

1b "Isn't it wonderful? It's the happiest Christmas we've ever had!"

"Little Stephen found a fir tree in a tub, decorated with more gifts, fruit and candles, the same way the gypsy children found their gifts many years ago."

"Yes, and Stephen says there's a big, shiny star at the very top."

"That's because Stephen believes in him," they said ashamed of themselves, "But now we believe too."

An old woman watching all the happy faces, said in her cracked voice, "He's a saint, that's what he is!"

"Yes he's Saint Nicholas now!" They all took up the cry and the whole village joined in shouting, "Saint Nicholas! Saint Nicholas!"

A little boy's voice tried to add his stumbling speech to the general shouting. "Sant Clos! Sant Clos!" he lisped.

"We believe now," the children and their parents all said to each other.

"How could Saint Nicholas be forgotten by us. We believe he will always visit us on Christmas Eve as long as there is one child left in the village"

"In the village," echoed little Stephen, "You mean in the whole wide world," he shouted triumphantly.

stoped pushing the covers aside and her face became white and her hot little forehead grew cooler to his touch .As the ashes in the fire turned from black to grey Nicholas' head nodded and he fell asleep on the floor beside the cot.

That was the way the villagers found him next morning when they brought the sad news that his father had been drowned in the storm. To make things even worse they also had to tell him that his poor mother had been killed by a tree falling on her on the way to fetch the doctor. Now of the once happy family of four, there was only Nicholas. He was an orphan.

Santa Claus Is Born

The year that followed Nicholas' death on that Christmas morning was a very sad one for all the villagers. They had tenderly put Nicholas to rest in the pine grove near the spot where the children had played with him in the past. The eight reindeer were no longer in the stall behind the empty cottage, but had been taken by Kathy to the stables at the big house up on the hill. In the months that passed, many a mother would pick up a little doll from the floor and gently wipe the dust from its face with a suddenly tear dimmed eye for the generous heart who had made the little toy with so much love. It gradually entered even the youngest mind that Nicholas was dead and would no longer fill their stockings at Christmas. They cried a little, but gradually the image of the fat, cheerful old man faded from their memories and so the year passed until it was again Christmas Eve.

"Mother, are we going to hang up our stockings?"

"No child. Have you forgotten that Nicholas is no longer here and can't come to fill your stockings?"

This question was asked and similarly answered in almost every house in the village on that Christmas Eve. All over the village, children went sadly to bed without hanging up their stockings, except for one little boy, Stephen, who refused to believe that Nicholas wouldn't come. He astonished his parents when he calmly went about hanging up his stocking just the way he had done every Christmas Eve since he could

father and beloved Kathy, Nicholas tried to drown the sounds of merrymaking in the cottage. But the door opened slowly, and a little form was seen in the ray of light. 3b

"What do you want?" asked Nicholas almost roughly. "Go away. I want to be alone."

Standing in the doorway, the little boy's mouth quivered. "My boat's broken," he cried. "The new one given to me for the Christmas feast. Father's gone out fishing and mother can't fix it. What shall I do?" he asked holding up a broken toy fishing boat. Nicholas dried his eyes on his sleeves and took the broken toy in his hands. "I'll fix it for you." he said as he turned back to his lonely corner.

"Oh, come in here where there's more light." said the young Bavran.

So Nicholas went in where there was more light, more children, and more laughter and for a while he forgot his sorrows.

As the months passed, Nicholas grew very fond of the Bavran children, Otto, Margaret and Gretchen. He loved playing with them, but he knew it couldn't last forever. When Christmas day was approaching again and the Bavran family talked of Nicholas leaving them, he became very confused and frightened, yet his main thoughts were of how he could repay them for their kindness. Nicholas wished that he could give them all a gift, but the only things he owned in the world were the clothes that he wore, an extra coat and trousers, an old sea chest and the pocketknife that had belonged to his father. He just couldn't part with any of these. Suddenly a wonderful idea came into his head. He would carve some toys for the children

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Chapter Twelve

Nicholas Sleeps

Holly was no longer little Holly, but a lovely slender young girl who led a happy life, her childish terrors long forgotten. She still continued the practice of bringing flowers to her old friend and every Christmas Eve she would go into the dark forest to gather holly to decorate his cottage on Christmas morning.

