

*Christmas Among the Lumberjacks*

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## CHRISTMAS AMONG THE LUMBERJACKS

By J. Olivier Curwood

As the dawning of Christmas Day is announced by the chiming bells of thousands of churches, and as little children and fond parents open their eyes to the mutual pleasure of gift-taking and giving, waking in the warm atmosphere of furnaces and glowing grates—away up in the snow and ice and intense cold of the big northern woods the "cookie's" huge horn calls Lumberjack from his hard bed of pine boards and straw, for it is Christmas Day in the lumber camps as it is Christmas all over the Christian world, and "cookie" is the one who announces it, as he stuffs his big square stove full of pine.

Probably there is no other day in the whole year that the lumberjacks look forward to with greater eagerness, and no other that brings with it so many conflicting emotions of sadness and joy. As these lonely men gather round the blazing pine-knot fire on Christmas eve, their rough surroundings softened by no sound or touch of woman's presence, their minds revert to the towns and cities in the outside world, where their wives, children, and sweethearts are lighting the evening lamps, and thinking as evening falls of the lonesome men who are struggling for them in the heart of the gloomy woods. On this night tears come to the bravest eyes, and it is then, if ever, that the woodsman swears the next Christmas will see him home.

Yet, withal, there is no other day like this for the lumberjack. The world outside the big woods may have its Independence Day, its Easter, its New Year's and its other holidays, but they are all rolled up in one to the hardy men who follow the camps. They may chop and scale and skid on other days,

even Thanksgiving, but as December rolls round they make their plans for a day of rest and of feast. Their life may be prosaic and dull week in and week out, but this day, and the day before and after, is livened with Christmas cheer. There is no church, no prayers, no Christmas tree. But there are the rude games of danger and skill that have still come down from the old backwood's days, in which these fearless men risk life and limb for a pipeful of tobacco, or merely to amuse their comrades; there is the chief "deacon," or the lucky man in camp who can rap out a song or a quadrille on a fiddle or a banjo; but more than all else, the gandy-shirted lumberjacks look forward to the arrival of the Christmas eve "toté wagon" from the nearest settlement, and to the big dinner that "cookie" is laboring on even the night before, and which comes only once during the whole year.

Christmas eve is a night of expectation in the lumber camp. Perhaps a half of its population has left. Some have gone to their wives and children in the nearby settlements and towns. Others have left to celebrate in livelier places, probably in the nearest city. But "cookie" is always at home, and with him remain those whose families are too far away to visit, and those who prefer the old-fashioned dinner to a few hours' revelry in the city.

A December night in the north woods is bitter cold. Outside the trees are loaded with snow and ice. The frost crackles among their branches. But inside the long, low "shanty" the night is given over to good cheer. There are no partitions to this rude home. Ranged along the sides of the log walls are the hunks, two-deep, fill-



ed with straw, a blanket or two, and the lumberjacks' "turkeys," or those bags in which they keep their clothes and little necessities. In the center of the big room is the great, long, old-fashioned box stove, in which logs five feet in length are blazing. Around this congregate the men who are going to spend their Christmas in camp. They are smoking or chewing, and in their center, within reach of all, is a box filled with sawdust in which they spit.

"Wish th' 'tote' 'd hurry up," says one.

This is the night when the rough, unkempt giants of the forest are as expectant as little children awaiting the coming of Santa Claus. The supply-wagon, or "tote," always comes from the nearest station on Christmas eve. On this will come the presents, if there are any, and nearly every lumberjack has his friends in the outside world—and more than all else, the turkey or goose. So they wait, passing the time away in song and story-telling. The man who went out after partridges for the next day's dinner tells how he "slew 'em." Another describes how he "perfrated" a doe, regardless of law. The "deacon" pumps his accordion or scrapes his fiddle and hums songs with no words. The whole camp is given up to Lumberjack. The overseer has gone home. "Cookie" is the only monarch left. If a man has not been sent especially to lug a turkey back on his shoulder the "cookie" casts anxious glances every now and then where the white trail winds out into the woods. In the "shanty" all sort of anxiety is shown. Here is a young ruddy-faced fellow who has a sweetheart in some distant town, and whose heart is beating high with both hope and fear, praying that she has not forgotten him. Another is waiting for the little remembrance that his wife and children will send him, and every few minutes goes out into the cold night and looks hopefully up the trail. All who have remained in camp expect something. The hours pass. Suddenly, in the midst of a song, a

dozen men become rigid, with listening ears. From the kitchen and eating room over on the edge of the woods comes a long, shrill, triumphant blast.

It is "cookie's" horn!

"The tote!" shouts somebody. There is a world of pathos in the scramble that follows.

Up the trail sounds the jingling of bells. A shout from the throats of the delighted lumberjacks is returned by a distant voice. Then there is the sharp crack of a 20-foot whip, the dashing of a spirited team and a sleigh across the open to the shanty, and the "tote" is pounced upon by a score of eager hands, who strip it of every bundle and package and heap them together in a big pile before the roaring stove. Then a self-appointed "Santa Claus," a red-faced giant with fists like hams, motions his comrades in a circle about him, and begins calling off the lucky names as he distributes the bundles.

