

HOW OL' HAMMER BEAT THE PLASTIC NICK

by David Schleich

I don't know; I just don't know. I mean, I'm just a store-keeper for the Hudson's Bay Co. here in Norman Wells, and when you really get down to it, what IS wrong with a little bit of glitter at Christmas? I was decorating the store window like I do every year and along comes old Hammer Nelson plomping down the street. He just stopped and stared at me through the window. I tried to smile him into moving on but he stayed there watching.

"Hey Hammer, you coming tonight?" I asked him when he came in.

"What you doin' puttin' plastic junk up in that window?" he asked me.

"It ain't junk; it's what folks like nowadays."

I mean, here I'd ordered it in from Fort Simpson as far back as last summer, figurin' everybody'd really like a little bit of sparkle for Christmas. Old Hammer, he snorted "good goddam" and bashed and crashed off down the street. Me, I went back to work on the window stringing streamers and mounting the little plastic Santa Clauses. Outside the snow was purling around the wood walk, small slopes of frost getting bigger and bigger along the window sills. A bit of sparkle, that's all.

Later in the afternoon we were all down in the town hall putting up the tree and balloons and streamers. Old Hammer came in just before we were done. "Good goddam," he snorted again as he looked over the pile of Christmas parcels under the tree.

"What're them presents doin' there already?" he asked me, pulling on my pant leg. I was on a ladder trying to fasten a plastic Santa Claus above the big fireplace.

"An' don' be stickin' up any more of them damn plastic Nicks," he roared, twisting his white whiskers and turning up his big red nose.

We all laughed, I mean, we couldn't see anything wrong with a plastic Santa Claus over the fireplace. It had lights that'd glow all red and jolly. Old Hammer, he got really mad and stomped off muttering about how he'd fix us if we didn't quit wrecking Christmas. Me and the decorating committee just ignored him and went on with the preparations.

After Hammer left some kids came in to watch us. We tried to shoo them out but they kept sneaking back into the hall, giggling with delight, rummaging around the pile of parcels under the giant tree in the middle of the floor. I finally got them out so we could turn off the lights to test the Santa Claus above the fireplace. It gleamed so red and festive we were all sure our plastic Nick'd be the hit of the party. I locked up after everybody was gone and headed back to the store figuring it was probably getting pretty busy down there by now. I could feel the crispy excitement along the street, people nipping about here and there carrying parcels wrapped in coloured paper, kids tagging along behind parents or stopping snow at each other.

"Merry Christmas!" Mrs. Cargle chimed at me at the Post Office.

"Same to you," I said.

People were standing around everywhere with arms full of mail, parcels, bags.

"Closin' up early tonight?" Mirvin asked me through the wicket.

"Not tonight."

"Sure glad it's Christmas Eve; no more parcels'n cards'n mountains of mail to shuffle around," Mirvin added.

We always stayed open until 7 p.m. on Christmas Eve so the men from the refinery could get into town for last minute shopping before the big Christmas Eve Party at the town hall.

I was just going in the front door of the store when Old Hammer bumped past me carrying a bunch of canvass or something.

"Doin' your Christmas shoppin'?" I asked him.

He growled at me and then disappeared down the alley. I stood there a minute, a bit affronted by his cold, un-Christmasy manner. The first winter I was in Norman Wells I'd gone with him on his line to learn how the trappers lived and worked in bush country. We walked nineteen days. He'd move kind of bent

forward, his snow shoes plo-plo-d regular and unrelenting through the trees and along the ridges overlooking the MacKenzie. And we walked without talking. At first I figured Old Hammer was unfriendly. There'd be animal tracks, signs in the snow; he'd watch for changes in the wind, tracks crossing each other. Maybe there was some snow that might have fallen from low-hanging branches. He'd notice all of it and not say anything; just gesture or grunt for me to see it too. We got to one of his shacks way back in the Franklin Mountains and he played this old wood recorder after we ate; told me stories of wintering on the delta before the war. He was a private old man and even then I figured he was on the looney side of eccentric.

Inside the store people were chattering and jabbing around the small displays I'd built along the walls. Some kids were looking at the angel I stuck in the window. It moved in circles by itself because of the heat rising from lighted candles underneath. I knew kids loved gadgets like that. Some of them were watching the little plastic Santas in the window too. Kids liked them even if Old Hammer didn't.

We closed up shortly after seven. I walked home through the snow watching how the street lights tinkled in halos because the flakes were just tricking down past the glass bulbs. There were far fewer people out now. I imagined them all at home getting ready for the party, maybe stuffing stockings to hang over their own fireplaces. I started feeling that old Christmas warmth; you know, that festival feeling getting in on me. I couldn't eat much. I was excited thinking about the carole singing, the games, the dancing, the kids jumping up and down anticipating gift-giving time when the mayor would hand out the presents from under the tree. The Christmas Party happened every year and every year I found myself getting as excited as the kids who were waiting outside the hall when I got there.

I hated having to make them stay out another few minutes, but while I got the furnace going and did some last minute checking over, I knew they'd be getting even more excited. I was no sooner in the door, though, when I heard Mrs. Cargle's voice whinnying behind me. She'd come early to get the kitchen ready for the onslaught of women and their cakes, sandwiches, cookies, candies, fruit, tea, coffee, lemonade, punch. She waited while I groped along the hall to find the light switch. Then we stepped in. She noticed it first. But for me it took a few minutes more before it sunk in.

"They're gone!" she screamed, almost in my ear.

