

The Life Story Of Santa Claus

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"But Stephen, he's dead," said his mother. "He can't come"

"Of course he'll come," said a determined Stephen, "We must keep the fire burning for him."

So that night, all the doors were shut and the fires put out, apart from Stephen's house, where a lonely stocking hung beside a cheerful blaze. Just after midnight, Holly woke up. "I thought I heard sleigh bells and reindeer hooves," she said sleepily. "It must have been a dream" and she turned over and drifted back to sleep. Christmas morning dawned bright and clear, the village silent under a blanket of snow. Suddenly the tranquillity was shattered by a wild shout as the door of one cottage burst open. "He's been!" shrieked Stephen.

"He's been. Look at my stocking! It's filled just the same as last Christmas and there's a big new sled by our fireplace. I knew it. Look everybody, Wake up, wake up! Nicholas has been."

Men, women, and children jumped from their beds to see what all the noise was about, and the children leaped right into the largest piles of toys they had ever seen. They were all around the fireplaces, on the tables and chairs, and even beside their beds. The entire village opened its doors and poured out into the streets, the children dragging handsome new sleds laden with the most beautiful toys the village had ever seen.

"Did you see this? Look at my boat."

"He must have come down the chimney when he found the door locked. There was some soot on the floor."

The Storm

Long, long ago, in a tiny village on the shores of the Baltic sea, a fisherman and his wife lived in a simple stone cottage with their two children, Nicholas a boy of five and his baby sister Kathy.

One afternoon, as Nicholas sat by the window carving a small piece of driftwood, he watched the fury of the storm clouds building. In the distance he could hear the roar of the waves breaking on the shore and his thoughts were for his father who must be being tossed about in his frail fishing boat. It was not long before Nicholas could no longer hear the waves above the rattle of wild hailstones hammering at the window panes. It was growing dark as Nicholas asked in a concerned voice, "Mother, do you think father will be safe out there?" He received no answer. His mother was too busy looking after baby Kathy who was lying in her cot tossing feverishly. Eventually she rose from beside the cot and with a worried look on her face confided in Nicholas.

"Your sister's fever is becoming worse and I can't wait for your father any longer. Nicholas, I want you to stay by Kathy and wipe her forehead with this damp cloth. Oh, and make sure she stays covered. I'll be as quick as I can." she said patting Nicholas' head absentmindedly. After putting on her long overcoat she hurried out into the cold, wild, black night, a flurry of snowflakes rushing in through the door as she left.

Patently, Nicholas watched Kathy for many hours until she

She gently arranged the holly around his bed then ran out into the snow and with tears running down her face called loudly for the villagers. 3a

They gathered in little groups to listen to her story. The women murmured in broken tones between sobs, "He's dead!" and clasped their wondering little children closer, as if to comfort them for the loss of their dearest friend. The men looked everywhere except into each other's eyes, for no man wanted to see the tears that were there. "Yes he's dead," they all sighed deeply.

"Who's dead mother? Is it Nicholas?" asked the children.

"Won't he come to visit us any more on Christmas Eve?"

And the parents had to turn away from the wide childish eyes because they didn't want to say that awful sentence, "Yes, Nicholas is dead."

The bells tolled and the village was in darkness that Christmas night. Vixen and his family whimpered in their stalls and holly glowed red over the still, loving heart in a red suit.

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Chapter Two

The First Christmas Toys.

Who would take care of little Nicholas now that he was all alone in the world? The fishermen and their wives had a meeting to discuss his plight. "We would take care of him of course," said one, "but it's not easy with five mouths to feed already, and he's a growing boy.."

"It's now the middle of winter and good fishing days are few and far between," said another. "With luck we'll just scrape through until spring."

Then kind, plump Mrs. Bavran spoke. "We have a reserve of food for this winter and there's an old bed in our store room, so we could take in the poor little mite. But mind you, a fisherman's life is never easy," she added. "Who knows what might happen between this year and next? I think that we should all share Nicholas. There are ten of us here now, so if we each agree to have him for one year, that will take care of him until he's fifteen, and without a doubt he'll run away to sea long before that."

