

HOW SANTA CLAUS FOUND THE POOR-HOUSE

By Sophie Swett
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HELIOGABALUS was shoveling snow. The snow was very deep, and the path from the front door to the road was a long one, and the shovel was almost as big as Heliogabalus.

But Gobaly—as everybody called him, for short—didn't give up easily. You might have known that he wouldn't give up easily by one glance at his sturdy little figure, at his bright, wide-open eyes, his firm mouth, and his square, prominent chin; even the little, turned-up end of his nose looked resolute.

Besides, Mrs. Pynchum had told him to shovel out the path; and she had a switch behind the wood-shed door, to say nothing of her slipper.

Mrs. Pynchum kept the poor-farm, and Gobaly was "town's poor." The boys sometimes called him that, when he went to coast on Three-Pine Hill or to see the skating on the mill-pound; and sometimes, too, they made fun of his clothes. But it was only the boys who were a great deal bigger than he who dared to make fun of Gobaly, and some of them even ran when he doubled up his fists. But Methuselah! I don't know what would have become of Methuselah if he had not had Gobaly to defend him. For he was a delicate little fellow; "spindlin' and good for nothin'," Mrs. Pynchum called him; and he had come to her in a basket—in other words, Methuselah was a foundling.

Mrs. Pynchum "didn't think much of children who came in a basket from no body knew where. It didn't seem to be long to Poplarville to support him, since he didn't belong to anybody that ever lived there, and his keep and his medicine cost more than he would ever be worth to anybody."

Gobaly's mother died in the poor-house, and left him there, a baby; she had always lived in the town, and so had his father, so of course Gobaly had a perfect right there; and old Dr. Barnacle, who was very learned, had said of him that he was an uncommonly fine baby, and had named him Heliogabalus.

Besides, he was strong and willing, and did a great deal of work. Mrs. Pynchum "could put up with Gobaly." But Methuselah, she said, was "a thorn in her side." And now, after being a trial all his life, he had a hip disease, which the doctor feared was incurable, and which made him more troublesome still!

But, after all, Mrs. Pynchum wasn't quite so bad as one would have thought from her talk. She must have had a soft spot somewhere in her heart, for she put plums in Methuselah's porridge, now that he was ill, and once she had let Gobaly leave his wood-chopping to draw him out on his sled.

I suppose there is a soft spot in everybody's heart, only sometimes it isn't very easy to find it; and Mrs. Pynchum might not have been so cross if she had led an easier life. There were a good many queer people in the poor-house, "flighty in their heads and wearin' in their ways," she said, and sometimes they must have been trying to the patience.

Once in a great while, indeed, Mrs. Pynchum was good-natured, and then, sometimes for a whole evening, the poor-house would seem like home. All those who lived there would then sit around the fire and roast apples; and Mrs. Pynchum would even unlock the closet under the back stairs, where there was a great bag full of nuts that Sandy Gooding and Gobaly had gathered; and Uncle Sim Perkins would tell stories.

But it happened very unfortunately that Mrs. Pynchum never had one of her good-natured days on Thanksgiving, or Christmas, or any holiday. She was sure to say on those days that she was "all tried to pieces."

And everybody was frightened and unhappy when Mrs. Pynchum was "all tried to pieces," and so that was the reason why Gobaly's heart sank as he remembered, while he was shoveling the path through the snow, that the next day was Christmas.

Some people from the village went by with a Christmas-tree, which they had cut down in the woods just beyond the poorhouse; there were children in the party, and they called to Gobaly and wished him a merry Christmas, and asked him if they were going to have a Christmas-tree at his house, and expressed great surprise that he wasn't going to hang up his stocking. Then one of the children suddenly exclaimed:

"Why, that's the poor-house! It's never Christmas there!"

Poor Gobaly's heart sank still more as he caught these words, and somehow he felt very tired, and minded the cold, as he had not thought of minding it a moment before, and the snow-bank looked as if he never could shovel through it. For though Gobaly was stout-hearted, he didn't like to be reminded that he was "town's poor," and that Christmas was nothing to him.

Just then he caught sight of Methuselah's little pinched face pressed against the window-pane. Methuselah always had, even when he was a baby, a worn and pallid face, like a little old man, and that was why they called him Methuselah. It was cold in the front room but Methuselah had wrapped himself in a piece of an old quilt and stolen into the back room and to the window, where he could see Gobaly shoveling the snow.

Methuselah never was quite happy when Gobaly was out of his sight.

Gobaly went up to the window.

"To-morrow's Christmas, 'Thusely!" he said.

"Is it? Do you s'pose she knows it? She'll be 'all tried to pieces,' won't she?"

(“She” always meant Mrs. Pynchum in the poor-house; nobody there ever spoke of her in any other way.)

