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Dramatic Publishing

A VISIT FROM ST. NICHOLAS
or
THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

by
LOWELL SWORTZELL



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THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS)

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for
Marina Maymone Siniscalchi

A VISIT FROM ST. NICHOLAS
or
THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

A Full Length Comedy
For Two Men and Four Women

CHARACTERS

MARGARET age ten or eleven
BENJAMIN age nine
CHARITY age eight
HARRIET BUTLER a holiday house guest, early 20s
FATHER (Clement Clarke Moore) in his 40s
MOTHER (Alice Moore) in her early 30s

PLACE: "Chelsea," the Moore homestead
in Manhattan, New York.

TIME: Late Christmas eve, 1822,
and early the next morning.

The action is continuous.

A VISIT FROM ST. NICHOLAS

OR

THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

SCENE: *Clement Clarke Moore's house, late Christmas Eve, 1822.*

AT RISE: *The FAMILY, except for MOTHER, is gathered in the living room, listening to FATHER finish reading a poem he wrote earlier in the day and which he is now speaking aloud for the first time. He stands by the fireplace while EVERYONE else is seated, the CHILDREN on pillows and HARRIET BUTLER sitting at a nearby table. Their rapt attention is totally focused upon FATHER who delivers the poem in a commanding voice with dramatic feeling. EVERYONE is elegantly dressed for bed, wearing colorful robes and appropriate slippers.*

FATHER. "He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,

And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk,
And laying his finger aside of his nose,
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose.
He sprang up to his sleigh, to his team gave a
whistle,

And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight,
'Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!'"

(As FATHER lowers the pages from which he has been reading, ALL applaud vigorously.)

CHARITY. Is that the end?

FATHER. It's the end of his visit, Charity, so it's the end of the poem, too.

BENJAMIN. That's why it's called "A Visit from St. Nicholas," silly.

MARGARET. Father, this is your very best poem.

FATHER (*pleased*). Why, thank you, Margaret.

MARGARET. The others are so...(*Searching for the correct word*)...serious...

FATHER. They're about serious subjects, Margaret. But you can say "boring" if you like. I won't mind.

MARGARET. I wouldn't be so cruel.

CHARITY. I would. They bore me.

FATHER (*to HARRIET*). Despite her name, Charity's my severest critic, in all things. (*He laughs*.)

CHARITY. But I love this one. Lots and lots.

BENJAMIN. Will you write some more for us?

FATHER. This was just an improvisation.

CHARITY. What does that mean? "Improvisation."

FATHER. Cousin Harriet, you're a teacher, you explain.

HARRIET. It's something that happens on the spur of the moment...quickly made up.

CHARITY. Then that's the way you should write all your poems instead of locked in your study with all your books...where we can't see you...

BENJAMIN. Charity's right, "improvisation" is best.

FATHER. But my poems are about life and death, religion and philosophy...they come from deep reading...and deep thinking...

CHARITY. That's why they put us to sleep...deep sleep.

FATHER. I must say I've never seen you so attentive as just now.

MARGARET. Because it was about something important...

CHARITY. St. Nicholas! I want to hear it again.

MARGARET. Father, would you please?

CHARITY (*excited*). Read it again! Read it again!

BENJAMIN. Please, Father!

FATHER. I will—next year.

MARGARET. Next year!

FATHER. Yes, I wrote it to be read on Christmas Eve.

CHARITY. Well, it's Christmas Eve.

FATHER. Only barely. The midnight chimes will be ringing any minute now. Remember we got ready for bed hours ago. And look, we're still up, all of us!

CHARITY. I want to stay and see St. Nicholas come down the chimney.

FATHER. You just did, young lady, in the poem.

MARGARET. Did you ever see him, Father?

FATHER (*not quite certain how to answer this and looking at HARRIET for help*). Well, I must have...to have written the poem...mustn't I?

HARRIET. And you made us see him, too, so clearly I believed he was right here in this room.

CHARITY. Dressed in red...

BENJAMIN. With a big beard...

MARGARET. And his suit trimmed in white fur.

HARRIET. You did see him! Oh, Mr. Moore, it's a wonderful poem.

FATHER. Some simple rhymes, that's all.

MARGARET. Father, this is the first time you've written anything for us. Thank you!

FATHER. You're welcome, Margaret.

HARRIET (*tentatively*). Mr. Moore...?

FATHER. Yes, Cousin Harriet.

HARRIET (*carefully feeling her way, not knowing how he will respond*). I'm wondering...if I might have a copy of the poem...to take home with me...

FATHER. Oh, no, it's just for the children...

HARRIET. But that's why I want it...for the children... the children I know in Troy...my students...

FATHER (*firmly*). I wrote it for the children in this house alone.

HARRIET. I loved it and I'm no child!

FATHER. You're just being kind...

HARRIET. I can get it published in Troy's best newspaper where everyone can read it.

FATHER (*not taking her seriously, he laughs*). No, no, no!

HARRIET. You'll be famous!

FATHER (*sharply*). No! (*Now taking her very seriously*.) That must never happen. Never! I can be famous only as a professor of classical languages. That's my profession, not as a poet for children. Do you understand?

HARRIET. Surely, it would do no harm.

FATHER (*clearly annoyed*). Cousin, it's quite out of the question!

HARRIET (*recognizing his answer as final*). I don't mean to anger you, sir, especially on Christmas Eve. Forgive me, please.

FATHER. Certainly. (*Changing the subject and returning to his normal voice*.) Now, children, where is your Mother? It's time for you to say good night.

MARGARET. She's in the dining room.

BENJAMIN. Setting the table for tomorrow's dinner.

FATHER. We need her to tuck you in.

CHARITY. Harriet will do it. Won't you, Harriet?

HARRIET. Of course. I always do when I come to visit.

CHARITY. Let Harriet do it, please.

FATHER (*to HARRIET*). Do you mind?

HARRIET. It's a pleasure, sir.

FATHER. Very well then. Now to make it easy for
Cousin Harriet, let's be certain everyone, and I mean
everyone, is in bed by the time the last bell chimes.

BENJAMIN. Does that include you and Mother?

CHARITY. You said *everyone*!

(MOTHER enters. She is in her early thirties, most attractive and self-assured. She runs the household and, usually without letting him know, FATHER as well.)

MOTHER. Does *what* include me?

FATHER. If she's willing to join in, it does.

MOTHER. Oh, dear, surely it's too late for games. We've
got to go to bed.

MARGARET. That's just it!

FATHER. Everyone must be in bed, with all lamps and
candles out, by the twelfth chime of midnight.

MOTHER. Sounds like an excellent game to me. I'm
happy to play.

FATHER. I'll fix the fire for the night. (*He works at the
fireplace.*)

HARRIET (*to MOTHER*). I'll go with the children.

MOTHER. Thank you, dear. They always do everything
you say.

CHARITY. Harriet's our favorite cousin.

MARGARET. Her visit is the best Christmas present you
could give us.