Everyone agreed, and so Nicholas went to live with the Bavran family, moving in on Christmas Eve, the day before the Christmas feast. The children's excitement only made him feel more miserable and he curled himself up in a corner of the storeroom, and with heartbroken sobs for his lost mother,

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Nicholas shook himself then stood up wearily. "Yes, it's Christmas morning and I haven't finished my work." 4a

"Never mind. I'll finish the last stocking for you," said the man. "Just leave the presents and go home to bed, but hurry before the children wake up and see you."

Nicholas, thinking of his warm comfortable bed, handed over the stocking and presents and wearily headed outside.

A few minutes later a little boy in his pyjamas stood in the doorway. "What are you doing daddy?" he asked in a disappointed tone. "I thought it was Nicholas who gave us the toys."

The child looked ready to cry but his father reassured him, "Your Nicholas is getting old," he said, "and sometimes we fathers have to help him, but remember, it's Nicholas who leaves the toys for you."

"That's alright then," said the little fellow. "It isn't half as much fun if you think it's your mother or father who leave the gifts."

"I should say not," said the father very sternly, "and you must never doubt Nicholas. Why he would be so hurt at a little boy thinking he didn't fill the stockings that he might never come to his house again. Wouldn't that be terrible?"

"Yes," whispered the boy in a frightened voice. "What would Christmas be without Nicholas?"

just as he had done for his dear little sister Kathy.

So for the last two weeks of his stay with the Bavran family, Nicholas worked secretly in the dark storeroom, hiding his knife and wood whenever he heard anybody approaching. He struggled furiously during the last few days so all the gifts could be finished by Christmas morning, because, it was Christmas when the Bavrans had taken him in last winter and now the time had come that he must be passed onto another family.

The children wept quietly as Nicholas packed his meagre belongings and Mr. Bavran, waited to take him to the home of Hans the rope maker. The little orphan drew from out of his bag the rough little toys he had made and on seeing the children's delight in their gifts he was so happy that he didn't feel like crying himself. A lovely glow spread over his heart when he saw their happy faces and heard their cries of thanks.

"Next Christmas I shall be able to make you even better toys," said Nicholas, an air of determination in his voice. "Just you wait and see!"

With this promise, Nicholas now six years old, bravely left them, his small figure turned away from the happy scene to face the uncertainty of the year ahead with the new family. His face was sad, yet his bright blue eyes were warm with the thought of the happiness he had left behind.

"Well," he thought to himself as they approached the rope maker's house "maybe the five children here will be just as nice to me as the Bavrans and I can make toys for them too. Christmas can be a happy time for me even if it's my moving day."

The Last Stocking

The years passed and Nicholas was now a very rich man even though he shared all he had with his friends in the village. Every Christmas morning the children would wake to find their stockings filled with toys and sweets. The poorer families would also find food... such things as chickens, vegetables and hams and often bundles of clothing would be left on their doorsteps.

But as you would expect, each year he would be a little feebler and the villagers who loved and respected him began to worry. Each Christmas morning as the children excitedly took the gifts from their stockings, the fearful thought in every parent's heart was "Maybe next Christmas he won't be with us."

A few days before one Christmas, a number of villagers called on Nicholas with a suggestion. "We thought Nicholas," said one man a little hesitantly, "we thought that you must get so cold filling the stockings outside the door, especially when there are five or six in the family, that it would be better if the children left their stockings inside by the fire."

"Then you could come in and sit by the fire and take your time about it," added one woman kindly.

Old Nicholas looked up from the work he was doing and smiled. He placed his hand on the man's shoulder. "Ho, ho, ho. Fancy you coming here to tell me how to do my work." he joked. "Why I remember filling an embroidered bag for you

5a "And the prize," interrupted Hans, "is a grand new sled with metal runners."

"Nicholas, you'll enter won't you? That's not a bad sled you have, even though you..."

"Hush Jan." whispered another. "It's not nice to remind Nicholas that he built his own sled, just because our fathers had ours made for us."