It was almost noon, and as she approached the cottage she noticed how silent and empty it looked without Nicholas bending over his work and no smoke coming from the chimney.

She stole silently into the cold little cottage and quietly opened the door to his bedroom.

"Why the darling was so tired he fell asleep with his clothes on," she murmured tenderly.

For the fat round figure lay there, still dressed in the bright red suit with the white fur, the shiny black boots and the close fitting cap.

"Here's your holly," whispered the girl, bending over Nicholas.

Then with a startled exclamation she dropped the red berries over the still figure and sprang back frightened. It was a few moments before Holly realised what must have happened and as she edged back close to him she sobbed, "Poor Nicholas. Why did you have to die? We all loved you so much."

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The Sled Race

At the rope maker's cottage most of the winter evenings were spent by the children learning how to wind and untangle masses of twine, and to most of the simple net mending. Nicholas discovered that by loosening strands of flaxen coloured hemp he could make the most realistic hair for the little wooden dolls he still found time to carve. When he left at the end of one year, the rope maker's five little children found five small toys waiting for them on the mantle of their fireplace. Nicholas did not forget his promise to the three Bavran children, but made a special trip to their house on that Christmas morning with their gifts.

As the years went by, Nicholas became more and more skilful with his father's pocket knife and all the children came to expect one of Nicholas' toys on Christmas day. No child was ever disappointed, for the young wood carver always knew exactly what each child would like.

Christmas was only a week away when Nicholas, now aged fourteen, arrived at the school playground to find all his friends in a group chattering excitedly.

"What's happening?" he enquired.

"There's going to be a sled race on Christmas morning," said Otto. "It will start from the Squire's gate at the top of the hill and finish at the big pine on the far side of his house."

4b when you were smaller than your own children are now. Then things changed when they started putting out stockings instead of bags and now you want me to change again and leave them inside. Well I suppose I must keep up with the times and if you all think it's better to have them inside, then inside I will go"

So from then on Nicholas would quietly creep into the houses on Christmas Eve and sit in front of the fire, slowly filling the stockings. Often the children would leave him a drink and a piece of cake, as they knew that he had a long night of exhausting work.

One Christmas Eve, old Nicholas found it harder than usual to leave each home. The warm fire made him feel drowsy and his old bones ached as he wearily pulled himself up to go. He made slow progress from one house to another until thankfully he arrived at his last stop, his back hurting from carrying his bulky sack, his head drooping with tiredness and his heart heavy as he realised how old he must be. The work he had done with such enthusiasm for so many years was now almost too much for him. He dropped into a chair by the fire with a deep sigh of relief and it was a long time before he recovered enough to start filling the stockings. Even then he did it very slowly and it hurt as he reached down into the bottom of the sack, each time straightening himself with growing difficulty. He finished filling four of the five stockings but with the fifth one still empty in his hand he fell sound asleep.

About an hour later he woke with a start when he felt a hand shaking him.

"Are you alright Nicholas?" asked a worried voice, "I got up to see if the fire had gone out and found you still here. Why it's nearly dawn."

every doorway As the children set off with their sleds for the race, the whole village followed behind to watch the excitement. But there was no sign of Nicholas. Unfortunately one of his old sled's wooden runners had broken under the strain of carrying the heavy load of toys. As he desperately tried to lash it together with rope, he could hear the faint echo of the Squire's horn coming from the top of the hill. The race had started. Nicholas was deeply disappointed because he knew he had missed the chance to win the new sled, but as he had to go to the woodcutter's cottage anyway to deliver Elsa's present, he turned the battered sled upright and made a dash for the hilltop. As he reached the starting line, Nicholas saw his friends speeding off, looking like little black specks in the distance.