Gobaly was sadly afraid that she would, but he said, cheerfully:

“May be she won’t. May be she’ll let me take you out on my sled; and one Christmas there was turkey and plum-pudding.”

“Must have been a good many Christmases ago; I can’t remember it!” said Methuselah. “Some folks have ‘em every Christmas, Uncle Sim says, but perhaps it isn’t true. Gobaly, do you believe there really is any Santa Claus, such as Uncle Sim tells about, or did he make it all up? To be sure, he showed me a picture of him.”

“I know there is,” said Gobaly firmly, “because I’ve seen presents that he brought to boys and girls in the village.”

“Then why don’t he ever come here and bring us some?” said Methuselah, as if a new idea had suddenly struck him. “Do you s’pose it’s because we’re worse than any other boys in the world? She says we are, sometimes. Or may be he’s too proud to stop at the poor-house.”

“Perhaps he can’t find the way,” said Gobaly. “ ‘Cause it’s a pretty crooked road, you know. Or may be he wouldn’t think it was worth the while to come so far out of the village just for us; he wouldn’t be going to Squire Thorndike’s, because there aren’t any children there, and there aren’t any other houses on this road.”

“I wish we lived where there was a truly Christmas, like places where Uncle Sim has been; don’t you, Gobaly? May be he makes them all up, though; it seems if they must be too good to be true.”

“I shouldn’t wonder if you got lots of plums in your porridge to-morrow and perhaps a piece of mince-pie. And I’ll ask her to let me take you up to ThreePine Hill on the sled.”

Gobaly always showed the bright side of things to Methuselah and he had become so accustomed to looking for a bright side that he could find one when you wouldn’t have thought there was any there.

And whenever he found a very big lump in his throat he swallowed it for Methuselah’s sake, and pretended that he didn’t see anything in the world to cry about.

He had to go back to his shoveling then, but after he had started he turned back to say:

“When I’m a man, you shall have Christmases, ‘Thusely ! “

It was in that way that Gobaly often comforted Methuselah. It never seemed to occur to either of them that “Thusely might possibly grow to be a man too.

Gobaly went to work at the snow again as if it were not a bit bigger than he was, and he soon had a rampart piled up on each side of the path so high that

he thought it must look like the Chinese Wall which Uncle Sim was always telling of.

As he was digging the very last shovelful of snow out of the path, he heard the jingle of sleighbells, and saw the butcher's wagon, set upon runners and drawn by a very frisky horse, going in the direction of the village. The butcher's boy and three of his comrades occupied the seat, and as many more boys were wedged in among the joints of meat and heaps of poultry in the back of the wagon. They were evidently combining pleasure with business in the liveliest manner.

Coming in the other direction, from the village, was a large Newfoundland dog with a basket in his mouth. Gobaly liked dogs, and he was sure that he was acquainted with everyone in the village. As he was on intimate terms with every big one, he knew that this must be a stranger.

The butcher's boy was driving recklessly, and seemed to think it would be fun to make a sudden turn into the drifts through which the dog was bounding. The horse, taken by surprise and somewhat frightened, made a sudden plunge; and though Gobaly could not quite see how it happened, it seemed that before the dog had time to get out of the way, the sled had gone over him, and he lay helpless and howling upon the snow!

The boys either found it impossible to stop their horse, or were too frightened to investigate the extent of the mischief they had done, for they went careering on, and left the poor dog to his fate.

Gobaly was at his side in a moment, patting his shaggy black head, calling him "poor doggie" and "good doggie," and trying to discover how badly he was hurt. He came to the conclusion, after a thorough examination, that his leg was either broken or badly sprained,—and Gobaly was a judge of such things. He had once doctored a rooster's lame leg, and though the rooster was never again able to mount a fence, and crowed with diminished energy, he was still able to cheer his heart by fighting the three other roosters all at once, and was likely to escape the dinner-pot for a long time to come, though his gait was no longer lordly. Gobaly had also successfully treated a kitten with a sprained ankle—to say nothing of one whose tail the gobbler had nipped off. And he had seen the doctor in the village set a puppy's leg, and had carefully watched the operation.

He helped the dog along toward the house—and it was well that he was a strong and sturdy little fellow or he could not have done it—and managed at last to get the poor creature, unobserved, into the wood-shed. He was very much afraid that Mrs. Pynchum, if she should see him, would order him to leave the dog in the road, and he knew it would not do to carry him in beside the kitchen fire, as he wanted to, for Mrs. Pynchum never wanted "a dirty dog in her clean house."

Gobaly found it hard to decide whether the bone was broken or only out of place, but he made a sort of a splint, such as he had seen the doctor use upon the puppy's leg, and then wound soft cloths, wet with liniment, about it, and the dog certainly seemed relieved, and licked Gobaly's hand, and looked at him with grateful eyes.

