

THE HARD TIMES IN ELFLAND by Sidney Lanier

A Story of Christmas Eve.

Strange that the termagant winds should scold
The Christmas Eve so bitterly!
But Wife, and Harry the four-year-old,
Big Charley, Nimblewits, and I,

Blithe as the wind was bitter, drew
More frontward of the mighty fire,
Where wise Newfoundland Fan foreknew
The heaven that Christian dogs desire --

Stretched o'er the rug, serene and grave,
Huge nose on heavy paws reclined,
With never a drowning boy to save,
And warmth of body and peace of mind.

And, as our happy circle sat,
The fire well capp'd the company:
In grave debate or careless chat,
A right good fellow, mingled he:

He seemed as one of us to sit,
And talked of things above, below,
With flames more winsome than our wit,
And coals that burned like love aglow.

While thus our rippling discourse rolled
Smooth down the channel of the night,
We spoke of Time: thereat, one told
A parable of the Seasons' flight.

"Time was a Shepherd with four sheep.
In a certain Field he long abode.
He stood by the bars, and his flock bade leap
One at a time to the Common Road.

"And first there leapt, like bird on wing,
A lissome Lamb that played in the air.
I heard the Shepherd call him `Spring':

Oh, large-eyed, fresh and snowy fair

"He skipped the flowering Highway fast,
Hurried the hedgerows green and white,
Set maids and men a-yearning, passed
The Bend, and gamboll'd out of sight.

"And next marched forth a matron Ewe
(While Time took down a bar for her),
Udder'd so large 'twas much ado
E'en then to clear the barrier.

"Full softly shone her silken fleece
What stately time she paced along:
Each heartsome hoof-stroke wrought increase
Of sunlight, substance, seedling, song,

"In flower, in fruit, in field, in bird,
Till the great globe, rich fleck'd and pied,
Like some large peach half pinkly furred,
Turned to the sun a glowing side

"And hung in the heavenly orchard, bright,
None-such, complete.
Then, while the Ewe
Slow passed the Bend, a blur of light,
The Shepherd's face in sadness grew:

"`Summer!' he said, as one would say
A sigh in syllables. So, in haste
(For shame of Summer's long delay,
Yet gazing still what way she paced),

"He summoned Autumn, slanting down
The second bar. Thereover strode
A Wether, fleeced in burning brown,
And largely loitered down the Road.

"Far as the farmers sight his shape
Majestic moving o'er the way,
All cry `To harvest,' crush the grape,
And haul the corn and house the hay,

"Till presently, no man can say,
(So brown the woods that line that end)
If yet the brown-fleeced Wether may,

Or not, have passed beyond the Bend.

"Now turn I towards the Shepherd: lo,
An aged Ram, flapp'd, gnarly-horn'd,
With bones that crackle o'er the snow,
Rheum'd, wind-gall'd, rag-fleec'd, burr'd and thorn'd.

"Time takes the third bar off for him,
He totters down the windy lane.
'Tis Winter, still: the Bend lies dim.
O Lamb, would thou wouldst leap again!"

Those seasons out, we talked of these:
And I (with inward purpose sly
To shield my purse from Christmas trees
And stockings and wild robbery

When Hal and Nimblewits invade
My cash in Santa Claus's name)
In full the hard, hard times surveyed;
Denounced all waste as crime and shame;

Hinted that "waste" might be a term
Including skates, velocipedes,
Kites, marbles, soldiers, towers infirm,
Bows, arrows, cannon, Indian reeds,

Cap-pistols, drums, mechanic toys,
And all th' infernal host of horns
Whereby to strenuous hells of noise
Are turned the blessed Christmas morns;

Thus, roused -- those horns! -- to sacred rage,
I rose, forefinger high in air,
When Harry cried (SOME war to wage),
"Papa, is hard times ev'ywhere?"

"Maybe in Santa Claus's land
It isn't hard times none at all!"
Now, blessed Vision! to my hand
Most pat, a marvel strange did fall.

Scarce had my Harry ceased, when "Look!"
He cried, leapt up in wild alarm,
Ran to my Comrade, shelter took
Beneath the startled mother's arm.

And so was still: what time we saw
A foot hang down the fireplace! Then,
With painful scrambling scratched and raw,
Two hands that seemed like hands of men

Eased down two legs and a body through
The blazing fire, and forth there came
Before our wide and wondering view
A figure shrinking half with shame,

And half with weakness. "Sir," I said,
-- But with a mien of dignity
The seedy stranger raised his head:
"My friends, I'm Santa Claus," said he.