But Nicholas was not listening to the conversation. He was thinking swiftly. Finally he turned to the others and asked, "What time does the race begin?"

"Nine o'clock sharp on Christmas morning." was the reply.

Nicholas shook his head doubtfully.

"I don't know if I can make it." he said slowly. He was thinking of the chest full of toys which he had planned to deliver to all the children on Christmas morning, especially the one for Elsa the wood cutter's daughter, as she lived outside the village.

"Perhaps if I get up very early and really hurried," Nicholas said to himself, then suddenly he realized that the race would pass right by Else's cottage. The doll could be dropped off in a few seconds, allowing him to continue without loosing any time at all.

"I'll be there! I'll be there! At nine o'clock sharp and you had better watch out for that prize!" he shouted gleefully. Christmas morning was bright and sunny, with fresh crisp snow. Nicholas had been up long before the sun, and as usual had left toys in

forest grew dimmer and dimmer.

As she started to run, the snow whirled in white mists around her. The wind whistled through the branches and moaned high up in the tree tops. It caught Holly's cloak and wrapped it around her head, making her think that some ghostly hand was plucking at her and trying to keep her in this terrible place.

She ran faster and faster, her arms clutching the bundle of berries, her head bent against the wind, and her feet tripping over rocks and stumps hidden in the snow. She breathed heavily and in spite of the biting wind she felt her head grow hotter and hotter. Her heart was pounding so hard she thought it would burst through her ribs.

"I can't see anything," she sobbed, "It's getting darker and darker. I can't lift my feet and the trees are falling on me. "OH!" she shrieked aloud as her terrified eyes saw a huge form looming at her through the clouds of snow. She closed her eyes and fell in a faint, face down in front of Nicholas and Vixen.

When she next opened her eyes she was in the wood carver's cottage with her mother holding her in her arms and Nicholas' kind face looking anxiously down on her.

"Where are my flowers?" was her first question. "I went into the dark forest alone to get them for you. Where are they?"

Nicholas put the red berries and branches in her arms. "Here they are my dear. Did you bring them for me?"

"Yes Nicholas, and I was afraid, but I'll never be again, I know that now."

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With a noisy whoosh, twenty children were off and the race continued over the frozen creek, through patches where they had to carry their sleds, zigzagging between trees and then the long hard pull up the hill behind the Squire's house. Nicholas could only see one boy in front of him just as the big pine tree came into view. His mind was on how much he needed that new sled for his Christmas deliveries. Nicholas flew along so fast that for a moment he thought he would sail right through the tree splitting it in two, but just in time he steered his sled to one side and jumped off. When he pulled off his woolly hat, he could hear the shouts and cheers from the villagers. He had won the race. It was like a dream come true.

All the children pulled Nicholas home on his new sled and each mother and father that they passed, waved and smiled proudly, as happy as if it was their own child that had won the race.

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don't know what it's called."

"Oh, it's so pretty," said Holly again, "but, but, did you say the dark forest?"

"Yes," answered Karl, "and it's dark alright. The sun hardly ever gets through those trees and if you get lost in there I guess you'd stay lost for ever."

"Yes added another boy. "I wouldn't go in there alone I can tell you," and off they went waving some of their prize and leaving Holly picturing the bright red berries and shiny green leaves in her mind. How Nicholas would love some of that cheery little bush. But the dark forest! She shuddered.

"There must be all kinds of terrible things in there," she thought. "Wild animals and strange noises and maybe, behind the trees - goblins!"

Holly shook a little and then suddenly she had a mental picture of herself when she was in Nicholas' cottage saying, "I'll just look at him and say, Goblin, Nicholas says you just aren't."

Holly buried her little face in her hands. "Oh, if only I dared to do it," she almost sobbed. "Nicholas says to do anything when you are really afraid is braver than if you felt no fear at all. But that's a horrible place. Even the boys are afraid to go there alone. But I haven't any flowers for him and he's always so kind to us and spring is so far away!"

