

NICHOLAS, A Garland of Tales for the Nights Before Christmas

by Pamela Grenfell Smith.

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Introduction

Long before your grandparents' grandparents' grandparents were born, back when years were counted in only three numbers, in the city of Myra there lived a fine and generous Bishop named Nicholas. He was in charge of every church in Myra - every single one. He lived in a fine house in the nicest part of town, and he never had to worry much about money.

When he could not finish his dinner he would say to his cook, "Here, Cook, give these leftovers to some hungry family."

If he had old clothes he would say to his washerwoman, "Here, Washerwoman! I don't need these things any more. Let them be given to some poor fellow!"

Every year on Easter Sunday a grand procession of deacons, acolytes and torch-bearers paraded out of the great church at the top of the hill and all around the streets of the city. Bishop Nicholas walked at the end of the procession, the position of greatest honor, wearing a splendid cloak of silk brocade and carrying a mighty silver-and-cedarwood staff. On these occasions, if he saw beggars in the streets he would tell his deacons, "Come, brothers, toss those poor souls a coin or two."

Oh yes, Nicholas lived in comfort and ease, but it was his daily habit to turn his heart and mind towards the great mystery at the center of all things, the mystery that loves us and knows our names. This mystery was working a change in him. As Nicholas sat down to his meat and wine he found himself wondering if anyone in the city of Myra had only a crust of bread for dinner. As he went to sleep in his soft bed with its warm woolen blankets, he wondered if anyone in Myra had to sleep on the hard, cold ground.

So Nicholas's comfort became bitter to him, and one night after church he put aside his splendid cloak and his mighty staff. Over his robe of white wool he wrapped an old, ragged cloak. He took up a plain wooden staff and slipped out, unseen and alone, into the streets of Myra.

The First Tale

Nicholas walked through the clean, quiet streets near the church. "Look at these fine houses! These people must certainly have enough to eat," he told himself. Down the hill he walked, down to the harbor, where the city was livelier. He had never seen this part of Myra after dark. "How different things are!" he said to himself. "All the noises seem so particularly loud." He pulled his old cloak tight around him and wished he'd brought a deacon or two for company. No one in these crowded streets paid any attention to Nicholas. Without his silk and brocade

cloak and his silver-and-cedarwood staff, who could possibly know that he was the Bishop of Myra?

Golden lamplight spilled out of every tavern door, along with the smells of garlic and olive oil. The sailors in the taverns sang and shouted for more wine, and there were streams of laughter from the tavern girls in their bright, dirty clothes. “Look at those children running around. Why are they awake? Surely it is past their bedtime,” Nicholas thought to himself. “Can it be that they have no place to sleep? Can even little children be hungry and in need?”

Near the docks men sat alone with a wineskin or slept on the ground, drunk. “Why don’t they go home? Do they have homes?” Nicholas wondered. “Are they happy? I don’t understand their lives at all.”

At last Nicholas found a stone bench and sat and looked out at the ocean, considering all the people he had seen. “I want to help them,” he said to himself, “but they are so different from anyone I have ever known before. Suppose I do the wrong thing! I could make them angry – I could even make them ashamed. And it seems to me that there are more problems here than one person can solve, even if that person is the Bishop of Myra.”

Sorely troubled, Nicholas turned his heart and mind towards the mystery at the center of all things and waited for love to guide him. After a while he got up and walked to the street market, where a few stalls were open late. First, he bought a big, strong sack. Then he went to the stall that sold bread and asked to buy twenty loaves of bread.

“Are these all for yourself, old fellow?” asked the baker.

“Oh, no,” said Nicholas, “no, no – they are for – several people.”

“Hah,” thought the baker to himself, “this old man must have a big family. I’ll tuck in a few extra loaves.”

At the stall that sold old clothes, Nicholas asked to buy ten old blankets. “Are these all for your own bed, good sir?” asked the stallkeeper.

“Oh, no,” said Nicholas nervously. Why did these strangers keep asking him questions? “No, they are not all for me.”

“Hah,” thought the stallkeeper, “he must know someone who needs help. I’ll put in a few extra.”

When Nicholas hoisted his sack at last, his shoulders ached at the weight of it. “Never mind,” he told himself. “All this will be of help to people, I hope.” And he walked off all alone into the shadows of the city.

And – that very night -- curious things began to happen among the people who lived down by the harbor. This young mother, sleeping with her babes in an alley - how did she happen to find a beautiful loaf of new bread in her arms? She and her children ate it for breakfast and shared it with their friends. And that shiftless old man who passed out in the middle of the street – how did that warm blanket get tucked around him, from his toes to his whiskery chin? All over the city, people were getting presents – but nobody knew where they came from!

The Second Tale

Night after night, Nicholas wandered. The baker sold him bread, always with a few extra loaves. Clearly this old man must be feeding a houseful of hungry people! The other stallkeepers filled up his great sack with clothes and blankets and little odds and ends.

Late one night he came to a small, shabby home where the lamp still was lighted. Inside, people were talking. Or -- were they weeping? He stopped to listen.

