

Galaxy

SCIENCE FICTION

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TO OUR READERS

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Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

not a creature was stirring

*This could be a Christmas story. If it is, it
shows one way peace on Earth can be attained!*

By DEAN EVANS

HE was a tall, hard man with skin the color of very old iodine. When he climbed up out of the vertical shaft of his small gold mine, *The Lousy Disappointment*, he could have been taken for an Indian, he was that dark. Except, of course, that Indians didn't exist any more in 1982. His name was Tom Gannett and he was about forty years old and he didn't realize his own uniqueness.

When he made it to his feet, the first thing he did was to

squint up at the sun. The second was to sneeze, and the third to blow his nose.

"Hey, you old sun!" he growled. "You old crummy sun, you look sicker'n a dog."

Which was literally true, for the sun seemed to be pretty queer. The whole sky seemed to be pretty queer, for that matter. Skies should be blue and the sun should be a bloated golden bauble drifting serenely across them. But the skies were not blue; they were a dirty purplish-gray. And the

Illustrated by DAVID STONE

sun wasn't a bloated golden bauble; somebody had it by the scruff of the neck and was dragging it.

Gannett planted his big feet wide apart and frowned sourly around and sniffed the air like a dog at a gopher hole. "The damn world smells sick," he grunted.

Which was also true. The world did smell sick. The world smelled something like that peculiar odor that comes from an old graveyard carefully tended by an old man with dank moss sticking to the soles of his old shoes. That kind of smell.

Gannett didn't know why the sun looked sick, and he didn't know why the world smelled sick. Indeed, there were many things Gannett didn't know, among which would be these in particular:

(a) He did not know (since, for the last six months, he had been living and working all alone at his little mine, which was in the remotest of the most remote desert regions of Nevada) that a little less than three weeks earlier, mankind had finally achieved the inevitable: man's own annihilation.

(b) He did not know that he was going to be the loneliest man on Earth—he who was used to, and perfectly content with, the hermitlike existence of a desert rat.

(c) He furthermore did not know that there were four of the Ten Commandments which he wasn't going to be able to break any more—not even if he stayed up nights trying and lived for centuries.

GANNETT snorted the smell from his nostrils and shrugged. Hell with it. He thought about Reno and how he hadn't been there for nearly a year. He thought of the dimly lighted, soft-carpeted cocktail lounges in Reno where drinks come in long stemmed glasses and blondes in long-stemmed legs. Reno at Christmastime, he thought. There was a town, Reno!

He grinned, showing big gold teeth that blazed out of his mouth like the glittering grille on a Buick. He dug his feet into the hard ground and walked the hundred feet or so to his cabin where he sometimes slept when he didn't happen to sleep in the mine. He stripped off his grime-sodden clothes. He stepped out of them, in fact, and stretched luxuriously as though he hadn't felt the good joy of being unclothed for a long time.

He got up and went to a corner of the cabin, rummaged out a pair of dusty clogs and pushed his feet into them. Then—and they don't come any nakeder than he was—he went outside and around the shack to the rear where he kept his jeep and where the shower was.

He stepped into it, for it was nothing more ornate than a large oil drum suspended on long four by sixes. He yanked on a rope that hung down from the drum.

The result of doing that made him leap out again dripping wet and colder than a buried mother-in-law.

He shivered, eyes blinking fast. He took a deep breath. His gold teeth went together tightly and the big muscles in his neck corded defensively. He deliberately went under the shower again. Pawing a sliver of laundry soap from a ledge on one of the four by sixes, he went to work with it, and when he finally tripped the hanging rope once more, he was a clean man.

He went into the cabin. It wasn't any warmer than the great outdoors, but that was where his clothes were. He shaved from an old granite basin full of cold water. After that he went to a hook on the wall and got down a suit of clothes which looked as though it had shriveled up waiting for somebody to wear it. The last thing he did before leaving was to pry up one of the boards behind the door and lift out of this hiding place a small leather bag.

The bag was filled with gold.