So she sat there for a long time, her mind turning from one decision to another. "Maybe there would be some sun in the forest and if I hurried and found the berries quickly, perhaps I could be back again before dark. I'm going to do it!"

7a and followed Mad Marsden home to his mean looking cottage on the outskirts of the village.

On entering the cottage, Nicholas stepped immediately into the main workroom of the wood carver. Here was found his bench, work table, tools and an assortment of wood.

Marsden pointed to a door in the corner and said, "You can store your belongings in there.

Nicholas stood in the middle of the untidy room, looking around in dismay.

"There's a bed you can sleep on and you might as well put that pretty sled away for good. We have no time here to go romping in the snow. Come now Nicholas, don't stand there gawking. Put away your belongings; you have much to learn here. "I'm going to make a good wood carver of you. There'll be no time for silly little dolls and wooden toys. You'll have to earn your keep here. Oh, by the way you can keep that tribe of young children that always follow you about away from here, do you understand me boy?"

Nicholas bowed his head and went silently to work putting away his small bundle of belongings.

So Nicholas started to work for the mad old wood carver and learned that his father's old pocket knife was a clumsy tool compared with the beautifully sharp knives and chisels that Marsden used. He learned to work for hours on end, bent over the bench beside his master, patiently going over a piece of wood until it was smooth as a piece of glass. Sadly Nicholas could not learn to get used to the dreadful loneliness of the cottage, and longed for the days when he had been in friendlier ones surrounded by laughing children. Over the months, so as

Holly

Holveg, who everyone called Holly, was a timid little girl who was sometimes frightened by the dark. Her skill at growing flowers in the harsh climate was remarkable and nothing gave Holly more pleasure than to repay Nicholas' generosity by sharing flowers with him. One day as she was arranging the flowers for him she queried,

"Are you afraid of goblins?" Nicholas put down the toy he was working on and turned a surprised face toward the little girl. "Goblins!" he exclaimed. "Now here am I, well past sixty years old and I've never heard of goblins. What are they Holly?" he asked in an interested tone. Holly looked confused, then a doubtful tone crept into her voice, "Why I don't exactly know," she confessed, "but I've heard of them and when I'm lying in my bed at night I'm sure that's what I see creeping about my room."

"They must be shadows," said Nicholas, "I've never come across goblins, or for that matter ghosts either," he added.

Holly looked very impressed and said, "If I think I see a goblin in my room, I'll just say to him, Nicholas says you just aren't, you old goblin!"

They both laughed and Nicholas hugged the little girl and told her it was time for her to run home for her supper. The winter months passed by and when spring arrived and it was time again for planting the flowers, Holly fell very sick. All through the summer weeks she lay on her bed, weakened by a

8a tugging at the corners of that stern mouth which had been turned down for so many years.

Marsden lifted his head, and looked at the strong young face with the kind blue eyes.

"You're a good lad Nicholas, and," he added almost shyly, for it wasn't easy for a harsh man to change so quickly, "I think I'd like to help you with some of those little things you make. We'll make them together these long winter evenings, eh, shall we Nicholas. You can deliver them on Christmas day in that fine sled of yours. Perhaps by then you might even like to stay and live with me next year," the old man added in such a soft voice it sounded like a plea.

He grasped Nicholas' arm almost roughly, then a peaceful expression crept into the lonely old face as the boy answered simply, "Yes, of course master. I'll stay here with you just as long as you want me to."

So every winter evening saw two heads bent over the work bench. A grey head with thick, shaggy hair, and the smooth yellow head of a boy. They worked feverishly during the weeks before Christmas and with the old man helping with the carving, Nicholas was able to add delicate little touches to the toys, which made them far more handsome than any he had made before. He painted the dolls' faces so that their eyes were as blue and their cheeks and lips were as rosy as the little girls who would soon clasp them in their arms. The little chairs and tables were stained with the same soft colours that Marsden used on his own work; the little boys' sleds and boats were shiny with bright new paints, red, yellow, blue and green

Only two nights before Christmas, everything was finished. Although a toy for every child in the village was packed onto

doors, nor do we wear stockings. We certainly don't carry any chimneys with us," she laughed

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Little Sonya, who wanted everybody to be happy, reported some of these things to Nicholas, and came away from his cottage with a contented mind, for she knew that the wise smile on his face meant that he had a plan in his kind old head.

