

Below is a full transcript of *The Thief's Christmas* (New York Evening Sun, December 24, 1898) that is included in the exhibition. The document is written in Riis's handwriting.

THE THIEF'S CHRISTMAS

"It is that or starve, Captain! I can't get a job. God knows I've tried, but without a recommend it's no use. I ain't no good at beggin.' And—and—there's the childer?"

There was a desperate note in the man's voice that made the Captain turn and look sharply at him. A swarthy, strongly built man in a rough coat and with that in his dark face within told that he had lived longer than his years, stood at the door of the Detective Office. His hand that gripped the door handle shook so that the knob rattled in his grasp, but not with fear. He was no stranger to that place. Black Bill's face had looked out from the Rogues' Gallery longer than most of those now there could remember. The Captain looked him over in silence.

"You had better not, Bill!" he said. "You know what will come of it. When you go up again it will be the last time. And up you go, sure."

The man started to say something, but choked it down and went out without a word. The Captain got up and rang his bell.

"Bill, who was here just now, is off again," he said to the officer who came to the door. "He says it is steal or starve, and he can't get a job. I guess he is right. Who wants a thief in his pay? And how can I recommend him? And still, I think he would keep straight if he had the chance. Tell Murphy to look after him and see what he is up to."

The Captain went out, tugging viciously at his gloves. He was in very bad humor. The policeman at the Mulberry street door got hardly a nod for his cheery "Merry Christmas" as he passed.

"Wonder what's crossed him," he said, looking down the street after him.

The green lamps were lighted and shone upon the hurrying 6 o'clock crowds from the Broadway shops. In the great business buildings the iron shutters were pulled down and the lights put out, and in a little while the reporters' boys that carried slips from Headquarters to the newspaper offices across the street were the only tenants of the block. A stray policeman stopped now and then on the corner and tapped the lamp post reflectively with his club as he looked down the deserted street and wondered, as his glance rested upon the Chief's darkened windows, how it felt to have \$6,000 a year and every night off. In the Detective Office the sergeant who had come in at roll-call stretched himself behind the desk and thought of home. The lights of a Christmas tree in the abutting Mott street tenement shone through his window, and the laughter of children mingled with the tap of the toy drum. He pulled down the sash, so as to hear better. As he did a strong draught swept his desk. The outer door slammed. Two detectives came in bringing a

prisoner between them. A woman accompanied them. The sergeant pulled the blotter toward him mechanically and dipped his pen.

“What’s the charge?” he asked.

“Picking pockets in Fourteenth street. This lady is the complainant, Mrs. _____.”

The name was that of a well known police magistrate. The sergeant looked up and bowed. His glance took in the prisoner, and a look of recognition came into his face.

“Well, Bill. So soon?” he said.

The prisoner was sullenly silent. He answered the questions put to him briefly and was searched. The stolen pocketbook, a small paper package, and a crumpled letter were laid upon the desk. The sergeant saw only the pocketbook.

“Looks bad,” he said, with wrinkled brow.

“We caught him at it,” explained the officer. “Guess Bill has lost heart. He didn’t seem to care. Didn’t even try to get away.”

The prisoner was taken to a cell. Silence fell once more upon the office. The sergeant made a few red lines in the blotter and resumed his reveries. He was not in a mood for work. He hitched his chair nearer the window and looked across the yard. But the lights there were put out, the children’s laughter had died away. Out of sorts at he hardly knew what, he leaned back in his chair with his hands under the back of his head. Here it was Christmas eve, and he at the desk instead of being out with the old woman buying things for the children. He thought with a sudden pang of conscience of the sled he had promised to get for Johnnie and forgotten. That was hard luck. And what would Katie say when—

He had got that far when his eye, roaming idly over the desk, rested pon the little package taken from the thief’s pocket. Something about it seemed to move him with sudden interest. He sat up and reached for it. He felt it carefully all over. Then he undid the package slowly and drew forth a woolly sheep. It had the blue ribbon about its neck, with a tiny bell hung on it

The sergeant set the sheep upon the desk and look at it fixedly for better than a minute. Having apparently studied out its mechanism, he pulled its head and it baa-aed. He pulled it once more, and nodded. Then he took up the crumpled letter and opened it.

