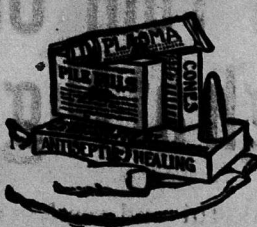


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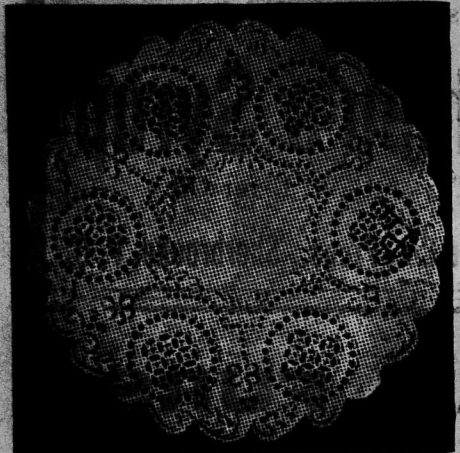
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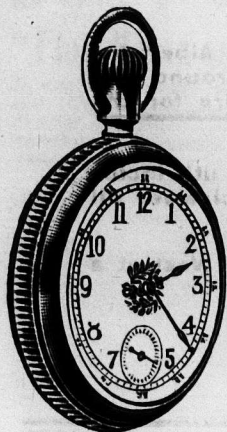
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It was nine o'clock when he came within sight of the cabin. An angry oath escaped his lips when he saw a light streaming forth from the one little window beside the cabin door. He shook his head savagely and muttered dire threats against the "ornery cuss" within the cabin. Then he crept forth cautiously, with his hand on the butt of one of his pistols, ready to fire instantly should the invader detect his presence and come forth to open the attack. He crept up to the little window and peeped in, and as he did so his hand fell from the butt of the pistol and his mouth opened and closed in speechless surprise. He saw a careworn looking woman sitting by a smouldering fire on the hearth, mending a little stocking. Two other stockings were dangling from the rough pine board shelf on the chimney above the fireplace, and over in a bunk in a corner he saw the curly heads of two children sleeping under some old grey blankets. He saw a rude pine cradle near the fireplace, and the woman rocked it gently with one foot as she passed the needle in and out the stocking. Old Dad looked in on the scene with gaping mouth and staring eyes. He saw the woman hang the third little stocking with the others, and then she put into each two or three little cakes, and into the largest stocking she thrust a poor little rag doll. It was apparently all she had, and the thought of her

me how you and these babies happen to be here."

"There is little to tell," she said. "We have been wintering on a claim of my husband's about a mile from here, and last week our cabin caught fire and burned down and we came over here to stay until my husband can build another. We thought that the owner of this old cabin would not mind if we stayed here for a little while, and—"

"No, he doesn't, ma'am," said Old Dad, hastily. "I know the owner of this old shack well and you needn't worry in the least about him makin' any fuss over you movin' in here. Stay just as long as you please."

"Tell him that we are very grateful for his kindness. My husband has not been very well of late, or he would have gone right to work on another cabin. He went to Lead City to-day to see if he could get work of any kind, as we are about out of provisions. I am expecting him home at any time now. I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am for your kindness in bringing all of those lovely things for my children, but I can't understand how you should happen to be here in this way. It seems like a real fairy tale. Whoever you are or whatever you are, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for what you have done to give my babies a happy Christmas."

"That's all right ma'am. If you



"Sh-sh-sh! I'm Santy Claws!"

poverty seemed suddenly to depress her, for she burst into tears and stood before the little stockings with a corner of her apron held to her eyes.

Then Old Dad laid his hand on the latch of the cabin door. It yielded to his touch and the door opened. He stepped into the cabin, and when the woman turned with a half-uttered cry of affright, he pointed toward the sleeping children and said, softly:

"Sh-sh-sh! I'm Santy Claws!"

The woman drew back and looked at him with affright still in her eyes. "Don't be skeered, ma'am," said Old Dad. "I mean no harm. You are perfectly safe. I just want to fill up them little stockings, and then I'll go."

She sat down on an old chest in a corner, and watched him with staring eyes as he took the bags from his back, set them on the floor and drew forth a great doll, toys of several kinds, candy, oranges, nuts, raisins. He filled the stockings to overflowing and set the doll on the mantel. Then he took a purse from his pocket and dropped some shining yellow coins into each stocking. He looked not unlike a veritable Santa Claus, with his long gray beard and his bushy hair hanging to his shoulders. Before he went away he said quietly to the woman:

"Now that you know that I mean you fair, mebbe you won't mind telling

need any help or a friend at any time, just send word over to Old Dad Kinney in Camp Hilarity. Good-night, ma'am, and—merry Christmas!"

"The same to you, sir, and may God's blessing go with you!"

The old man went out into the moonlight and down the trail, chuckling to himself. He shook his shaggy head and burst into a roar of laughter when the cabin was far behind him. Then he said:

"I hope the boys at camp will never git on to the way I crept up to that cabin, with a hand on my six-shooter ready to fill three little kids and their mite of a mother with cold lead for jumpin' the Sweet Lavendar. They'd rig me to death if they knew about it. Jee—whiz, but didn't I feel cheap when I caught on to the real situation up there! An' ain't I glad I had all that stuff on my back for them poor little cusses! I reckon their eyes will about pop out o' their heads to-morrow, and them yaller boys in each stockin' won't come amiss to a poverty-struck push like that. I never thought I'd figure as a real Santy Claws when I left home this morning, and I never thought I'd go tralin' up to the Sweet Lavendar to fire a lot o' claim-jumpers. Dandy claim-jumpers them!"

He went on down the trail with the

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