On Christmas eve, the reindeer were surprised to find that when their usual sound was over, Nicholas drove them right past his cottage and out towards the forest, stopping on the edge of the pine grove. A dark figure with a wide grin stepped forward. This was Grinka, the leader of the band of gipsies.

"Here you are Grinka," said Nicholas, giving him a bundle of small white candles. "You go ahead with these and I'll follow."

Grinka stopped at every small fir tree in the grove and tied candles to their branches. Nicholas followed behind, covering the branches of each tree with nuts, shiny red apples and of course a sample of every one of his toys. It was almost dawn when the pair had finished, but there was a tree for each family with children.

"Now for the lights," said Nicholas and they went from tree to tree, touching a taper to each candle, until the whole dark grove was twinkling and glowing like the centre of a warm hearth fire.

"I think that's the prettiest part of it all," said Nicholas, "and you must be sure to wake the children before the sun gets through the pine trees and spoils the effect."

"Alright," said Grinka, "I'll go and wake them now, before you go."

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Chapter Five

The First Christmas Stocking

Nicholas did not leave the wood carver on that Christmas day, or the next, or the next, but stayed on learning to be as good a wood carver as his old master. Marsden realised this and as he was now becoming too old to spend a full day carving, decided to retire and live with his sister in a nearby village. He was very proud of Nicholas and knew that he would be quite able to carry on by himself, and so it was that Nicholas became known as "Nicholas the Woodcarver."

The village had grown so large that Nicholas did not know every child in the village the way he used to, and the only way that he could tell if a house had children was by a bag hanging on the door on Christmas Eve. With this increase in children his small sled could no longer carry the enormous number of toys and Nicholas had to use Old Marsden's horse and sleigh for his now large rounds. It had become the custom of the children to leave a brightly decorated bag filled with oats on their doors and when the horse had eaten the oats, Nicholas would fill the bag with the toys he had made.

Nicholas' life was not all work. One day he looked up from his workbench and saw some children having a snowball fight in the fresh snow. They were having so much fun that he couldn't resist the temptation to join in. One of the children, whom Nicholas had never seen before, was standing watching

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The First Christmas Trees

Very close to Nicholas' cottage was a thick grove of pine trees, tall, beautiful dark trees that lifted their branches high up into the sky and formed a perfect shelter for the ground underneath. Scattered in among the larger trees were a cluster of firs, brave little trees, which kept their sturdy branches green all through the cold northern winter and came through each heavy snow storm with their shiny needles still pointed towards the sky.

The children used to play in this grove, because no matter how stormy the weather was outside, here they could find a warmer, more sheltered spot away from the bitter winds. In the summer time it was a charming place, with the sharp keen scent of the pine trees and the soft murmuring of their branches in the breeze.

Nicholas loved this little grove, for in order to get there, the village children had to pass his cottage, and hardly a group went passed his door without one or more of them dashing in to say "Good day" to their old friend and to watch him at work at his fascinating toys.

One day as Nicholas glanced out of his window, he noticed a group of children running from the grove. As they became closer he could see that they were frightened and as they ran

"Well, it should be embroidered really, but I suppose any sort of bag would do. We have to hang it outside the door on Christmas Eve, and when Wilhelm wakes up tomorrow there will be a beautiful toy in it for him. Nicholas the wood carver does it for all the children of the village and I thought if there was only some kind of bag around here..."

His mother sighed, "Things like flour and potatoes come in bags and those we haven't seen for ages. Goodness knows, with all my other worries, I have no time to embroider a bag or even make one. Anyway I'm sure this Nicholas person wouldn't come to poor little children like you. Now go and get Wilhelm ready for bed. That might take your mind off your silly ideas."

