

Three of a Trade;

Or, Red Little Kriss Kringle

By Fitz-James O'Brien

The city was muffled in snow, and looked as calm and pale and stately as a queen in her ermine robes. It was night, and the tinkling of innumerable sleigh-bells made the frosty air musical. The sleighs themselves sped silently through the streets, painted blackly against the white snow as they passed, like so many phantoms winging their way to a festival on the Brocken Mountains.

It was late, for the corner groceries were shut. The last draught of poison had been drained over the counter. The last victim had staggered home to his trembling wife. The red, unwholesome light that flared over the door had been extinguished, and the bar-keeper was snoring in his bed behind the flour-barrels.

In the bleak shelter afforded by the projecting wooden awning of one of the corner groceries in Greenwich Street, close to where that thoroughfare nears the river, and huddled up against the side of the large coal-bin that stood hasped and padlocked on one side of the entrance, two little figures were visible in the dim glimmer of the night. Two little children they were, sitting with their cold arms embracing each other, their chill cheeks pressed together, and their large, weary eyes looking out hungrily into the blank street.

Down by the wharves they saw the tall, slender masts of ships piercing the sky like the seined lances of some band of gigantic Cossacks. Among the black hulls, a few late lights still shone, and the air rang occasionally with the voice of a drunken sailor, who, from some friendly doorstep, where he had involuntarily cast anchor, chanted his experiences of a young West Indian lady of color, who rejoiced in the horticultural name of Nancy Banana.

Presently a mystic music seemed to fall from the arched skies upon the city. It was the chimes from old Trinity ringing the Old Year out and the New Year in. The thrilling notes of the changes following each other in measured flow, vibrated through the air like music made by the feet of marching angels. They jubilantly seemed to scale the slope of heaven. The wild melodious clangor floated over the great silent city. Myriads of aerial Moors, clashing their cymbals, seemed to march over the house-tops. The clock was trembling on the stroke of twelve, and Time had one foot already in the territories of the New Year.

"Tip, listen to the bells," said one of the two children, that were huddled beneath the grocery awning, speaking in a faint, though clear voice, like a bell heard in a fog, "listen. It is time for Kriss Kringle to come."

Tip's cold little lips opened, and nothing issued therefrom but a low, plaintive "I'm hungry, Binnie."

"So am I," said Binnie, with a sort of far-off cheeriness, as if his heart was at a considerable distance, and could communicate only very faintly. "But, let us wait. Perhaps Kriss Kringle will bring us something nice. What would you like most, Tip?"

"Coffee and cakes wouldn't be bad," said Tip, hesitatingly, as if rather afraid of the consequences if he allowed his imagination to run away with him.

"Or a plate of roast beef, rare, with potatoes and peach pie," suggested the more reckless Binnie, "just such as mother used to give us on Sunday. Poor mother!"

"What are we going to do tomorrow, Binnie, to get some money?"

“Shovel snow off the stoops,” answered Binnie, resolutely. “We’ll go into Union Square early, and ask all around at the houses whether they want the sidewalk cleared. Some of ‘em are sure to give us a quarter; we might make fifty cents, and then wouldn’t we have a time!”

“When we were living in the country with mother what fun we used to have on New Year’s,” said poor little Tip, creeping up closer to Binnie, with a shiver, for the night was getting very cold, and a few large snowflakes commenced falling straight down from the fleecy sky, white as the manna that fell in the desert, but alas! not so nutritious.

“O golly! yes. What a good mother she was to us, and what things we used to find in the old stocking that she gave us to hang up! Kriss Kringle don’t come to us any more now that she’s dead. I wonder if he really used to come down the chimney, Tip, or if ’twas only make believe.”

“I don’t know,” said Tip, “I watched ever so many nights, but somehow I always fell asleep just before he came, and then the things got into the stocking. I used to dream, though, that I saw him. A little man with a red coat all covered with gold lace, and a long feather in his cap and a little sword by his side. And he used to smile at me, and say, ‘Tip, will you be a good boy if I put something into the stocking for you?’ and then I used to promise, and when I had promised I used to hear music sounding all through the house, a great deal finer than the music we heard when we went to the circus, Binnie; and then Kriss Kringle would take off his hat to me, and make a jump, and go clean up the chimney out of sight, like a red cricket. Ah! how cold it is, Binnie, and how hungry I am. Tell us a story.”

The wind arose in the north, and came down upon the city with a savage howl. The heavy snow-flakes fled before him into every angle and nook, like terrified white birds trying to hide themselves from some vast-winged, screaming falcon. They thrust themselves into the crevices of the windows, and between the slats of the window-blinds; they got under the sills of the doors. They left the centre of the streets, and flew madly into the gutters; they huddled themselves into the dark corner where Tip and Binnie were cowering, ran up the legs of their ragged trousers and slid down between their frail shirt-collars and their cold little necks. It was a fierce, biting, scratching wind of prey, and poor Binnie and Tip felt his talons digging into their flesh.

Just as the pair of vagrants had drawn closer together, and Binnie was trying to stop his teeth—which began to chatter—from biting in two the thread of the story that the patient little fellow was about to tell his brother, they heard a faint cry, something between a moan and a whistle, sounding close to them. Looking out into the dim twilight they beheld a dwarfish figure standing on the sidewalk, moaning and waving its arms. It seemed to be a little man about two feet high, clad in a red coat, covered with gold lace, and wearing a little cap, in which was stuck a long feather, that was bent nearly horizontal by the wind. A tiny sword, about the length of a lead-pencil, dangled at his side.

