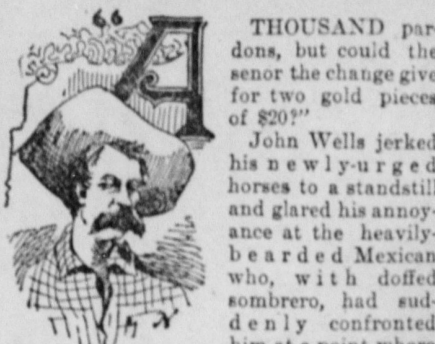


SANTA CLAUS AT GRIMM'S RANCH.



THOUSAND pardons, but could the senior the change give for two gold pieces of \$20?"

John Wells jerked his newly-urged horses to a standstill and glared his annoyance at the heavily-bearded Mexican who, with doffed sombrero, had suddenly confronted him at a point where the scattered roads of Fort McKavett and headed out for the open prairie.

Two gold pieces of \$20, he growled. "Where are they? Are they counterfeit? How did you come by them?"

"They are gold, senior. They were given me by the American, Senior Black—who sends the meat of goats across the seas in cans. The money is the price of 40 goats that I drove from the Rio Concho."

"I know Col. Hill Black, and his gold is good. But I think I know you, too. You were in the hotel just now when I paid my bill, and I think I saw you last night at the store where I bought those cursed cigars. I believe you want to learn if I have money, so you can relieve me of it farther out on the plains."

The object of Wells' distrust threw his arms aloft in humble deprecation. "The Sacred Mother knows!"

"Never mind that nonsense," exclaimed Wells, roughly. "I'm no baby, and I'll take chances on you and all the Greasers in McKavett. I'll give you silver for your gold; and here in this sack is more money—white and yellow—that you may have for the taking. Don't be afraid of the guns—they are never loaded—but sail in as soon as you can raise your crowd and overtake me."

"I have been successful in his mission and had remitted several large sums by express; but his collections had been heavy during the last few days, and at least \$3,000, in bills and coin, were stowed away in his pockets and in the buckskin bag at his feet. It was a large sum of money and he naturally felt the responsibility its possession involved.

by way of a change, conclude to make his annual trip with a beard of three weeks' growth, or even a smoothly-shaven face. Further than that he couldn't, under the circumstances, blame Little Hank for looking upon all strangers with an eye of suspicion; but he thought the chances of popping his gaze on Santa Claus by daylight were extremely small. Several millions of boys, in different parts of the world, had been keeping their eyes open for years without avail, and there had come to be a popular belief that the jolly fellow with the reindeer traveled principally in the dark.

"That's the way he hit this ranch last Christmas, and I reckon he left it till about the last ranch on his rounds," remarked the boy. "He didn't leave me a thing that I wanted—nuthin' but a little tin wagon and a pound of candy. Say, mister, d'y reckon Santa Claus ever handles windchesters?"

The appearance of the elder Hank Grimm surprised Wells the necessity of answering this difficult query. The owner of the "Two Boot ranch" was a man well advanced in years, and possessed of a sturdy, erect figure, square-cut features and sky-blue eyes, that told at once of German ancestry and of past service in the armies of the old world or the new. He welcomed the traveler heartily, directed him how to dispose of his horses for the night, and then abruptly turned away and entered the house. Little Hank remained behind and, in his quaint, boyish way, superintended Wells' every movement.

A covey of quail that had been foraging in the vicinity of the crib flushed at their approach, and settled in the prairie grass a short distance away. Little Hank clamored to have one of them killed for his Christmas breakfast, and to please him, on their return to the buggy, Wells slipped a couple of bird loads in his Parker, and, when the covey rose again, grassed three plump beauties with a hasty double shot. The boy was in perfect ecstasies over his success.

"That's better'n you could do with a windchester," he remarked, in a tone denoting that he considered this the height of possible praise. "Gran'paw says a shotgun is no good; but I reckon it depends a heap on who shoots it. I never seed but one before, and it wasn't worth shucks. It belonged to a man from Arkansas, and he couldn't hit the broadside of a mule."

The traveler's effects were soon transferred to the living room of the ranch, where he was introduced to the ranchman's aged wife, and found that the only occupants of the place were themselves and their precocious grandson, Grimm, with their respective school, with true Teutonic ideas of comfort, and it seemed that unusual preparations for the evening meal had been made in honor of his visitors. All in the way of food that the ranch could offer was on the table, and, surmounting the array of snowy biscuits, ham and eggs, juicy steak and canned fruit, stood a group of ancient glass decanters, their contents shining in a gradation of colors from deep red to straw yellow.

Little Hank seemed to look upon his share of the feast as an especial treat, and after it was disposed of his tongue ran more glibly than ever. At length his grandrere suspended for a moment a morsel of beef half raised to his mouth, and uttered a word of reproof. "Henry, my boy, it is not right that the children should talk and the grown ones listen. Remember, you should be very good boys and not kind."

"But see," retorted the lad, quickly. "I was good before and what did he bring me? Nothing. I wanted a windchester and he brought me a tin wagon."

"The child would be a man before his time," put in his grandmother. "He talks of nothing but guns; and if he had them he would kill us all, and himself in the bargain."