THE sun was gone now. Leg-like rays of light still sprawled, dirty-looking, in the sky over toward the California line, but aside from these extremities, most of it was somewhere out in the Pacific. The

purplish sky was darker now. Drab. Dead, somehow.

The 'old jeep started nicely. It always started nicely; that was one of the good things about a jeep. The only funny thing was that out of its exhaust pipe in the rear came angry purplish flames. Queer flames. Gannett stared at them, surprised.

"Even the damn jeep is sick," he muttered. He was wrong, of course, but he had no way of knowing that. He backed around, finally, and went down what he called his driveway, which was little more than rock-strewn ground, until he came to a small dirt road. This led him to another, larger dirt road, which in turn led him to route #395, which was a U.S. Highway.

A hundred miles farther on, he came to the outskirts of Carson City. It wasn't until he pulled into a gas station that he realized something was wrong. Nobody jumped out to wipe his windshield. The attendant who still leaned in the doorway of the station had a rag in his hand, but he didn't budge. He couldn't. His face looked like weathered leather and he was dead.

"Holy. . . !" whispered Gannett incredulously. He forgot about needing gas. He jumped in the jeep and drove down the main stem and found Police Headquarters in an old gray,

stone building. He knew it was Police Headquarters for the green neon over the revolving door had CPD on it and it was still burning.

He went up the steps two at a time, banged through the swinging doors and stamped straight to where the Sergeant sat at a desk over in the corner by the switchboard.

"Hey, by God!" yelled Gannett to the Desk Sergeant. "There's a guy down the street in a gas station and he's standing up in the doorway and he's dead as a mackerel!"

Dramatic words. But the Desk Sergeant was no longer among the living and didn't appreciate them. It took Gannett a long while to get over that. He slowly backed away. He made the big oak doors, still backing. He went down the stairs on legs as stiff as icicles.

He got back in his jeep and started up again. He knew there was something terribly wrong, but before he thought about it, he knew he had to have a drink. He pulled up in front of a saloon that had nice, cheery, glowing lights showing through the big front window. He got out of the jeep. He went through the swinging glass doors and straight to the bar.

"Scotch!"

Nobody answered. The barman

behind the mahogany, facing him, didn't make a move. The barman had a dead cigarette between his cold colorless lips. The cigarette had a half inch of ash on it. The ash looked as though it was sculptured out of purple marble.

Gannett put both hands flat on the bar and swallowed hard. He twisted his head and looked over the shoulder of a customer on his left, who was leaning negligently on the bar with one elbow. There was a half-full bottle in front of the leaning man and it had an alert-looking horse's head stuck in the neck of it for a pouring spout.

"Excuse me, Mac," Gannett whispered.

The leaning man didn't twitch a muscle.

Gannett sucked in a deep breath. He reached. He got the bottle. He blinked stupidly at the bottle and then he put it down very carefully and took another breath and looked at a highball glass in front of the leaning man. The highball glass was empty and clean, but the leaning man's fingers were curled lightly and gracefully around it. They were nice fingers. White fingers. Fingers that looked as if they hadn't had to do any hard work lately. Slender, tapering, carefully manicured fingers.

Gannett swore softly. He

yanked the horse's head out and then poked the bottle into his mouth and tilted it up. He held it until there wasn't anything left but the very glass it was made of plus the bright little paper label. His throat burned. He coughed. He banged the empty bottle down on the bartop and coughed again—hard.

The leaning man stirred, seemed to turn slowly, stiffly, in a half arc that put him face to face with Gannett. Then he went down backward and all in one piece, like a tall tree on top of a hill on a very still night.

He went down with the glass in his hand and, when he hit, swirls of thick dust rose lazily from the floor and then settled back over his rigid form like freshly falling snow blanketing something left out on the front lawn.

THE night was black. There wasn't a star and there wasn't a sound except for Earth sounds, which are never very loud. Gannett sat in his jeep with the motor running and the purple flames coming out of the tailpipe. His hands were tight around the wheel, but the Jeep wasn't moving. Gannett was staring off into space and his eyes looked as though somebody had peeled them back.

