



Santa Up Against It ~ By R.N. Wall ~

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

A LITTLE CARELESS.

THROUGH the merry crowds the man trudged endlessly up and down Broad Street, clad in a red suit with white fur trimming, his thin, tired face half hidden by false white whiskers and its paleness made ruddy with paint. As he walked along he rang a little bell and on his back he carried a bag full of toys. The sack was marked: "Santa Claus has his headquarters at Harmon's."

When Santa Claus was off duty his name was John Sloan. He had been a porter and the operator of the freight elevator at Harmon's. Along in October there had been an accident, and Sloan had been taken from the cage and sent to the hospital with a number of cracked ribs, a broken shoulder blade, and a crushed pulp of a hand. The doctors had put him in a plaster cast so that the ribs and clavicle knitted, but they couldn't do much with the hand.

Mr. Harmon was a kindly man. He didn't feel that he was to blame for the

accident; the elevator had been regularly inspected and the premiums duly paid. It was true that something had been wrong with it; Sloan had mentioned it to Mr. Jenkins, the manager, but Mr. Jenkins had been busy. And Sloan kept right on using it, which constituted contributory negligence and brought in the Employee's Liability Act and several other highly complicated things that Sloan didn't understand in the least.

Mr. Harmon had told Sloan that he was sorry he had been hurt, but that, really, he had been a little careless; he had paid Sloan's doctors' bills, and he had to have a porter with two good hands who could lift heavy cases. But because Harmon was at heart a kindly man and because Sloan could play Santa well enough with one hand and was willing, by reason of his incapacity, to work for a dollar and a quarter a day, Harmon gave him a job.

Sloan was a widower with one child, Myrtle, aged ten. While he had been a porter they had lived to the heart's wish on his sixteen weekly dollars in a four-room cottage on Oregon Hill. While not in an

exclusive neighborhood, the house was clean, and it was warm in the kitchen, and they had enough to eat; chuck roast every Sunday; they learned that there are many wonderful dishes which may be made from the remains of chuck roast.

They had been a very happy pair until that business of the elevator. Myrtle went to school and helped to keep house. She was bright and large for her age and in a year or so she would be big enough to look fourteen and get a place in Harmon's basement and ten dollars a week. Then the Sloans would have been plutocrats; they might have had chicken once in a while. But all that had been a dream.

Children flocked about Santa this afternoon, the little ones shy and wonderstruck; the older ones eager, curious, just a little doubtful. Sloan loved it; he loved children. He encouraged the bashful ones, joked with the merry ones, had a neat answer for the precocious ones who jeered.

He would have been truly happy but for one thing. He could forget the pain in his chest and the smart where his hand had been; he didn't mind standing all day, nor his cold feet, nor his feebleness; all these things he could forget in laughing with the children who followed him in a swarm.

What bit Sloan's heart was that he couldn't see where, in all this welter of wonderful toys, Myrtle's Christmas was coming from. His dollar and a quarter a day just kept him alive. Sloan had saved nothing against a rainy day, and now he was in a cloud-burst without an umbrella. He and Myrtle had lived sumptuously on chuck roast without a thought of the morrow and now Sloan did not dare let himself think of the child's Christmas. In his present role it was not easy to forget either Christmas or what would happen to them afterward.

John Sloan knew what it was for a man

with two hands to be out of work in mid-winter. He stepped more briskly and chattered more loudly to the children to push back that black horror, but the thought of Myrtle's empty Christmas stocking he could not drive away.

It had occurred to Sloan that he might hold out a toy or two from the sack on his back, but he remembered little Miss Lacy, in the toy department, who had tried to smuggle out a small doll the year before. He had seen Miss Lacy on the street that very week. No, they had not sent her to jail, for Harmon was a kindly man; yet it had been in the papers, and they might better have sent her to the chair, Sloan had thought, when he saw her, with his prim, old-fashioned ideas.

Sloan was muddling over ways and means for perhaps the thousandth time when he heard somebody shout: "Stop thief!" The orderly progress of the crowd was broken; persons jostled one another to make way for a slender little man with sharp features and furtive eyes, who writhed in and out through the crowd. The darting man careened sharply against Sloan, staggered, clung for a moment to Sloan's pack, and slid away. As the man twisted off, he raised his head and his shifty eyes met Sloan's with a quick look that held both menace and appeal. Sloan wondered what the fellow meant.

CHAPTER II.

A MYSTERIOUS WINK.