“O, Binnie,” whispered Tip, “it’s Kriss Kringle come again. I know him. He used to look exactly like that in my dream. I ain’t afraid of him. Are you?”

“Not a bit,” answered Binnie. “He looks a nice little chap. I hope he has brought us something.”

The little man on the sidewalk seemed very uneasy. He waved his long arms continually, took off his little cap every now and then with a quick jerk, as if he were making a series of abbreviated bows to the two little vagrants, and then hopped about, moaning the same shrill and extraordinary moan.

“Binnie, I think he’s cold; let us ask him to come and lie down with us and warm himself,” said Tip. “You know, in all the fairy books, if you treat a fairy well, he’s sure to give you three wishes.”

Whatever Binnie may have thought of the suggestion of warming anything by putting it close to two such little icicles as himself and his brother, the latter part of the speech seemed to strike him as containing a felicitous idea. So, bracing his chattering teeth as well as he could, he said,

“Kriss Kringle, will you come and lie down with us, and we will warm you?”

The little red-coated man made no reply to this hospitable invitation, but danced, and shivered, and moaned, and doffed his tiny cap many times in succession.

“Come, Kriss Kringle,” continued Binnie, beckoning to the dwarf, “come in out of the snow.”

“Maybe he don’t speak English, Binnie,” suggested the imaginative Tip.

This was a new view of the case, and Binnie began to consider within himself whether, by some inspiration of the moment, he might not suddenly master the particular foreign tongue with which their new friend was acquainted, when, suddenly, the little man made a swift leap and landed right in Tip’s lap.

“Why, Binnie!” cried Tip, “it’s not Kriss Kringle after all, it’s only a monkey!”

Sure enough it was a monkey: a poor shivering little Brazilian, with pleading eyes and soft, silky hands, and a countenance that seemed to tell of a life of sorrow. A bit of broken chain dangling from a belt round his waist told his story. The eternal organ in the street; the black-bearded, heartless Italian; the little switch that scored his back at home; the cruel pinches to induce politeness, when wondering schoolboys proffered their hoarded coppers; the melancholy pantomime of sprightly gratitude which was taught with blows, and performed in fear and trembling. Poor little runaway! Poor little vagrant! He seemed to know that he had found brothers in misfortune when he thrust his timid, silky paw in Binnie’s hand, and laid his little hairy face against Tip’s bosom.

The children vied with each other in attentions to the poor little wanderer. I do believe that if Tip had an apple or a chestnut at that moment, hungry as he was, he would have given it to his red little Kriss Kringle. The boys placed him between them, and tried to snuggle him up in their tattered clothes. He clung to them as if he really loved them. His little hand found its way into Tip’s shirt-bosom,—if that collection of discolored tatters which he wore beneath his jacket could be called a shirt,—and laid just over his heart. The poor vagrants kissed and fondled their pet; and, God help them! were almost happy for the time.

Meanwhile the snow drifted and drifted right under the shed where the vagrants lay. It began to pile itself up about them on all sides, and it clung to every projection of their persons. The air grew colder and colder. The wind swooped at them under the shed-still, like the wide-winged, shrieking falcon,—as if it would take them up in its talons and bear them away to its bleak nest to feed its unfledged tempests. Closer and closer the three houseless creatures drew together, until a great drowsiness fell upon them, and the sough of the storm sounded farther and farther off, and sleep and snow covered them.

Then a dream came to Binnie and Tip. Red little Kriss Kringle jumped up suddenly from his rest in their bosom, clad in the brightest finery. A wondrous white egret’s plume waved in his cap, and he wore a breastplate of diamonds. His red coat was redder than the blossoms of the wild Lobelia, and his sword was hilted with gold. Then he said to the boys, “Boys, ye have been very kind to me, and sheltered me when it was cold, so now ye shall come with me to the sweet land of the South, where ye shall idle in the sunshine for ever and ever!”

Then he led them down to the wharf near by, where, moored among the black hulls of the ships, they found a beautiful golden boat, so bright with many-colored flags that it seemed as if her tall masts had swept the rainbows from the sky. Fairy music sounded as the sails were set, and they sailed and sailed and sailed until they landed on the sweet Southern shore.

There they found strange trees with leaves of satin and fruits of gold. Wonderful birds shot like stars from bough to bough. The rivers sang like musical instruments. From the limbs of the trees trailed brilliant tapestries of orchideous flowers, which, with their roots in the air, sucked the sunlight into their secret veins, until their blossoms were covered with the splendor of Day.

Here red little Kriss Kringle led them to the foot of a huge tree covered with white flowers, and made them lie down while he fed them with fruits of a magical flavor. The sun shone cheerfully on their heads. The birds sang their pleasant songs. The huge tree rained its white blossoms on them, as they dropped off to sleep, weary with delight, until they reposed beneath a coverlet of scented snow.

When the first day of the New Year dawned, and the grocer's boy came from his bed behind the flour-barrels to take down the shutters, he saw a mound of snow close by the side of the coal-bin. He brought the shovel to take it away, and the first stroke disclosed the three little vagrants lying stark and stiff, enfolded in each other's arms.