

DON'T SHOOT THE BORLOKS

FROM YOU TO ME

First, a question:

“Do you believe in Santa Claus?”

No, of course not and I'm not blaming you. In fact, my illustrious boss, James Funnigan, did a quick job of dispelling any personal illusions of mine on this subject when, on the morning of December 24, I walked into his office to ask for a raise.

The big boss of the *New Sun* looked at me while chewing his awful Italian cigar.

“Come on, Syd, you believe it, don't you?”

I didn't need him to name it. I immediately understood WHO he was talking about. You'll tell me it's a catchphrase, a completely banal expression that says exactly what it means, but, as French singer Sacha Guitry said: “Whether you believe it or not, the main thing is to get presents.”

Jolly good! For that, there's only one date in the year when you can try your luck.

You know it: it's December 24th.

So, go on, wait patiently for that day and when the time comes, leave your shoes beside the fireplace.

After that... you will see what will happen to you.

Sydney Gordon

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

It often snows in New York City around Christmas time, but this time it's more of a "freak storm". It's falling from the leaden sky like in Siberia, so much so that, behind the windows of my office, the skyscrapers have completely disappeared from view.

But it's Bud I'm thinking of instead.

One thing is certain. The kid will not spend Christmas with us. And all because of Margaret's grandmother who absolutely insisted on taking him with her on her pilgrimage to Lourdes.

Of course, I disagreed, especially about Bud. That damn kid doesn't miss anything and this time he got a nasty bout of flu.

But go and make a crazy old woman and an impossible kid, both as stubborn as each other, listen to reason!

Result: the return canceled, kisses and all the rest...

I'm thinking about this when the phone rings. Miss Grant, my delightful secretary, picks up and hands me the receiver.

"For you, Syd. Your better half on the other end of the line."

I do indeed recognize the voice of my tender and sweet Margaret.

"Hello, Syd darling... I got lucky, I was afraid you had already left the *New Sun*."

"Where are you?"

"At the hairdresser."

"Well, he must be getting to know you pretty well!"

"Oh, Syd, stop grumbling. I'm calling about Bud."

"Yes... What now?"

"I got a second message from Grandma. Bud is over the worst of it."

"I'm sure he is. A flu is a flu, that's all."

"But, Syd, it's a French flu that Bud caught."

"So what? Whether it's French or Chinese, it's still a flu, right?"

"I'm not so sure."

"Anyway, we'll see..."

"What scared Grandma is that a French flu in the Pyrenees is almost a Spanish flu. I hope you've heard of that, at least, Mr. Know-it-all?"

I roll my eyes.

"It's all right. Just tell grandmother that as long as the kid doesn't play castanets in his delirium, he's in no danger."

"Silly!"

"Is that all?"

"No. When you get home, watch where you step. We've got so many toys for Bud that the living room is a mess. Adios!"

A sharp click batters my eardrum and I hang up with a sigh.

Behind her IBM, Miss Grant gives me a smile that I prefer not to encourage.

As I put on my leather coat, she stands up and walks towards me, swishing her hips.

"If you're wishy-washy about your evening, come celebrate New Year's Eve with us. We're organizing a Martian evening at the Waldorf."

"Mmmm! And what role do you play in it?"

"Venus!" my voluptuous secretary shoots back at me.

Since I really want my peace and quiet, I prefer to leave it at that.

“Very original for a girl who’s always in the clouds!”

She doesn’t take offense but bursts out laughing, which finally cheers me up.

“Merry Christmas!” she says to me good-humoredly.

“Merry Christmas!”

And here I am, driving my Buick through the streets of New York.

It’s still snowing and I feel like I’m driving on an ice rink. And what a hustle and bustle, cripes!

Mind you, it’s always like this on the eve of the holidays and this Christmas snow doesn’t change the traffic problem at all. On the contrary, it’s worse!

Even the sidewalks are taken over by a thick and rowdy crowd loaded with parcels, bottles, all kinds of provisions.

And just look at the long lines coming and going between the lighted fir trees whose endless rows of replicas are dizzying. But it’s especially in front of the toy stores that the traffic jams are the most intense.

Personally, I’ve never seen such a crowd in front of the lavishly decorated and illuminated shop windows. A real record!

Of course, this all brings me back to Bud. Poor kid, a flu on Christmas Day, that’s definitely bad luck...

But, whatever Margaret says, the flu in Lourdes, under Bernadette’s protection, can’t be so very bad.

