

'TIS THE SEASON

by

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Mr. Millet was having a hard day. At nine o'clock he'd held an orientation session for the new employees hired as temporaries for the Christmas rush. At ten he'd attended an executive meeting to settle the amount of the Christmas bonus to be given to the permanent staff. From eleven till twelve he'd attempted to arbitrate a dispute between two saleswomen in the Small Appliances Department—a long-standing feud which was obviously not going to be resolved. Mrs. Hopkins would have to be transferred to another department—but *where?* Lingerie? Cosmetics? Bargain basement? Mrs. Burton had seniority in Appliances, and was also chief assistant to the buyer. He checked the openings and picked the bargain basement, putting off till tomorrow telling Hopkins her fate. He knew she would explode.

During lunch, eaten at his desk, he dictated three letters that should have been mailed yesterday. At one o'clock he prepared to interview the men who had applied for the position of store Santa Claus. Miss Parsons informed him that four had answered the ad—"none of them very likely specimens."

He fortified himself with an antacid tablet and called the first man in.

Obviously a wino: flushed, ruddy face, watery eyes, large distended capillaries on his nose and cheeks. He too had obviously fortified himself.

"Next," Millet said to Miss Parsons on the intercom. He showed the first applicant to the door, ushered in the second.

A very fat man, about fifty years of age, dressed in an old wool overcoat, much too small for him and threadbare at the cuffs. Millet tried to visualize him with a white wig and full beard.

"We can offer the job for only three weeks," he began. "The hours are long, and the work tiring. You'll be sitting most of the time, holding children on your lap, with occasional walking tours through the Toy Department. You'll have to be jolly, because that's what the kids' parents expect."

"Ho, ho, ho!" bellowed the applicant, slapping his thigh. "Like *that*, you mean?"

"No, not like that. A deep chuckle, twinkle in the eyes—smile a lot."

The man smiled, and Millet noticed with a twinge of revulsion that his teeth were rotten all across the front, upper and lower, each tooth separated from those adjacent by black craters of decay.

"Twinkle, eh?" said the applicant. He twinkled, and Millet hastily pressed the intercom button. "I'm sorry, you just aren't what we had in mind. Thanks

for dropping by. See the secretary on your way out for a Christmas greeting from Klein's." Into the intercom: "Next, Miss Parsons."

The third applicant was an older man—about sixty-five. Thin and stooped, he had cut himself badly while shaving, and a thin crust of dried blood still disfigured his chin. Throughout the interview—which was short—he continually coughed, a dry hack followed by a moist rattle. Impatient with the old man's slowness in answering his questions, Millet said: "I'm sorry. We can't have a Santa who coughs like that; the parents would worry about your giving something nasty to their kids."

"It's just a cold," the old man said. "It'll be gone by the time I come to work."

"The Santa begins tomorrow morning," Millet said. "I'm afraid we can't use you. You really ought to do something about that cough."

The old man's mouth was trembling, his eyes hopeless. "That's why I applied for the Santa Claus job. I saw your ad . . ."

"Well, I'm sorry. As you go out, Miss Parsons will give you a small gift, compliments of Klein's."

As he passed her desk, the old man extended his frayed glove and the secretary placed in it a small bottle of cologne wrapped once around with a swatch of red ribbon. "Merry Christmas," she said.

The fourth applicant was about sixty, of moderate weight, square-shouldered and firm of step. His hair was close-cropped salt-and-pepper, his eyes alert and deep-set in a nest of wrinkles. He too had painfully shaved that morning, and his skin had a peeled, raw look. But he hadn't cut himself.

"This is the last one, Mr. Millet," the secretary said.

The personnel director remained seated behind his desk and motioned the applicant to a chair.

"For many years it's been Klein's tradition to have a Santa Claus who hears what children want for Christmas. Our competitors also have their own Santas, but we spare no expense to make *our* Santa's Workshop the best in town. The public has come to expect it. The kids look forward to meeting our Santa. From surveys we've done, we've good reason to believe that parents bring their kids *here* first—to *our* Toy Department—before going to Limkins' or Sherbo's. I tell you this to impress upon you that we have certain standards to maintain. The man who has played Santa for us during the last six years was excellent—all the kids loved him. But unfortunately he moved to Arizona to retire. Do you think you could handle the job?"

The applicant spread his hands. "I think so. I get on good with kids."

"That's important," said Millet. "You've got to make them excited and happy; make them believe in you. That makes the parents happy. And *that* 's good for Klein's."

"What do I have to do?"

“From nine till five you’ll be talking to kids, finding out what they want, and slipping this information to their parents if they want to know what the kid said. The small ones you’ll have to dandle on your knee. The bigger ones you just talk to man to man. Wink at the parents occasionally. Respond to what the kid says. If he whispers he wants a fire truck, you say ‘A fire truck, eh?’ loud enough for the parents to hear.”

“I think I can handle that.”

“The job will only be for three weeks, starting tomorrow. Be here at eight-thirty so you can get dressed in the costume we provide.”

“Fine.”