"Come on Nicholas," called the villagers, "Let's give you a good push to get you started. One, two, three. Off you go."

Nicholas flew down the hill, his face stinging in the wind, faster and faster he went, the wooden runners hardly touching the hard packed snow. The black specks were becoming larger and Nicholas knew he must have been catching up to the other children. Larger and larger they became until Nicholas nearly fell off his sled with amazement. They had stopped and were waiting for him just in front to he woodcutter's cottage.

"Hurry up Nicholas." encouraged little Josef, "We would have waited for you at the top, but the Squire became impatient and made us start when the horn blew. You know we'd have waited for you if we could."

"Yes," shouted Otto, "now go and leave that doll in Elsa's doorway, and let's go! From now on just see how long we'll wait for you! First come, first served for the new sled with metal runners."

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Nicholas wiped a tear from his eye. "You shouldn't have gone so soon after being sick, but I do love the little berries. What are they called?"

"I don't know, but I liked them because they remind me of you, so round, red and shiny," said the little girl with a mischievous laugh.

"That's funny," answered Nicholas, "they remind me of you somewhat, so brave growing out there in the darkness and cold. Those little berries have the deep red of courage in them, so I think I'll christen them and from now on we'll call them 'Holly'."

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THE EVENING BEFORE CHRISTMAS

After the crowd of villagers had dispersed on that merry Christmas day of the sled race, Nicholas was stopped at the door of the cottage where he had spent the last year by a lean, dark looking man who looked as though he had never smiled in his life. It was Bertram Marsden the wood carver of the village, who all the children called "Mad Marsden" because he lived alone, rarely spoke to anybody and chased the children away from his door with black looks and harsh words.

"You haven't forgotten have you Nicholas that you move to my house today?" Marsden asked gruffly.

Nicholas looked up. Oh no, he hadn't forgotten, and he well knew why Marsden had offered to take him in for the last year of his life as a wandering orphan. The only reason he was willing, even eager, to feed and clothe Nicholas was because for almost five years now he had watched the work he had been doing with his old pocketknife, and realised that Nicholas would make a very good and cheap apprentice for him.

Once again Nicholas packed his few belongings onto his new sled, said a grateful farewell to the family he was leaving,

- 6b She ran for her cloak before she had a chance to change her mind and before her mother returned from the village.

Nicholas looked up from his work and saw a little figure flying along the road, right past his cottage and into the forest.

"That looked like Holly," he thought startled. "No, it can't be. She's not well yet. Besides," he shook his head sadly, "The poor little thing would be too terrified to go into the forest as it was dark enough for goblins," he said with a chuckle.

An hour later however, he was interrupted from his work by Holly's frantic mother. "Oh, I thought she was here," she cried.

"When I came home and found her gone, I was sure I would find her with you. She's still so weak and look, it's beginning to snow!"

Nicholas was soon pulling on his bright red coat and fur trimmed cap. "I'll find her, don't you worry." He looked out at the grey afternoon sky filled with black clouds. Already the air was filled with millions of snowflakes, scurrying and tumbling in every direction.

"I know where to look," said Nicholas. "I'll take the small sled with Vixen and we'll have Holly back here before the snow covers my path."

Holly meanwhile had found the red berries and her joy on seeing the cheerful little bush almost chased away the thoughts of what awful things might be lurking behind the huge tree trunks or hiding on the bough, waiting to spring down at her. She gathered a large armful of the berries and started back again, her heart beginning to pound as the light inside the

not to make it obvious to Marsden, Nicholas gradually cleaned and brightened the cottage to make his enforced home bearable.

One night as Marsden sat in front of the fire, silently smoking his long curved pipe, he noticed that Nicholas was still bent over the workbench engrossed in some task.

