



Shown here in a portrait by A.S. Conrad, Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C., the fidgety and whimsical Paulding was also Martin Van Buren's Secretary of the Navy.

THE KNICKERBOCKERS RESCUE SANTA CLAUS

"...from the dawn of recollection, until within a few years since, I lived wholly in the Country, and there spent the happiest days of my life.

*The Dawn of youth serenely smil'd
And jocund danced the hours along;
I roved my native woodlands wild,
And wak'd blithe Echo with my song.*

To be sure my 'douce Amie,' I was no great Singer – but there were no listeners Save Miss Echo and as She repeated my Song no doubt She was pleased with it..."

~ To Sally Hanlon, New York, 3rd Sept. 1802.¹

Now that there's a cloud pending over the authorship of "A Visit from Saint Nicholas" (1823),² who in heaven's name is there left that can possibly save the tarnished name of "Santa?" Never fear! The Knickerbocker authors -- Washington Irving and James Kirke Paulding -- are here to retrieve the day! For "A Visit" was not Mr. Claus' (or as he was better back then "Saint Nicholas")³ earliest debut in popular American culture. That honor goes to Irving's *A History of New-York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty* (1809) written, as you know, under the pseudonymous name and fictional creation Diedrich Knickerbocker (from whence the name originated of the Irving, Paulding, et al. school of New York writers.⁴) Most notably in chapters 5 and 7 of the same work, we find some of the very same attributes of the "jolly old elf" as we find in "A Visit": that is, he rides his sleigh over the rooftops bringing presents to children; smokes a pipe with a wreath of smoke circling his face; stockings are hung by the chimney for him to fill; and he's described as "laying his finger beside his nose and winking hard with one

¹ *The Letters of James Kirke Paulding*, Edited by Ralph M. Aderman, p. 22.

² While there does appear to be some argument to support the claim of Henry Livingston, Jr.'s writing that famous poem, it seems highly improbable that Clement Clarke Moore engaged in premeditated and willful fraud. And the mistaken attribution, granting such to be the case, may have stemmed from a misunderstanding on the part of Moore's children, and that Moore subsequently so acted and went along with it to spare himself, and them, potential embarrassment. Of note, it is said Livingston was a Major in the 3rd New York Regiment led by Colonel James Clinton, and served in Canada in the 1775 campaign; however, I don't find him listed in the *Heitman Register*. His cousin, however, Col. Henry Beekman Livingston (1750-1851) is. The latter's sister Janet, by the way, was the wife of Maj. Gen. Richard Montgomery.

³ The name "Santa Claus" itself is a pardonable mispronunciation of the Dutch "Sinter Klaas." Depending on the story-teller, he makes his visits on Christmas Eve, New Years Eve, or possibly both.

⁴ Including, informally (since they wrote more or less independently of each other), Joseph Rodman Drake, George P. Morris, Nathaniel Parker Willis, Robert Charles Sands, Lydia Maria Child, P. Hamilton Myers; and in the lyric and poetical branch of the same: Henry Livingston, Jr., Fitz-Greene Halleck, Samuel Woodworth, Clement Clarke Moore, Gulian Crommelin Verplanck, Charles Fenno Hoffman, and James Gates Percival.

eye” (ch.7). Whoever it was therefore who wrote “A Visit from Saint Nicholas” indubitably derived no little of his material directly from Irving.

But where then does James Kirke Paulding come in? Paulding (whom Irving addressed and personally referred to as “Jim”) was, in company with Irving and Irving’s brother William⁵, one of the co-authors of the earlier *Salmagundi* (1807-1808) series of humor essays, poems, and sketches. And it is not in the least inconceivable that Irving picked up much of his information on and understanding of the New York Dutch, including their language, from Paulding; the latter himself of that descent⁶ -- including perhaps details on their ideas regarding Saint Nicholas. Moreover, Paulding was a helpful aid to Irving’s public relations. For not all Dutch New Yorkers looked very kindly on his historical parody; including Walt Whitman, for one, who took offense at Irving’s “buffonery.” Paulding then, being a stalwart ally and friend, joined Irving in having comic fun at the expense of the early Dutch settlers, and thus demonstrated that the Dutch New Yorkers, himself being one, need not receive the jest harshly.