So sadly Frederick was forced to abandon the idea of putting a bag outside the door for his little brother's Christmas gift, but he couldn't forget about Nicholas. He thought about how he looked, such a kind, jolly man there out there by the forest. He felt sure Nicholas wouldn't pass a child's house just because they were poor. He thought and thought, and while sitting by the fireplace helping his little brother undress, he pulled of his warm, bright and woolly stocking. As Wilhelm held it up he said jokingly, "Now that would hold some kind of gift just as well as any embroidered bag. And why not?" he murmured to himself. "Why not indeed?" and with one leap he flung open the door and soon had the stocking tied to the door.

Once again this Christmas Eve, everything in the village was blanketed with white snow, sparkling under the bright winter moon. No lights were showing in the village and everyone was asleep... except Nicholas, of course, who was busy going from house to house leaving bulging bags filled with gifts. At Frederick's doorway he paused. In the bright moonlight he saw a funny object dangling on the door. A child's woollen stocking!

"Don't be so foolish," he said quickly, realising that Dinsler was in a rage and dangerous. "I haven't come after your gold. Look..."

"Haven't you. Well then what brings you into my house in the middle of the night."

"I'll tell you what! Look behind you at that stocking. The other children in the village leave their stockings outside their front doors, but you have so frightened your grandchild that she is afraid to ask you for anything. I only wanted to make her feel wanted like other children, and that she should get gifts the same as they do on Christmas morning."

"Gifts!" exclaimed the old man, bewildered and lowering the poker. "You mean you give things away?" He looked at Nicholas with a very strange look.

"Yes," replied Nicholas, relieved to see the poker being put away. "I'll even give you a Christmas gift, you mean old man." He reached inside his deep pocket and poured a stream of bright gold coins onto the table in front of Dinsler. "Here, if gold is all you care about, take this.. and more... and more to add to your hoard! And now," Nicholas said with an air of authority as he brushed some soot from one eye, "Will you please show me to your front door. If I have to climb back up the chimney I'll never get this suit clean again."

With that he marched from the room, in some ways a ridiculous stout figure covered in soot, yet he looked very impressive to old Dinsler, as he hurried ahead to open the door for Nicholas to return out into the cold black night.

The Red Suit

Squire Kenson, the richest man in the village, came driving up to Nicholas' cottage one day with an order for a new chest of drawers. Nicholas was attracted by the sound of silver bells and reindeer hooves on the snow. He looked out of his window and was impressed by the way the squire had arrived in his shiny red sleigh drawn by two beautiful reindeer. Donner and Blitzen were their names because they travelled so swiftly, like thunder and lightning. Nicholas looked at the two beautiful animals and thought how much quicker they would pull him around the village on Christmas eve than his old horse Lufka, who was now getting slower and slower as the years passed by.

All the time the squire was talking, the woodcarver was gazing admiringly at the fine suit of red deerskin he was wearing. The coat was rather long and belted at the waist, the trousers loose and tucked into shiny black leather leggings. Soft white ermine fur was around the coat at the collar, cuffs and the bottom, with the same beautiful fur around the close-fitting hat. After the squire had left, Nicholas carried on with his work but his mind was on the beautiful red suit.

"There's no reason why I can't have one too," he said to himself. "I've been going around dressed like an orphan instead of a wood carver for far too long."

The very next day Nicholas paid a visit to Widow Arpen, the best dressmaker in the village.

"As if we'd touch his money," the villagers said angrily. "He's a nasty old man. Why I'll bet he won't even let her put out a stocking on Christmas Eve."

"That's a safe bet," laughed Nicholas, "he wouldn't open the front door even to let in something that was free!"

The crowd broke up and Nicholas went back to his work but over the following months he often thought of lonely little Kathy. He saw her several times and she told him she wouldn't be allowed to hang out her stocking at Christmas. The last time he visited her, old Dinsler shook his stick at him and told him to keep away from his house. After that, Kathy wasn't seen again but Nicholas still made a few toys for her and packed them away, just in case.

