

~ CHAPTER FOUR ~

The Green Christmas

HENRY was glad he sat in the row by the windows in Room Four, because he could watch for snowflakes. Even though his father said they would probably have a green Christmas this year, Henry still hoped for snow. He was pretty sure the package hidden behind some boxes in the garage was the sled he wanted, a real Flexible Flyer.

While he sat at his desk looking out at the clouds for signs of snow, he was listening to Miss Roop talk about the Christmas operetta and thinking he had taken part in enough school plays for one semester.

In September he had been Second Indian in a play for the Westward Expansion Unit. That hadn't been too bad. He had stuck an old feather out of a duster in his hair and worn an auto robe his mother let him take to school. It was an easy part, because all he had to say was "Ugh" First Indian and Third Indian also said "Ugh!" It really hadn't mattered which Indian said "Ugh!" Once all three said it at the same time.

Then in November Robert came down with mumps just before Book Week. At the last minute Henry had to wear a long cotton beard and read Robert's part, one of the seven dwarfs in a play called "Storyland Favorites Come to Life." It was not a play that appealed to Henry, but at least he did not have to memorize any lines or do much practicing, because there wasn't time. During the performance he had to stop reading several times in order to take pieces of his beard out of his mouth.

His worst part had been in a Parent Teacher program for National Brush Your Teeth Week. Henry had been really disgusted that day. He had to wear his best trousers and a white shirt to school and he had to stay clean all day. Then he missed practicing with his football, because the meeting was after school. Worst of all, he had to stand up in front of all the mothers and teachers, bow, and recite :

*I am Sir Cuspid,
My job is to bite.
Brush me twice daily
To keep me so white.*

The kids called him Sir Cuspidor for a long time after that.

Now Miss Roop was telling the class that the Christmas operetta was called "A 'Visit to Santa Claus." It was about a mother and father and their two children who visited Santa Claus at the North Pole on Christmas Eve. Henry thought it was a dumb play. In the end it turned out that the little boy had dreamed the whole thing. Henry disliked stories that ended by being someone's dream.

Miss Roop said, "Since the whole school is giving the operetta, there won't be parts for

everyone in our room."

That's good, thought Henry. He slid way down in his seat so Miss Roop wouldn't notice him when she assigned parts.

Miss Roop continued. "Richard, Arthur, Ralph, and David will be four of Santa Claus's reindeer. The other four will be chosen from Room Five." So far Henry was safe! He stayed down in his seat just to be sure. "Mary Jane, you are to have the part of the Dancing Doll. Beezus-uh, I mean Beatrice, you will be the Rag Doll." Girls' parts. Henry felt a little safer. "Robert, you will be the Big Brown Dog," Miss Roop went on. All the children laughed.

"Gr-r-r-r. Arf! Arf!" said Robert. The children laughed again.

When Miss Roop started to hand out the parts, Henry decided she had come to the end of the list. He sat up straight in his seat and looked out of the window at the sky. It looked darker. There might be snow before Christmas after all. He was glad he wouldn't have to stay in after school to rehearse "A Visit to Santa Claus." He wanted to make snow men and throw snowballs, since, of course, his mother and father would not give him the Flexible Flyer until Christmas. When he had his sled, he wanted to coast on the Thirty-third Street hill.

Miss Roop, holding one part in her hand, stood in front of the class again and smiled in Henry's direction. Just in case she was smiling at him, Henry quickly slid down in his seat again.

She *was* smiling at him. She said, "And the best part of all goes to Henry Huggins. Henry, you are the shortest boy in Room Four, so you are to have the part of Timmy, the little boy who dreams the whole story." The class shouted with laughter.

A little boy! It was worse than anything Henry had imagined. He could never live down the part of a little boy! Sir Cuspid had been bad enough, but a little boy-the kids would never stop teasing him. "Miss Roop," he said desperately, "there're lots of littler kids in the lower grades. Couldn't one of them have the part?"

"No, Henry. All the second and third grade boys are needed for the chorus of polar bears and the first grade boys are too little to learn so many lines." She handed Henry his part. So many carbons had been typed at one time that the thin paper was almost too blurry to read.