It was one of Paulding’s signal traits to decide and express himself as he felt -- with little or no qualm or concern as to who might disapprove. He had all manner of curious ideas on various subjects. Today his pro-slavery views and relentless and overdone tirades against British cultural despotism, and his desire for a solely *sail*-going navy in the growing industrial age (evidently for aesthetic reasons) sound like so much foolishness. Yet the important thing to keep in mind is that Paulding had the feisty courage and determination to think and speak for himself; regardless of whether or not others liked it. And it is in this his remains a most refreshing perspective on life and regenerating voice for the human soul; even if particular opinions of his were, in retrospect, in wild error. As for his pro-slavery stance, he seemed to have been motivated by a desire to remain friendly with southerners, and thus preserve the struggling Union; as well, based on his visits to Virginia,⁷ was persuaded to think that Blacks could be well cared for and happy in their arbitrary station. And further in fairness, be it noted, he does, despite his ridicule of everyone present, including Blacks, depict the latter in his comic novels (such as *Konigsmarkke: The Long Finn*) with indubitable warmth and thinly concealed affection. Sadly however, and somewhat like the country itself, it must be admitted that in later years and as he became more deeply embroiled in national politics, coming to serve as Martin Van Buren’s Secretary of the Navy and subsequently Van Buren’s informal campaign advisor, he grew more intransigent and bigoted; in his letters treating the Black and Red races with unbecoming and paranoid scorn that contrasted sharply with his more open minded youth.

“Yes,” you say, “but what does this all have to do with Santa Claus?” I’m getting to that. In 1836 Paulding published a collection of stories entitled *The Book of Saint Nicholas*; doubtless in part intended as a holiday gift book, in which Father Christmas appears in most of them. True, Paulding is as much indebted to Irving as the author of “A Visit.” And yet *The Book of Saint Nicholas* is no little precious to us for delving into the Saint Nicholas, or Santa, legend, in greater depth; and thereby providing an added dimension to the notions and ideas surrounding the venerated joy and gift bearer. In Irving, Saint Nicholas is a kind of briefly attending guest star; while in “A Visit” he rides swiftly out of sight before you have hardly time to properly make his acquaintance. Paulding, on the other hand, takes us into his very thoughts and haunts, and provides us with diverse scenarios involving different sorts of people; all the more welcome as vehicles by which Santa’s character, circa 1810-1840, can be better grasped and appreciated.

⁵ Paulding, by the bye, was also William Irving’s brother-in-law.

⁶ In keeping with our Continental Army series theme, Paulding’s own Revolutionary War pedigree was nothing to sneeze at. His father, William, was an active commissary who supplied both the Continental Army in New York, under Maj. Gen. James Clinton, and the state militia. His uncle, John was, along with David Williams and Isaac Van Wart, one of the three militiamen who captured André. Paulding mother was Catharine Ogden; member of the famous New Jersey clan of Ogdens who produced several Revolutionary War notables, including Samuel and Matthias Ogden. In addition to his *Life of Washington* (1835), Paulding also wrote *The Old Continental, or The Price of Liberty* (1846), a mostly delectable, if haphazardly organized and episodic, historical novel set in the Revolutionary War Westchester County, and which includes at length accounts of the Jersey prison ship and the notorious Sugar House prison (both mentioned by Ethan Allen in his *Narrative*), as well as numerous other to be expected period places, events, and persons. His *The Dutchman’s Fireside* (1831), another particular favorite of ours we should mention, occurs during the French and Indian War.

⁷ In political temperament and wittily sarcastic manner of pleading, Paulding bears reasonable comparison with John Randolph.

The following then is a tale chosen from this story collection that we fondly hope will bring back to you, who are unfamiliar with the book, sweet and cordial memories you presumably never had.⁸

~***~

CLAAS SCHLASCHENSCHLINGER.

Thrice blessed St. Nicholas! may thy memory and thine honours endure for ever and a day! It is true that certain arch calumniators, such as Romish priests, and the like have claimed thee as a Catholic saint, affirming, with unparalleled insolence, that ever since the pestilent heresy of the illustrious John Calvin, there hath not been so much as a single saint in the Reformed Dutch Church. But beshrew these keepers of fasts, and other abominations, the truth is not, never was, nor ever will be in their mouths, or their hearts! Doth not everybody know that-.the blessed St. Nicholas was of the Reformed Dutch Church, and that the cunning Romanists did incontinently filch him from us to keep their own calendar in countenance? The splutterkins! But I will restrain the outpourings of my wrath, and contenting myself with having proved that the good saint was of the true faith, proceed with my story, which is of undoubted authority, since I had it from a descendant of Claas Schlaschenschlinger himself, who lives in great honour and glory at the Waalboght on Long Island, and is moreover a justice of the peace and deacon of the church.