A few days before Christmas, Nicholas took a walk around the big boarded up house. He looked up at the covered doors and windows and his eyes brightened as he noticed the huge stone chimney on the roof. He chuckled to himself, "I'll try it! I might get stuck but it's worth the try."

Christmas Eve was dark and moonless with the wind whistling through the streets and the light snow stung Nicholas's face and covered the sleigh and reindeer with a shining coat of ice.

"Come on," he encouraged the reindeer, "Only the house on the hill left."

He shivered in his red coat and must have looked like a giant snowman with the snow forming icicles on his white beard. He tied the reindeer to the front gate, took his sack from the back of the sleigh and climbed from his high seat to the top bar of the fence and jumped into the yard. He stopped to listen

12a On the day the suit was finished and the last loving stitch placed in the soft rabbit trimming, Nicholas arrived to try it on. He went into the widow's little changing room and came out a few minutes later - and what a picture he made.

"I can't see myself Mrs. Arpen," said Nicholas doubtfully, "because the little mirror in your room only shows part of me at a time, but it did seem to go on rather loosely," he finished tactfully, not wanting to hurt her feelings.

The widow gave one look at him and burst into tears. "Oh Nicholas, I've spoilt your suit. I've ruined it. I thought you were bigger. Oh, what shall I do?"

"There, there, don't worry about it. Look at the length, that's all right. It's only that I'm not as fat as I should be. Why if I ate all the food the villagers sent me why, I guarantee in a few months time you wouldn't notice it. The trousers will be fine as soon as I buy a pair of boots to tuck them into, and what a nice cap this is! See how closely it fits and how warm looking the fur band is!"

So Nicholas kept his oversized red suit and soon the villagers became used to the tall figure in the bright red trousers and tunic, the close fitting stocking cap trimmed with fur and the shiny black leather belt and boots. And what do you think happened after Nicholas ate more porridge, vegetables and milk, week after week? Yes his face became full, his chest filled out and he even began to acquire - whisper it - a belly!

The First Christmas Chimney

When Nicholas was about fifty years old, and his hair and beard were becoming as white as the snow, a strange family came to live in the village. Not much of a family you may think, just one small old man, brown and wrinkled like a nut and a skinny little girl who drew back shyly from the crowd of villagers, who had gathered as they always did when someone new came to live.

"His name is Carl Dinsler," one woman whispered. "The old squire's housekeeper told me about him. She said that he was very rich. He must be rich to be able to buy the big old house up on the hill."

"He may be rich but he doesn't look it," remarked another. "Did you notice that poor little child he had with him? She looks as though she needs a good square meal. Who is she anyway?"

"She's his grand-daughter. Her parents died a little while ago and they say the old man bought the house on the hill so that they could be alone."

"Do you know what he has done?" asked one little boy of the interested crowd. "He's nailed up all the gates and left only the front one open and that one he keeps locked with a bolt as large as this." He spread out his hands to show the size. "And

13a he and Lufka finally returned to the cottage, Nicholas, fat and rosy, puffing heavily, while poor Lufka dragged his tired old bones straight to the stable door.

For many days after that disastrous Christmas Eve, the villagers heard sounds of sawing and hammering coming from Nicholas' wood shed. They wondered what he was building, and whenever anyone asked him what it was he would jokingly say, "Just wait and see."

The villagers soon forgot their curiosity when an exciting piece of news spread through the village.

"What's this I hear about the squire, Otto?" Nicholas asked his old friend.

"Ah," said Otto, puffing away on his pipe. They say things have not gone too well for him over the last few years, so now he's going to sell some of his land and furniture to pay back the people he owes money to. The sale is tomorrow, so why don't you come up with us Nicholas?"

"Now what would I be wanting to buy from the squire? I don't need any more land and I can make furniture every bit as good as any he has in the house. As a matter of fact I made some of it."

"What about his animals?" asked Otto. "He has two fine horses and a team of reindeer."

"That's true," said Nicholas, finally interested enough to put down his work. "Lufka is too old to be of much help to me now. I think I will go up there with you tomorrow and see some of the excitement."