He said it to himself mentally,

for the first few times. Then, as if he couldn't contain them any longer, the words tumbled out of his mouth into the night air:

"Everybody's dead, by God!"

He drove through deserted streets until he found an all-night drugstore. It didn't seem funny to him just yet that the streets were deserted; that was something he would think of later. He walked into the drugstore and went to the newsstand and picked up a copy of the *Carson Daily Bugle*. The date struck him first. It was the wrong date; it was three weeks ago. He dropped it and picked up another, a *Reno* paper this time. Same trouble with the date. He read the headline then:

REDS STRIKE AT TURKEY!

Unveil New Weapon

He blinked at it. There was a little more — pitifully little — to the effect that Congress had been asked for a declaration of war in order to defend the assaulted member of the Atlantic Pact nations.

Gannett swallowed hard. He dropped the paper and turned to the clerk who was leaning over the glass counter watching him.

"Jeez!" Gannett said. "When did all this happen? I didn't even know about it."

He didn't get any answer from

the clerk. He knew he wouldn't from the way the clerk's eyes looked. They looked as if they should have been under refrigeration.

"People around dead," he muttered. "By God, the Governor oughta know about this!"

He left the drugstore and drove straight for the State Capitol Building, which wasn't far away, for Carson City isn't very large. He walked up the long concrete ribbon to the big stone steps. He mounted them. He stood before the bronze doors for an instant, a feeling of awe coming over him despite what he knew he was going to tell the Governor. He pulled on the handle of the nearest of the bronze doors.

Nothing happened.

It was locked, of course. The Capitol is never open at three A.M. (which was the exact time when it had happened three weeks ago—but he didn't know that).

A feeling of rage came over Gannett slowly, like heat radiating through soft wood. He stood on the stone steps and faced the broad expanse of lawn, which, in the summertime, at least, was very lovely. He slowly pulled his leather bag of gold from his coat pocket and raised it up so he could see it. Then he turned once more to the bronze doors and smashed the bag of gold through

one of the glass panes.

"Gannett done it!" he roared. "If anybody wants to know, tell them Gannett, by God!"

He went back to his jeep. The big, darkly hulking form of the red brick Post Office Building went by and faded into the night. He passed a jewelry store. He looked in. An electric mantel clock in the store window indicated the time as nine-ten. He passed a supermarket. The big illuminated clock on the facade said nine-seven. The clock in the service station, where he finally pulled in for gas, pointed at nine exactly. Cycles have to be controlled if electric clocks are to keep correct time, but that was something else he did not know.

After he put back the gasoline hose, he left one more observation on the silence of the night before driving to Reno. He said it loudly, and there was angry frustration in every word of it:

"Hell with Carson City. To hell with it!"

APPROACHING downtown Reno at night is a pleasant, cheerful experience. There are lights all around, like a store selling electric fixtures. On the right hand side of Virginia Street they glow brightly, each one a little gaudier than the last. Big lights. Neon lights in all the colors neon lights can come in.

Signs on the fronts of the big gaming houses that stay open until lights aren't needed any more; and the one flash of light across Virginia Street at the intersection of Commercial Row which had been photographed more times than the mind of man could have conjectured:

RENO

The Biggest Little City in the World

He drove slowly by the Happy Times Club. He could see quite a few people inside. You wouldn't think there was anything wrong when you looked at something like that.

At the corner of First Street, he stopped for the signal. He pulled around a military vehicle that seemed to be waiting for the signal, too. It was an open vehicle, painted the olive drab of the Army, and sitting stiffly erect behind the wheel was a natty-looking first lieutenant with his cap at just the right angle over one eye.

The signal bell up on the corner poles clanged loudly and the lights turned green. Gannett crossed the intersection, but the lieutenant and his military vehicle stayed behind.

