

ing his two calloused palms together with a resounding whack.

"Hang up the baby's stockin'
Be sure you don't forget,
Dear little dimpled darlin'
Ain't never had a Christmas yet!"

sang little Joe Moss in his thin treble voice.

"Next week's Christmas all right, an' it seems to me that something ought to be did about it," said Old Dad.

"What for instance?" asked Big Andy.

Old Dad scratched his head with its great shock of grisly iron-gray hair and said:

"Hanged if I ain't stumped for once in my life. We're all too near bed rock in our finances to do much, but I'll be derned if the day shall go by without something being did. Gimme a day or two to think the matter over, will ye?"

The next day was one of more than ordinary interest in Camp Hilarity, because it brought the bi-weekly mail. Old dad rarely received a letter, but on this day there was one for him bearing the Denver postmark. It was in a bright yellow envelope addressed in a sprawling hand that the old man did not recognize. A storm was brewing and Old Dad hurried homeward as soon as he had received his letter and his Denver papers. Within the cabin he threw off his great bearskin coat and buckskin gloves with cuffs reaching to his elbows, and hung his big fur cap on a wooden peg in the wall. Then he lighted a tallow candle and sat down with it in one hand and the letter in the other. He glanced at the signature of the letter, and said to himself:

"Old Bill Heffner! What in time can he—"

He did not finish the sentence, for a thin slip of printed paper slipped from the envelope and fell to the floor, and the old man leaned over to pick it up.

"What's this? Why, it's—yes, by gum, if it ain't a check! An' for an even thousand dollars! Am I asleep or awake? What's it all mean?"

He turned to the letter for information, and read these words:

"Dear Old Dad: I reckon you will be consid'able dashed to git this letter an' what's in it from me. But mebbe you ain't forgot that ten year ago this month, when I was down an' you was up, you loaned me five hundred dollars, an' I reckon you've got my I O U for it tucked away som'wheres. No matter if you ain't or if you have, here is the money with plenty of interest added. I struck it ritch over in ole Bald Eagle Gulch a few weeks ago, an' have got money to burn, but I gess I will pay my dets an' you come first. So find check inklosed an' thank God I can do it. Have just found out your whereabouts, an' hasten to send the money with thanks for awl your kindness in days that are went an' gone. Call on me if you ever find myself in a tite place, for one good turn deserves another, as the saying is. So good-bye from
"Yours trooly,
"Bill Heffner."

"Well, if that ain't bread cast on the waters I'd like to know what is," said the old man, slowly nodding his head to and fro. "Bill Heffner's white, that's just what he is! I'll write and tell him so before I go to sleep this night. If this don't come in the very nick o' time, fer a two-dollar bill is the extent o' my cash boodle. I'll just fasten my feet to a pair o' snowshoes and scun over to Lead City and cash this neat little slip o' paper to-morrow. I reckon it will make me about the flushest man in camp. Some o' the poor cusses ain't got a dollar to their names. Makes a kind of a tough outlook fer Christmas fer 'em."

He sat for a long time in silence before the fire with the check in his hand. The letter dropped to the floor, but Old Dad held the check lightly between his thumb and finger. Presently he sat erect, slapped one leg with his open hand, and said:

"I'll do it! I'll give the boys a Christmas blowout with this check, or a part of it! There ain't more than thirty of us left in camp. I'll invite the hull caboodle of 'em to dinner at Denny Thompson's tavern. It's many a day since Denny set up a dinner to that many, and I've my suspicions that he'll never git a chance to do it ag'in. I'll give the boys a dinner and a good time all round that will cheer them up for many a day."

True to this generous impulse Old

Dad went down to the camp early next morning and held a conference with Denny Thompson, proprietor of the Delmonico Hotel, the only building of two storeys in the camp. Denny fell in readily with Old Dad's plan and agreed to "spread himself" in the way of a dinner for the boys on Christmas day. Then Old Dad attached himself to a pair of snowshoes and slipped away down the gulch in the direction of Lead City, with two or three stout canvas ore bags on his back. These were for the purpose of holding a few "gimcracks in the way of seegars an' sich" for the boys.