He ventured into the house after a while, and beckoned to Methuselah to come out to the woodshed.

Methuselah was convinced that Santa Claus had sent the dog to them as a Christmas present, and his delight was unbounded.

"Of course, Santa Claus must have sent him, or why would he have come down this lonely road all by himself? And you will cure him" (Methuselah thought there was little that Gobaly couldn't do if he tried), "and perhaps she will let us keep him!"

But a sudden recollection had struck Gobaly. The dog had been carrying a basket in his mouth; there might be something in it that would tell where he came from.

Though the dog's appearance was mysterious, Gobaly was not so ready as Methuselah to accept the Santa Claus theory.

He ran out and found the basket, half buried in the snow, where it had fallen from the dog's mouth. There were several letters and papers in it addressed to "Dr. Carruthers, care of Richard Thorndike, Esq."

Dr. Carruthers was the famous New York physician who was visiting Squire Thorndike! Gobaly had heard the people in the village talking about him. The dog probably belonged to him, and had been sent to the post-office for his letters.

Although he had not really believed that Santa Claus sent the dog, Gobaly did feel a pang of disappointment that they must part with him so soon. But then Mrs. Pynchum would probably not have allowed them to keep him, anyhow, and she might have had him shot because his leg was hurt. That thought consoled Gobaly, and having obtained Mrs. Pynchum's permission to carry him to his master,—which was readily given, since it was the easiest way to get rid of the dog,—he put a very large box, with a bed in it made of straw and soft cloth, upon his sled, and then lifted the dog gently into the box. The dog whined with pain when he was moved, but still licked Gobaly's hand, as if he understood that he was his friend and did not mean to hurt him.

Methuselah stood in the shed door, and looked after them, weeping, sadly making up his mind that Santa Claus was proud and would never come to the poor-house.

Gobaly had never been even inside Squire Thorndike's gate before, and he went up to one of the back doors with fear and trembling; the servants at Squire Thorndike's were said to be "stuck-up," and they might not be very civil

to “town’s poor.” But at the sight of the dog they raised a great cry, and at once ushered Gobaly into the presence of Squire Thorndike and Dr. Carruthers, that he might tell them all he knew about the accident.

Dr. Carruthers was a big, jolly-looking man, with white hair and a long white beard, just like pictures of Santa Claus. Gobaly was sure that Methuselah would think he was Santa Claus if he could see him. He evidently felt very sorry about the dog’s accident, and pitied him and petted him as if he were a baby; Gobaly, who had never had so much petting in his whole life, thought the dog ought to forget all about his leg.

And then he suddenly turned to Gobaly and asked him who set the leg. Gobaly answered, modestly, that he “fixed it as well as he could because there wasn’t anybody else around.”

“How did you know how?” asked the doctor. And Gobaly related his experiences with the rooster and the kitten and the puppy. Dr. Carruthers looked at him steadily out of a pair of eyes that were very sharp, although very kind. Then he turned to Squire Thorndike and said “an uncommon boy.” Squire Thorndike answered, and they talked together in a low tone, casting an occasional glance at Gobaly.

How Gobaly’s ears did burn! He wondered what Squire Thorndike knew about him, and he thought of every prank he ever had played in his life. Gobaly was an unusually good boy, but he had played a few pranks,—being a boy,—and he thought they were a great deal worse than they really were, because Mrs. Pynchum said so. And he imagined that Dr. Carruthers was hearing all about them, and would presently turn round and say that such a bad boy had no right to touch his dog, and that such conduct was just what he should expect of “town’s poor.” But instead of that, after several minutes’ conversation with Squire Thorndike, he turned to Gobaly, and said:

“I want an office-boy, and I think you are just the boy to suit me. How would you like to come and live with me, and perhaps, one of these days, be a doctor yourself?”

Gobaly caught his breath.

To go away from Mrs. Pynchum; not to be “town’s poor” any more; to learn to be a doctor! He had said once in Mrs. Pynchum’s hearing that he wanted to be a doctor when he grew up, and she had said, sneeringly, that “town’s poor weren’t very likely to get a chance to learn to be doctors.”

And now the chance had come to him!

Gobaly thought it seemed too much like heaven to be anything that could happen to a mortal boy!

“Well, would you like to go?” asked the doctor again, as Gobaly could find no words to answer.

“Would I, sir? Wouldn’t I!” said Gobaly, with a radiant face.

“Well, then, I will make an arrangement with the selectmen—which I have no doubt it will be easy to do—and will take you home with me to-morrow night,” said the good doctor.

But the brightness had suddenly faded from Gobaly’s face. He stood with his hands thrust into his trousers pockets, gazing irresolutely at the carpet.