He went by the Golden Bubble, which was perhaps the largest and gaudiest of all the gaming places in Reno. Its big front, done

in glass bricks with multicolored lights behind them, looked like some monstrous kaleidoscope built for the use of the Man in the Moon. Seen from his jeep, through the plate glass of the wide door, the interior of the Golden Bubble seemed to be a happy, carousing place full of the joyous laughter of folks having a fine time. Only that wasn't so, of course, for the only sounds to be heard were the jeep's motor and the signal bells on the corner poles.

Gannett parked. He walked back, went slowly through the doors of the Golden Bubble. The first thing that met his eyes was the flashing welcome grin of the head waiter, who was dressed in a tuxedo just inside the doors. The head waiter had his hand half out, as if to shake the hand of Gannett as he came in. Gannett almost stuck out his own hand in return—but not quite.

He went to the bar. He didn't look at the barman lying on the floor with his ear in the spittoon. He shambled around the end of the bar, took a full bottle of scotch off the backbar shelf, broke the seal and took a long swallow. The bartender didn't notice.

After that he took the bottle with him out on the floor. He went around a man in an overcoat who looked to be uncon-

fortably warm but wasn't. He went over to a roulette table and stared the croupier straight in the eyes. He reached for a pile of chips under the croupier's right hand and slid them over.

"Double zero," he said.

The croupier looked bored, which was the way a croupier should look. Gannett reached down and gave the wheel a spin and then stood back and waited. The croupier waited. Two women and one man, on Gannett's right, also waited. The ball clicked merrily, came to a stop. The wheel slowed, finally rested.

It wasn't double zero. Gannett reached for the croupier's rake and shoved his pile of chips back under the croupier's protecting right hand.

"Lousy wheel is fixed," Gannett said.

Nobody argued with him on that.

He uncorked his scotch bottle and took a long pull. Nobody objected to that, either, the croupier still looked bored; and the two women and the one man waited patiently for the Day of Judgment.

Gannett went over to a cashier window and reached in and got a handful of silver dollars. He took them to the machines over against the far wall and stuck in a couple and pulled the two handles simultaneously. For his in-

vestment he got back five dollars, which one of the machines disgorged with a loud clatter. He put more dollars in. He put them in fast and pulled the levers fast. He went down the entire row of machines and pulled the levers as he went. He didn't linger to see what happened at any of them.

He began to feel cold. He took out his scotch bottle again and half emptied it. A woman who looked as if she were someone's great-grandmother, except that her hair was bleached and fingernails were sharp talons, and who sat in a chrome and leather chair not six feet away from him, stared a little disapprovingly. Gannett caught the look.

"Lady," he said defensively, "I earned me a holiday, see? It's none of your business if I do some celebrating, is it?"

The lady didn't change her mind. She looked as though she might prefer gin herself.

Gannett belched. He wasn't so cold now. He threw back his head and laughed and listened to the sound of it bounce off walls. He did it again. He was feeling fine.

He went back to the roulette wheel, got around behind it and nudged the croupier gently. The croupier went over like a broom sliding down the side of a wall.

Gannett picked up the little plastic rake and looked at the two women and one man.

"Place your bets, folks," he said, in a low tone that was a pretty good imitation of the drone of a professional man.

He separated the chips into four neat piles. He pushed a pile each at the two women, one to the man. The last he kept for himself.

"Place your bets, folks," he repeated.

Nobody did, but that was okay anyhow. Grinning happily, he made bets for them. One of the women—the one that was red-headed—looked to him as if she might be a plunger. He shoved her pile of chips over onto zero and then he gave her a friendly little wink. The other woman was the careful type, he thought. Her chips—not all of them, of course—he shoved for red. He disposed of the man perfunctorily: ten dollars on plain number nine. His own bet was due a little more deliberation. He carefully spread around five hundred dollars until the strip looked as if eighteen people were playing it all at once.

The effort made him sweat. He reached for his bottle, emptied it, then dropped it on the fallen croupier.

"Folks," Gannett said in an apologetic tone, "you'll have to pardon me a minute. It seems I'm out of fuel. Don't go away; I'll be right back."