IN sharp pursuit came a pompous, purple-faced, pop-eyed gentleman in a frock coat and silk hat, who continued to bellow "Stop thief!" at the top of his voice. With one hand he waved a gold-headed cane, and with the other he dragged a fat, overdressed little girl whose eyes, as she squealed, stuck out like plums. Sloan

knew the purple gentleman as Mr. Cranch, president of the Second National Bank.

Then the big traffic officer from the center of the street forced his way into the heaving mass, hurling his heavy body in the method policemen are taught, so that the crowd broke away on each side before him.

“What’s the row?” the officer wanted to know.

“That man grabbed my pocketbook!” screamed the purple gentleman, and pointed toward the scurrying, twisting man who had dashed against Sloan. “Arrest him, officer!”

Easier said than done, but luck was with the police this time. Another officer headed off the fugitive, caught him by the collar of his coat and pulled it down over the man’s shoulder so that his arms were pinioned. The crowd surged about the group, and upon its edge was Sloan, his heart beating fast.

“What about it?” the traffic policeman thundered as he swung the captive around. “Did ye swipe the gemmun’s leather?”

“Naw!” answered the little man, his restless eyes darting about.

“What was ye runnin’ for, then?”

“I gotta right t’ run if I wanta. I ain’t done nuthin’.”

“He did take it,” panted the pompous gentleman. “I was pointing out Santa Claus to my granddaughter, officer, and I felt this man close beside me. At the same time, he must have snatched my pocketbook. It’s gone.”

“Did ye see him take it?” demanded the traffic policeman.

“No-o—that is, I didn’t exactly see him, but I know he did take it. He was close to me; I saw him run. And it’s gone!”

“What’s all this?” gruffly asked a thick-set man with a reddish mustache and a black derby who shouldered past Sloan.

“Right in your line, Duffy,” answered the uniformed officer. “This gemmun claims this guy copped his poke. This here’s a plain-clothes man—a detective,” he explained to the banker.

“Huh,” the detective grunted, “you collared the right man, all right. I know him—’Joe the Dip.’ He’s from New York, but he’s worked this town before.”

Duffy grabbed the man roughly by the shoulder and shook him fiercely. “Come across, Joe,” he snarled. “We got the goods on you this time. Where’s the leather?”

“I ain’t touched nobody,” protested the little man. “I was rubberin’ at Santy alongside this old gent an’ somebody started shovin’ an’ I fell agin’ him. Frisk me, if you want to!” he spat out. “I tell you, I ain’t turned a trick in this town. I’m just moochin’ along South—makin’ an honest day’s wages when I can an’ pullin’ in my belt when I can’t.”

“You look him over, Tom,” said the traffic officer. “The street’s in a snarl; I gotta straighten it out.”

“All right,” said the detective, sliding his thick fingers down the arm of the accused. “Come along, mister, and if this dip has anything of yours on him, we’ll get it. Scatter the crowd, Bill.”

All this Sloan had watched in a daze. He waited while the detective, the crook, and the gentleman with his granddaughter entered the drug store on the corner. Sloan walked nervously a little way up the street, walked back again, and paused to peer over the heads of the spectators who had their noses against the drugstore window. In a few minutes the party came out, the purple gentleman protesting, the detective imperturbable, the rat-faced man sneeringly triumphant. As the accused caught Sloan’s eye he gave him a sharp look filled with meaning. Again Sloan wondered.

The gentleman stalked away, violently indignant, jerking along the fat little girl, who wailed unheeded. The detective let go the prisoner's arm. Sloan heard him say:

"Now, Joe, I wouldn't bet that you weren't in on this play. Likely you got the coin and slipped it to a stall. Don't think for a minute you can put my eye out. I could vag you and get you thirty days on suspish, but I dunno why the city should board you. You just fade out of town. If I see you here after twenty-four hours, you get a nice warm job making small ones out of big ones on the pile. Get me?"

"Aw, I get you all right," sneered Joe. "You fat bulls gotta throw a front t' keep your jobs. You ain't got nuthin' on me, but I'll move. I don't like yer town!"

He was gone into the crowd, but not until he had grinned at Sloan, and brought his right eyelids together in an almost imperceptible wink.

CHAPTER III.

BEYOND HIS DREAMS.