But oh, how changed! That rotund face
The new moon rivall'd, pale and thin;
Where once was cheek, now empty space;
Whate'er stood out, did now stand in.

His piteous legs scarce propped him up:
His arms mere sickles seemed to be:
But most o'erflowed our sorrow's cup
When that we saw -- or did not see --

His belly: we remembered how
It shook like a bowl of jelly fine:
An earthquake could not shake it now;
He HAD no belly -- not a sign.

"Yes, yes, old friends, you well may stare:
I HAVE seen better days," he said:
"But now, with shrinkage, loss and care,
Your Santa Claus scarce owns his head.

"We've had such hard, hard times this year
For goblins! Never knew the like.
All Elfland's mortgaged! And we fear
The gnomes are just about to strike.

"I once was rich, and round, and hale.
The whole world called me jolly brick;
But listen to a piteous tale.
Young Harry, -- Santa Claus is sick!

"'Twas thus: a smooth-tongued railroad man

Comes to my house and talks to me:
'I've got,' says he, 'a little plan
That suits this nineteenth century.

"Instead of driving, as you do,
Six reindeer slow from house to house,
Let's build a Grand Trunk Railway through
From here to earth's last terminus.

"We'll touch at every chimney-top
(An Elevated Track, of course),
Then, as we whisk you by, you'll drop
Each package down: just think, the force

"You'll save, the time! -- Besides, we'll make
Our millions: look you, soon we will
Compete for freights -- and then we'll take
Dame Fortune's bales of good and ill

"(Why, she's the biggest shipper, sir,
That e'er did business in this world!):
Then Death, that ceaseless Traveller,
Shall on his rounds by us be whirled.

"When ghosts return to walk with men,
We'll bring 'em cheap by steam, and fast:
We'll run a Branch to heaven! and then
We'll riot, man; for then, at last

"We'll make with heaven a contract fair
To call, each hour, from town to town,
And carry the dead folks' souls up there,
And bring the unborn babies down!

"The plan seemed fair: I gave him cash,
Nay, every penny I could raise.
My wife e'er cried, 'Tis rash, 'tis rash:
How could I know the stock-thief's ways?

"But soon I learned full well, poor fool!
My woes began, that wretched day.
The President plied me like a tool.
In lawyer's fees, and rights of way,

"Injunctions, leases, charters, I
Was meshed as in a mighty maze.

The stock ran low, the talk ran high:
Then quickly flamed the final blaze.

"With never an inch of track -- 'tis true!
The debts were large . . . the oft-told tale.
The President rolled in splendor new
-- He bought my silver at the sale.

"Yes, sold me out: we've moved away.
I've had to give up everything.
My reindeer, even, whom I . . . pray,
Excuse me" . . . here, o'er-sorrowing,

Poor Santa Claus burst into tears,
Then calmed again: "my reindeer fleet,
I gave them up: on foot, my dears,
I now must plod through snow and sleet.

"Retrenchment rules in Elfland, now;
Yes, every luxury is cut off.
-- Which, by the way, reminds me how
I caught this dreadful hacking cough:

"I cut off the tail of my Ulster furred
To make young Kris a coat of state.
That very night the storm occurred!
Thus we became the sport of Fate.

"For I was out till after one,
Surveying chimney-tops and roofs,
And planning how it could be done
Without my reindeers' bouncing hoofs.

"My dear,' says Mrs. Claus, that night
(A most superior woman she!)
'It never, never can be right
That you, deep-sunk in poverty,

"This year should leave your poor old bed,
And trot about, bent down with toys,
(There's Kris a-crying now for bread!)
To give to other people's boys.

"Since you've been out, the news arrives
The Elfs' Insurance Company's gone.
Ah, Claus, those premiums! Now, our lives

Depend on yours: thus griefs go on.

"And even while you're thus harassed,
I do believe, if out you went,
You'd go, in spite of all that's passed,
To the children of that President!"

"Oh, Charley, Harry, Nimblewits,
These eyes, that night, ne'er slept a wink.
My path seemed honeycombed with pits.
Naught could I do but think and think.

"But, with the day, my courage rose.
Ne'er shall my boys, MY boys (I cried),
When Christmas morns their eyes unclose,
Find empty stockings gaping wide!

"Then hewed and whacked and whittled I;
The wife, the girls and Kris took fire;
They spun, sewed, cut, -- till by and by
We made, at home, my pack entire!"

(He handed me a bundle, here.)

"Now, hoist me up: there, gently: quick!
Dear boys, DON'T look for much this year:
Remember, Santa Claus is sick!"