

## In The Great Walled Country

Away at the northern end of the world, farther than men have ever gone with their ships and sleds, and where most people suppose that there is nothing but ice and snow, is a land full of children. It is called "The Great Walled Country" because all around the country is a great wall, hundreds of feet thick and hundreds of feet high. It is made of ice, and never melts, winter or summer. Because of this, only a small number of people from the outside world have ever found the place.

The land, as I said, is filled with children, for the people who live there never grow up.

The king and the queen, the princes and the people who work in the palace may be as old as you please, but they are children for all that. Most of the time they play with dolls and toy soldiers, and every night at seven o'clock have a bowl of bread and milk and go to bed. But they are excellent rulers, and the other children in the land are well pleased with the government.

There are all sorts of unusual things about the way they live in The Great Walled Country, but this story is only of their Christmas season. One can imagine what a fine thing their Christmas must be, so near the top of the world, with ice and snow everywhere. But this is not all. Grandfather Christmas lives just on the north side of the great wall. In fact, his house stands against the wall and would fall over if it were not for its support.

Grandfather Christmas is his name in The Great Walled Country; we call him Santa Claus here. He is the same person, and he loves the children behind the great wall of ice best of all the children in the world.

One very nice thing about having Grandfather Christmas for a neighbor is that the people in The Great Walled Country never have to buy Christmas presents to give to people. On the day before Christmas every year, Grandfather Christmas visits before he makes up his packages of presents for the rest of the world. He goes into a great forest of Christmas trees that grows just behind the king's palace and fills the trees with candy and books and toys and all sorts of good things.

When night comes, as children in all other lands are sleeping in their beds, the children of The Great Walled Country dress warmly and go to the forest to find presents for their friends. Each one goes alone, so that none of his friends can see what he has for them. And no one ever thinks of such a thing as taking anything for himself. The forest is so big that there is room for every one to walk about without meeting the people for whom he has presents, and there are always enough nice things to go around.

So Christmas time is a great holiday in that land, as it is in all the best places in the world. They have been doing it in this way for hundreds of years, and since Grandfather Christmas does not seem to grow old any faster than the children, they will probably do so for hundreds of years to come.

But there was once a time, so many years ago that they would have forgotten all about it if the story were not written in their Big Book and read to them every year, when the children in The Great Walled Country had a very strange Christmas. A visitor came to the land. He was an old man, and was the first stranger that had succeeded in getting over the wall for very many years. He looked so wise, and was so much interested in what he saw and heard, that the king asked him to the palace and treated him with great honour.

When this old man had asked about what they do at Christmas, and was told how they carried it on every year, he listened carefully. Then, looking wiser than ever, he said to the king: "That is all very

well, but I should think that children who have Grandfather Christmas for a neighbor could find a better and easier way. You tell me that on the night before Christmas you all go out to get presents to give to one another the next morning. Why take so much trouble, and act in such a round about way? Why not go out together, and every one get his own presents? That would save the trouble of handing them out again, and every one would be happier, for he could pick out just what he wanted for himself. No one can tell what you want as well as you can.”

This seemed to the king a very good idea, and he called all his advisers about him to hear it. The wise stranger talked further about his plan, and when he had finished they all agreed that they had been very foolish never to have thought of this simpler and better way of getting their Christmas presents.

“If we do this,” they said, “no one can ever say they are unhappy with what he has, or wish that someone had taken more time to find what he wanted. We will send out a notice to all the people, and always after this follow the new way.”

So the notice was sent, and the plan seemed as wise to the children of the country as it had to the king and the advisers. Everyone had at some time been a little disappointed with his Christmas presents; now there would be no danger of that.

On the night before Christmas, they always had a meeting at the palace and sang Christmas songs until the time came for going to the forest. When bell on the clock rang ten times, every one would say “I wish you a Merry Christmas!” to the person nearest him, and then they all went different ways in the forest.

On the night before this Christmas, it seemed to the king that the singing was not quite so merry as usual. And when the children spoke to one another, their eyes did not shine as excitedly as he had noticed in other years. But there could be no good reason for this, since everyone was expecting a better time than usual. So he thought no more of it.

There was only one person at the palace that night who was not pleased with the new Christmas rule. This was a little boy named Inge, who lived not far from the palace with his sister. His sister could not walk, and had to sit all day looking out of the window from her chair. Inge took care of her, and tried to make her life happy from morning till night.

Inge had always gone to the forest at Christmas and returned with his arms and pockets full of pretty things for his sister. These would keep her pleasantly entertained all the coming year. He did not mind at all that she was not able to go after presents for him. And he also had other friends who never forgot to bring back good things for him.