But it was not the carpet that Gobaly saw; it might as well have been the yellow paint of the poor-house floors for all that he noticed of its luxurious pile and beautiful colors. It was “Thusely’s pale, pinched little face that he saw! It had risen before him even while the doctor was speaking. If he went away, who would take care of “Thusely? And “Thusely’s heart would be broken.

“I can’t go, sir; I forgot. No—no—I can’t go!” said Gobaly.

Oh, what a lump there was in his throat!

He had swallowed many a lump for “Thusely’s sake, but that was the very biggest one!

And then he turned and ran out of the house, without any ceremony. He knew it was rude, but that lump wouldn’t stay down, and though he might be called “town’s poor,” he wasn’t going to be called a cry-baby!

And home he ran, as fast as his legs would carry him.

That night something very unusual happened. Mrs. Pynchum went to the village to a Christmas festival. She went before dark, and the spirits of everybody in the poor-house rose as soon as she was out of sight. Mr. Pynchum piled great logs upon the fire-place, till there was such a roaring fire as had not been seen there for many a long day; and he told Joe Golightly and Gobaly to go down cellar and bring up as many apples as they wanted to, and he found the key of the closet where the bag of nuts was kept! And Sandy Gooding brought out some fine pop-corn that he had saved up; and Joe Golightly brought out his violin, which, though some of its strings were broken and its voice was a little cracked and wheezy, could yet cheer one up wonderfully with “Bonnie Dundee” and “The Campbells are Coming.” Everybody was merry,—although there was no Christmas-tree, and nobody had a present except “Thusely, who had a big red peppermint-drop that Gobaly bought him with a penny hoarded for six weeks—and it would have been a very pleasant evening if there had not been one great drawback. Mrs. Pynchum had a way of pouncing upon people when they least expected her. If a window rattled or a mouse stirred in the wall, a hush fell upon the mirth, and everybody shrank with dread. It would be so like Mrs. Pynchum to suspect that they were having a good time, and turn back to put a stop to it before she had fairly reached the festival!

Just as they had poured out a popperful of corn,—popped out so big and white that it would do you good to see it,—and Uncle Sim was clearing his throat to begin a story, there came a loud knock at the door. Everybody

jumped. Mr. Pynchum and Sandy began to cram the apples into their pockets, and thrust the corn popper into the closet, and Joe hid his violin under his coat-tails. It took them all fully two minutes to remember that Mrs. Pynchum never knocked.

Mr. Pynchum sat down again, and said, in a tone of surprise, as if he had not been in the least agitated:

“What is the matter with you all? Gobaly, open the door.”

Gobaly opened the door, and who should be there but Squire Thorndike and the city doctor!

The moment Thusely saw Dr. Carruthers he called out “Santa Claus!” And the big doctor laughed, and took a great package of candy out of his pocket and gave it to Thusely.

After that it was of no use for Gobaly to whisper, “The dog gentleman!” in Thusely’s ear; he couldn’t think it was anybody but Santa Claus.

“I’m so glad you’ve come!” he said, confidentially. “And you look just like your picture. And I don’t see why you never came before, for you don’t seem proud. And we aren’t such very bad boys; anyway, Gobaly isn’t. Don’t you believe what Mrs. Pynchum tells you!—*Will* you?”

The doctor laughed, and said he was getting to be an old fellow, and the snow was deep, and it was hard for him to get about; but he was sorry he hadn’t come before, for he thought they did look like good boys. Then he asked Methuselah about his lameness and the pain in his side, and said he ought to be sent to a certain hospital in New York, where he might be cured. And then he asked if he had no relatives or friends.

“I’ve got Gobaly,” said Thusely.

The doctor turned and looked sharply at Gobaly.

“Is he the reason why you wouldn’t go with me?” he asked.

“He’s such a little chap, and I ‘m all he’s got,” said Gobaly.

The doctor took out his handkerchief and said it was bad weather for colds.

“Suppose I take him, too?” said he.

This time the lump in his throat fairly got the better of Gobaly!

But Thusely clapped his hands for joy. He didn’t understand what was to happen, only that Santa Claus was to take him somewhere with Gobaly; and one thing that Thusely was sure of was that he wanted to go wherever Gobaly went. And he kept saying:

“I told you that Santa Claus sent the dog,—now, didn’t I, Gobaly?”

Methuselah went to the hospital and was cured, and Gobaly—well, if I should tell you his name, you might say that you had heard of him as a famous surgeon-doctor. I think it is probable that he could now make a lame rooster or a kitten with a sprained ankle just as good as new, and I am sure he wouldn’t be

above trying; for he has a heart big enough to sympathize with any creature that suffers.

There is at least one person in the world who will agree with me, and that is a gentleman who was once a miserable little cripple in a poor-house, and was called Methuselah.