"Here lad," he said almost kindly, in his gruff voice. "I'm not such a hard master that I would have you work night as well as day. What's that you're doing? Why don't you go to your bed?"

"It's only a small piece of wood you threw away," said Nicholas quickly, "I'm trying to make a copy of that chair you finished today, but this is a little one- a toy," he ended fearfully, for he well knew that the word "toy" would mean children to old Marsden, and for some strange reason just to mention a child in his presence sent him into a terrible rage.

Tonight however, he contented himself with merely a black look, and said, "Let me see it. Hmm, not bad, but you have the scroll on the back larger on one side than the other. Here, pass me that small knife." Nicholas hastened to give him the small tool and watched admiringly as the old craftsman deftly corrected the mistake

"There," Marsden said finally, holding the work away from him so that he could study it, "that's the way it should be done."

Then, instead of handing the little chair to Nicholas, who was waiting expectantly, he continued holding it in his hands whilst a sad expression came into the fierce old eyes as he remembered the toys he had made for his own two sons many, many years ago. Slowly a smile grew on the tired old face, Nicholas blinked and looked again. Yes a real smile was

7b fever, recognizing no one, not even her beloved Nicholas. He brought flowers to her, hoping that they might bring back the wandering little mind, but she only pushed them away and went on with her delirious ravings of big black giants and horrible goblins. For with her illness, her almost forgotten fears had returned and with a heavy heart Nicholas realised that their friendly little talks had been completely wiped from her mind. She gradually recovered but the fever left her the same pale, timid little girl she had been when she had first brought a bouquet to Nicholas.

Holly was sadder than she had ever been during her entire life. Everything seemed black to her and her nights were filled with terror in spite of all that Nicholas had told her. But more than anything else, he worried because she had no flowers to take to him. Holly pressed her thin little face against the window pane and looked with tear filled eyes out into her bleak front garden.

As some boys passed her gate they paused to wave kindly to her. Holly waved back and wiped her eyes. She pushed open the window a little and called out, "What's that green bush you have in your sled Karl?"

The boys came over to the window and Karl held up an armful of branches with lovely little warm red berries scattered among shiny pointed green leaves.

"Why it's so beautiful!" exclaimed Holly, clasping her hands. Her dull eyes began to sparkle a little as she asked, "What is it? Where did you get it Karl?"

"We found it in the woods, way back in the part they call the dark forest. It grows like this even in the middle of winter but I

the sled with metal runners, Nicholas and the old man were still working at the bench. This time, they were desperately trying to finish a chest, which had been ordered by a wealthy woman in the next village twenty miles away. It was late on Christmas Eve when it was eventually finished.

"I'm sorry," said old Marsden reading Nicholas' thoughts. "You'll have to take it over tomorrow. I'd go myself, but I'm not as strong as I used to be. It's an all day trip, twenty miles over, then you'll have to wait a few hours to rest the horses, and then the twenty long miles back.

"If only she didn't want the chest tomorrow," said Nicholas.

"Well," answered his master, "We did promise it, and it has to be delivered on time. Now the toys weren't promised..."

"No, but I have given them," interrupted Nicholas.

"I was going to say lad, that they weren't promised for Christmas day. Now you know that little children go to bed early. Why can't you..."

"Why of course!" Nicholas jumped to his feet shouting, "Where's my list? Where's my sled? I'll have to hurry."

Outside, the village was asleep. No one saw the lone figure, wrapped up against the crisp icy air, dragging a sled from house to house, leaving a small pile of toys in each doorway until it was empty. It was three o'clock on Christmas morning when Nicholas turned away from the last doorway. His sled was now much lighter to pull, but his feet were tired from trudging through the heavy snow, but he was happy it was Christmas and once again he had kept his unspoken promise to the children of the village.

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"Oh No!" said Nicholas alarmed. "They mustn't see me. The children must NEVER see me. It would spoil it all. Now I must go!"