Nicholas, or, according to the true orthography, Claas Schlaschenschlinger, was of a respectable parentage, being born at Saardam, in our good faderland, where his ancestors had been proprietors of the greatest windmill in all the country round, ever since the period when that bloody tyrant, Philip of Spain, was driven from the Low Countries by the invincible valour of the Dutch, under the good Prince of Orange. It is said in a certain credible tradition, that one of the family had done a good turn to the worshipful St. Nicholas, in secreting him from the persecutions of the Romanists, who now, forsooth, claim him to themselves! and that ever afterwards the saint took special interest and cognizance in their affairs.

While at Saardam, little Claas, who was the youngest of a goodly family of seventeen children, was observed to be a great favourite of St. Nicholas, whose namesake he was, who always brought him a cake or two extra at his Christmas visits, and otherwise distinguished him above his brothers and sisters; whereat they were not a little jealous, and did sometimes slyly abstract some of the little rogue's benefactions, converting them to their own comfort and recreation.

In the process of time, Claas grew to be a stout lad, and withal a little wild, as he did sometimes neglect the great windmill, the which he had charge of in turn with the rest of his brothers, whereby it more than once came to serious damage. Upon these occasions, the worthy father, who had a reverend care of the morals of his children, was accustomed to give him the bastinado; but as Claas wore a competent outfit of breeches, he did not much mind it, not he; only it made him a little angry, for he was a boy of great spirit. About the time, I say, that Claas had arrived at the years of two or three and twenty, and was considered a stout boy for his age, there was great talk of settling a colony at the Manhadoes, which the famous Heinrick Hudson had discovered long years before. Many people of good name and substance were preparing to emigrate there, seeing it was described as a land flowing with milk and honey -- that is to say, abounding in shad and herrings -- and affording mighty bargains of beaver and other skins.

Now Claas began to cherish an earnest longing to visit these parts, for he was tired of tending the windmill, and besides he had a natural love for marshes and creeks, and being a shrewd lad, concluded that there must be plenty of these where beavers and such like abounded. But his father and the Vrouw Schlaschenschlinger did eschew and anathematize this notion of Claas's, and placed him apprentice to an eminent shoemaker, to learn that useful art and mystery. Claas considered it derogatory to the son of the proprietor of the greatest windmill in all Saardam to carry the lapstone, and wanted to be a doctor, a lawyer, or some such thing. But his father told him in so many words, that there were more lawyers than clients in

⁸ Of perhaps further and curious note, the famous Castle of Otranto, as Walpole himself relates it, is tellingly located next store to a church of *St. Nicholas!* The latent and possibly suspicious meaning of this is made more evident when we learn that his celebrated and fantastic gothic history first saw publication in 1764 -- on *December 24th!*

the town already, and that a good cobbler saved more people from being sick, than all the doctors cured. So Claas became apprentice to the shoemaking business, and served out his time, after which he got to be his own master, and determined to put in practice his design of visiting the Manhadoes, of which he had never lost sight.

After much ado, Mynheer Schlaschenschlinger, and the good vrouw, consented unwillingly to let him follow the bent of his inclinations, and accordingly all things were got ready for his departure for the New World, in company with a party which was going out Under that renowned Lord Michael Paauw, who was proceeding to settle his domain of Pavonia, which lieth directly opposite to NewAmsterdam. Mynheer Schlaschenschlinger fitted out his son nobly, and becoming the owner of the largest windmill in all Saardam, equipping him with awls, and knives, and wax, and thread, together with a bench, and a goodly lapstone, considering in his own mind that the great scarcity of stones in Holland might, peradventure, extend to the Manhadoes. Now all being prepared, it was settled that Claas should depart on the next day but one, the next being St. Nicholas his day, and a great festival among the people of Holland.

According to custom, ever since the days of the blessed saint, they had a plentiful supper of waffles and chocolate -- that pestilent beverage tea not having yet come into fashion -- and sat up talking of Claas, his adventures, and what he would see and hear in the Manhadoes, till it was almost nine o'clock. Upon this, mynheer ordered them all to bed, being scandalized at such unseasonable hours. In the morning when Claas got up, and went to put on his stocking, he felt something hard at the toe, and turning it inside out, there fell on the floor the bowl of a pipe of the genuine Meershaum, which seemed to have been used beyond memory, since its polish was a thousand times more soft and delightsome than ivory or tortoise shell, and its lustre past all price. Would that the blessed Saint would bestow such a one on me!