Everybody was agreeable.

Gannett went back to the bar, went around behind it.

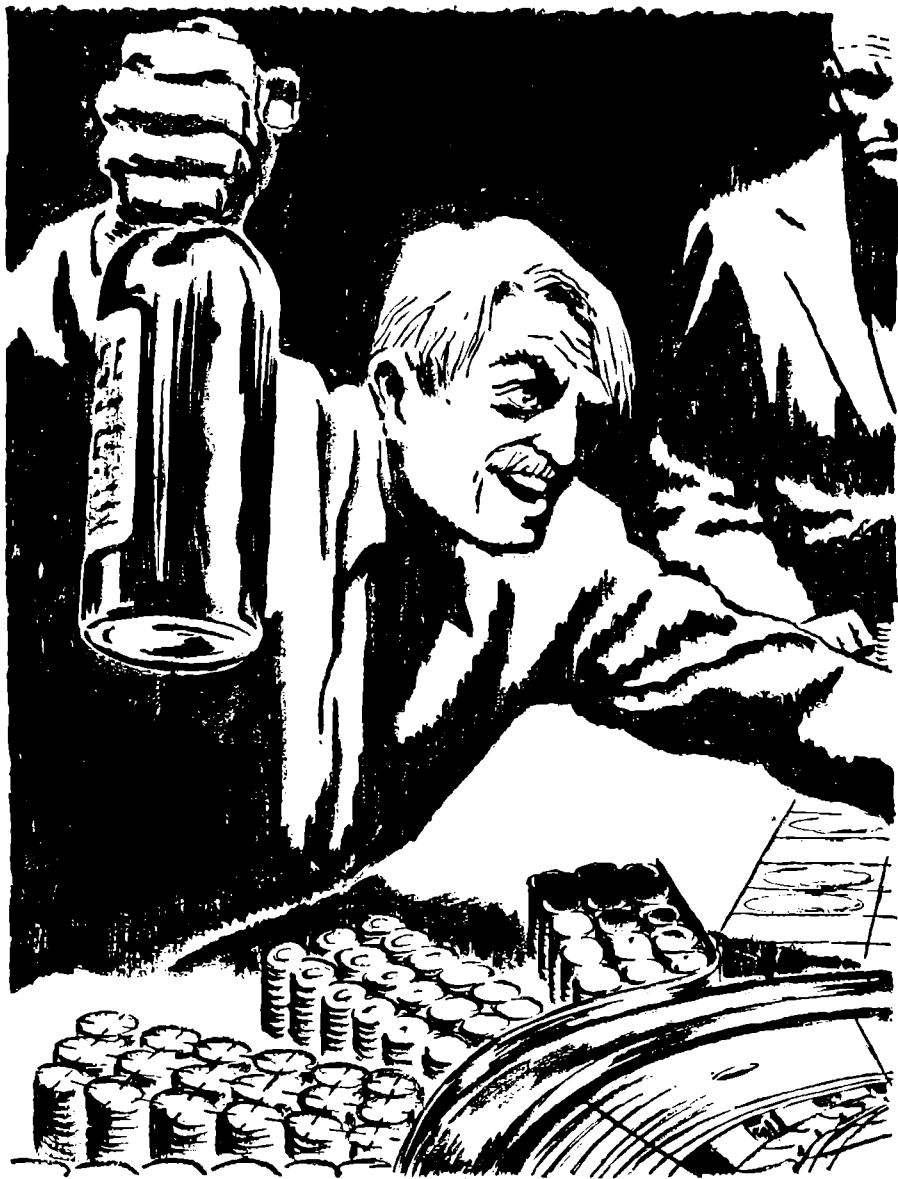
He said to the barman: "I got a party out there, Doc. A big party, see? The house might stand to make a mint. How's about drinks?"

The barman considered it. The barman was still considering it when Gannett went back to the wheel with a fifth of scotch and four glasses and a dish of olives. He made drinks. In each one he put an olive. By this time, of course, he was getting a little loud, but nobody could blame him for that. When the drinks were made and placed before the two women and the man, he was ready. He grinned around, rubbed his hands together and winked a sly little leering wink at the red-head.