WHEN the whistles blew for six o'clock, Sloan trudged wearily around to the rear of Harmon's and into the dressing room, where he slipped off his pack, and began to take out the toys as usual. He found something that was not a toy. Instinctively he jammed it into his pocket. Then he removed his costume, scrubbed the paint from his face with his one good hand, and started home.

It was slushy and bitter cold. Sloan, not possessed of an overcoat, felt doubly cold after taking off his warm, fur-trimmed costume of red flannel. He would have been glad to wear it to and from work, but Santa Claus would have made too startling a figure on Oregon Hill, where the saint is seldom seen. But tonight, Sloan hardly felt the weather,

although his bad arm was numb and his cough bothered him some.

What bothered him more was the dilemma into which that thing he found in the bag had plunged him. He had something in his pocket that he had not stolen; something taken from his pack that he had not placed there; something that had not been in it that morning. The poor old chap tried to make believe that Providence had dropped it in his pack for Myrtle's Christmas present.

So he scuffled through the slush, with frequent furtive looks over his shoulder, trying, in his confused way, to think, while every now and then that clear, vital question pierced the fog of his maundering: "Are you a thief?"

The snow had been swept from the front of the house in which Sloan lived. He stamped his cold feet on the clean asphalt and clumped up the stairs, trying to bring to his face the usual jovial look with which he forced himself to greet Myrtle every night. There was a scurry of feet within, the door was thrust open and quickly closed behind him and Myrtle threw herself into his arms.

Her bright little face was flushed from bending over the kitchen stove, and the big gingham apron which she wore down to her shoe tops gave her a quaint, old-fashioned look. She was thin, and her big eyes looked hungry, but they were very loving, and she hugged her father hard as she led him through the dank hall to the kitchen where the one fire did double duty for warmth and cookery.

"What's for your hungry man tonight?" asked Sloan, and lifted the lid of the pot upon the stove. "Beans again?"

"Yes, daddy; nice hot beans."

"Aren't you getting sick of beans, Myrtle?"

"A little," the girl admitted.

"I wonder what Banker Cranch is having for supper," Sloan meditated aloud, a distant look in his eyes. "Turkey and beefsteak and oysters and ice cream and cake, I reckon."

"Why?" asked the child in surprise.

"Oh, nothing," said Sloan. "I just wondered. I'll slip upstairs a minute, while you dish up the beans."

Upstairs he went into one of the two little rooms, drew down the shades, and lighted the gas. With a stealthy hand and furtive looks about the empty room, as if he could not make certain that he was alone, he drew out the pocketbook. He shook from head to feet as he opened it. It was filled with crisp new notes that Cranch had obtained from his teller for his Christmas shopping—ten, twenty, forty, fifty; one hundred, two hundred; two hundred and fifty dollars! Sloan had never in his life held so much money in his hand—that single trembling hand.

He put the notes back and drove the wallet deep down in an inner pocket. He hardly knew what he was doing. He turned out the light, butted into the door in the darkness, and groped his way downstairs.

CHAPTER IV.

JUST A WORD?

MYRTLE had the beans on the table. Their steaming scent turned Sloan sick. How tired he was of beans, beans, beans! He wanted to snatch up the dish and hurl it through the window. And Myrtle, how thin she was! She ought to have better, more varied food. And her poor clothes, all mended and patched! She needed a new dress; she would show it off to better advantage than Banker Cranch's pop-eyed granddaughter. And books to read! She was so bright and eager to learn. Oh, Heaven, it wasn't fair!

"What's the matter, papa?" Myrtle asked, as she heaped his plate. "Don't you feel well to-night?"

"Yes—no—oh, not very," Sloan muttered, trying to fix his attention on his plate and to steady his whirling thoughts. He pushed the beans away.

"I can't eat to-night, child," he said. "Reckon I'll try a smoke instead." He sat down by the stove, filled his old brier, and vainly tried to get consolation from it.

Myrtle watched him in dismay. She hurried through her own supper; perhaps beans had lost their savor for her, too. She cleared the table briskly, giving her father a little loving pat now and then as she passed. Did he have a pain anywhere? Did his chest hurt him? Was he tired out after his long day in the snow? Should she fix him some medicine? No, they hadn't any, but she could run around to the drug store and get some. Mr. Fay would trust them. He knew they were honest and would pay in time.

Sloan started as though he had been shot. Honest, were they? Well, they had been, up to now. Honest? Was it just a word? No, it wasn't. It was something deeper, something ingrained in the fiber of him, handed down—something that he had to be to face the girl before him.