This is what he read, scrawled in a child’s uncertain hand:

“Deer Sante Claas—Pease wont yer bring me a sjeep wat bas. Aggie had won wonst. An Kate wants a dollie offul. In the reere 718 19 Street by the gas house. Your frend Will.” [spelling as is]

The sergeant read it over twice very carefully and glanced over the page at the sheep, as if taking stock and wondering why Kate’s dollie was not there. Then he took the sheep and the letter and

went over to the Captain's door. A gruff "Come in!" answered his knock. The Captain was pulling off his overcoat. He had just come in from his dinner.

"Captain," said the sergeant, "we found this in the pocket of Black Bill, who is locked up for picking Mrs. _____'s pocket an hour ago. It is a clear case. He didn't even try to give them the slip," and he set the sheep upon the table and laid the letter beside it.

"Black Bill? Said the Captain, with something of a start, "the dickens you say!" And he took up the letter and read it. He was not a very good penman, was little Will. The Captain had even a harder time of it than the sergeant had had making out his message. Three times he went over it, spelling out the words, and each time comparing it with the woolly exhibit that was part of the evidence, before he seemed to understand. Then it was in a voice that would have frightened little Will very much could he have heard it, and with a black look under his bushy eyebrows, that he bade the sergeant: "Fetch Bill up here!" One might almost have expected the little white lamb to have _____ to its heels with fright at having raised such a storm, could it have run at all. But it showed no signs of fear. On the contrary, it baaed quite lustily when the sergeant should have been safely out of earshot. He heard it and grinned.

An iron door in the basement clanked and there were steps in the passageway. The doorman brought in Bill. He stood by the door, sullenly submissive. The Captain raised his head. It was in the shade.

"So you are back, are you?" he said.

The thief nodded.

The Captain bent his brows upon him and said with sudden fierceness, "You couldn't keep honest a month, could you?"

"They wouldn't let me. Who wants a thief in his pay? And the children were starving." It was said patiently enough, but it made the Captain wince all the same. They were his only words. But he did not give in so easily.

"Starving?" he repeated harshly, "And that's why you got this, I suppose?"

And he pushed the sheep from under the newspaper that had fallen upon it by accident and covered it up.

The thief looked at it and flushed to the temples. He tried to speak, but could not. His face worked and he seemed to be strangling. In the middle of his fight to master himself he saw the children's crumpled message on the desk. Taking a quick step across the room he snatched it up, wildly, fiercely.

"Captain," he gasped, and broke down utterly. The hardened thief wept like a woman.

The Captain rang his bell. He stood with his back to the room when the doorman came in. “Take him down,” he commanded. And the iron door clanged once more behind the prisoner.

Ten minutes later the reporters were discussing across the way the nature of “the case” which the night promised to develop. They had piped off the Captain and one of his trusted men leaving the building together, bound east. Could they have followed them all the way they would have seen them get off the car at Nineteenth street and go toward the gas house, carefully scanning the numbers of the houses as they went. They found one at last before which they halted. The Captain searched in his pocket and drew forth the baby’s letter to Santa Claus and they examined the number under the gas lamp. Yes, that was right. The door was open, and they went right through to the rear.

Up to the third story three little noses were flattened against the windowpane, and three childish mouths were breathing peepholes through which to keep a lookout for the expected Santa Claus. It was cold, for there was no fire in the room, but in their fever of excitement the children didn’t mind that. They were bestowing all their attention upon keeping the peepholes open.

“Do you think he will come?” asked the oldest boy—there were two boys and a girl—of Kate.

“Yes; he will. I know he will come. Papa said so,” said the child in a tone of conviction.

“I’m so hungry, and I want my sheep,” said Baby Will.

“Wait and I’ll tell you of the wolf,” said his sister and took him on her lap. She had barely started when there were steps on the stairs and a tap on the door. Before the half-frightened children could answer it was pushed open. Two men stood on the threshold. One wore a big fur overcoat. The baby eyed him in wide-eyed wonder.

“Is you Santa Claus?” he asked.