It is with this rather comforting thought that I park my car right in front of my building. The main elevator drops me off a few seconds later on the 24th floor and when I slip the key into the lock my next-door neighbor comes at me with a big smile.

“Merry Christmas, Mr. Gordon, and thank you!”

He pats me on the shoulder in a friendly manner and winks at me.

“It’s great that you thought of my little one. The electric train, my wife immediately said it was you. The signaling is amazing. We haven’t stopped since this morning... Thanks again, and Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas!”

He disappears into the elevator and I shrug. Margaret, I guess. It’s possible, although we don’t socialize much with our neighbors. But, if he says so...

I have to admit that Margaret was not lying when she talked about the “mess” that awaited me in the apartment.

A real clutter! Toys on all the tables, on the armchairs, on the carpets. And then boxes, packaging, bits of string... And come on... Is it or isn’t it Christmas...

I find rugby balls, a remote-controlled lunar exploration tank, a fire engine, an astronaut’s costume, a big cybernetic “ladybug” that obeys whistles and a bunch of other clever toys, not to mention all kinds of play sets, toy soldiers, electric trains, a menagerie of stuffed animals and painted clowns.

A normal kid, playing 24 hours a day would take ten years to play with them all. But with Bud, I’m sure that everything will be done and gone within ten days. And that reassures me.

Somehow I manage to wind through the toys, pushing aside a few boxes, which Margaret certainly didn’t have time to open, and I stumble into the kitchen, tripping over a roller skate.

I nibble on an apple, a ham sandwich and return to the living room to pour myself a Cutty Sark. To find the bottle is another expedition, but I find it on the bar behind a pile of carefully tied comics.

“Good morning!”

I swing around, almost spilling my drink. Instinctively, my eyes go to the front door. But no, it’s still closed.

“Hello. Hello and Merry Christmas!”

And there it goes again. Again the same small, soft, monotone voice. Well now, since when do people just let themselves into the homes of...

I step forward through the clutter, scanning the room.

“Hey! Where are you? Come out of your hidey-hole so I can see you!”

“But you see me very well. I’m right here...”

I swivel forty-five degrees in the direction of the voice.

No, it's not true, it's not possible... It's not coming from that doll sitting comfortably on an Empire armchair!

I walk around the chair but there's no one behind it. Then I look at the doll, a lovely doll the size of a two-year-old child, all blonde with green ribbons tying her braids. The dress is white silk decorated with gold braid.

I look at it and it looks at me too. Two big blue eyes of celestial clarity, which stare at me with an almost angelic sweetness.

A little pout curls her lips and makes her cute dimpled cheeks swell.

"You are not polite. I said Hello and Merry Christmas! You must return my greeting and wishes. It is in the instructions."

This time it's gone too far. A toy that says "Hello and Merry Christmas" is great, but a toy that has the gall to remind you to be polite is a bit excessive.

There are indeed instructions in the long cardboard box lying at the foot of the chair. Without really knowing why, I pick it up still watching the incredible doll that's giving me a bad feeling.

"My name is Pat," she says, her big blue eyes still fixed on me. "And you?"

I stammer, "Um... Sydney... Sydney Gordon..."

"That's a nice name."

I take the opportunity to swallow the rest of my drink in one gulp while she goes on:

"I am very happy to be in your home. It is very nice and very comfortable."

"Uh... Thanks a lot for the compliment, Pat, but..."

"You do not have the right to talk to me informally. Only children have that privilege and you are not a child."

She points me the instructions with her chubby little arm.

"It is written, you can check."

A sweat begins to bead on my forehead. I take time to go back to the bottle of Cutty Sark and pour myself another dose.

I point to the box.

"I suppose... you were in that box?"

"Yes."

"Where are you from? Who sent you?"

"Who?"

"Yes. Which store made you? There's nothing in the manual about that."

"I don't know."

"Listen... since you seem to understand everything. You should know that I am a reporter... a journalist... Do you see what I mean? I haven't written anything good for several weeks, you can probably help me. Where are you from? Answer! It's really very important."

"Yes, I see. You want to know my creator?"

"Exactly."

"Well, he's called M."

"M?"

"Yes, M. A capital M."

"And where is this... this capital M?"

"I don't know. The borloks have no right to know."

"*Borloks*? Where does this word come from?"

"I don't know."

"In short, you don't know much."

"Oh yes. I know how to entertain children, laugh and sing with them. But you can also take me with you to the theater, the cinema, to bars and cabarets. I am well brought up, a model doll..."

