



# Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

## The Greatest Of These

The outside door swung open suddenly, letting a cloud of steam into the small, hot kitchen. Charlie Moore, a milk pail in one hand, a lantern in the other, closed the door behind him with a bang, set the pail on the table and stamped the snow from his feet.

"There's the milk, and I near froze gettin' it," said he, addressing his partner, who was chopping potatoes in a pan on the stove.

"Dose vried bodadoes vas burnt," said the other, wielding his knife vigorously.

"Are, eh? Why didn't you watch 'em instead of readin' your old Scandinavian paper?" answered Charlie, hanging his overcoat and cap behind the door and laying his mittens under the stove to dry. Then he drew up a chair and with much exertion pulled off his heavy felt boots and stood them beside his mittens.

"Why didn't you shut the gate after you came in from town? The cows got out and went up to Roney's an' I had to chase 'em; 'tain't any joke runnin' round after cows such a night as this." Having relieved his mind of its grievance, Charlie sat down before the oven door, and, opening it, laid a stick of wood along its outer edge and thrust his feet into the hot interior, propping his heels against the stick.

"Look oud for dese har biscuits!" exclaimed his partner, anxiously.

"Oh, hang the biscuits!" was Charlie's hasty answer. "I'll watch 'em. Why didn't you?"

"Ay tank Ay fergit hem."

"Well, you don't want to forget. A feller forgot his clothes once, an' he got froze."

"Ay gass dose taller vas ketch in a sbring snowstorm. Vas dose biscuits done, Sharlie?"

"You bet they are, Nels," replied Charlie, looking into the pan.

"Dan subbar vas ready. Yom on!"

Nels picked up the frying-pan and Charlie the biscuits, and set them on the oilcloth-covered table, where a plate of butter, a jar of plum jelly, and a coffee-pot were already standing.

Outside the frozen kitchen window the snow-covered fields and meadows

stretched, glistening and silent, away to the dark belt of timber by the river. Along the deep-rutted road in front a belated lumber-wagon passed slowly, the wheels crunching through the packed snow with a wavering, incessant shriek.

The two men hitched their chairs up to the table, and without ceremony helped themselves liberally to the steaming food. For a few moments they seemed oblivious to everything but the demands of hunger. The potatoes and biscuits disappeared with surprising rapidity, washed down by large drafts of coffee. These men, labouring steadily through the short daylight hours in the dry, cold air of the Dakota winter, were like engines whose fires had burned low—they were taking fuel. Presently, the first keen edge of appetite satisfied, they ate more slowly, and Nels, straightening up with a sigh, spoke:

"Ay seen Seigert in town ta-day. Ha vants von hundred fifty fer dose team."

"Come down, eh?" commented Charlie. "Well, they're worth that. We'd better take 'em, Nels. We'll need 'em in the spring if we break the north forty."

"Yas, et's a nice team," agreed Nels. "Ha vas driven ham ta-day."

"Is he haulin' corn?"

"Na; he had his kids oop gettin' Christmas presnts."

"Chris—By gracious! to-morrow's Christmas!"

Nels nodded solemnly, as one possessing superior knowledge. Charlie became thoughtful.

"We'll come in sort of slim on it here, I reckon, Nels. Christmas ain't right, somehow, out here. Back in Wisconsin, where I came from, there's where you get your Christmas!" Charlie spoke with the unswerving prejudice of mankind for the land of his birth.

"Yas, dose been right. En da ol' kontry dey havin' gret times Christmas."

Their thoughts were all bent now upon the holiday scenes of the past. As they finished the meal and cleared away and washed the dishes they related incidents of their boyhood's time, compared, reiterated, and embellished. As they talked they grew jovial, and laughed often.

"The skee broke an' you went over kerplunk, hey? Haw, haw! That reminds me of one time in Wisconsin—"

Something of the joyous spirit of the Christmastide seemed to have entered into this little farmhouse set in the midst of the lonely, white fields. In the hearts of these men, moving about in their dim-lighted room, was reechoed the joyous murmur of the great world without: the gayety of the throngs in city streets, where the brilliant shop-windows, rich with holiday spoils, smile out upon the

passing crowd, and the clang of street-cars and roar of traffic mingle with the cries of street-venders. The work finished, they drew their chairs to the stove, and filled their pipes, still talking.

"Well, well," said Charlie, after the laugh occasioned by one of Nels' droll stories had subsided. "It's nice to think of those old times. I'd hate to have been one of these kids that can't have any fun. Christmas or any other time."

"Ay gass dere ain't anybody much dot don'd have someding dis tams a year."

"Oh, yes, there are, Nels! You bet there are!"

Charlie nodded at his partner with serious conviction.

"Now, there's the Roneys," he waved his pipe over his shoulder. "The old man told me to-night when I was up after the cows that he's sold all the crops except what they need for feedin'—wheat, and corn, and everything, and some hogs besides—and ain't got hardly enough now for feed and clothes for all that family. The rent and the lumber he had to buy to build the new barn after the old one burnt ate up the money like fury. He kind of laughed, and said he guessed the children wouldn't get much Christmas this year. I didn't think about it's being so close when he told me."

