



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Christmas On Big Rattle

Archer sat by the rude hearth of his Big Rattle camp, brooding in a sort of tired contentment over the spitting fagots of var and glowing coals of birch.

It was Christmas Eve. He had been out on his snowshoes all that day, and all the day before, springing his traps along the streams and putting his deadfalls out of commission—rather queer work for a trapper to be about.

But Archer, despite all his gloomy manner, was really a sentimentalist, who practised what he felt.

"Christmas is a season of peace on earth," he had told himself, while demolishing the logs of a sinister deadfall with his axe; and now the remembrance of his quixotic deed added a brightness to the fire and to the rough, undecorated walls of the camp.

Outside, the wind ran high in the forest, breaking and sweeping tidelike over the reefs of treetops. The air was bitterly cold. Another voice, almost as fitful as the sigh of the wind, sounded across the night. It was the waters of Stone Arrow Falls, above Big Rattle.

The frosts had drawn their bonds of ice and blankets of silencing snow over all the rest of the stream, but the white and black face of the falls still flashed from a window in the great house of crystal, and threw out a voice of desolation.

Sacobie Bear, a full-blooded Micmac, uttered a grunt of relief when his ears caught the bellow of Stone Arrow Falls. He stood still, and turned his head from side to side, questioningly.

"Good!" he said. "Big Rattle off there, Archer's camp over there. I go there. Good 'nough!"

He hitched his old smooth-bore rifle higher under his arm and continued his journey. Sacobie had tramped many miles—all the way from ice-imprisoned Fox Harbor. His papoose was sick. His squaw was hungry. Sacobie's belt was drawn tight.

During all that weary journey his old rifle had not banged once, although few eyes save those of timberwolf and lynx were sharper in the hunt than Sacobie's. The Indian was reeling with hunger and weakness, but he held bravely on.

A white man, no matter how courageous and sinewy, would have been prone in

the snow by that time.

But Sacobie, with his head down and his round snowshoes padding! padding! like the feet of a frightened duck, raced with death toward the haven of Archer's cabin.

Archer was dreaming of a Christmas-time in a great faraway city when he was startled by a rattle of snowshoes at his threshold and a soft beating on his door, like weak blows from mittened hands. He sprang across the cabin and pulled open the door.

A short, stooping figure shuffled in and reeled against him. A rifle in a woollen case clattered at his feet.

"Mer' Christmas! How-do?" said a weary voice.

"Merry Christmas, brother!" replied Archer. Then, "Bless me, but it's Sacobie Bear! Why, what's the matter, Sacobie?"

"Heap tired! Heap hungry!" replied the Micmac, sinking to the floor.

Archer lifted the Indian and carried him over to the bunk at the farther end of the room. He filled his iron-pot spoon with brandy, and inserted the point of it between Sacobie's unresisting jaws. Then he loosened the Micmac's coat and shirt and belt.

He removed his moccasins and stockings and rubbed the straight thin feet with brandy.

After a while Sacobie Bear opened his eyes and gazed up at Archer.

"Good!" he said. "John Archer, he heap fine man, anyhow. Mighty good to poor Injun Sacobie, too. Plenty tobac, I s'pose. Plenty rum, too."

"No more rum, my son," replied Archer, tossing what was left in the mug against the log wall, and corking the bottle, "and no smoke until you have had a feed. What do you say to bacon and tea! Or would tinned beef suit you better?"

"Bacum," replied Sacobie.

He hoisted himself to his elbow, and wistfully sniffed the fumes of brandy that came from the direction of his bare feet. "Heap waste of good rum, me t'ink," he said.

"You ungratefu' little beggar!" laughed Archer, as he pulled a frying pan from under the bunk.

By the time the bacon was fried and the tea steeped, Sacobie was sufficiently revived to leave the bunk and take a seat by the fire.

He ate as all hungry Indians do; and Archer looked on in wonder and whimsical regret, remembering the miles and miles he had tramped with that bacon on his back.

"Sacobie, you will kill yourself!" he protested.

"Sacobie no kill himself now," replied the Micmac, as he bolted a brown slice and a mouthful of hard bread. "Sacobie more like to kill himself when he empty. Want to live when he chock-full. Good fun. T'ank you for more tea."

Archer filled the extended mug and poured in the molasses—"long sweet'nin'" they call it in that region.

"What brings you so far from Fox Harbor this time of year?" inquired Archer.

"Squaw sick. Papoose sick. Bote empty. Wan' good bacum to eat."

Archer smiled at the fire. "Any luck trapping?" he asked.

His guest shook his head and hid his face behind the upturned mug.

"Not much," he replied, presently.

He drew his sleeve across his mouth, and then produced a clay pipe from a pocket in his shirt.

"Tobac?" he inquired.

Archer passed him a dark and heavy plug of tobacco.

"Knife?" queried Sacobie.

"Try your own knife on it," answered Archer, grinning.

With a sigh Sacobie produced his sheath-knife.

"You t'ink Sacobie heap big t'ief," he said, accusingly.

"Knives are easily lost—in people's pockets," replied Archer.

The two men talked for hours. Sacobie Bear was a great gossip for one of his race. In fact, he had a Micmac nickname which, translated, meant "the man who deafens his friends with much talk." Archer, however, was pleased with his ready chatter and unforced humour.

But at last they both began to nod. The white man made up a bed on the floor for Sacobie with a couple of caribou skins and a heavy blanket. Then he gathered together a few plugs of tobacco, some tea, flour, and dried fish.



Sacobie watched him with freshly aroused interest.

"More tobac, please," he said. "Squaw, he smoke, too."

Archer added a couple of sticks of the black leaf to the pile.

"Bacum, too," said the Micmac. "Bacum better nor fish, anyhow."

Archer shook his head.

"You'll have to do with the fish," he replied; "but I'll give you a tin of condensed milk for the papoose."

"Ah, ah! Him good stuff!" exclaimed Sacobie.

Archer considered the provisions for a second or two. Then, going over to a dunnage bag near his bunk, he pulled its contents about until he found a bright red silk handkerchief and a red flannel shirt. Their colour was too gaudy for his taste. "These things are for your squaw," he said.

Sacobie was delighted. Archer tied the articles into a neat pack and stood it in the corner, beside his guest's rifle.

"Now you had better turn in," he said, and blew out the light.

In ten minutes both men slept the sleep of the weary. The fire, a great mass of red coals, faded and flushed like some fabulous jewel. The wind washed over the cabin and fingered the eaves, and brushed furtive hands against the door.

It was dawn when Archer awoke. He sat up in his bunk and looked about the quiet, gray-lighted room. Sacobie Bear was nowhere to be seen.

He glanced at the corner by the door. Rifle and pack were both gone. He looked up at the rafter where his slab of bacon was always hung. It, too, was gone.

He jumped out of his bunk and ran to the door. Opening it, he looked out. Not a breath of air stirred. In the east, saffron and scarlet, broke the Christmas morning, and blue on the white surface of the world lay the imprints of Sacobie's round snowshoes.

For a long time the trapper stood in the doorway in silence, looking out at the stillness and beauty.

"Poor Sacobie!" he said, after a while. "Well, he's welcome to the bacon, even if it is all I had."

He turned to light the fire and prepare breakfast. Something at the foot of his bunk caught his eye. He went over and took it up. It was a cured skin—a beautiful specimen of fox. He turned it over, and on the white hide an uncultured hand had written, with a charred stick, "Archer."

"Well, bless that old red-skin!" exclaimed the trapper, huskily. "Bless his puckered eyes! Who'd have thought that I should get a Christmas present?"

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