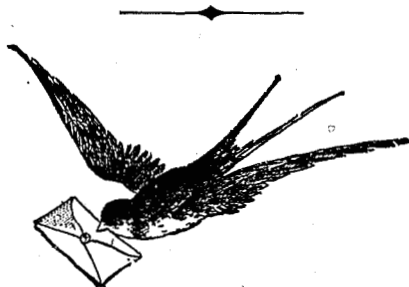


Our visitors, of course, declared that the *menu* was entirely to their mind, and I comforted myself with the remembrance that there was a Christmas pudding and mince pies in the background. As the sausages were disappearing a horrible thought struck me, however. The *cook* knew how the pudding should be treated, but how about the kitchen boys? Suppose my cherished pudding appeared in the form of soup. It was just as likely as not!

With many misgivings I awaited its appearance. My spirits sank to zero as a boy appeared with a vegetable dish, and there was no sign of a pudding. "What have you got there?" I asked. "*Cahey*," said the boy triumphantly, and whisked off the cover, when to my untold relief the pudding appeared intact, and was speedily demolished and pronounced excellent. The meal ended with fruit and coffee, so things might have been worse.

I thought my experience as to the cook was unique, but I heard afterwards that nearly every cook in the town had absented himself from his duties that evening, and that the Consul-General, who had given a dinner party in honour of the day, had to descend to the kitchen and prepare the meal himself.

Well, after a longer residence abroad, one learns to take these *contretemps* serenely and as part of the day's work. At all events let us hope they are useful in teaching one adaptability, and resourcefulness in emergencies. So ended our Christmas Day. Next year I was wiser, and the cook did not get a Christmas-box until Christmas was well over.



Letter from Holland.

SANTA CLAUS IN THE WILHELMINA HOSPITAL AT AMSTERDAM.

Do you know Santa Claus, our dear old saint, the patron of our blessed Amsterdam, the mild and charitable bishop, the beloved friend of all Dutch children? Merry Christmas, with its richly-decorated and illuminated fir-tree, has as yet been impotent to replace in our affections the good-humoured, jestful, patient, clement "*Sint Nicolaas*," the Spanish bishop, coming from Spain to reward the diligent and obedient children, and to punish the naughty ones—Santa Claus, in fact Odin, metamorphosed, riding on his white horse to bring blessings and happiness into the dwelling-places of men. Santa Claus, the bishop of Myra, the symbol of benevolence and generosity, the incarnation of the feeling of solidarity evinced by the rich towards their poorer brethren. In the end of November, and in the early days of December, when the good bishop has safely arrived in Holland—he

always travels by steamer—he rides over the roofs, seated on the back of his white horse. He peeps through the chimneys into the rooms and sees all that happens there, and hears all that is spoken. And he has a sharp sight and a fine ear, dear old *Sinterklaas*! He notes all the peccadilloes of his youthful friends. Woe to those children that have a long list of mischief in their book of sins! A rod will be their share, instead of the realization of their dearest wishes. Santa Claus, however, is a man of a long and ripe experience, and, in consequence, merciful and long-suffering, especially where he has to do with very young sinners. The popularity in which he rejoices is owed greatly to these amiable traits of his character. When he is riding over the roofs and peeping through the chimneys, he listens with an attentive ear to the various longings and desires confided to him by small voices, often trembling with shyness and emotion.

Dear old saint, friend of our childhood, we greeted you with a hearty welcome and a happy smile, when you entered the church-hall of the Wilhelmina Hospital on December 5th. Hundreds of eager, young eyes, glistening with joyful expectation, looked in the direction of the entrance, when the arrival of Santa Claus was announced with due respect and emphasis. There he appeared on the threshold, the white-bearded bishop, attired in state-dress, a mitre on his reverend head, and a staff in his hand. Kindly smiling and greeting, and followed by his black servant, panting under the weight of a large basket, the contents of which made beat faster many a heart, Santa Claus stalked towards the estrade prepared for him. With clearly visible approbation, he listened to the song set up in his honour by the little patients of the Hospital, who concluded their Santa Claus hymn by many well-meant cheers. The bishop offered his thanks by a most gracious nod of his head, and then the black servant, on a hint from his master, began to strew sugar-peas, sweet-meats, &c., amongst the joyous crowd. As soon as the first excitement was over, *Sint Nicolaas* began to speak. He delivered an eloquent speech, which did not fail to make a deep impression upon the minds of his youthful audience. He told them that he had visited the Hospital many times in the course of the past week, without having been seen by one of them. And no wonder! He had not entered the wards—he had been on horseback on the roofs of the various pavilions; he had peeped through the drawn curtains and the keyholes. Santa Claus is a supernatural being, endowed with an exceedingly sharp sight—he had heard all the praises given by the Nurses to the docile patients, but also the warnings and rebukes which the Sisters had been compelled to address to the unwilling, the naughty children. He had noted the names of the former, and each of them was to be gifted with a little present.

The black servant went on unpacking the large basket, and a still larger one, lifted upon the estrade by six serviceable hands. All the children were called into the illustrious presence of *Sint Niklaas*, in order to receive from the bishop's own hands the realization of some long-cherished wish. On this occasion the inexhaustible clemency of Santa Claus was gloriously revealed, for the black sheep among the herd were not forgotten by the kind Saint, although the benevolent, but nevertheless just and earnest bishop, added to his presents a warning word to the repentant sinners. One of them, however, who had

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