Claas was delighted; he kissed it as if he had been an idolatrous Romanist -- which, by the blessing of Saint Nicholas was not -- and bestowing it in the bottom of his strong oaken chest, resolved, like unto a prudent Dutchman, never to use it, for fear of accidents. In a few hours afterwards, he parted from his parents, his family, and his home; his father gave him a history of the bloody wars and persecutions of Philip of Spain; a small purse of guilders, and abundance of advice for the government of his future life; but his mother gave him what was more precious than all these -- her tears, her blessing, and a little Dutch Bible with silver clasps. Bibles were not so plenty then as they are now, and were considered as the greatest treasures of the household. His brothers and sisters took an affectionate farewell of him, and asked his pardon for stealing his Newyear cookies. So Claas kissed his mother, promising, if it pleased Heaven, to send her stores of herrings and beaver. skins, whereat she was marvellously comforted; and he went on his way, as it were sorrowfully rejoicing.

I shall pass over the journey, and the voyage to the Manhadoes, saving the relation of a curious matter that occurred after the ship had been about ninety days at sea, and they were supposed to be well on their way to the port of New-Amsterdam. It came into the heads of the passengers to while away the time as they were lying to one day with the sails all furled, except one or two, which I name not, for a special reason, contrary to the practice of most writers -- namely, because I am ignorant thereof -- having the sails thus furled, I say, on account of certain suspicious-looking clouds, the which the captain, who kept a bright lookout day and night, had seen hovering overhead, with no good intentions, it came into the noodles of divers of the passengers to pass the time by opening their chests, and comparing their respective outfits, for they were an honest set of people, and not afraid of being robbed.

When Claas showed his lapstone, most of the company, on being told the reasons for bringing it such a long distance, held up their hands, and admired the foresight of his father, considering him an exceeding prudent and wise man to think of such matters. Some of them wanted to buy it on speculation, but Claas was too well acquainted with its value to set a price on it. While they were thus chaffering, an old sailor, who had accompanied the renowned Heinrick Hudson as cabin boy, in his first voyage to the Manhadoes, happening to come by and hear them, swore a great Dutch oath, and called Claas a splutterkin for bringing stones all the way from Holland, saying that there were enough at the Manhadoes to furnish lapstones for the whole universe. Whereupon Claas thought to himself, "What a fine country it must be, where stones are so plenty."

In process of time, as all things, and especially voyagings by sea, have an end, the vessel came in sight of the highlands of Neversink -- vulgarly called by would-be learned writers, Navesink -- and Claas and the rest, who had never seen such vast mountains before, did think that it was a wall, built up from the earth to the sky, and that there was no world beyond.

Favoured by a fine south wind, whose balmy freshness had awakened the young spring into early life and beauty, they shot like an arrow from a bow through the Narrows, and sailing along the heights of Staaten Island, came in sight of the illustrious city of New-Amsterdam, which, though at that period containing but a few hundred people, I shall venture to predict, in some future time, may actually number its tens of thousands.

Truly it was a beautiful city, and a beautiful sight as might be seen of a spring morning. As they came through Buttermilk Channel, they beheld with delighted astonishment the fort, the church, the governor's house, the great dock jutting out into the salt river, the Stadt Huys, the rondeel, and a goodly assemblage of houses, with the gable ends to the street, as before the villainous introduction of new fashions, and at the extremity of the city, the gate and wall, from whence Wall-street deriveth its name. But what above all gloriously delighted Claas, was a great windmill, towering in the air, and spreading its vast wings on the rising ground along the Broadway, between Liberty and Courtlandt streets, the which reminded him of home and his parents. The prospect rejoiced them all mightily, for they thought to themselves, "We have come to a little Holland far over the sea,"