“Miss Parsons will put you on the payroll, show you the time clock and dressing room, and so on. My name is Mr. Millet. And yours—” he glanced at the paper in his hand—“is Ralph Gilligan, I see.”

“I go by Ralph.”

“Good. Now, Miss Parsons will take care of you. Eight-thirty sharp.”

Alone again, Millet opened a folder and spread out a stack of papers concerning the time-and-motion study he was projecting for the Maintenance staff after the first of the year.

At one the next afternoon, Millet went to the Toy Department to see how the new Santa Claus was doing. The escalator lifted him to the third floor and let him off into a throng of people milling about in the aisles between display counters filled with toys. Christmas carols from overhead speakers blended with the babble of voices, the shouts of excited children. Large gold stars and hanging bells decorated the columns; from the ceiling looped great festoons of green and silver tinsel glittering with red ornaments. At one side of the display area stood Santa’s Workshop, a symphony of colored lights and motion. Behind a guard rope of simulated evergreen, mechanical elves clicked and nodded, smiled and hammered, lifted and lowered a variety of toys, jerked paint brushes rhythmically up and down, and turned slow graceful arabesques. The animated workshop extended for fifteen feet, leading the spectators from the Santa Claus into the toy department proper.

Directly in front of the Workshop, Santa Claus sat on a golden throne richly carved with holly leaves and upholstered, seat and back, in dark green velvet. A long congested line of children and their parents stood patiently waiting to talk to him. As Millet watched, a little boy left Santa’s knee, receiving a final pat on the head, and a little girl in a plaid coat climbed up into his lap. She whispered eagerly, and Santa bent his head to listen, the flowing white beard moving as he smiled; his keen blue eyes beamed and twinkled—now at the little girl, now at the crowd. Thus disguised and padded, the Santa looked nothing like the applicant Millet remembered sitting in his office. Gilligan, it

was. Well, he seemed to be doing all right. Millet, returning to his desk, was pleased.

A week passed, with more irritations for Millet. Three people down with flu in Dinnerware, and no one to fill in for them. He finally found substitutes from Draperies and Furniture; but it wasn't easy, and the supervisors of those areas carped at him. Another explosion from Mrs. Hopkins, who, having never adjusted to her transfer from Small Appliances to Bargain Basement, had screamed at her supervisor in front of customers, and quit. "Good riddance," was Millet's response: but it did cause a problem finding a replacement for her. The biggest irritation of all: the assistant Millet had been hoping for—had in fact been counting on as promised—had been cancelled by the general manager just as applications were beginning to come in. "Hold on till March," the manager had said. "Then we'll try to find somebody. You're doing a good job, Millet; we'll raise you seventy-five a month."

But the Toy Department was reporting excellent sales. Two weeks from Christmas, and receipts from toys surpassed those for each of the past three years. This, in spite of money being tighter this year than anytime in the last five. "You got a good Santa Claus," the manager said after the first week. "He's really pushing the merchandise. See if he's available for next year."

At one-twenty on Tuesday of the second week, while he was hearing a grievance from an employee in Cooking Ware, Millet received a telephone call from the buyer in the Toy Department. "Mr. Millet, the Santa Claus hasn't come back from lunch yet. He's twenty minutes overdue and people are waiting. The kids are getting wild, and people are asking me where he is."

"All right," he said soothingly, "you just hold tight and keep things running as smoothly as you can. Get people to look at toys while they're waiting—don't let them get away. I'll see what I can do." He hung up and stared at the wall. Where the hell was the Santa Claus? He hadn't been late before; and by God, he thought darkly, he won't be late again.

At one-thirty he finished the conference with the disgruntled employee and got rid of him. He called the toy Department: still no Santa Claus.

No sooner had he hung up, than the phone rang. It was the general manager. "Millet, where's the Santa Claus?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Why the hell isn't he on the job? Who does he think he is?"

"I'm just on my way to check it out, sir."

"Okay. Tell him he'd better watch it from now on, if he wants to finish out the three weeks."

Millet left the office and went down to the employees' time clock in the basement. Gilligan's card was in the 'IN' rack..

“All right,” Millet said under his breath. “He’s in the store—or pretending to be.”

He hurried to the employees’ locker room down a narrow corridor between stacked shipping crates. A gray-painted room, lined with gray lockers, lit from overhead by two naked bulbs. There, on a bench beside a row of lockers, Ralph Gilligan sat in his Santa suit, wearing his false beard and mustache, holding his wig and cap on his knees. In the bright light, his cropped salt-and-pepper hair gleamed like dull pewter.

“All right, Gilligan!” Millet snapped.—“Why are you sitting down here? Get upstairs right now. You’re a half hour late, and we’re losing sales by the minute.”

Hunched and slumped forward on the bench, Gilligan looked at him with frightened eyes from beneath the tufted white eyebrows. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t feel good. Not at all.” He pressed his palm against his chest and with squinted eyes searched the personnel director’s face beseechingly. “I’m sick. There’s somethin’ awful wrong.”