It was down grade all the way to Lead City, and Old Dad found himself in that camp by ten o'clock. Lead City was almost as dead as Camp Hilarity, but it still had a daily mail, a bank and three or four paying mines giving employment to about one hundred men. There was a large and well-stocked general store, for the camp was the base of supplies for many miners in the gulches and small camps round about.

Having cashed his check an' filled his ore bags with "gimcracks," Old Dad started on his homeward way. This homeward journey would be slower and more difficult than had been the journey to Lead City. There would be some stiff climbing and the ore bags on the old man's back were heavy.

"I feel sure-enough like a old Santy Claws," he said to himself as he left the camp behind him and began the ascent of a steep trail.

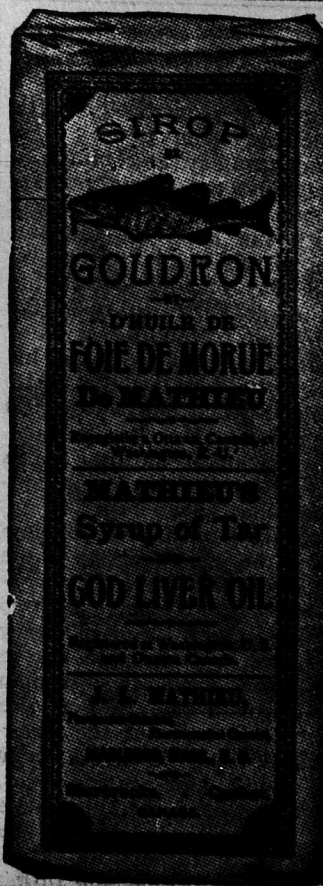
There were some things in the bags on his back over which he chuckled merrily as he walked over the snowy trail. His fun-loving spirit had induced him to make some queer purchases. He had in one bag a large and gorgeously attired wax doll he proposed to present to Big Andy Taft, who was six feet four and "tipped the beam" at two hundred and eighty pounds. Then he had a glittering toy rattle-box with a horn in the handle for Joey Moss. There were tin railroad trains and other childish toys for some of the other men, and several pounds of striped stick candy, with which Old Dad proposed to have "slathers of fun" at his Christmas dinner on the morrow. He was within a couple of miles of his cabin on his homeward way, and the sun, a great golden ball, was slipping down behind old Paradise Mountain, and the black shadows in the gulch were lengthening on the snow. Suddenly the old man stopped short on the trail. A thin column of smoke was rising on the mountain slope far above him. He saw it was coming up from among the stunted pines at the edge of the timber line, and an oath came from between his bearded lips.

"If that smoke ain't comin' from the little cabin on my Sweet Lavendar claim then I'm a liar!" he said, angrily. "And if some sneak of a claim-jumper has jumped that claim of mine the Lord help him! Big Andy said yesterday that they had nabbed a couple of claim jumpers over in Stray Horse Gulch. It looks mighty to me as if one had lit down on my claim now, and I'll know whether he has or not before I sleep. It's going to be a moonlight night, and I shan't mind getting home late. There'll be trouble if I find a claim-jumper on Sweet Lavendar. I have a feeling that its going to open up into something big in the spring."

The nature of the "trouble" in store for the possible claim-jumper may be inferred from the fact that before he started up the trail toward the claim he took a pair of villainous-looking pistols from his belt and examined them carefully to make sure that they were in perfect order.

"A claim-jumper don't deserve no more mercy than a boss thief," said Old Dad, as he went up the trail.

It was slow and difficult work climbing the steep snow-covered trail leading up to the Sweet Lavendar claim. The full moon came riding up above the highest peaks of the distant mountain range before the old man had gone half way up the trail. The stars came out and the snow on the mountain slopes began to glisten. The old man cast a long and grotesque shadow on the snow, and the trees took on queer shapes.



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