So far as I know, it was somewhere about the year of our Lord one thousand six hundred and sixty, or thereabout, and in the month of May, that Claas landed in the New World; but of the precise day of the month I cannot be certain, seeing what confusion of dates hath been caused by that idolatrous device of Pope Gregory, called the New Style, whereby events that really happened in one year are falsely put down to another, by which means history becomes naught. The first thing he thought of, was to provide himself a home, for be it known it was not then the fashion to live in taverns and boarding houses, and the man who thus demeaned himself was considered no better than he should be; nobody would trust or employ him, and he might consider it a special bounty of the good St. Nicholas, if he escaped a ride on the wooden horse provided for the punishment of delinquents. So Claas looked out for a pleasant place whereon to pitch his tent. As he walked forth for this end, his bowels yearned exceedingly for a lot on the Broad-street, through which ran a delightful creek, crooked like unto a ram's horn, the sides of which were low, and, as it were, juicy with the salt water which did sometimes overflow them at spring tides, and the full of the moon. More especially the ferry house, with its never to be forgotten weathercock, did incite him sorely to come and set himself down thereabout. But he was deterred by the high price of lots in that favoured region, seeing they asked him as much as five guilders for the one at the corner of the Broad and Wall streets, a most unheard-of price, and not to be thought of by a prudent man like Claas Schlaschenschlinger.

So he sought about elsewhere, though he often looked wistfully at the fair meads of the Broadstreet, and nothing deterred him from ruining himself by gratifying his longings, but the truly excellent expedient of counting his money, which I recommend to all honest people, before they make a bargain. But though he could not settle in Broadstreet, he resolved in his mind to get as nigh as possible, and finding a lot with a little puddle of brackish water in it large enough for a goose pond, nigh unto the wall and gate of the city, and just at the head of what hath lately been called Newstreet -- then the region of unsettled lands -- he procured a grant thereof from the schout, scheepens, and burgomasters, who then ruled the city, for five stivers, being the amount of fees for writing and recording the deed by the Geheim Schryver.

Having built himself a comfortable house, with a little stoop to it, he purchased a pair of geese, or, to be correct and particular, as becometh a conscientious historian, a goose and gander, that he might recreate himself with their gambols in the salt puddle, and quietly sat himself down to the making and mending of shoes. In this he prospered at first indifferently well, and thereafter; mightily, when the people found that he made shoes, some of which were reported never to wear out; but this was, as it were, but a sort of figure of speech to express their excellent qualities.

Every Sunday, after church, in pleasant weather, Claas, instead of putting off his Sunday suit, as was the wont of the times, used to go and take a walk in the Ladies' Valley, since called Maiden Lane, for everything has changed under those arch intruders, the English, who, I believe, in their hearts, are half Papists. This valley was an exceeding cool, retired, and pleasant place, being bordered by a wood, in the which was plenty of pinkster blossoms in the season. Being a likely young fellow, and dressed in a goodly array of breeches and what not, he was much noticed, and many a little damsel cast a sheep's eye upon him as he sat smoking his pipe of a summer afternoon under the shade of the trees which grew plentifully in that quarter. I don't know how it was, but so it happened, that in process of time he made acquaintance with one of these, a buxom creature of rare and unmatched lineaments and dimensions, insomuch that she was considered the beauty of New-Amsterdam, and had refused even the burgomaster, Barendt Roeloffsen, who was taxed three guilders, being the richest man of the city. But Aintjie was not to be bought with gold; she loved Claas because he was a solid young fellow, who plucked for her the most beautiful pinkster blossoms, and was the most pleasant companion in the world, for a ramble in the Ladies' Valley.

Report says, but I believe there was no great truth in the story, that they sometimes Queested*⁹ together, but of that I profess myself doubtful. Certain it is, however, that in good time they were married, to the great content of both, and the great discontent of the burgomaster, Barendt Roeloffsen.

In those days young people did not marry to set up a coach, live in fine houses filled with rich furniture, for which they had no use, and become bankrupt in a few years. They began in a small way, and increased their comforts with their means. It was thus with Claas and his wife, who were always employed in some useful business, and never ran into extravagance, except it may be on holydays. In particular Claas always feasted lustily on St. Nicholas his day, because, he was his patron saint, and he remembered his kindness in faderland.

Thus they went on prospering as folks always do that are industrious and prudent, every year laying up money, and every year increasing their family; for be it known, those who are of the true Dutch blood, always apportion the number of children to the means of providing for them. They never are caught having children for other people to take care of. But be this as it may, about this time began the mischievous and oppressive practice of improving the city, draining the marshes, cutting down hills, and straightening streets, which hath since grown to great enormity in this city, insomuch that a man may be said to be actually impoverished by his property.