"No Christmas!" Nels' round eyes widened with astonishment. "Ay tank dose been pooty bad!" He studied the subject for a few moments, his stolid face suddenly grown thoughtful. Charlie stared at the stove. Far away by the river a lonely coyote set up his quick, howling yelp.

"Dere's been seven kids oop dere," said Nels at last, glancing up as it for corroboration.

"Yes, seven," agreed Charlie.

"Say, do ve need Seigert's team very pad?"

"Well, now that depends," said Charlie. "Why not?"

"Nothin', only Ay vas tankin' ve might tak' some a das veat we vas goin' to sell and—and—"

"Yep, what?"

"And dumb it on Roney's granary floor to-night after dere been asleeb."

Charlie stared at his companion for a moment in silence. Then he rose, and, approaching Nels, examined his partner's face with solemn scrutiny.

"By the great horn spoon," he announced, finally, "you've got a head on you like a balloon, my boy! Keep on gettin' ideas like that, and you'll land in Congress or the poor-farm before many years!"

Then, abandoning his pretense of gravity, he slapped the other on the back.

"Why didn't I think of that? It's the best yet. Seigert's team? Oh, hang Seigert's team. We don't need it. We'll have a little merry Christmas out of this yet. Only they mustn't know where it came from. I'll write a note and stick it under the door, 'You'll find some merry wheat—'No, that ain't it. 'You'll find some wheat in the granary to give the kids a merry Christmas with,' signed, 'Santa Claus.'"

He wrote out the message in the air with a pointing forefinger. He had entered into the spirit of the thing eagerly.

"It's half-past nine now," he went on, looking at the clock. "It'll be eleven time we get the stuff loaded and hauled up there. Let's go out and get at it. Lucky the bobs are on the wagon; they don't make such a racket as wheels."

He took the lantern from its nail behind the door and lighted it, after which he put on his boots, cap, and mittens, and flung his overcoat across his shoulders. Nels, meanwhile, had put on his outer garments, also.

"Shut up the stove, Nels." Charlie blew out the light and opened the door. "There, hang it!" he exclaimed, turning back. "I forgot the note. Ought to be in ink, I suppose. Well, never mind now; we won't put on any style about it."

He took down a pencil from the shelf, and, extracting a bit of wrapping paper from a bundle behind the woodbox, wrote the note by the light of the lantern.

"There, I guess that will do," he said, finally. "Come on!"

Outside, the night air was cold and bracing, and in the black vault of the sky the winter constellations flashed and throbbed. The shadows of the two men, thrown by the lantern, bobbed huge and grotesque across the snow and among the bare branches of the cottonwoods, as they moved toward the barn.

"Ay tank ve put on dose extra side poards and make her an even fifty pushel," said Nels, after they had backed the wagon up to the granary door. "Ve might as vell do it oop right, skence ve're at it."

Having carried out this suggestion, the two shovelled steadily, with short intervals of rest, for three quarters of an hour, the dark pile of grain in the wagon-box rising gradually until it stood flush with the top.

Good it was to look upon, cold and soft and yielding to the touch, this heaped-up wealth from the inexhaustible treasure-house of the mighty West. Charlie and Nels felt something of this as they viewed the results of their labours for a moment before hitching up the team.

"It's A number one hard," said Charlie, picking up a handful and sifting it slowly through his fingers, "and it'll fetch seventy-four cents. But you can't raise any

worse on this old farm of ours if you try," he added, a little proudly. "Nor anywhere else in the Jim River Valley, for that matter."

As they approached the Roney place, looking dim and indistinct in the darkness, their voices hushed apprehensively, and the noise of the sled-runners slipping through the snow seemed to them to increase from a purr to a roar.

"Here, stob a minute!" whispered Nels, in agony of discovery. "Ve're magin' an awful noise. Ay'll go und take a beek."

He slipped away and cautiously approached the house. "Et's all right," he whispered, hoarsely, returning after a moment; "dere all asleeb. But go easy; Ay tank ve pest go easy." They seemed burdened all at once with the consciences of criminals, and went forward with almost guilty timidity.

"Thunder, dere's a bump! Vy don'd you drive garefuller, Sharlie?"

"Drive yourself, if you think you can do any better!" As they came into the yard a dog suddenly ran out from the barn, barking furiously. Charlie reined up with an ejaculation of despair; "Look there, the dog! We're done for now, sure! Stop him, Nels! Throw somethin' at 'im!"

The noise seemed to their excited ears louder than the crash of artillery. Nels threw a piece of snow crust. The dog ran back a few steps, but his barking did not diminish.

"Here, hold the lines. I'll try to catch 'im." Charlie jumped from the wagon and approached the dog with coaxing words: "Come, doggie, good doggie, nice boy, come!"

His manoeuvre, however, merely served to increase the animal's frenzy. As Charlie approached the dog retired slowly toward the house, his head thrown back, and his rapid barking increased to a long-drawn howl.

"Good boy, come! Bother the brute! He'll wake up the whole household! Nice doggie! Phe-e—"

The noise, however, had no apparent effect upon the occupants of the house. All remained as dark and silent as ever.