The wheel spun, stopped. Zero. The redhead had brought down the house.

"By God!" whispered Gannett in frank admiration. "Lady, you sure got luck. 'Nother little snifter just to nail it tight?"

Gannett liked the idea. He drank her drink for her and made a face over the olive. He poured another. He made more bets for everybody and then thought of something. Excusing himself once more, he got a roll of quarters from the cashier cage and, breaking it open, fed them into a big glittering juke box over in the





NOT A CREATURE WAS STIRRING

corner. That done, he pushed down a row of tabs and went back to the table.

Everybody seemed to be having a time. The redhead just couldn't lose. Three separate times Gannett was forced to collect chips from other tables in order to keep the game going, but he didn't mind. He even said to the redhead once:

"Lady, ten more minutes and we sign the joint over to you. But have fun; you're doing swell."

Once more he consulted the thoughtful barman, and more than once he had to go back to the juke box and punch tabs, but that was all right. He liked music.

At ten minutes past three in the morning, with all the chips in the place before the lucky redhead he finished his last bottle.

He lifted his eyes and considered a crystal chandelier which hung from the exact center of the broad ceiling. It was a beautiful chandelier. It looked as though it might have graced the banquet hall of some castle over in England, back in the days when England was a tight little isle. He grinned appreciatively at it. He pitched the empty bottle upward.

There was a crash. Half the lights in the place went out.

Bowing solemnly to the scattered immobile figures, Gannett lurched to the big door up front.

He tried a bow to the friendly floorman, but it didn't quite go over. He banged through the doors and out into the street.

GANNETT groaned his aching body out of bed and padded heavily to the window. He put his big hands on the sill and looked out. Purple snow was falling on a quiet world. The flakes came down softly, big wet, colored things like fluffy bits of cotton candy escaping from a circus in the sky. There was his jeep down on the street where he had left it. He could recognize it, for it was the only jeep on the block.

"Then it wasn't no lousy dream," he said miserably.

He went back to the bed and sat down on the edge of it. He recalled the headlines in the paper.

"Them lousy Reds," he whispered. "They done this, sure as hell."

That made him think a little. Everybody was dead, even the redhead in the Golden Bubble who couldn't lose.

"What the hell am I doin' alive, then?" he asked himself.

There was no answer to that. He thought of his mine, *The Lousy Disappointment*, and wondered if, living most of the time below the surface as he did, he had been protected from some sort of purple gas or something

that seemed to have killed off everybody else. It could be. Some very light gas, maybe, that wouldn't seep below the surface.

"Aw, for cripe sakes!" he grunted disgustedly.

He dressed and left the room. He went downstairs. There was the lobby, all soft, quiet carpeting and soft, quiet furniture and soft, quiet drapes. A sheet of paper on a writing desk said *Grand Pachappa*. He was in a hotel, then. He must have wandered into it after he left the Golden Bubble.

He carefully avoided looking at two well-dressed women who sat in lobby chairs, staring off into nothing, but he felt their presence chillingly. He shivered. He made his way outside, the purple snow coming down and giving his cheeks wet, cold caresses. He angrily brushed them off, but they came down anyway. Above the snow, the sky was a sodden mass of purplish gray.

He found a restaurant that was open. A few customers sat on the stools like statues in a museum. All the coffeemakers were on the electric stove, but they were dry and clean except one that had no bottom in it any more and was quite discolored. Beneath it, the round electric coil still glowed faithfully.

He grabbed up one of the clean pots and took it to the metal rinse

sink and reached for the faucet. And then his hand froze. What if the water was tainted? He had no way of finding out if it didn't carry that identifying purplish tint. He tried the faucet. It did.

The milk in the refrigerator was three weeks old, of course. Gannett ended by opening a bottle of Pepsi Cola for breakfast.