Barendt Roeloffsen, who was at the head of the reformers, having a great estate in vacant lands, which he wanted to make productive at the expense of his neighbours -- Barendt Roeloffsen, I say, bestirred himself lustily to bring about what he called, in outlandish English, the era of improvement, and forthwith looked around to see where he should begin. I have always believed, and so did the people at that time, that Barendt singled out Claas his goose pond for the first experiment, being thereunto impelled by an old grudge against Claas, on account of his having cut him out with the damsel he wished to marry, as before related.

But, however, Barendt Roeloffsen, who bore a great sway among the burgomasters, on account of his riches, got a law passed, by hook or by crook, for draining Claas his pond, at his own expense, making him pay at the same time for the rise in the value of his property, of which they did not permit him to be the judge, but took upon themselves to say what it was. The ancestors of Claas had fought valiantly against Philip of Spain, in defence of their religion and liberty, and he had kept up his detestation of oppression by frequently reading the account of the cruelties committed in the Low Countries by the Spaniard, in the book which his father had given him on his departure from home. Besides, he had a great admiration, I might almost say affection, for his goose pond, as is becoming in every true Dutchman. In it he was accustomed to see, with singular delight, his geese, now increased to a goodly flock, sailing about majestically, flapping their wings, dipping their necks into the water, and making a noise exceedingly tuneful and melodious. Here, too, his little children were wont to paddle in the summer days, up to their knees in the water, to their great contentment as well as recreation, thereby strengthening themselves exceedingly. Such being the

⁹ [Footnote in the original] * This word is untranslatable.

case, Claas resisted the behest of the burgomasters, declaring that he would appeal to the laws for redress if they persisted in trespassing on his premises. But what can a man get by the law at any time, much less when the defendant, as in this case, was judge as well as a party in the business? After losing a vast deal of time, which was as money to him, and spending a good portion of what he had saved for his children, Claas was at length cast in his suit, and the downfall of his goose pond irrevocably decreed.

It was a long time before he recovered this blow, and when he did, Fortune, as if determined to persevere in her ill offices, sent a blacksmith from Holland, who brought over with him the new and diabolical invention of hobnails, the which he so strenuously recommended to the foolish people, who are prone to run after novelties, that they, one and all, had their shoes stuck full of nails, whereby they did clatter about the streets like unto a horse newly shod. As might be expected, the business of shoemaking decreased mightily upon this, insomuch that the shoes might be said to last for ever; and I myself have seen a pair that have descended through three generations, the nails of which shone like unto silver sixpences. Some people supposed this was a plot of Barendt Roeloffsen, to complete the ruin of poor Claas; but whether it was or not, it is certain that such was the falling off in his trade, on account of the pestilent introduction of hobnails, that, at the end of the year, Claas found that he had gone down hill at a great rate. The next year it was still worse, and thus, in the course of a few more, from bad to worse, he at last found himself without the means of support for himself, his wife, and his little children. But what shows the goodness of Providence, it is worthy of record, that from this time his family, miraculously as it were, ceased to increase.

Neither begging nor running in debt without the prospect of paying was in fashion in those days, nor were there any societies to invite people to idleness and improvidence by the certainty of being relieved from their consequences without the trouble of asking. Claas tried what labouring day and night would do, but there was no use in making shoes when there was nobody to buy them. His good wife tried the magic of saving; but where there is nothing left to save, economy is to little purpose. He tried to get into some other business, but the wrath of Barendt Roeloffsen was upon him, and the whole influence of the burgomasters stood in his way on account of the opposition he had made to the march of improvement. He then offered his house and lot for sale; but here again his old enemy Barendt put a spoke in his wheel, going about among the people and insinuating that as Claas had paid nothing for his lot, the title was good for nothing. So one by one he tried all ways to keep want from his door; but it came at last, and one Newyear's eve, in the year of our Lord -- I don't know what, the family was hovering round a miserable fire, not only without the customary means of enjoying the festivity of the season, but destitute of the very necessaries of life.

The evening was cold and raw, and the heavy moanings of a keen northeast wind announced the approach of a snow storm. The little children cowered over the almost expiring embers, shivering with cold and hunger; the old cat lay half buried in the ashes to keep herself warm; and the poor father and mother now looked at the little flock of ragged -- no, not ragged -- the mother took care of that; and industry can always ward off rags and dirt. But though not ragged or dirty, they were miserably clad and worse fed; and as the parents looked first at them and then at each other, the tears gathered in their eyes until they ran over.

“We must sell the silver clasps of the Bible my mother gave me, wife,” said Claas, at last.

“The Goodness forbid,” said she; “we should never prosper after it.”