"I would be a brave soldier—like my father," said the boy, his eyes filling with tears. "And he killed by the Indians, as was he," responded the old ranchman. "My child, the Grimms have been soldiers since the earliest days. I have fought, in my time, with brave men to lead me on to battle, and I tell you there is nothing in soldiering—nothing but hard work and slavery and bloodshed and death. It is a dog's life; nothing more."

forth the injured lad and placed him tenderly in a chair; but he at once struggled to his feet. "Turn loose the dog, gran'paw, or he will git away. It's Santa Claus, and I'm blamed if he didn't miss me with his pistol right slap in my face. I never knowed afore that Santa Claus was an Arkansas man."

Wells turned from the excited boy and approached the open window. Below it, and directly to the right, the whitewashed walls were torn and disfigured with shot, and there were great splashes and dark, trickling streams of something like red paint shining in the light of the lamp.

He turned to the old German; his features pale but collected. "You will not need the dog," said he. "The man who tumbled through that window is lying where he fell—and I think I will recognize him when I see him."

Wells was right in both his surmises. In "layin' fer Santa Claus" Little Hank had taken a step that no midnight marauder could have foreseen. In forcing an entry to Grimm's ranch, the Mexican goat-herder, who had trailed Wells all the way from McKavett, had gone directly to his death. He lay outside the window, as he had fallen when the bulk of two loads of buckshot had struck him, and when Little Hank gazed into his dead face, its pallor more ghastly still in the lamplight, he screamed and staggered back, covering his eyes with trembling hands.

"I don't want to be a soldier," he sobbed. "I never want to kill another man as long as I live." But his sturdy old grandrere—descended, no doubt, from a long line of warlike Teutons—took him in her strong arms consolingly.

"But this man was a robber, my dear. Killing was his desert, for he came to murder us all in our beds. You saved our lives, and now would you turn coward and make us ashamed?"

"It was not a brave deed," growled old Grimm. "The boy thought to shoot Santa Claus and killed a lazy thief of a Mexican instead. It was a bull's-eye on the wrong target and no honor is won. Still, I am glad it has happened, for it may frighten his babyish mind from this folly about soldier-life and guns."

And so Kris Kringle did not visit the ranch that night, and Little Hank had to wait for his rifle—but not, as it chanced, so very long, after all. Arriving without further incident at his destination, Wells first care was to visit the different gunstores of San Antonio upon an errand the nature of which can be easily guessed. On New Year's Eve the McKavett stage halted at Grimm's ranch to deliver a package, and a few minutes later the heart of the younger Hank was beating high with elation. Snuggly packed in a neat box lay two guns—a tiny windchester and a light breech-loading shotgun. It was a present fit for a king, and a costlier one than Jack Wells' slim purse could have stood unaided; but his employers had been told how their thousands were saved and graciously donated two per cent. of the entire amount towards rewarding the principal actor in that Christmas Eve tragedy at the "Two Boot ranch."

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MY cousin Robert has written that he is sending us a little Christmas surprise," said Mrs. Meekmid, for the tenth time. "I felt sure that if he could once be induced to visit our happy little home he would forget that I—"



THE LID WAS OFF THE BOX AT LAST.

apt to appreciate such a compliment as a rich old bachelor, I'd like to know?" "No one, I'm sure. But he thawed as soon as he had seen our little cherubs. How he laughed when six little Josiah rode on my back and playfully kicked me in the eye!"

"And how merry he was when Ariadne spilled milk on my best dress. What a pleasure it must have been to witness such felicity. To be sure, I am sorry that he happened to hear your remarks when my dressmaker's bid came in, but—"

"And I had rather that he had been out of earshot when you told me your honest opinion of a man who could not match embroidery silks better than I, after he had been married ten years. However, this is mere detail. I remember his rage when he found that I had married his little fairy, as he called you. Odd, isn't it, that he has forgiven me now that you weigh twice as much!"

"Humph, I may weigh a few pounds more, but my hair is intact, and that is more than—"

"And now he is sending us a Christmas box. I wonder what it contains? The children will be up at daylight to find out. Well, properly will not change us?"

"Never. Even though I am able to dress as well as our own hired girl, I shall not insist that you write it Xmas, instead of Christmas, nor shall I call it appendicitis when little Rufus has eaten too much pie. Personally, I expect tickets to Europe."

"Tickets to Europe, and I such a poor sailor that the sight of a marine in water colors gives me seasickness! Nonsense, he has sent us the deed to a ranch in Texas."

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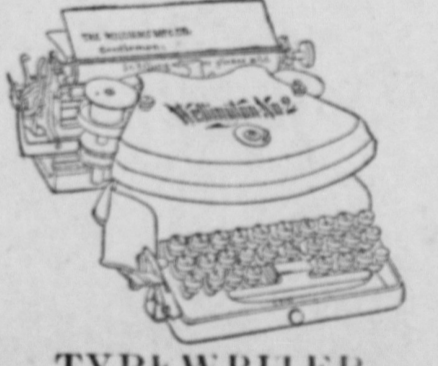
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I'VE GOT YOU THIS TIME, SANTA CLAUS.

hard dirt floor lay a freshly discharged pistol and a Mexican sombrero. "It is robbers that have been here," exclaimed the ranchman. "It is Mexican robbers, and they have shot my boy!"