Henry made out:

Act I. The scene is Timmy's bedroom. Timmy is wearing pajamas. Enter Timmy's mother.

Timmy's Mother: Hurry up and get into bed, Timmy. This is Christmas Eve and good little boys should be asleep when Santa Claus comes.

Timmy: Yes, Mother. (Timmy gets into bed. His mother tucks him in and kisses him good night.)

Timmy's Mother: Good night, Timmy. Pleasant dreams. (Goes out and shuts door.)

Timmy: Ho hum. My, I am sleepy! I wonder what Santa Claus will have for me in his pack. I think I---will-try-to-stay-awake. (Falls asleep.)

Henry groaned. It was even worse than he had expected. Pajamas! Good-night kiss! Did they think he was going to stand up there on the stage in front of all the girls in the school in his

pajamas? And be kissed by some dumb old eighth grade girl who was supposed to be his mother? It was horrible even to think about.

He had to find a way out! Already Robert was whispering across the aisle, "Hey, Little Boy!"

Henry ignored him. Maybe if he did stretching exercises for a whole hour every morning he would grow fast enough to outgrow the part. No, that wouldn't work. There wasn't time. He would have to think of something else.

During the rest of the afternoon Henry had trouble keeping his mind on Social Studies. He was too busy trying to find a way out of playing Timmy, the Little Boy. When the last bell rang, he grabbed his beanie and raincoat from the cloakroom. He was first out of Room Four and first out of the school building.

Ribs was waiting under the fir tree out of the rain. "Come on, Ribsy," Henry yelled, "let's keep ahead of the rest of the kids!"

But he wasn't quite fast enough. Beezus and Robert and Scooter were right behind him. "Hi there, Timmy!" they yelled. "How's the Little Boy?" Then they began to chant, "Henry is a Little Boy! Henry is a Little Boy!"

Henry slowed down. "Aw, shut up!" he yelled back. "You think you're smart, but you're not. You're just an old Rag Doll and a Brown Dog. And I'll bet Scooter is something dumb, too!"

"You wouldn't catch me being in any old operetta," said Scooter loftily. "I'm on the stage crew. I get to pull the curtain and turn on the lights and paint the scenery and stuff."

Mary Jane came skipping down the street, jumping across the puddles on the sidewalk. "Here comes the old Dancing Doll!" yelled Henry.

"Yes." Mary Jane smiled proudly. "I'll wear my new ballet slippers and my pink taffeta party dress and have my hair curled."

The other children were disappointed. They couldn't tease Mary Jane if she wanted to be a Dancing Doll. It gave Henry an idea. He waited until Scooter said, "I'll bet the Little Boy will look real cute in his pajamas. Are you going to wear the kind with feet in them, Little Boy?"

"Aw, you're just jealous because you don't have an important part like I have. I have the most important part in the whole operetta!"

"Don't be funny!" Scooter laughed. "I wouldn't learn all those lines and run around in front of a bunch of people in my pajamas for a million trillion dollars!"

It was a good idea but it didn't work. Henry would have to think of something else. Maybe he could pretend to be sick. No, that wouldn't do. His mother would make him go to bed and if it did happen to snow, he would have to stay in the house while all the other children were out sliding on the Thirty-third Street hill.

By the time Henry reached his house on Klickitat Street, he decided to say nothing about the operetta to his mother and father until he could work things out. He said hello to his mother, who was writing a letter on the typewriter, and then he went into the kitchen to fix himself a snack of peanut butter, jam, and pickle relish on graham crackers. He spread a cracker with peanut butter and gave it to Ribsy. Then he leaned against the refrigerator to munch and think.

Tap-tap-tap went the typewriter. Henry fixed himself another cracker. Tap-tap-tap. He heard his mother pull the sheet of paper out of the machine. Then he heard her go into the bedroom. The typewriter-that was it!

"Hey, Mom, can I use the typewriter?" "May I use the typewriter."

"May I use the typewriter?" asked Henry patiently.

"Yes, Henry, but don't pound too hard."

Henry gulped down his graham cracker with peanut butter, jam, and pickle relish. He wiped his fingers on the seat of his jeans and went into the living room. There he sat down at the desk, took a sheet of paper from the drawer, and put it into the typewriter. He thought a while and then began to type. He didn't make the typewriter go tap-tap-tap the way his mother did. He made only one tap at a time and then, after a long pause while he looked for the right letter, he made another tap. He had to remind himself to push the extra key to make capital letters.