"Sharlie, Sharlie, let him go!" cried Nels, in a voice smothered with laughter. "Ay go in dose parn; maype ha'll chase me."

His hope was well founded. The dog, observing this treacherous occupation by the enemy of his last harbour of refuge, gave pursuit and disappeared within the door, which Charlie, hard behind him, closed with a bang. There was the sound of a hurried scuffle within. The dog's barking gave place to terrified whinings, which in turn were suddenly quenched to a choking murmur.

"Gome in, Sharlie, kvick!"

"You got him?" queried Charlie, opening the door cautiously. "Did he bite you?"

"Na, yust ma mitten. Gat a sack or someding da die him oop in."



A sack was procured from somewhere, into which the dog, now silenced from sheer exhaustion and fright, was unceremoniously thrust, after which the sack was tied and flung into the wagon. This formidable obstacle overcome and the Roneys still slumbering peacefully, the rest was easy. The granary door was pried open and the wheat shovelled hurriedly in upon the empty floor. Charlie then crept up to the house and slipped his note under the door.

The sack was lifted from the now empty wagon and opened before the barn, whereupon its occupant slipped meekly out and retreated at once to a far corner, seemingly too much incensed at his discourteous treatment even to fling a volley of farewell barks at his departing captors.

"Vell," remarked Nels, with a sigh of relief as they gained the road, "Ay tank dose Roneys pelieve en Santa Claus now. Dose peen funny vay fer Santa Claus to coom."

Charlie's laugh was good to hear. "He didn't exactly come down the chimney, that's a fact, but it'll do at a pinch. We ought to have told them to get a present for the dog—collar and chain. I reckon he wouldn't hardly be thankful for it, though, eh?"

"Ay gass not. Ha liges ta haf hes nights ta hemself."

"Well, we had our fun, anyway. Sort of puts me in mind of old Wisconsin, somehow."

From far off over the valley, with its dismantled cornfields and snow-covered haystacks, beyond the ice-bound river, floated slow, and sonorous, the mellow clanging of church bells. They were ushering in the Christmas morn. Overhead the starlit heavens glistened, brooding and mysterious, looking down with luminous, loving eyes upon these humble sons of men doing a good deed, from the impulse of simple, generous hearts, as upon that other Christmas morning, long ago, when the Jewish shepherds, guarding their flocks by night, read in their shining depths that in Bethlehem of Judea the Christ-Child was born.

The rising sun was touching the higher hilltops with a faint rush of crimson the next morning when the back door of the Roney house opened with a creak, and Mr. Roney, still heavy-eyed with sleep, stumbled out upon the porch, stretched his arms above his head, yawned, blinked at the dazzling snow, and then

shambled off toward the barn. As he approached, the dog ran eagerly out, gambolled meekly around his feet and caressed his boots. The man patted him kindly.

"Hello, old boy! What were you yappin' around so for last night, huh? Grain-thieves? You needn't worry about them. There ain't nothin' left for them to steal. No, sir! If they got into that granary they'd have to take a lantern along to find a pint of wheat. I don't suppose," he added, reflectively, "that I could scrape up enough to feed the chickens this mornin', but I guess I might's well see."

He passed over to the little building. What he saw when he looked within seemed for a moment to produce no impression upon him whatever. He stared at the hillock of grain in motionless silence. Finally Mr. Roney gave utterance to a single word, "Geewhilikins!" and started for the house on a run. Into the kitchen, where his wife was just starting the fire, the excited man burst like a whirlwind.

"Come out here, Mary!" he cried. "Come out here, quick!"

The worthy woman, unaccustomed to such demonstrations, looked at him in amazement.

"For goodness sake, what's come over you, Peter Roney?" she exclaimed. "Are you daft? Don't make such a noise! You'll wake the young ones, and I don't want them waked till need be, with no Christmas for 'em, poor little things!"

"Never mind the young 'uns," he replied. "Come on!"

As they passed out he noticed the slip of paper under the door and picked it up, but without comment.

He charged down upon the granary, his wife, with a shawl over her head, close behind.

She peered in, apprehensively at first, then with eyes of widening wonder.

"Why, Peter!" she said, turning to him. "Why, Peter! What does—I thought—"

"You thought!" he broke in. "Me, too. But it ain't so. It means that we've got some of the best neighbours that ever was, a thinkin' of our young 'uns this way! Read that!" and he thrust the paper into her hand.

"Why, Peter!" she ejaculated again, weakly. Then suddenly she turned, and laying her head on his shoulder, began to sob softly.

"There, there," he said, patting her arm awkwardly.

"Don't you go and cry now. Let's just be thankful to the good Lord for puttin' such fellers into the world as them fellers down the road. And now you run in and hurry up breakfast while I do up the chores. Then we'll hitch up and get into town

'fore the stores close. Tell the young 'uns Santy didn't get round last night with their things, but we've got word to meet him in town. Hey? Yes, I saw just the kind of sled Pete wants when I was up yesterday, and that china doll for Mollie. Yes, tell 'em anything you want. Twon't be too big. Santy Claus has come to Roney's ranch this year, sure!"

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