Nicholas jumped onto his sleigh and was off, with the familiar jingling of silver bells and the crack of his long silver whip.

A few minutes after his departure, Grinka had aroused all the children in the camp. Nicholas should have stayed just to see the joy on the thin little faces as they scampered among the trees, each one discovering something new to shout about.

"It's the lights on these lovely little trees that makes everything so beautiful," said one child.

"No, it's the presents! exclaimed another. "Just look at this pretty little doll I have!"

"It's the fruit and nuts," added one hungry child stuffing his mouth with goodies.

"I think everything is so beautiful because it's Christmas," decided one wise little boy. "Yes, yes, because it's Christmas!" they all shouted, dancing around.

"And these are our Christmas trees!"

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"Here," said Nicholas, handing him a large hard snowball, "try this one for size. Justin looks like a good target over there."

"Oh no! I have to gather some firewood and get home quickly," said the small boy as he moved away pulling his empty sled.

"Who's the new fellow?" Nicholas enquired from the children when the boy was out of earshot.

"That's Frederick. He's just moved into the village. His father had an accident at sea which paralysed him and now he has to stay in bed all day. The family is really poor so Frederick and his little brother Wilhelm don't have any time to play because they are always helping their mother.

Later, as Frederick was pulling his sled of firewood home, he had only one thing on his mind. He had heard so much about Nicholas and how he only left toys at the doors that had bags hanging on them. It was only a few days until Christmas and Frederick could imagine his little brother's face if he had a new toy on Christmas morning, but how could he arrange it so that Nicholas would know that there was a little boy in the house? He looked everywhere for a bag without success.

On Christmas Eve he tried to interest his mother in the problem.

"Mother." he began slowly. "Mother, do you suppose we have a bag in the house?"

"A bag! What sort of bag Frederick?" she inquired in astonishment.

9b into his cottage for cover, puffing and panting, Nicholas asked "What's happened? You all look so frightened."

"They've got long black hair," one boy cried out, "And the men wear rings in their ears," piped in another. "We couldn't understand a word they spoke."

"Slow down, Slow down," said Nicholas, "Who are you talking about?"

"Strange people with dark skin and hair."

"Did they have horses and carts with them?" asked Nicholas with a knowing look.

"Yes, and big covered wagons." "They sound like gipsies to me," replied Nicholas, though they don't usually come so far north. They must have lost their way, and now they'll camp here until spring. There's no need to be afraid of them. They are people just like you and me."

Reassured, the children ran back into the grove to investigate these new people. They soon made friends with the gypsies and discovered that the children played the same games as them, as well as some interesting new ones. As Christmas drew near, they told the gypsy children about Nicholas, and how he drove up on Christmas Eve on a red sleigh pulled by eight shiny reindeer and filled their stockings with beautiful toys that he had made.

"Once, when he couldn't get into Kathy's house because it was all boarded up, he climbed down the chimney!"

"He can't visit us," joked one gypsy girl, "We don't have any

Nicholas laughed silently to himself, a kind tender laugh, then reached down into his bag and filled the lonely little stocking up to the top, and then with a snap of his whip and the jingle of sleighbells he was off to the next house on his rounds.

When Frederick opened the door on Christmas morning, he and his little brother found not one, nor two but three toys each. Right down in the toe of the stocking he found five large coins, enough to keep the whole family all through the winter. The boys shouted with joy, while their father almost sat up in his bed with the excitement. Their mother's eyes although always bright, were filled with happy tears as she watched Frederick and his brother hugging close to their hearts, the first Christmas stocking.

The next week the village buzzed with excitement. Something was happening up on the hill. The old miser had ripped the boards off the windows and doors. He had bought a horse and cart and had been down to the village to buy huge quantities of food. He had also spoken to the school teacher and within a few days Kathy and her grandfather were seen on the road leading to the school, the little girl's face beaming up at the old man, her feet skipping along to keep up with him and her warm little hand tucked into his fist. All this because Nicholas had climbed down a chimney to fill ONE stocking!