Henry worked a long time. Fortunately his mother did not pay any attention to his typing. Tap. Tap. Tap. At last it was finished. Henry pulled the paper out of the typewriter and read:

dEar mIss rrOOP?

P^{1/2}easee xcuze henry from the ~~oppa~~ ~~oppa~~ Play/
HE Has to mucj workk todo at home.
yYourz turly.
MRs, hUggins

Somehow it didn't look the way he had thought it would. The capitals were not in the right places. He knew much wasn't spelled with a j or yours with a z. His fingers had just put themselves on the wrong keys. Henry tore his letter into little pieces and threw them in the fireplace. He ran *another piece of paper into* the typewriter and started again. Tap. Tap. Tap. When the second letter was finished, it read:

DEar misS rOop.

P PLease ezcude Henry Fro m the
play? eH has ~~too~~ too much wwork too
doat home.

YYours turly/
mRs, hUggins

Henry studied it. Those capitals again. He pushed the thing too soon or not soon enough. And who ever heard of a word like *ezcude*? Or *doat*? His fingers just didn't hit the right keys. No, the letter was not a finished product. Henry tore this one up, too, and threw it in the fireplace. He would have to think of something else.

When rehearsals started after school the next day, Henry still had not thought of a way out.

Miss Roop said that today the children would read their parts, but by next week they must have them memorized. "Henry, you and Alice are on the stage first," she directed. Alice was the eighth grade girl who was to play the part of Timmy's mother. "'Come on, Henry, don't waste time."

Henry slouched up the steps to the stage. He pulled his crumpled part out of his hip pocket and looked at it. He decided to pretend he couldn't read it. Maybe if he read everything wrong, Miss Roop would give someone else the part.

Alice read, "Hurry up and get into bed, Timmy. This is Christmas Eve and good little boys should be asleep when Santa Claus comes."

Henry held the paper almost against his nose. He frowned and squinted. He didn't say, "Yes, Mother." He said, after scowling and twisting the paper around, "Yeah, Ma."

"Henry Huggins!" Miss Roop interrupted. "You read what is typed on that paper!"

"Well, gee whiz, Miss Roop, it's so blurry I can hardly see what it says."

"Bring your part to me."

Henry slouched off the stage and handed it to her. "Now Henry, it isn't as blurred as all that. However, since you have such a long part you had better trade with me."

Well, that's that, thought Henry. None of his ideas seemed to work.

"Continue," ordered Miss Roop.

The operetta proceeded. It seemed to Henry that it took a long time to go through it. The music teacher played the music for the songs they were supposed to learn by next week. Henry discovered that in the second act he was supposed to stand in the center of the stage and sing a song all by himself. It went:

Hurrah for Santa! Hurrah for Saint Nick!

He comes from the North with reindeer and sleigh,

Riding on clouds up high in the sky

With a pack full of toys so children can play.

It was the dumbest song Henry had ever heard. Hurrah for Santa! It was just plain stupid. He felt a little better when he learned that Robert had to sing an even dumber song called "Woof, Woof, I'm a Big Brown Dog."

As Christmas drew near, Henry became more and more discouraged. Everybody in Glenwood School called him Little Boy. His mother and father found out about his part in the play, because Mary Jane told her mother and she told Henry's mother. He had to learn his lines and recite them every evening while his father looked at the part and prompted him. He scarcely had time to go out to the garage to peek at the Flexible Flyer package.

Mrs. Huggins went downtown to buy him a pair of new pajamas to wear in the first act. They were made of pink-and-blue-and-white-striped flannel. Henry felt that any pajamas were bad enough but pink-and-blue pajamas! He didn't even like to think about them.

Henry swallowed hard every morning. He hoped his throat might be a little bit sore but it never was. Finally he gave up. There was no way out. Now all he wanted was to get it over.

One afternoon during fifth period Henry looked out of the window and saw a few feathery snowflakes drifting down. They were so light he wasn't sure at first. When Miss Roop wasn't looking, he leaned over closer to the window. It was snow, all right! It wasn't going to be a green Christmas after all! Now he would get to use his Flexible Flyer!