I wasn't daydreaming exactly; it's just that when you don't expect something like that, when it does happen, you don't really believe it at first. Mrs. Cargle put her hands to her mouth and mumbled again.

"They're gone!"

I looked in the same direction she was looking: at the tree. It was there, just as before, ten feet tall, dazzling with lights, floss, angel hair, tinsel, bells. I'm not sure if I coughed or wheezed or grunted or what. I walked over to the tree and felt around under it.

"So they are," I think I said.

My first reaction was that some kids must have broken in and made off with them all. But even that didn't make sense. My next idea was that somebody was playing a practical joke. Then I became so perplexed that I ended up sitting under the tree with my thumb at my nose and my elbow in the palm of my other hand. Meanwhile Mrs. Cargle was running all over the hall looking under chairs. She finally came back over to where I was sitting.

"What has happened to all the Christmas parcels? They were here when we left this afternoon!"

I told her I had no particular idea and certainly no general idea of where they might be. My brain was wheeling and grinding, trying to sort out the mystery. I saw the twisted and contorted despair in her face and I decided that I must take command of the situation or jeopardize the whole Christmas Party.

There had to be an explanation for the missing gifts.

Mrs. Cargle went reluctantly to the kitchen to start getting things ready for the other ladies. I stayed sitting under the tree in the middle of the big empty hall, all kinds of exotic solutions springing into my mind. I thought I might race back to the store and parcel up a few dozen toys to replace the missing packages. Then I thought of dashing through the snow to find Constable Melbourne to report the disappearance. I got as far as the front door and discovered a crowd of beaming Christmas faces shivering there.

I'm not sure how they got in so quickly; they sort of walked over me and on into the hall putting presents under the tree, clambering around the chairs, talking back and forth. I waited and watched for what seemed a long, long time before Mirvin from the Post Office finally came up to ask me,

"Not many parcels this year, eh?"

I don't think I answered him straight; everything was happening so fast. People just kept coming in and putting new packages under the tree. There weren't many gifts there now, compared to what had been there before, but enough to take the sting off that shocking emptiness Mrs. Cargle and I had discovered. Someone started playing the piano and everybody was singing caroles. Finally the mayor made a welcoming speech. Soon even I was eating cakes and drinking hot chocolate, trying to decide what to do. So far nothing had happened to force the moment to its crisis.

I think it was close to nine o'clock when Mrs. Cargle came up to me again, her lips quivering.

"It's gone too!"

I looked along her pointing fingers to where the big plastic Santa Claus had been this afternoon. In the midst of all the confusion I hadn't even noticed. This time I leaned back against a wall to keep standing.

I don't know; I just don't know; how can a man take two serious mysterious disappearances on one Christmas Eve? I mean, there's the whole town depending on me to make sure the annual party goes along without a hitch and the most important part of the programme gets bungled. Just when the mayor was supposed to start handing out presents we were going to light up the plastic Santa on the fireplace. I went out for a walk. The sudden silence on the street settled me a little and I knew that eventually I must stand up and tell everybody. Inside they were singing *O Come All Ye Faithful*. I went to Melbourne and asked him to help me make the painful admission. He figured I'd been imbibing too much Fiddlebrant Brandy at first; then he took me seriously and before long we were back at the hall and standing on the stage.

The Mayor smiled at me when I told him I had an important announcement to make before the gift-giving time. I looked out from the stage at the bubbling

bubbling kids, Christmas glistening in every eye. I turned to Melbourne. He nodded me on.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid I must..."

I was hoping they'd see it in my face, the pain, I mean. But instead they clapped and cheered me on. I couldn't help glancing over toward the fireplace. I'd been looking forward to seeing the plastic St. Nick glowing red and jolly there, little kids dancing under him, their arms full of gifts.

"I'm afraid there's been a terrible..."

Still they beamed up at me, so unsuspecting, so festive. In the background the piano rolled out *Jingle Bells*.

"Somebody has taken all the parcels..." I began.

I think a few people near the front were starting to understand that something was wrong. I felt like such a heel up there; I'd let them all down and now they were going to find out how badly. Then it was pitch dark.

I think a woman screamed when the lights went out. Most everybody laughed, though, in the next few minutes. The piano played louder. Suddenly there was a thundering, rolling, rumbling, clattering, bashing thump from the direction of the fireplace.

"The lights!" I yelled.

The piano played faster.

When the lights came on, smoke, ash and dust from the fireplace were drifting like a sooty haze across the floor toward the stage. A little boy squealed: "Santa Claus!" and ran toward the fireplace. Slowly it all settled. At the fireplace, nothing. Moments passed in shuffles and murmurings. Then someone pulled something out of the smouldering coals. The plastic Santa Claus was still smoking when I recognized it.

Somehow it had come crashing down the chimney.

An enthusiastic roar from the boys and girls in the hall came next. I was still standing on the stage when from the other direction, plomping through the front doors, came an old man dressed in red with a canvas sack twice his size in tow. For an instant I too believed it was Old Nick himself; the first impression was so shocking and sudden. Every kid in the place dashed up to him, jumping and jostling around the soiled, sooty fellow, tugging at his red pants and vest, yelling "Santa Claus!", "Santa Claus!"

The man with white whiskers and red toque ambled slowly up to the stage. I glanced again toward the fireplace mourning the loss of the plastic Santa Claus. Then the man with white whiskers pulled his enormous sack of parcels up onto the stage after him. It was Old Hammer all right, Norman Wells' Santa. He stepped up beside the Mayor and me, winked at the kids below, wrinkled his sooty nose at me and snorted quietly:

"Don' even make chimneys like they used ta."