"Cookie!"

A huge turkey is tossed out, and a cheer greets it.

"Cookie again!"

Parcels, big and little, are handed to him. The ruddy-faced youth with a sweetheart in a distant town pays little attention to them.

"Sammy!"

A man reaches out eagerly. In his package are warm stockings from home, clean new shirts, and a dozen little things from the children and wife.

Another name is called. One gets a box of cigars from a friend in a distant city, and another a pair of warm felt boots, and overshoes from his father and mother on the farm. There are half a dozen thick neck-scarfs, for nothing is more acceptable to Lumberjack, and almost everybody is remembered with big, wool-lined mittens. And all the time the pile grows smaller.

The boy watches it eagerly. He wants to pounce upon it, and hunt for himself. Has the girl he would give his

life for forgotten him? His name is called! His heart almost stops beating as he snatches the precious gift. It is very small. He goes back and opens it. A lock of soft brown hair falls out, and the picture of a sweet-faced girl, with the words "Your waiting M." written under it. For one man, at least, Christmas is complete.

This is the night of hilarity in the logging-camps. Christmas night Lumberjack must be in his bunk by nine o'clock or a little later, for the next day is a work-day, so he "opens up" on Christmas eve. Up on the "tote" has come a barrel of apples. The "Comp'ny" has sent up a few boxes of cigars. "There must be no whiskey" is the injunction in the lumber-camps, but the Jackies have substitutes. They have "chipped in" and the tote-driver has lugged back a keg of beer or a barrel of cider. It is set up in the corner, with a tin cup beside it. Rather shamefacedly, in making out the list somebody has suggested peanuts and candy, and few are the north-woods' shanties but what are littered from end to end with husks for the "camp devil" to sweep out the next morning.

Everybody is happy. The boy with the sweetheart kicks his heels and shouts out a tuneless love song. He can afford to be laughed at now. But there are others in the same mood. Shouts and loud laughter echo out into the bitter cold night. Over near the wailing pines "cookie" sends back a blast of his horn. A great, red-shirted giant with a three months' growth of beard on his face lunges into the middle of the floor with a shout. There is a scramble for seats on the edges of the bunks. The fiddler begins scraping, and the bearded monster careens around the rough floor, in a wild jig. Another joins him. The others follow. The fiddler shrieks out "a stag quadrille" and the shanty of logs trembles under the heavy, shuffling feet.

Suddenly the door opens, and for an instant "cookie's" horn shows through, and an ear-splitting blast fills the shanty. A man grabs a comrade's dun-

nage-bag—or "turkey," heavy with clothes and boots, and hurls it into the midst of the whirling dancers. A Jackie goes down before it like a ten-pin. "Turkeys" begin to fill the air. A score of them are "clubbed" good-naturedly, as small boys fight with pillows. A resounding whack on the back and a 200-pound lumberjack goes over with a thud that shakes the roof. There is a sudden scuffle. The "turkeys" are flung in the bunks to be assorted by their owners later, and the men flock about an unlucky comrade who is struggling vainly in the arms of two or three big woodsmen.

"Whoo-ee-p-la" yells somebody. It is a signal for a blanket, and into the middle of it goes the victim. With a man at each corner of the blanket, and two in the middle, the fun begins. Up into the air shoots the "game." Each time he goes higher, until he nearly strikes the log girders. His great legs spin out like those of a spider. His arms clutch at the air. His mouth is agape, and his red shirt creeps up round his neck.

"'Nuff" he pants now and then, but relentlessly he goes up and down in the air. Then he is rolled out on the floor, and the dancing, laughing, drinking and eating begin over again.

As the night grows late, and the first hour of morning begins, the spirits of the lumberjacks subside, and they gather round the great box stove and smoke cigars, a luxury they seldom get, and swap stories.

Everybody has something to say. There is the "Chris'mus when I was a kid." Some of the married men tell of their own children, and how next Christmas he is going to be at home. But best of all there are the young men who regularly labor over letters to their sweethearts. The boyish fellow who received the picture and the lock of hair must tell his story, and he does it. He relates how he met her at a huskin' bée, or a 'lasses-pull, or at an ice cream social. Then he tells of his courtship, and when he comes to the place where the first kiss ought

to be, the delighted lumberjacks make him point out its exact location on the picture.

So the night passes, and early dawn begins creeping over the woods with Christmas day before Lumberjack seeks his bunk. And while the shanty is filled with the strange noises of sleep, over in "cookie's" place is a scene of lively activity. If the camp is one with a score of men or more there are always three or four big turkeys, and other things accordingly. A couple of "hands" aid the cook in his work, and while one of these prepares the late breakfast for the men, the others begin work on the big dinner.

At 8 or 9 o'clock the cook's horn announces "Christmas Day" in a series of deafening calls, and the drowsy Jackies pile out to the light breakfast and the sports that are a part and parcel of Christmas Day in every lumbering camp in the north-woods.

