon him together.

"Would you be Santa Claus?" she asked him.

"Have you had any experience?" Mr. Shellhammer inquired. This last question struck the old man's funnybone. His little round body shook with inward chuckles.

"Yes," he said. "A little."

"Then you've got to help us out. Please!"

"Madam," Kris replied with quiet dignity, "I am not in the habit of substituting for spurious Santa Clauses."

Mrs. Walker pleaded and coaxed, but the old man was firm. Not even money seemed to interest him.

"Well, we can't hold the Parade up any longer," said Mr. Shellhammer. "We'll have to go on without a Santa Claus."

Kris looked off toward the crowd of excited children lining the streets. And then he realized that he had no alternative. He couldn't disappoint those eager faces.

"All right," he said, handing his hat and cane to Shellhammer. "Get me the clothes. I'll do it!"

A few minutes later, Kris found himself the leading figure of this great Parade moving down the long avenue, waving and smiling at thousands of children, cracking his whip and having the time of his life.

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WHEN she had finally managed to get the Parade under way, Doris Walker, exhausted and frozen, returned to her apartment on Central Park West. The Parade was passing right by the building, but Doris pushed through the crowd and entered without giving it so much as a glance. She didn't care if she never saw a parade again. All she wanted was a hot bath.

Doris opened the door to her small and sternly modern apartment and called "Susan—Susan!" There was no reply. But Cleo, the colored maid, poked her head out of the kitchen and said that Susan was in "Uncle" Fred's apartment watching the Parade. Doris walked to the living-room window and looked out. From her inside apartment, the only view was directly into the rear windows of the front apartment across the court. Doris rapped loudly on the glass and in a moment Fred appeared at the

opposite window. They waved a greeting and Doris shouted that she'd be over in a little while.

"Uncle" Fred was no relation of Susan's at all. Young and attractive, Fred Gayley was a lawyer with one of the city's oldest law firms. Being neighbors, he and Susan had become great pals and out of this had grown a pleasant and casual friendship between Fred and Doris. It was far more casual than Fred would have liked. But Doris' first marriage had ended in divorce and from her grim avoidance of any reference to it, Fred gathered that it had been a bitter disillusionment. At any rate she seemed determined to avoid further entanglement. She was pleasant and friendly enough to Fred but the real Doris would never emerge from her shell—even for a fleeting minute.

Fred's apartment faced Central Park West and from its windows he and Susan, a rather serious child of six, had a perfect view of the gay and colorful Parade. The sound of band music and cheering children filled the air. But, as usual, Fred was filled with much more childlike wonder and excitement than his little companion. As one of the huge, inflated figures passed the window, Fred said eagerly:

"That's Jack the Giant Killer, isn't it? And look! The great big fellow is the giant!"