The sky stayed leaden, but even so there were many things apparent now that he hadn't seen the night before. A lack of heavy traffic on the streets would seem to indicate that what had happened—purple gas or whatever—had been very late at night; even so, traffic accidents were everywhere. There was one big sedan with its front end crushed against the First Olympic Bank. There was one cop who had died trying to tie his right shoe—his fingers still clutched the laces. There was a doctor (his car had a caduceus emblem on the windshield) who had just stepped down to the street, his bag in his left hand and his right hand on the door, ready to slam it shut. He had a serious, purposeful look on his face that even the falling purple snow couldn't quite eradicate.

Despite the cold, sweat frosted Gannett's forehead. He made his way to a radio and television store and kicked in a glass panel of the front door. Stepping through to the clamor of the sud-

denly aroused night-warning bell, he went directly to a TV set and turned it on.

The big screen tube flickered after a while and a scratching hum came out of the speaker, but nothing happened. He tried all the channels. Nothing.

He tuned in a big radio console next, going carefully and slowly across the dial with a hand that shook. Even though the night-warning bell was kicking up quite a racket, he could tell after a moment or two.

Nothing . . .

THE sky was getting dark as Gannett left the store. The purple snow still fell. It was then that he noticed for the first time the gay street decorations in preparation for Christmas. Big paper bells with plenty of glittering tinsel and electric lamps inside them.

On the corner of First and Virginia, he saw a big iron kettle of some Salvation Army Santa. Hanging from its metal tripod, it looked quite natural, except that it was filled with purple snow; and the Santa who was supposed to ring his little bell was holding it stiffly over his head. He and the bell were frozen silent.

There was a large department store. Inside, in the show window, was a Christmas display that would delight the kiddies. There was a big Christmas tree trimmed

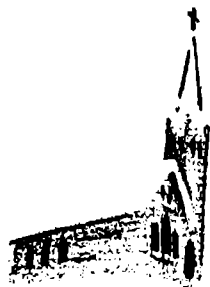
with every imaginable ornament.

Beneath the tree, electrically activated toy soldiers jerked robotlike through their precise military designations, their lithographed faces looking stern and very brave. There was a clown who did uncouth somersaults; a lifelike doll who clapped her hands in glee. There was an aluminum bomber with a wingspread of three feet—it was held in the air by almost invisible wires — and its six propellers droned in perfect unison, making a brisk little wash that rustled the silk of the little doll's dress. And around the base of the tree, through valley and over mountain, into tunnel and over spiderweb trestle, was a railroad track. It should have had busy little trains on it, except that it didn't —the trains had been derailed at a whistle stop called North Pole.

Gannett's eyes twitched.

The sky grew darker; the purple snow continued to fall silently. Gannett went by the Masonic Lodge, the YMCA, and crossed the little stone bridge over the frozen Truckee River. He came to the heavy gray stone building of First Community Church.

He stopped in front of the church and stared at it. It was a solid, respectable-looking building. It was a very nice thing, indeed, to have here in Reno.



NOT A CREATURE WAS STIRRING

"Christmas Eve," Gannett whispered through cold lips. "This is Christmas Eve!"

He went up six purple-snow-covered stone steps. He reached the top where the stone steps ended and where the big square stone slab was, that slab where the minister stands when the weather is fair, and shakes hands with the congregation after the service.

Somewhere above, in the steeple, bells struck off the hour of eight. A timing device did that. Many churches had such timing devices to save labor. And as though that were a signal, a loudspeaker, attached way up on the spire especially for this festive

season, began to growl out preparatory scratching noises, like a big metal monster clearing its throat.

Gannett pulled on the wrought brass handles of the closed oaken door. The door didn't budge. He grabbed the handles in both hands and braced his feet. He pulled hard. The door was locked.

"God," he whispered hoarsely. "God, this is me. I gotta get in, God. God, listen, *I gotta get in!*"

High above, in the steeple, the loudspeaker was finally ready with a cheerful little carol.

"*God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen!*" the voices of a dead choir roared out upon the silent city.

—DEAN EVANS