Millet waved his hand in exasperation. “Now’s a fine time to get sick! You got the flu?”

“I don’t know. I got lotsa pain—here—here—all over inside.”

“Look, you’ve had a good work record so far, Gilligan. Don’t spoil it now. I suppose you want the rest of the day off?” He smiled crookedly. “I just got a call from the manager. He’s furious that you haven’t shown up. He said for you to get on the job, or forget about the next week and a half.” He added, “I see you’ve clocked in. I’d like to remind you that you’re on company time now—not your own.”

Gilligan’s mouth hung open. His breathing was rapid and shallow. Slowly he put on his wig and cap. “Okay, I’m going up.”

“I’ll go with you,” Millet said. He followed the Santa out and up the stairs to the ground floor, tight-lipped with impatience at the old man’s slow pace. He moved as though his boots were full of sand. “Can’t you go faster?” Millet growled, glancing at his watch. Ten till two. The Santa quickened his pace.

They took the escalator to the third floor, where the usual crowd of children and parents thronged among the toys. When they saw the Santa, the kids shouted and cheered and crowded around him as he shuffled toward the throne.

The buyer stood with Millet and watched as the Santa climbed into the chair and began greeting the children, who’d rapidly formed a line. “Well?” she said, “Where was he?”

“Down in the locker room, sitting on a bench.”

“Was he asleep?” she asked, looking at the Santa sharply. “Has he been drinking?”

“I don’t know.” A little girl had climbed onto the Santa’s knee and was whispering to him excitedly. “No, he wasn’t asleep.”

She shook her head and turned away. “I’m going up to fourth floor,” he said. “I’ll be in the Furniture Department.”

He took the escalator up, and was relieved to find the upper floor almost empty of people—quiet, remote from the clamor and bustle of the Toy Department. On his way to the buyer’s desk he stopped to admire a cherry-wood table, oval, with a mirror polish. He glanced at the price-tag, was shocked at the amount, but lingered with his fingers touching the wood, studying their reflection in the gloss.

The furniture buyer called to him: “Mr. Millet, it’s the Toy Department. Something terrible’s happened. The Santa Claus just collapsed!”

He spun around, and, almost running through the tables and chairs, reached the escalator and leaped down it two steps at a time. From above, he beheld a jam of people tightly gathered round the throne. Through the press of bodies Millet saw the Santa Claus crumpled on the dais like a rag doll. The children were screaming or standing silent, wide-eyed and awestruck. Some were being hustled away by their parents.

“Oh my god,” Millet muttered, descending into the scene. “Excuse me, let me through. I’m the personnel director. Excuse me, Ma’am. Everyone stay calm. No reason to get excited.”

He pushed his way through the crowd, reached the buyer who stood beside the Santa.

“I think he’s dead!” she whispered hoarsely.

“That’s all we need!” he whispered back. “Call the store nurse, and I’ll try to clear the area.” She darted away, and he studied the Santa Claus.

Dead, all right. No doubt about it. The left cheek, in slamming against the floor, had raised the upper lip and exposed his teeth. Beard detached and dangling from his ear. Eyes half-open. Skin faintly blue.

Millet became aware of the crowd huddled around him and of a little girl standing against the green guard rope shrieking hysterically. Another was bawling and blubbering while her mother tried vainly to silence her.

“Please stand back,” he said, waving his hand in a gesture of friendly admonition. He tried to reassure them with a smile. “There’s been an accident, and we’d like to clear the area. Thank you, that’s better. Please stand back and let the nurse through. Thank you.”

He moved toward the crowd, arms raised and fingers spread, making slow patting motions in the air. He expected them to fall back as he advanced, and they did yield, but only reluctantly, standing on tiptoe and craning their necks to see around him.

One of the floorwalkers arrived. He took down the guard rope protecting Santa's Workshop and re-hung it across the aisle between Millet and the crowd. The loudspeaker in the ceiling was playing "Joy to the World."

Millet turned back to the Santa Claus as the nurse rose from beside the body and confirmed his certainty. "Dead." He nodded, and saw the general manager, broad in his dark suit with its white carnation, coming through the toys. The manager glared at the Santa Claus as the nurse and buyer covered him with a large counter cloth. Frowning, he then surveyed the crowd, which was beginning to disperse and drift aimlessly away.

"Well, Millet," he said. "This is a fine kettle of fish. Couldn't have happened at a worse time. Let's get him out of here. Fast. Mrs. Andrews, call Maintenance, have them bring a wheeled cart, and take him down to the nurse's station. I'll call the police." He shook his head angrily. "Word travels fast. We'll soon have Sherbo's and Limkins' calling to inquire about the incident. And it'll be all over the evening news. This could scuttle our toy sales for the rest of the season." He started away, then turned back. "Millet, can you find another Santa Claus to finish out next week?"

"I don't know. I can try."

"Well, try hard."

Millet watched him hurry off through the displays. In the Workshop, the elves, with painted smiles, continued their rhythmic tasks, nodding and tapping, lifting, hammering, wielding their brushes, and turning their slow arabesques.

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