It suddenly came to Sloan that he couldn't listen to Myrtle's prayers at his knee that night with Banker Cranch's money in his pocket. He knocked out his pipe, put on again the sodden shoes steaming under the stove, and took down his old thin overcoat. Myrtle regarded him in amazement.

"Oh, daddy! You're not going out to-night? You must be tired and you don't look well."

"I got to," mumbled Sloan.

"Why?"

"I got to see a man."

"It's so lonely when you go out at night," the child pleaded.

"I got to go, Myrtle," her father insisted. "I won't be long and maybe I'll bring you something nice."

He kissed Myrtle and went out into the windy darkness, bent upon returning the pocketbook to its owner. It held two hundred and fifty dollars. Sloan's heart leaped with hope. Maybe Cranch would give him one of those crisp twenties; but then, he must have many calls upon him; perhaps he would think five dollars enough. Well, he could get Myrtle some dandy things for five dollars.

First, a very small chicken for Christmas dinner. Turkey, of course, was out of the question, but how good chicken would taste! They would pull the wishbone together and then Sloan would bring out the things he was going to buy for Myrtle. The dinner could be compassed for two dollars; that would leave more than enough for one of those twenty-five cent books at Harmon's, of box of candy, a ribbon for Myrtle's hair, and perhaps a blue bead necklace.

Sloan shambled up the broad stone steps of Mr. Cranch's home in Franklin Street, his way lighted by the soft glow of the electric dome in the roof of the porch. He was very happy; his burden of guilt had fallen away and he was full of pleasant anticipation. Mr. Cranch would be pleased with his honesty; he would see what a trustworthy man Sloan was; he might even offer him a post as watchman at the bank. In the splendor of this vision Sloan stood agape and beaming, as the door opened to his ring.

The fat butler frowned his disgust at the shabby figure Sloan made on the splendid porch.

"Mr. Cranch doesn't give money at the door," he said sharply, and made to close it.

"I—I'm not begging," stammered Sloan, coming to earth. "I came to bring back something he lost to-day."

"Oh, did you?" sneered the butler. "Give it to me and I'll take it to him. We're having a party, and Mr. Cranch has no time to bother with you."

"You tell Mr. Cranch I found his pocketbook and that I won't give it to anyone but him," insisted Sloan.

"Wait outside, then," snapped the butler, and slammed the door, shutting out from Sloan the genial warmth and laughter and music within. He stood for several minutes on the cold porch, disturbed by the butler's scorn, but hugging the thought that Cranch himself would be just and kind.

The door opened again, and the pompous banker stood there, the fat butler at his back. Cranch was in evening clothes; his face was more purple than ever, after his hearty dinner, and his protuberant eyes glared fiercely over his bristly mustache at Sloan.

"What's this? What's this?" he said pettishly, shivering as the cold wind struck his face.

"My name is Sloan. I work for Harmon's, dressed up like Santa Claus and—"

"Well, well," snapped the banker.

"This afternoon your pocket was picked and the thief jammed the wallet into my sack, that I carry toys in, you know, and I—"

"Well, where is it?"

"Here, sir," said Sloan, and held out the wallet.

The banker snatched it and leafed through the bills with a practiced hand. "I knew that rascal took it," growled Cranch, "but the mutton-witted detective couldn't find it. In your sack, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

“Took you quite a while to bring it back,” commented the banker, looking up suddenly. “When did you find it?”

“Why—er—when I knocked off work.”

“So?” sneered the banker. “I wonder if you were in league with the man who took it? Decided it would pay you better to bring it back than to run the risk of detection?”

“I never saw the man before,” Sloan protested.

The banker looked incredulous. “Expect something for your honesty, though, I suppose? That’s the way it is to-day; a man has to be rewarded for being commonly honest.”

Hot words rose to Sloan’s lips, but he remembered Myrtle and the chicken and the other things and stood silent, his eyes on the porch floor, shuffling his feet.

The banker’s face was the picture of suspicion, but it was the Christmas season, and Cranch could afford to be charitable. He fumbled in his pocket, drew out a little silver, selected a half-dollar and thrust it out to Sloan.

“Here you are, my man,” he grumbled. “Don’t drink it up.”

The door was shut in Sloan’s face before he could recover. He uttered an imprecation and dashed the half-dollar into the street. It took him ten minutes to find it again.

CHAPTER V.

QUESTION OF SPEED.