“We can't prosper worse than we do now, Aintjie.”

“You had better sell the little book about the murders of the Spaniards, that you sometimes read to me.”

“It has no silver clasps, and will bring nothing,” replied Claas, despondingly, covering his face with his hand, and seeming to think for a few moments. All at once he withdrew his hand, and cried,

“The pipe! the meershaum pipe! it is worth a hundred guilders!” and he ran to the place where he had kept it so carefully that he never used it once in the whole time he had it in his possession.

He looked at it wistfully, and it brought to his mind the time he found it in his stocking. He thought of his parents, his brothers, his sisters, and old faderland, and wished he had never parted from them to visit the New World. His wife saw what was passing in his heart, and said, "Never mind, dear Claas, with these hundred guilders we shall get on again by the blessing of the good St. Nicholas, whose namesake you are."

Claas shook his head, and looked at the meerschaum, which he could not bear to part with, because, somehow or other, he could not help thinking it was the gift of St. Nicholas. The wind now freshened, and moaned more loudly than ever, and the snow began to come in through the crevices of the door and windows. The cold increased apace, and the last spark of fire was expiring in the chimney. There was darkness without and within, for the candle, the last they had, was just going out.

Claas, without knowing what he was doing, rubbed the pipe against his sleeve, as it were mechanically.

He had scarcely commenced rubbing, when the door suddenly opened, and without more ado, a little man, with a right ruddy good-humoured face, as round as an apple, and a cocked beaver, white with snow, walked in, without so much as saying, "By your leave," and sitting himself by the side of the yffrouw [sic], began to blow at the fire, and make as if he was warming his fingers, though there was no fire there, for that matter.

Now Claas was a good-natured fellow, and though he had nothing to give, except a welcome, which is always in the power of everybody, yet he wished to himself he had more fire to warm people's fingers. After a few moments, the little man rubbed his hands together, and looking around him, with a good-humoured smile, said, "Mynheer Schlaschenschlinger, methinks it might not be amiss to replenish this fire a little; 'tis a bitter cold night, and my fingers are almost frostbitten."

"Alack, mynheer," quoth Claas, "I would, with all my heart, but I have nothing wherewith to warm myself and my children, unless I set fire to my own house. I am sorry I cannot entertain thee better."

Upon this the little man broke the cane with which he walked into two pieces, which he threw in the chimney, and thereupon the fire began to blaze so cheerfully that they could see their shadows on the wall, and the old cat jumped out of the ashes, with her coat well singed, which made the little jolly fellow laugh heartily.

The sticks burnt and burnt, without going out, and they were soon all as warm and comfortable as could be. Then the little man said,

"Friend Claas, methinks it would not be much amiss if the good vrouw here would bestir herself to get something to eat. I have had no dinner today, and come hither on purpose to make merry with thee. Knowest thou not that this is Newyear's eve?"

"Alack!" replied Claas, "I know it full well; but we have not wherewithal to keep away hunger, much less to make merry with. Thou art welcome to all we have, and that is nothing."

"Come, come, Friend Claas, thou art a prudent man, I know, but I never thought thou wert stingy before. Bestir thyself, good Aintjie, and see what thou canst find in that cupboard. I warrant there is plenty of good fare in it."

The worthy yffrouw looked rather foolish at this proposal, for she knew she would find nothing there if she went; but the little man threatened her, in a good-humoured way, to break the long pipe he carried stuck in his cocked hat, over her nightcap, if she didn't do as he bid her. So she went to the cupboard, resolved to bring him out the empty pewter dishes, to show they had nothing to give him. But when she opened the cupboard, she started back, and cried out aloud, so that Claas ran to see what was the matter; and what was his astonishment to find the cupboard full of all sorts of good things for a notable jollification.

“Aha!” cried the merry little man, “you’re caught at last. I knew thou hadst plenty to entertain a stranger withal; but I suppose thou wantedst to keep it all to thyself. Come, come! bestir thyself, Aintjie, for I am as hungry as a schoolboy.”

Aintjie did as she was bid, wondering all the time who this familiar little man could be; for the city was not so big, but that she knew by sight everybody that lived in it, and she was sure she had never seen him before.

In a short time there was a glorious array of good things set out before them, and they proceeded to enjoy themselves right lustily in keeping of the merry Newyear’s eve. The little man cracked his jokes, patted little Nicholas -- Claas, his youngest son, who was called after his father -- on the head; chucked Aintjie under the chin; said he was glad she did not wed the splutterkin Barendt Roeloffsen, and set them so good an example, that they all got as merry as crickets.

