



How Come Christmas

From the Story
By Roark Bradford



(A condensation of the story by Roark Bradford which has become a classic of American folklore. This Christmas tale is told in the simple and loving words of a Negro minister of the old days.

(One word may puzzle some readers. We believe that "clawin'" means "rewarding." There is an Anglo-Saxon word "claw" which meant "to flatter" or "support".)

HOW COME CHRISTMAS

The scene is in a rural Negro church in bygone days. Six children are sitting around the old stove where there is a cheerful fire glowing. The Reverend stands by, and there are Christmas decorations of holly and red paper and strings of popcorn on the walls.

The Reverend speaks:

"Well, hyar we is, chillun, and hyar hit is Christmas. Now we all knows we's hyar 'cause hit's Christmas, don't we? But what I want to know is, who gonter tell me how come hit's Christmas?"

Willie

"'Cause old Sandy Claus come around about dis time er de year, clawin' all de good chillun with presents."

Christine

"Dat ain't right, is hit, Revrund? Hit's Christmas 'cause de Poor Little Jesus was bawnd on Christmas, ain't hit, Revrund?"

Reverend

"Well, bofe er dem is mighty good answers. Old Sandy Claus do happen around about dis time er de year with presents, and de Poor Little Jesus sho was bawnd on Christmas Day. Now, de question is: did old Sandy Claus start clawin' de chillun with presents before de Poor Little Jesus got bawnd, or did Little Jesus git bawnd before old Sandy Claus started gittin' around?"

Willie

"I bet old Sandy Claus was clawin' chilluns before de Poor Little Jesus started studdin' about gittin' around."

Christine

"Naw suh. De Little Jesus came first, didn't he, Revrund?"

Willie

"Old Sandy Claus is de oldest. I seed his pitchers and I seed Little Jesus pitchers and old Sandy Claus is a heap de oldest. His whiskers mighty nigh tech de ground."

(And then Delia came into the argument to tell them Methuselah was older than either one, and Willie stuck up for old Sandy Claus, and someone else brought up Moses, and they had it back and forth till the Reverend intervened. "De point is," he says . . .)

Reverend

"Ain't nobody got no idea how come hit start bein' Christmas?"

Willie

"You can't fool old Sandy Claus about Christmas. He know, don't he, Revrund? He just lay around and watch and see how de chilluns mind dey maw, and den fust thing you know he got his mind made up about who been good and who been bad, and den he just hauls off and has hisself a Christmas."

Christine

"Yeah, but how come he know hit time to haul off and have hisself a Christmas?"

Willie

"'Cause any time old Sandy Claus make up his mind to have Christmas, who gonter stop him?"

Christine

"Den how come he don't never make up his mind ontwell de middle er winter? How come he don't make up his mind on the Fou'th er July? Ev'ybody git good around de fou'th er July so's dey kin go to der picnic. But Sandy Claus ain't payin' no mind to dat 'cause hit ain't time for Christmas, is hit, Revrund?"

Willie

"'Course he don't have Christmas on the Fou'th er July! Sandy Claus believe in scatterin' de good stuff out, don't he, Revrund? He say: 'I better wait till winter when hit's too cold for de picnic.' Ain't hit right, Revrund?"

(So then, just to move things along, the Reverend switches the subject and asks what the point of the Fourth of July is and the children burst into song: . . .)

Chorus

"Old George Wash'n'ton whupped de Kaing,
And de eagle squalled, Let Freedom raing."

(Unfortunately, the time of the Fourth of July created another argument, Christine claiming that it came before and Willie that it always came after Christmas. But the Reverend set them right.)

Reverend

"I b'lieve Christine got you dat time, Willie. Christmas do come before deh Fou'th er July. 'Cause hit was at Christmas when old Gawge Wash'n'ton got mad at de kaing 'cause de kaing was gonter kill de Poor Little Jesus. And him and de kaing fit f'm Christmas to de Fou'th er July before old Gawge Wash'n'ton finally done dat kaing up."

(And so, by degrees, the Reverend led them on to Christmas and here is the story he told about how the Poor Little Jesus and Sandy Claus made Christmas come.)

HOW COME CHRISTMAS

How come de Poor Little Jesus and old Sandy Claus got mixed up with gettin' Christmas goin'? Hit was dis way:

You see, one time hit was a little baby bawnd named de Poor Little Jesus, but didn't nobody know dat was him name yit. Dey knew he was a powerful smart and powerful purty little baby, but dey didn't know his name was de Little Jesus. So, 'cause he was so

smart an' so purty, ev'ybody thought he was goin' ter grow up and be de kaing. So quick as dat news got spread around, ev'body just about bust to git on de good side er de baby, 'cause dey figure efn dey do dat he'd grow up likin' 'em and not chop dey head off when he was de kaing.

So old Moses went over and give him a hund'ed dollars in gold, and old Methuselah went over and give him a diamond ring. And old Peter give him a fine white robe. And ev'ybody was runnin' in with fine presents so Poor Little Jesus wouldn't grow up and chop dey heads off.