Third scotch, which is not extravagant in a situation like this, believe me!

"Are you married?"

My word, but this is an interrogation As I nod, she continues:

"Children?"

"Just one, but I don't think you'll do the trick."

"For what?"

“Well, first of all my son doesn’t play with dolls. We’re very strict in the family about this kind of... amusement...”

“At least wait for your wife’s opinion. By the way, where is she?”

“At the hairdresser.”

“Is she pretty?”

“Yes... yes... but...”

“You are also very nice. You are even very handsome. How old are you?”

“Thirty-five years-old.”

“When your temples turn gray, I’m sure you’ll look even better.”

Then the door swings wide open and a Margaret disguised as a fury bursts into the middle of the living room.

At the time, I don’t even notice that she’s had her hair cut. I only see her flushed face and her glaring green eyes.

“No, but seriously... Now the guy is having his tryst at home?”

“Margaret...”

She cuts me off abruptly.

“No need, what I heard is enough for me. Where’s the girl?”

She races across the living room like a Polaris rocket as I force myself to smile.

“Come on, calm down, I’ll explain.”

She glances towards the bedroom, then retraces her steps.

“Well, I’ll give you some graying temples. Are you going to answer? Where is she?”

With my glass, I point to the doll.

“Here’s who you’re looking for.”

“Stop, you want to make fun of me?”

“Not at all. She answers all questions and even asks a lot more.”

“Like what?”

I turn to wink at Pat.

“Come on, Pat, show her.”

But in the chair, the doll no longer moves. Her blue eyes have lost their sparkle and her face remains stone. She now looks like a regular dime-store doll, motionless and frozen.

I mutter, “I really don’t understand. She was talking until you got here.”

“Maybe I upset her, poor little thing.”

I snatch up Pat, lift her dress in search of some mechanism, but find nothing. Nothing but synthetic skin, velvety, and extraordinarily supple.

“Something must have gone wrong inside.”

I take the opportunity to take a look at Margaret’s hairstyle.

“It wasn’t a good idea for you to get your hair cut. I hate it.”

“Don’t try to change the subject. I want you to tell me the truth.”

She grabs the doll from my hands and puts it back on the chair. She’s about to start in again when, suddenly:

“Hello! Merry Christmas!”

Right away, Margaret smiles. She looks at the doll in awe.

“Oh... Syd... Syd darling.”

But I pounce on Pat.

“What happened? Why didn’t you answer me?”

“If you had read the instructions carefully, you would know that I have periods of disconnection. From time to time, my energy cells need to recharge.”

Triumphant, I turn to Margaret, but my wife shrugs.

“Well, what, it’s a talking doll.”

“And that’s all you can say? But don’t you get it?”

“Oh come on, you know, with technology...”

“But she talks like a human being.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not deaf.”

“And it’s a borlok.”

“A what?”

“Well, apparently that’s the name of this toy.”
I think and whisper, “Who could have sent us this thing?”
Under Pat’s watchful eye, Margaret examines the box.
“Yes, I remember this package. It was in the pile the doorman brought up this morning. But there was no card.”
“Someone had to send it to us, right?”
Margaret scratches her forehead,
“Wait a minute, maybe it’s Aunt Emma. She’s so forgetful...”
“Aunt Emma? Are you completely crazy?”
“And why, pray tell?”
“She’s been dead for a year.”
“Oh my, that’s true.” She frowns and decides “So, it was Funnigan.”
“What, the boss? He’s way too cheap. It must’ve cost a fortune, a toy like this. No, it’s probably Archie and Gloria.”
“Impossible! Look, you know very well that they take great joy every Christmas in giving their godson his present themselves. By the way, do you at least remember that we’re celebrating Christmas Eve at their house tonight?”
I slapped my forehead. By Jove, I’d completely forgotten.
A burst of laughter from Pat, “You two are really funny.”
“Funny or not, I intend to find out.”
“What are you going to do?” Margaret asks me.
“I want to know where she comes from.”
“And you intend to search all the shops in the city?”
And then suddenly, inspiration strikes.
“M! Capital M! Damn, I think I’ve got it!”
I pick up some cardboard boxes and show them to Margaret.
“Macy’s! Almost all of these toys come from Macy’s. That’s where this doll was bought. No doubt about it. With any luck, I’ll find out who played this prank on us.”
Without waiting for Margaret’s answer, and even less for Pat’s opinion, I grab the doll and place it delicately in the long cardboard box.
Two seconds later, with the package under my arm, I rush into the elevator.