It was a mother and father, grieving together about their oldest daughter. In those days a young woman needed a certain amount of money to get married, and these people were so poor that they could not set up their daughter in a decent home. "What will become of her?" said her mother. "She'll never have a husband, or a little house, or even a garden to grow roses and herbs."

"Perhaps she will have to work in the taverns, dear wife, and bring wine to the sailors until daybreak. Hard work, rough work, for our precious girl. Oh, my heart will break!" said the father. And they clung to one another and wept.

Nicholas said to himself, "Now, I have a small bag of gold that would help this family -- but I don't want them to feel that I expect something in return. How can I get it to them without being seen? He leaned against the wall of the house and waited for love to give him an idea.

There was a chimney in the roof of the house where smoke came out from the cooking fire, but at this time of night there was no fire on the hearth. Nicholas tossed the bag of gold straight into the chimney.

There was a terrific puff of ashes. "Mercy on us, husband," yelled the wife, "the chimney is exploding!"

"No, no, wife," said the husband, "look, it's gold! Gold! Soon we'll dance at our daughter's wedding!" And they ran outdoors to see where the gold had come from, but Nicholas had already hurried away into the night.

The Third Tale

There was a rich man in Myra whose son killed a friend in a fight over a game of cards. "What trouble!" the rich man said. "Surely my son shouldn't have to be punished for this little problem." So he and his son cooked up a story that three sailors had tried to rob the son and his friend.

The rich man went to the judge who would hear the case and gave him a fat bag of money. He told the judge, "When my son comes before you at his trial, old friend, perhaps this little gift will convince you that he is innocent!"

At his trial the son said, "A gang of rowdy sailors attacked me and my friend. They took all our money and when my friend tried to fight them off, they stabbed him." What a liar! And he didn't stop there. The son picked out three sailors and said they were the killers, and the judge sentenced these three innocent men to be put to death the very next morning.

Down by the harbor that night, no one could talk about anything else but this terrible injustice. Nicholas heard them talking as he wandered with his sack of bread. Everyone knew about the bag of money and the lies, but people were afraid to stand up to the wicked judge.

All night, Nicholas sat awake in the church and turned his heart towards the great mystery at the center of all things, the mystery that loves us and knows our names. At dawn, the judge's doorkeeper heard a tremendous knock at the door. When he looked out, there was the Bishop of Myra with the acolytes, the deacons, the torch-bearers, and even the choir, who were singing a psalm.

"Surely your master's heart is troubled," Nicholas said to the doorkeeper. "After all, it is no small thing to sentence three men to death. Tell the honorable judge that the Bishop of Myra is here to say his morning prayers with him."

So Nicholas went in. A silent, uneasy crowd waited outside the judge's house until the judge appeared on his balcony. "It is my wish that Myra should be known as a merciful and compassionate city," he declared loudly. "Therefore, I pardon these three sailors and they are free to go."

The judge's doorkeeper thought this was a fine story. Think of that crafty old judge being hauled out of bed at dawn to say his prayers! Whenever the doorkeeper wanted a cold drink or a hot meal, he'd find someone and tell the story all over again. They'd gladly treat him! And as for the wicked judge, the rich man, and his son – they knew that Nicholas's eye was on them, and they mended their ways.

The Fourth Tale

A year passed, and another, and Nicholas still walked through the streets of the city at night, wrapped in an old cloak and carrying a great sack filled with secret presents. A coin here, a coin there, a few loaves of bread inside this gate -- he found many ways to ease the sufferings of the poor. But no one knew who was doing it!

One night he happened to walk past the home of the family whose first daughter he had helped with a bag of gold. The lamps were lit, so he listened by the window.

There were the mother and father, weeping and worrying. "Dear wife, here is our second daughter, just as precious as our first. What's to become of her? We have no money for a dowry. We barely have enough money for food!"

And the wife replied, "If only we knew who helped us before! He must be a good man, a kind man. We could go and be his servants for the rest of our lives if he would let us have a little gold."

Nicholas heard, he smiled, his hand went to the pouch of gold at his belt. Splash! went the ashes, and the mother and father jumped for joy. "Come in! Come in!" they shouted out into the darkness, but Nicholas was already gone.

The Fifth Tale

Word got around among the sailors about how Nicholas had stood up to the wicked judge and saved the lives of three of their comrades. Soon, whenever a ship came to the harbor at Myra, some of the sailors would climb up the hill to the church. They'd stand outside the door, hoping to meet Nicholas. "Pray for us, Bishop, when there are storms at sea," they'd ask him. "Of course I will," Nicholas told them. "We all will, here at the church, every morning and every evening."

Then a great famine came upon the city of Myra and all the countryside around it. The price of food went up and up, and poor people could not buy enough to eat. In the streets of the city, poor people begged for bread. Night and morning, Nicholas prayed for the city of Myra as parents pray for a sick child. This was how things stood until the day a great ship arrived in the harbor, loaded with wheat.

The merchants of Myra were weak and hungry but they put on their finest clothes and went out to the ship in a rowboat to buy wheat. The Captain would not sell it to them. "This wheat is the property of the rich sea-princes of Alexandria," he told them. "If I sell it to you, they will throw me to the sharks! Some other ship will come along soon with food for Myra. I cannot spare any."