By-and-by the little man inquired of Claas concerning his affairs, and he gave him an account of his early prosperity, and how he had declined, in spite of all he could do, into poverty and want; so that he had nothing left but his wife, his children, his Dutch Bible, his history of the Low Country wars, and his meershaum pipe.

“Aha!” quoth the little man, “you’ve kept that, hey! Let me see it.”

Claas gave it to him, while the tears came into his eyes, although he was so merry, to think that he must part with it on the morrow. It was the pride of his heart, and he set too great a value on it to make any use of it whatever.

The little man took the pipe, and looking at it, said, as if to himself,

“Yes; here it is! the very identical meershaum out of which the great. Calvin used to smoke. Thou hast done well, Friend Claas, to preserve it; and thou must keep it as the apple of thine eye all thy life, and give it as an inheritance to thy children.”

“Alack!” cried Aintjie, “he must sell it to-morrow, or we shall want wherewithal for a dinner.”

“Yea,” said Claas, “of a truth it must go tomorrow!”

“Be quiet, splutterkin!” cried the little man, merrily; “give me some more of that spiced beverage, for I am as thirsty as a dry sponge. Come, let us drink to the Newyear, for it will be here in a few minutes.”

So they drank a cup to the jolly Newyear, and at that moment the little boys and negroes, who didn’t mind the snow any more than a miller does flour, began to fire their cannon at a great rate; whereupon the little man jumped up, and cried out,

“My time is come! I must be off, for I have a great many visits to pay before sunrise.”

Then he kissed the yffrouw with a hearty smack, just as doth the illustrious Rip Van Dam, on the like occasions; patted little Nicholas on the head, and gave him his blessing; after which he did incontinently leap up the chimney and disappear. Then they knew it was the good St. Nicholas, and rejoiced mightily in the visit he had paid them, looking upon it as an earnest that their troubles were over.

The next morning the prudent housewife, according to custom, got up before the dawn of day to put her house in order, and when she came to sweep the floor, was surprised to hear something jingle just like money. Then opening the embers, the sticks which the good saint had thrown upon the fire again blazed out, and she descried a large purse, which, on examination, was found filled with golden ducats. Whereupon she called out to Claas, and they examined the purse, and found fastened to it a paper bearing this legend: --

“THE GIFT OF SAINT NICHOLAS.”

While they stood in joyful wonder, they heard a great knocking and confusion of tongues outside the door, and the people calling aloud upon Claas Schlaschenschlinger to come forth; whereupon he went forth, and, to his great astonishment, found that his little wooden house had disappeared in the night, and in its place was standing a gorgeous and magnificent mansion of Dutch bricks, two stories high, with three windows in front, all of a different size; and a door cut right out of the corner, just as it is seen at this blessed day.

The neighbours wondered much, and it was whispered among them, that the fiend had helped Claas to this great domicil[e], which was one of the biggest in the city, and almost equal to that of Barendt Roeloffsen. But when Claas told them of the visit of St. Nicholas, and showed them the purse of golden ducats, with the legend upon it, they thought better of it, and contented themselves with envying him heartily” his good fortune.

I shall not relate how Claas prospered ever afterwards, in spite of his enemies the burgomasters, who, at last, were obliged to admit him as one of their number; or how little Aintjie held up her head among the highest; or how Claas ever after eschewed the lapstone, and, like a worshipful magistrate, took to bettering the condition of mankind, till at length he died, and was gathered to his forefathers, full of years and honours.

All I shall say is, that the great house in Newstreet continued in the family for several generations, until a degenerate descendant of Claas, being thereunto incited by the d--l, did sell it to another degenerate splutterkin, who essayed to pull it down. But mark what followed. No sooner had the workmen laid hands on it, than the brickbats began to fly about at such a rate, that they all came away faster than they went; some with broken heads, and others with broken bones, and not one could ever be persuaded to meddle with it afterwards.

And let this be a warning to any one who shall attempt to lay their sacrilegious hands on the Last of The Dutch Houses, the gift of St. Nicholas, for whoever does so, may calculate, to a certainty, on getting well peppered with brickbats, I can tell them.

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For the complete *The Book of Saint Nicholas* (1836), see:  
<http://www.archive.org/details/bookofsaintnich00paulrich>

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