The rest of the class soon noticed the snow too, and everyone began to whisper. Miss Roop smiled and pretended not to hear. As soon as the bell rang, the children all scrambled for their wraps and rushed out to see the snow—all except those who had parts in the operetta. They took their wraps from the cloakroom and went to the auditorium.

The auditorium was a busy place. In one corner of the room, mothers from the Parent Teacher Association were altering costumes for the polar bear chorus. Henry remembered those white suits. He had worn one when he had been an Easter bunny in a spring program. Now the mothers were ripping off the long ears and fuzzy tails, and were sewing on short ears and straight tails to change the suits into polar bear costumes.

The stage crew was at work. Some of the eighth grade boys were turning different-colored lights on and off. At the back of the stage, Scooter, standing on a board laid across two stepladders, was painting scenery with green paint.

Henry sat down to wait for his turn, while Mary Jane and Beezus rehearsed their dance, and Robert, wearing his dog suit, practiced walking on all fours.

Henry waited and waited. He sat on the hard auditorium chair and looked out of the window at the snowflakes. He could hear the other kids laughing and yelling outside, so he knew there must be enough snow for snowballs. He wished his turn would come so he could leave. Now the tin soldiers were practicing their steps. At the end of their song and dance one of the stage crew threw a basketball across the stage in front of them. It was supposed to look like a cannon ball, and the tin soldiers were supposed to fall over with one leg in the air. Miss Roop didn't like the way they fell and she made them do it over several times.

Henry wandered up on the stage behind the tin soldiers to watch Scooter paint scenery. "What're you supposed to be painting?" he asked him.

"Trees," answered Scooter. "With real paint." "Where did you get it?"

"A fellow in my room's father has a paint store and he gave it to us."

Just then Henry heard a bark. It sounded like Ribsby. It *was* Ribsby. He bounded in through the door of the auditorium, ran up the steps to the stage, and wormed his way behind the row of tin soldiers to get to Henry. He shook himself and wagged his tail.

"Well, Ribsby, old boy!" said Henry. "Did you get tired of waiting out in the cold?" Ribsby shook himself again. Henry patted him. "Why, Ribs. you're all wet! It must be snowing hard."

"He's a dumb-looking dog," said Scooter.

"Aww, he is not. He's a smart dog. Aren't you, Ribsby?"

"I'll bet he can't climb a stepladder like my dog can," said Scooter.

"I'll bet he can. Call him and see."

Scooter looked down at the dog. "Here, Ribsby, he called. "Come on, boy." Ribsby looked at him

and then at Henry.

"Go on," said Henry. "Up the ladder." He pointed to the ladder. Ribsby put one paw on the bottom step. "Atta boy, go on!" Ribsby carefully put a paw on the next step. "Good dog!" said Henry, urging him on.

"Come on, Ribsby," coaxed Scooter. Ribsby cautiously made his way up to the board on top of the stepladders.

"Good old Ribsby!" said Henry. "See, I told you he could do it!"

Pleased with himself, Ribsby looked down at his master, wagged his tail, and said, "Woof!" "You be quiet!" ordered Henry in a loud whisper. "If Miss Roop hears you, she'll throw you out!"

Ribsby sat down on the board and looked around the auditorium.

"Beat it!" said Scooter. "Can't you see I have work to do?"

"Here, Ribsby!" whispered Henry. "You don't want Miss Roop to see you, do you?" Ribsby liked sitting on the board.

"See,~ I told you he was a dumb dog." Scooter picked up his can of paint and stepped over Ribsby. He set the can down and went on painting treetops.

"Come on, Ribsby!"

"Aw, he's too dumb to go down the ladder." "He is not! Here, Ribsby!"

Ribsby stood up and sniffed at the can of paint. "Here, Ribsby! Come on down," begged Henry, looking up at his dog. "Come on, you old dog. I'll catch it if Miss Roop sees you."

Miss Roop clapped her hands for attention, the music ceased, and the tin soldiers stopped falling down.

"How did that dog get in here?" she demanded. "I don't know," answered Henry. "I guess he just walked in."

"Well, take him out!"