Ev'ybody but old Sandy Claus. Old Sandy Claus was kinder old and didn't git around much and didn't hyar de news. So him and de old lady was settin' back by de fire one night, toasin' dey shins and tawkin' about dis and dat, when old Miz Sandy Claus up and remark, she say: "Sandy, I hyar Miss Mary got a brand new baby over at her house."

"Is dat a fack?" say Sandy Claus. "Well, well, hit's a mighty cold night to do anything like dat, ain't it? But on de yuther hand, he'll be a heap er pleasure and fun for her next summer, I reckon."

So de talk went on and finally old Sandy Claus remark hit was powerful lonesome around de house since all de chilluns growed up and married off.

"Dey all married well," say Miz Sandy Claus, "and so I say: 'Good riddance.' You ain't never had to git up and cyore dey colic and mend de clothes, so you gettin' lonesome. Me, I love 'em all, but I'm glad dey's married and doin' well."

So de talk run on and den old Sandy Claus got up and got his hat. "You ain't goin' out on a night like dis, is you?" say Miz Sandy Claus.

"Sho I'm goin' out," say Sandy Claus. "I'm pyore cravin' to see some chilluns."

"But hit's snowin' and goin' on," say Miz Sandy Claus. "You know yo' phhisic been dev'lin' you, anyhow, and yo'll git de chawley mawbuses sloppin' round in dis weather."

"No mind de tawk," say Sandy Claus. "Git me my umbrella and my overshoes. And you better git me a little somethin' to take along for a cradle gift, too, I reckon."

"You know hit ain't nothin' in de house for no cradle gift," say Miz Sandy Claus.

"Git somethin'," say Sandy Claus. "You got to give a new baby somethin' or else you got bad luck. Git me one er dem big red apples outer de kitchen."

"What kinder cradle gift is dat?" say Miz Sandy Claus. "Don't you reckon dat baby got all de apples he want?"

But Sandy Claus got de red apple and he lit out. Well, when he got to Miss Mary's house, ev'ybody was standin' round givin' de Poor Little Jesus presents. Fine presents. Silver and gold and diamonds. Dey had presents stacked around dat baby so high you couldn't hardly see over dem.

So when ev'ybody seed old Sandy Claus come in, dey looked to see what he brang. And when dey seed he didn't brang nothin' but a red apple, dey all laughed. "Quick as dat boy grows up and gits to be de kaing," dey told him, "he's gwiner chop yo' haid off."

"No mind dat," say old Sandy Claus. "Y'all jest stand back." And so he went over to de crib and he pushed away a handful er gold and silver and diamonds and stuff and handed de Poor Little Jesus dat red apple. "Hyar, son," he say, "take dis old apple. See how she shine?"

And de Poor Little Jesus reached up and grabbed dat apple in bofe hands, and laughed jest as brash as you please!

Den Sandy Claus tuck and tickled him under de chin with his before finger and say, "Goodly-goodly-goodly." And de Poor Little Jesus laugh some more and reach up and grab a fistful er old Sandy Claus' whiskers, and him and old Sandy Claus went round and round!

So about dat time up stepped de Lawd. "I swear, old Sandy Claus," say de Lawd, "Betwixt dat apple and dem whiskers de Poor Little Jesus ain't had so much fun since he been bawnd."

So Sandy Claus stepped back and bowed low and give de Lawd hy-dy, and say: "I didn't know ev'ybody was chivareein' or else I'd a stayed at home. I didn't had nothin' much to bring dis time, 'cause you see how it been dis year. De dry weather and de bull weevils got mighty nigh all de cotton, an' de old lady been kinda puny—"

"Dat's all right, Sandy," say de Lawd. "Gold and silver have I a heap of. But verily you sho do know how to handle youse'f around chilluns."

"Hit's easy to do what you likes to do," say Sandy Claus.

"Well," say de Lawd, "Hit might be somethin' in dat, too. But de trouble wid my world is, hit ain't enough people which likes to do de right thing. But you likes to do wid chilluns and dat's what I needs. So stand still and shet yo' eyes whilst I passes a miracle on you."

So Sandy Claus stood still and ghet his eyes and de Lawd r'ared back and passed a miracle on him and say: "Old Sandy Claus, live forever and make my chilluns happy."

So Sandy Claus opened his eyes and say, "Thank you kindly, Lawd. But do I got to keep 'em happy all de time? Dat's a purty big job. Hit'd be a heap er fun but still, and at de same time—"

"Yeah, I knows about chilluns, too," says de Lawd. "Chilluns got to fret and git in devilmint ev'y now and den and git a whuppin' f'm dey maw er else skin won't git loose so dey kin grow. But you jest keep yo' eyes on 'em and keep 'em happy about once a year. How's dat?"

"Dat's fine," say Sandy Claus. "Hit'll be a heap er fun, too. What time er de year you speck I better make 'em happy, Lawd?"

"Christmas suits me," say de Lawd, "ef'n hits all O.K. wid you."

"Hit's just about right for me," say Sandy Claus.

So ever since dat day and time old Sandy Claus been clawin' de chilluns on Christmas, and dat's on de same day dat de Poor Little Jesus got bawnd. 'Cause dat's de way de Lawd runs things.

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