"I want a fine red suit, Mrs. Arpen." he started. "You know the one the squire wears?" The woman nodded. "Well unfortunately I can't afford such fine soft deerskin and of course I know I can't have mine trimmed with real ermine, so what do you suggest?"

The widow thought for a moment, then said, "We could get a bolt of strong homespun from the weaver which I could dye a rich red with rowan berries. As for the collar and cuffs, well pure white rabbit skin would look just perfect."

"Done!" cried Nicholas, and he poured a handful of gold coins onto the table, "That should cover the materials and your work."

"But that's far too much." exclaimed the widow, "Why half of this would keep my whole family right through the winter."

"Keep it woman." smiled Nicholas. "You've had a hard time and I'll not be the man to die with a chest full of gold buried under the fire place."

"The widow stood at her door and watched Nicholas drive away through the snow. "Now there's a fine man." she murmured, the gold coins jingling through her fingers. "A fine big man." And so she bought the home spun which she died a beautiful bright red, but a strange thing happened. She had no pattern to go by as Nicholas was wearing the only tunic he owned, so the widow cut and sewed the suit with the image of a fine big man constantly in front of her. Nicholas was not a short man by any means but he was rather thin, and yet as Mrs. Arpen cut out and sewed the suit together, she knew she was sewing for a fine generous man and she made the suit to fit his heart instead of his body."

but could only hear the banging of shutters in the wind. He crept over to the side of the house where a vine covered one door and this made an ideal ladder to the roof. Being so fat and bulky and with the sack on his back it was hard work, but finally he puffed his way to the roof. This was the dangerous part as it was slippery with the snow and ice, and he had to hack away with his knife to make footholds. Finally a large shape loomed up above him. it was the chimney. Nicholas stopped and rested for a moment, then leaned over the edge and looked down the chimney into the inky blackness.

"Just as I thought," he murmured, "the old miser lets the fire go out at nights.... even on such a bitter cold one as tonight." He climbed over the edge and began his dangerous decent, feeling carefully with his feet for the jutting bricks, pressing his hands flat on the sides and bracing his back against the wall. Slowly he inched his way down until he felt solid earth beneath his feet. He stepped out of the fireplace into a room almost as dark as the chimney. Gradually as his eyes became accustomed to the dark, he could make out a table and by groping in the darkness eventually found a stub of a candle, which he soon had lit. He drew out from the sack a bright blue woollen stocking, and filled it up to the brim with toys. Also he left nuts and lollies as he thought the hungry little girl wouldn't have had treats like this for some time. Nicholas the hung the stocking on the mantelpiece, weighed it down with a heavy candlestick and stood back to admire the good job he had done. Just as he was about to blow out the candle Nicholas was startled by the sudden opening of a door and old Dinsler rushing into the room.

"Sneaking into my house, are you? After my gold I suppose? I'll show you what I do with thieves, I'll show you!" The old man picked up a poker and swung it at Nicholas, who jumped to one

The Reindeer

The next Christmas Eve Nicholas did not have such an easy time making his rounds of the village. To begin with, he was considerably amused and rather dismayed to discover that instead of one embroidered bag for each house, the children had followed little Frederick's example and had each put out a woollen stocking. So with some families having five or six children, there was often quite a row of stockings nailed to the door. Of course Nicholas couldn't very well just put one toy in each stocking as it made the rest of it look so flat and empty. Since he hadn't stocked his sleigh with enough toys so that there would be several for each child, he found himself with an empty sleigh, and only half way through his list!