But now, said Inge to himself, what would his sister do? For the king had ordered that no one should bring back any presents that are not for himself, or any more than he could carry away at once. All of Inge’s friends were busy planning what they would pick for themselves, but his poor sister could not go a step toward the forest.

After thinking about it a long time, Inge decided that it would not be wrong if, instead of taking presents for himself, he took them only for her. This he would be pleased to do. After all, what did a boy who could run about and play in the snow care for presents when you compare it with a little girl who could only sit and watch others having a good time? Inge did not discuss his plan with anyone, for he was a little scared they might tell him that he must not do it.

And now the bell on the clock had rung ten times, and the children were making their way toward

the forest, in star-light that was so bright that it almost showed their shadows on the snow.

As soon as they came to the edge of the forest each one went by himself in the old way, even though now there was really no reason why they should not show what they have in their bags to one another.

Ten minutes later, if you had been in the forest, you might have seen the children standing around looking very worried with tears on their faces, and crying out that there had never been such a Christmas before. For as they looked excitedly about them in the trees, they saw nothing hanging from them that could not be seen every day in the year. They searched high and low, going farther into the forest than ever before, thinking that Grandfather Christmas might have chosen a new place this year for hanging his presents; but still no presents appeared.

The king called his advisers about him, and asked them if they knew whether anything of this kind had happened before. They could tell him nothing, and no one could guess whether Grandfather Christmas had forgotten them, or whether some terrible accident had kept him away.

As the children were coming out of the forest, tired after hours of searching, some of them met little Inge, who carried over his shoulder a bag that was so full that they could see the shapes of the things inside pushing out the sides. When he saw them he called: "Are they not beautiful things? I think Grandfather Christmas was never so good to us before."

"Why, what do you mean?" cried the children. "There are no presents in the forest."

"No presents!" said Inge. "I have my bag full of them." But he did not offer to show them, because he did not want the children to see that they were all for his little sister instead of for himself.

Then the children asked him to tell them in what part of the forest he had found his presents, and he turned back and pointed them to the place where he had been. "I left many more behind than I brought away," he said. "There they are! I can see some of the things shining on the trees even from here."

The children followed the marks left by his feet in the snow to the place where he had been, but when they got there they still saw nothing on the trees. They thought that Inge must be walking in his sleep, and dreaming that he had found presents. Perhaps he had filled his bag with nuts from the trees.

On Christmas Day there was sadness all through The Great Walled Country. But those who came to the house of Inge and his sister saw many books and dolls and beautiful toys all around the little girl's chair. When they asked where these things came from, they were told, "Why, from the Christmas-tree forest." And they went home not knowing what it could mean.

The king held a meeting in the palace, and chose five of his most trusted advisers to go and visit Grandfather Christmas to see if they could find what was the matter. In a day or two more the five men set out on their journey. They had very hard work to climb the great wall of ice that lay between their country and the place where Grandfather Christmas lived, but at last they reached the top. And when they came to the other side of the wall, they were looking down into the top of his chimney. It was not hard to go down this chimney into the house, and when they reached the bottom of it they found themselves in the very room where Grandfather Christmas lay sound asleep.

It was hard enough to wake him, for he always slept one hundred days after his Christmas work was over. It was only by turning the hands of the clock around two hundred times that they could do

anything. When the clock had rung twelve times two hundred hours, Grandfather Christmas thought it was time for his sleep to be over, and he sat up sleepily in bed.

“Oh, sir!” cried the prince who was the leader of the group, “we have come from the king of The Great Walled Country. He has sent us to ask why you forgot us this Christmas, and left no presents in the forest.”

“No presents!” said Grandfather Christmas. “I never forget anything. The presents were there. You did not see them, that’s all.”

But the prince told him that they had searched long and carefully, and in the whole forest there had not been found a thing that could be called a Christmas present.

“Really!” said Grandfather Christmas. “And did little Inge, the boy with the sister who cannot walk, find none?”

Then the prince said nothing, for they had all heard of the presents at Inge’s house, and did not know what to say about them.

“You had better go home,” said Grandfather Christmas, who now began to understand that he had been woken up too soon, “and let me finish my sleep. The presents were there, but they were never meant for children who were looking only for themselves. I am not surprised that you could not see them. Remember that not everything that wise travelers tell you is wise.” And he turned over and went to sleep again.

The five men returned to The Great Walled Country and told the king what they had heard. The king did not tell all the children of the land what Grandfather Christmas had said. But when the next December came, he sent out another notice, this one telling everyone to look for presents for others in the old way.

So that is what they have been doing ever since. And in order that they may not forget what happened, in case anyone should ever ask for another change, they have read to them every year from their Big Book the story of the time when they had no Christmas presents.