In the average camp the greater part of the morning is spent in playing pedro and "forty-five." But if it is a nice day, and the sun comes rolling up big over the woods, the Jackies are out long before the dinner hour, which ordinarily does not come before two o'clock, amusing themselves in the odd and dangerous games that suit a Lumberjack's fancy. Somebody shoves his head in at the door and interrupts two or three games of cards by shouting, "I'll play any man a game o' grog."

"Grog" it is from the instant. Two or three men spring to their feet. It is a signal for others. A crowd rushes out to the tool-shanty, and while two or three arm themselves with axes the others seize big shovels. Laughing and tripping one another up like so many school children, the men spy out a tall pine in the open, and while a couple climb up among its branches with axes the rest begin piling a huge bank of snow, 10 or 12 feet deep, beneath it. The pine is cleared of all branches almost to its top, leaving only short stubs. Then the men collect and make a "pot." One puts down a piece of tobacco. Another adds a cigar. A third

contributes an old pipe. Still others add small coins. To the man who dares to jump into the snow-drift from the highest point on the pine belongs the heap of treasures.

One of them starts the ball rolling. He goes up—ten—twenty feet. He pauses, and as the top of the pile of snow is only ten or twelve feet below him, his comrades hoot in good-natured derision. He goes up higher, then jumps. Half way to the bottom of the huge drift he goes and flounders out laughing, while another breaks his record. At each jump the game becomes more thrilling. More and more daring grow the lumberjacks. Masses of snow are added to the drift, until it becomes fifteen feet high. But a man is jumping from fifty feet above it. It is a dizzying height, especially to the heavy lumberman, who is not accustomed to being far off the ground. A few begin to falter, and the contestants grow fewer. Finally it lies between two. Foot by foot they dare each other. Then one makes a spurt, and makes a jump of sixty feet off the pine. When he sprawls out of the snow-drift his rival shakes his hand, and a shout of applause goes up as he pockets the "pot."

From one game to another the lumberjacks go with childish enthusiasm, but there is always "something in it" to make the sport interesting. In the "whip" there are both the elements of chance and skill, and another "pot" is made up. A coin is placed on a board raised three or four inches off the ground, and draws are taken to see who has the first "whip." The lucky one takes his stand twenty feet away, and with the long lash of his whip takes a shot at the coin. If he misses, the next man has a chance, and so on until the coin is flipped from the board, when the one who performs the feat pockets the stake. With such remarkable skill is this game practiced in the lumber camps that the champion "whipper" is regarded as only next to the "deacon," and that is saying a good deal.



And last of all the good things in the Lumberjack's Christmas Day comes the shrill blast of "cookie's" horn, which calls him to the biggest feast of all the year.

Eagerly they crowd to the wash-basins, and the coarse, clean towels become wet and brown as they take their turns at them. Then they line up at the tables. Sometimes there is more than one, but in the majority of camps the table is one long affair of pine boards. On Christmas Day there are no jibes and jokes thrown at "cookie," as happens on ordinary days. "Cookie" is king. The potatoes and bread are brought on, the coffee and tea, the cranberry sauce, then the big, white, thick plates heaped high with turkey and game. Ah! the joy of that meal! Millionaires' tables may groan under the delicacies of land and sea, but what are they to the steaming piles of meat that come to Lumberjack, who possesses an appetite which seems to reach from the crown of his head to the soles of his rough boots.

The lumberjacks do not eat their Christmas dinner to the strains of soft music. They are all business. There is the rough etiquette of the woods, to be sure, but not enough of it to bother them. Again and again the plates are sent out to "cookie" and his assistants. There is no envy on the part of the kitchen hands, as there is in more civilized establishments, for they have had their dinner, and the choicest of it. After all seems over, there follows "cookie's" puddings and pies, and when they are done the satisfied lumberjacks settle back, as people settle

back all over the Christian world, with that glorious feeling of rest and satisfaction that follows a good Christmas dinner.

Once more the lumberjacks trail back across the snowy paths to their shanty. No man among them wants to climb the pine tree now. Around the big, comfortable stove they smoke and tell stories. They are mostly stories of home. But gradually the sleepy aftermath of the feast passes off, and somebody begins a song. The "deacon" pulls out his fiddle, and while he is tuning it a couple of friendly loggers get to sparring. One of the men gets a rap on the ear that keels him over, but it is all in fun. The Jackies crowd around in a ring, and now one and then the other is cheered as a good blow is given. Blood may run, but it is seldom there is anger. If any does begin to show, a dozen friendly hands join in, and the match is turned into a general, good-humored wrestling-match. In games, story-telling, singing, smoking and dancing the rest of the day passes away, and when "cookie's" horn signals supper from the kitchen the men troop back again, as hungry as ever, to feast on what was left of the Christmas dinner. Once more back to the shanty, a few hours more of fireside comfort, and Lumberjack rolls up in his blanket, stretches himself out on his hard bunk, and dreams of the homes and dear ones out in the other world, as his tired limbs rest themselves for the morrow, which marks the beginning of another year in Jackie's life.