IT was a very cold, sick and tired Santa Claus that stumbled up the stairs of John Sloan’s home a little later. Myrtle ran to let him in as he fumbled with numb fist at the keyhole.

“Oh, papa,” she cried excitedly, “there’s such a funny man here to see you!”

“Who is he?” asked Sloan dully.

“I don’t know,” the girl answered. “I didn’t like his looks at first, but he’s been real nice.”

Sloan followed his daughter to the kitchen. In a chair by the fire, his feet on the oven ledge, sat Joe the Dip, quite at his ease.

“Well, old pal,” was his greeting to Sloan, which he accompanied with a ratlike grin, “we meet again!”

“What do you want?” said Sloan coldly.

“Why, pal, that ain’t no way to talk,” returned the pickpocket pleasantly. He waved an airy hand toward Myrtle. “Run along, kiddie; yer pa an’ I got some business to talk.”

“Yes, Myrtle, it’s getting bedtime,” said her father. “Well?” he said to his guest, when the girl had gone.

“Where’s the leather?” queried the pickpocket. “Pretty soft, wa’n’t it?” He showed his blackened teeth in an unwholesome grin. “I took a quick think when I slammed the bundle in your pouch, an’ I knew it was safe as in a church. Come across with it an’ we’ll split fifty-fifty.”

“I haven’t got it,” said Sloan.

“What?” The man sprang to his feet, looking more verminlike than ever. “Wha’d’yer mean? Say, wha’d’yer do wit’ it?”

“I just took it back to Cranch—the man you robbed,” said Sloan. A great sob rose from his shattered breast and ended in a series of terrible, racking coughs.

Joe the Dip sat down and looked Sloan over with a face in which anger struggled with amazement. “What in blazes did ye do that fur?” he said at last.

“Because I’m an honest man—and a fool,” groaned Sloan, when he could master his cough. “I’ve been poor all my life, but I never took anything yet that didn’t belong to me. Lord knows I wanted to keep that money. Here we are, Myrtle and I, with the coal most gone, nothing to eat but beans, and me making a dollar and a quarter a day. I was tempted to keep it, but when I come home and faced the girl—I couldn’t.”

“So you was wise it was there all the time?”

“No, not until I found it in my bag when I got back to Harmon’s.”

For a moment the Dip was silent, staring at the floor. Then he looked up. “Say, I got some respect for a guy that sticks by what he thinks is right. It must have come hard t’give that coin up, in yer fix, eh, bo?” He looked around the bare room and shivered slightly. The fire was getting low.

“It did,” said Sloan grimly, “and what hurt worst was that I wanted to give Myrtle some Christmas—and now—she won’t have any, that’s all.”

“Didn’t the old geezer cough up a reward?”

“Yes,” said Sloan, with a bitter laugh, and pulled out the half dollar. “This.”

“What! The whole of a half? Say, that bird’s generous. But let’s talk about somethin’ pleasant, pard. That’s a nice kid you got. She was tellin’ me how you got hurt, an’ all. I had a girl myself, wunst. Yep. Got hitched out West wit’ a dish-slinger. She wa’n’t no good. She quit me, when our girl was about five. I didn’t

know nuthin’ about bringin’ up a girl. I tried—but she just faded out. Yep. Well, bo,” he went on after a moment of silence, “I gotta be moochin’. We all got our troubles. Don’t lose yer grip.”

Sloan followed the crook to the door. The man turned up his coat-collar, shivered a bit, cleared his throat and said:

“Gittin’ out for Orleans t’night. Too cold here. Say, I took a fancy t’ yer kid. She’s a fine girl; I’d like to give her something for Christmas if I could.” In the dimly lighted hall Sloan could see that the visitor was awkwardly holding out his hand. “Good-by,” he said, and went down the stairs. Halfway down the first flight he turned and called back: “Don’t worry about how I got it. I hocked my overcoat this morning. I won’t need it; I’m going South.”

Back in the lighted room, Sloan found Myrtle there. She stared at something sticking out of the top pocket of his coat. It was a clean five-dollar Federal Reserve Bank note, neatly folded. The man so expert in the art of taking things out of pockets was evidently just as adept in the art of slipping them in unobserved.

Sloan ran to the window and threw up the sash. He saw his visitor emerging from the door below. “Look here!” he called down to him, “I can’t take this—your last dollar. I’m going to come down and give it back to you.”

“Right-o!” called back Joe the Dip; “but you’ve got to catch me first,” and he sprinted up the street and around the corner.