"Luckily I have an extra supply of toys at home in the chest," he said to his horse Lufka as they returned to the cottage for more. Nicholas quickly loaded up the sleigh and off they went again to finish the rounds. When there were only a few houses left to visit, the tired old horse began to falter. "Come on old boy," encouraged Nicholas, but Lufka was getting too old to spend all night struggling around the village, and this particular night he had made two trips. As he plodded through a deep snow bank Lufka stumbled and the sleigh slid into a ditch. Crack! went one of the runners. Nicholas climbed down and after making sure that his horse was alright, shook his head at the sight of the disabled sleigh.

Nicholas had to finish his rounds on foot that Christmas and the first pink streaks of dawn were brightening up the sky when

12b that's not all. I don't know how you would get into the house any way because he's put up boards over the windows and the front and side doors. There's not a sign of life anywhere in the old house now. You would think that it was deserted."

"Why, the old man must be crazy," they all said. "He must be afraid of somebody."

"Afraid nothing," one man remarked, "The only thing he's afraid of is that someone will steal his money."

"I'm sure Nicholas the wood carver will be interested in this news," said another. "One more child in the village, and such a lovely one too."

"Nicholas already knows about her," they heard a deep voice say and the villagers turned to see it was the wood carver himself who had joined the group unnoticed.

"Her name is Kathy. I once knew a girl with that name," he went on with a sad faraway look in his usually merry blue eyes as he remembered his little sister. "I'd like to do something special for the poor little girl."

"How did you find out her name, Nicholas?"

"She was wandering around in her yard just like a forlorn puppy who had been locked in," Nicholas answered. "I was passing that way and stopped at the gate so that I could talk to her. She says that she's not allowed outside the fence and can only play in the yard for one hour a day. She also told me that her grandfather doesn't want her to play with the other children from the village in case she talks about his gold and where he keeps it."

The next morning the squire's house and surrounds thronged with eager people. Some had come to buy while others just to watch or be nosy. Nicholas strode past the horses straight to the stables where the reindeer were kept. "He's after Donner and Blitzen," the men whispered to each other. "He's always admired the way they go so fast."

The squire, now a bent old man with a worried look on his face, seemed somewhat bewildered by all the people talking about his house and possessions. When Nicholas showed his interest in the two reindeer he replied sternly, "Well you can't have Donner and Blitzen alone. The set of reindeer go together or not at all. Why Donner would go raving mad if she was separated from the rest of her family."

"Family!" exclaimed Nicholas. "But Squire I only need two reindeer. How many more...?" Eventually Nicholas weakened and became the proud owner of not two, but eight prancing reindeer, Donner and Blitzen, the mother and father with their six children, Dasher and Dancer, Comet and Cupid, Prancer and Vixen.

This year Nicholas was planning for a bigger and better Christmas Eve than ever before and worked day and night to finish the toys. Finally the great night arrived. Nicholas finished tying the eight reindeer to each other with a harness bright with jingling silver bells. He slowly backed them up to the wood shed door, which he proudly opened, disclosing a most beautiful sight. There stood a bright, shining red sleigh, trimmed with silver stripes, the runners curving up in the front to form a swan's head, the back roomy enough to hold toys for children of several villages. Nicholas guided the reindeer into the shafts and climbed up onto the high seat, so beautifully padded with cushions made of soft doe skin. He took out of its holder, a long shiny black whip, cracked it in the cold air, and

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they were off. That night the villagers were woken from their sleep by a merry jingling of silver bells, the stamp of reindeer's hooves on the hard snow and the sharp crack of a whip. They peeked out from behind their curtains and saw by the white light of the moon, a shinning red sleigh drawn by eight prancing reindeer whose flying hooves moved as fast as lightning. Perched high up in the seat, snapping a long whip with one hand and guiding the reindeer with the other was a large round man, dressed in a belted red tunic trimmed with white fur, baggy trousers stuffed into high black boots and a close fitting red stocking cap which flew in the wind. Of course they weren't close enough to see his face, but one and all, as they returned to their warm beds murmured kindly, "That's Nicholas on his way to the children. God bless him."