“Yes, my little man, and you are Baby Will?” said a voice that was singularly different from the harsh one Baby Will’s father had heard so recently in the Captain’s office, and yet very like it.

“See! This is for you, I guess,” and out of the big, roomy pocket came the wooly sheep and baaed right off as if it were his own pasture in which he was at home. And well might any sheep be content nestling at a baby heart so brimful of happiness as little Will’s was then, child of a thief though he was.

“Papa spoke for it, and he spoke for Kate, too, and I guess for everybody,” said the bogus Santa Claus, “and it is all right. My sled will be here in a minute. Now we will just get to work and make ready for him. All help.”

The sergeant behind the desk in the Detective Office might have had a fit had he been able to witness the goings-on in that rear tenement in the next hour; and then again he might not. There is no telling about those sergeants. The way that poor flat laid itself out of a sudden was fairly staggering. It was not only that a fire was made and that the pantry filled up in the most extraordinary manner; but a real Christmas tree sprang up, out of the floor as it were, and was

found to be all besprinkled with gold and stars and cornucopias with sugar plums. From the top of it, which was not higher than that Santa Claus could easily reach it, because the ceiling was low, a marvellous doll with real hair and with eyes that could open and shut, looked down with arms wide open to take Kate to its soft wax heart. Under the branches of the tree browsed every animal that went into and came out of Noah's ark, and there was a glorious game of Messenger Boy and Three Bad Bears, and honey-cakes and candy-apples, and a little yellow bird in a cage, and what not. It was glorious, glorious. And when the tea-kettle began to sing, skillfully manipulated by Santa Claus's assistant, who nominally was known in Mulberry street as Detective Sergeant Murphy, it was just too lovely for anything. The baby's eyes grew wider and wider, and Kate's were shining with happiness, when in the midst of it all she suddenly stopped and said:

"But where is papa? Why don't he come?"

Santa Claus gave a little start at the sudden question, but pulled himself together right away.

"Why, yes," he said, "he must have got lost. Now you are all right, we will just go and see if we can find him. Mrs. McCarthy here next door will help you keep the kettle going and the lights burning till we come back. Just let me hear that sheep baa once. That's right! I'll bet we'll find papa." And out they went.

That evening, while Mr. _____, the Magistrate, and his good wife were viewing with mock dismay the array of little stockings at their hearth in their fine uptown house, and talking of the adventure of Mrs. _____ with the pickpocket, there came a ring at the doorbell and the Captain of the detectives was entered in. What he told them I do not know, but this I do know, that when he went away the honorable Magistrate went with him, and his wife waved goodbye to them from the stoop with wet eyes as they drove away in a carriage hastily ordered up from a livery stable. While they drove downtown, the Magistrate's wife went up to the nursery and hugged her sleeping little ones, one after the other, and tear drops fell upon their warm cheeks that had wiped out the guilt of more than one sinner before, and the children smiled in their sleep. They say among the simple-minded folk of far-off Denmark that then they see angels in their dreams.

The carriage stopped in Mulberry street in front of Police Headquarters and there was great scurrying among the reporters, for now they were sure of their "case." But no "prominent citizen" came out, made free by the Magistrate, who opened court in the Captain's office. Only a rough looking man with a flushed face, whom no one knew, and who stopped on the corner and looked back as one in a dream and then went east, the way the Captain and his man had gone on their expedition personating no less exalted a personage than Santa Claus himself.

That night there was Christmas indeed in the rear tenement "near the gas house," for papa had come home just in time to share in its cheer. And there was no one who did it with a better will, for the Christmas evening that began so badly was the luckiest night in his life. He had the promise of a job on the morrow in his pocket along with something to keep the wolf from the door in the holidays. His hard days were over, and he was at last to have his chance to live an honest life. And it was the baby's letter to Santa Claus and the baa sheep that did it all, with the able assistance of the Captain and the sergeant. Don't let us forget the sergeant.

In Riis's hand:

Jacob A. Riis

This was the last Xmas story I wrote for my paper, the Evening Sun. They laughed it to scron in the office, and made no end of fun of it. And yet, of all the stories I have written I like this best. It moved me more deeply than any of the rest. J.A.R.