Henry did not move.

"Quickly, Henry! We have a lot to do this afternoon."

"Gee whiz, Miss Roop, I'm trying to take him out but he won't come down."

"I'll carry him down, Miss Roop," offered Scooter. "I don't think he knows how to go down a ladder."

Henry glared at Scooter.

"No, he's too heavy to carry down a ladder. You might fall," said Miss Roop.

Just then Ribsby sat down to scratch behind his left ear. Thump. Thump. Thump. His hind leg bumped against the can of paint. The can tipped. Scooter yelled. Ribsby barked.

"Henry! Look out!" screamed Miss Roop. The can fell over and green paint poured down over Henry.

"Glub!" said Henry as he heard Miss Roop run up onto the stage. He heard her but he couldn't see her. He had to keep his eyes shut. The cold, oily paint was dribbling down his face and neck. He could feel it dripping off his ears.

Miss Roop made a squeaking noise. Then Henry could feel her rubbing his head with something made of cloth.

"Run and get some paper towels!" she called to the other children. She wiped away at his face. "I knew I shouldn't have let those boys use real paint. They should have used poster paint. It would have washed off. Oh dear, I'm afraid your shirt is ruined."

Henry heard Ribsby barking. When he could see again he found all the tin soldiers and polar bears and P.T.A. mothers crowded around him. Miss Roop began to scrub his hair with paper towels. "Oh, that's all right," he said to Miss Roop. "It's an old shirt anyway." The towels she was wiping him with felt scratchy on his ears and neck.

Ribsby continued to bark and to pace back and forth across the board as he looked down at his master.

"Quiet, Ribsby!" ordered Henry.

Ribsby stopped barking and looked anxiously at the floor. Then he looked at Henry. Before Henry realized what was happening, Ribsby leaped from the board, sailed over the heads of several tin soldiers and polar bears, and landed on all fours in the puddle of paint. He skidded and sat down.

"Ribsby!" groaned Henry. Then he said to Scooter, "See, he was smart enough to get down by himself."

The dog began to bark and run around Henry. He left a circle of green footprints on the floor of the stage.

"Oh, Henry," wailed Miss Roop and then said sharply, "Scooter, take that dog out of the building! And carry him. I don't want any green footprints in the halls!"

"Yes, Miss Roop." Scooter lugged the barking dog away.

Mary Jane squirmed through the crowd to look at Henry. "Henry Huggins!" she exclaimed. "Wait till your mother sees you! Your hair is green and so is your skin!"

Beezus laughed. "Henry, your face looks just like a green apple!"

"Henry, I'm afraid this isn't going to come off for a long time," said Miss Roop.

Someone handed Henry a mirror. "Golly!" breathed Henry. He stared into the mirror. His hair and eyebrows were pale green. His face was all green at the forehead and streaked with green toward his chin. His ears were green all over. "Jeepers! Green ears!" He couldn't take his eyes off the mirror. Secretly he thought he looked fascinating. Like a leprechaun in a fairy tale. Now maybe the kids would stop calling him Little Boy! That gave him an idea.

"Miss Roop, I can't be in the operetta when I'm all green, can I?" he asked hopefully.

Miss Roop sighed. "No, Henry, I guess you can't." She looked at him. Then she smiled. "I'll give your part to someone else and you can play the part of the Green Elf! Now run along home."

The Green Elf! That was a good part. The Green Elf turned somersaults and didn't have to say anything.

Henry put on his raincoat and beanie and went out into the snow. It was deep enough to scrunch under his feet. He scooped up a handful and threw it at Ribsby, who was waiting under the fir tree. The snow would be just right for coasting on the Thirty-third Street hill when his mother and father surprised him with the Flexible Flyer at Christmas. In the meantime he would make a snow man on the front lawn. Maybe he would make a whole snow family. Even a snow dog.

"Good old Ribsby. I don't know how I'd ever get along without you." He took out his handkerchief and wiped green paint from his dog's tail.

Then Henry followed a set of big footprints in the snow. He took big steps and carefully put his feet into the marks someone else had made in the snow. "Jeepers!" he exclaimed. "I'm going to have a green Christmas and a white Christmas at the same tune. Won't Mom be surprised?"