When Nicholas heard the news he put on his splendid cloak and picked up his silver-and-cedarwood staff. With the acolyte, the deacons, the torch-bearers and the choir, he hurried to the harbor. The poor people of Myra, hungry and worried, joined the procession. Nicholas was rowed across to the great ship. He climbed up a rope ladder to the deck of the ship and said to the Captain, "I have come to speak with you, my son, concerning the poor people of Myra, who suffer from hunger. They need this wheat."

"The poor are liars, honored Nicholas," the Captain answered. "They are playing on your pity, they are not really hungry. Give them food and they will only gamble it away or sell it to buy wine. The poor are lazy scoundrels! You do not know the poor!"

"You are mistaken, my son," said Nicholas. "I know the poor. I know their suffering. The merchants asked to buy your wheat and you refused them. I ask you now to give your wheat to the poor people of Myra."

The Captain was just about to laugh in Nicholas's face – but he heard his sailors whispering to one another. Bishop Nicholas was their friend, they were saying, their friend who helped them and prayed for them. If their Captain showed disrespect to Nicholas, surely some terrible evil would happen to their ship. A storm? A whirlpool? A sea monster with great jaws to snap their ship in two like a breadstick?

The Captain did not want any trouble with his crew. He sighed and groaned and complained, but he gave Nicholas enough wheat to feed Myra until the next harvest. The people of Myra feasted on new bread that night. What wonderful songs of thanksgiving they sang!

As for the Captain, when he got to Alexandria, his ship was full of wheat again. Maybe he bought it himself, so the sea-princes of Alexandria wouldn't throw him to the sharks. The sailors told everyone that angels brought it. Who knows? Perhaps it was a present from Nicholas!

The Sixth Tale

Indeed, it was good to be alive in Myra when Nicholas was Bishop. The city prospered because the sailors loved it and came there to trade and to repair their ships. The people who ran the city knew that Nicholas was keeping an eye on them. Those who were kind and wise grew stronger, and those who were greedy and wicked were ashamed and tried to mend their ways. And, year after year, a remarkable thing kept happening in Myra. Someone gave secret presents that eased the sufferings of the poor. But nobody knew who was doing it!

The poor couple whose two daughters had received those mysterious bags of gold had one more daughter, and when she was all grown up and ready to leave home they decided to find out who had helped them. So it happened that one more time as Nicholas walked down by the harbor he came upon their lighted window and heard the mother's voice weeping and worrying.

Nicholas looked in the window. Only the mother was awake. The youngest daughter slept with her head in her mother's lap. The two older daughters and their husbands slept on the floor with their children next to them. How many grandchildren were there now? Surely he could see at least three! In his heart he spoke a great word of thanksgiving to the mystery that created them, loved them, and knew their names. Then once again he tossed a bag of gold onto the cold hearth.

But the father of this family was hiding and watching in the garden, and when he saw the ashes fly up, he ran to greet Nicholas. "My friend, my benefactor," he exclaimed, "Please let me see your face!" And then the whole family came streaming out with torches and plates of sweet cakes and pomegranates. No one had been asleep at all!

Nicholas knew he was caught. He threw back his hood. "It's Nicholas!" they shouted. "It's Nicholas the Bishop! Come and see! Come and see! Bishop Nicholas is the one who's been helping us!"

All the neighbors woke up. Soon the street was full of people saying to one another, "The silver, the loaves of bread, all those blankets – look, it was Bishop Nicholas who brought them! See? See his great sack of presents?" More and more people joined the crowd, thanking Nicholas for gifts without number. As for the sailors, when they heard the news they shouted it all over the harbor. The crews of every ship ran to join the commotion. They brought food and wine from the taverns to place a great feast around the feet Nicholas, their friend.

The Seventh Tale

After that night, it became the delight and joy of the people of Myra to surprise one another with secret presents. How they loved to pretend that Nicholas had given them!

That warm shawl that appeared around the shoulders of an old woman in the market? Of course Nicholas gave her that! Didn't you see him, sneaking around with that sack of his?

The great pot of soup that appeared on a sick man's table? Nicholas brought it – no question about that. He hung the handle on his great staff and carried it down the hill from the church. And he didn't spill a drop!

The doll that seemed to drop from the sky into the arms of a child? Ah, well, Bishop Nicholas must have been flying by. Didn't you see his cloak, blowing in the wind?

When Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, came to the day of his death and returned to the mystery that loved him and knew his name, there was great weeping among the people of the city. "Our helper is gone," they said to one another. "There will be no more presents from Nicholas now."

But the presents did not stop! Indeed, hundred and hundreds of years have passed – and the secret presents have never stopped. All over the world, every December, there are more and more mysterious secret presents.

And Bishop Nicholas has never been forgotten. People call him Papa Noel, or Father Christmas, or Saint Nicholas, or Sinter Klaas, or Santa Claus. They say he sails in a fine, great ship, or walks along with a dog team, or flies in a sleigh pulled by reindeer. But he always has his great sack full of presents!

Certainly, at my house at this time of year, mysterious secret presents arrive. People say that Nicholas brings them. What do you think?