



Beaver Bob

An old man's first Christmas

It was Christmas Eve. The gently dropping snow came down on the good and evil alike; on the saved and the damned; on the born again and those dead to saving grace. It swirled around the tall, shining steeple of the red-brick United Church, the somewhat lower and more modest steeple of the Anglican, the squat steeple of the Roman Catholic and the wooden bell tower of the Methodist before swirling out over the river in a blinding curtain of white.

Street lights poked narrow holes in the white curtain down the long, bare street where no traffic moved. A dark shadow broke the uninterrupted counterpane of white where a late-skulking hound made homeward his guilty way. At the end of the street an iron bridge stretched its rusted, weary frames over the silent water armoured in white except where a black hole bubbled.

The river flowed there for many years, perhaps a thousand; relic of a vast sea which one stretched to the St. Lawrence and receded, gently dropping great granite boulders which still perched improbably on grasslands where no granite grew. Over the centuries the river had created a bowl for itself which acted as a kind of light condenser, so that where the streets were dark and blowy beyond the lights and the field were maelstroms of whipping, wind-lashed snow devils, below the bridge the snow dropped with a kind of illuminated grace, like tinsel on a tree. On the ice a curious, mis-shapen, humped-over figure moved. It was a trapper carrying a beaver.

The beaver was of course dead; drowned in a leg-hold trap. The beaver was an old one, big, fat and heavy. The trapper comparatively, was almost as old as the beaver. That is, he was past middle age, rather on the heavy side and panting with the weight of his burden.

His snowshoes made curious spoon-shaped marks as he made his way steadily, and persistently, like a giant water rat in the night, to the outskirts of the village where he had his shack. Perhaps shack is not the right word, because by any standards other than those of Hollywood or the new rich of suburbia, the trapper's cabin was warm and functionally designed to provide a maximum of comfort along with the facilities which he required in his line of business.

The cabin was situated on a bend in the river, a good two miles from the village. All round the walls were furs drying on stretchers, muskrat, mink, otter, ermine and even rabbit. To the trapper they represented the fruits of his labours. They represented the fitness of things. They were money in the bank when converted by the skill of the fur auctioneer. The price of pelts was high and the process of converting pelts into pelf, along with various cheques received at regular intervals from benevolent governments left the trapper in the situation which if it did not represent affluence, at least was well above mere subsistence.

In addition to supplying furs, the creatures of wood, field, marsh and river also donated their bodies in the form of nourishing and tasty dishes. Muskrat stew, as put together by the old man, with herbs, lentils and potatoes was something out of this world. Stuffed and baked beaver, done to a crackling turn in the oven of the woodstove sent

odours wafting through the cedars which, if there had been anyone to smell them, would have made a hardened gourmet cry tears of delight.

This was precisely what the old man had in mind as he stamped the snow from his gumboots, dumping the big, old beaver on the kitchen table, preparatory to skinning it. His skinning knives were sharp and his hand practised as he simply undressed the beaver, peeling the coat off him like an attendant in a Turkish bath helping a customer off with his jacket.

All the time he was working he talked to the animal which, by the time he was finished bore a rather pathetic resemblance to a naked, defenceless infant.

"I'm sorry about this, Mister Beaver, but it had to be. Yes, sir, it had to be. Why with turkey at more than a dollar a pound and no wild ones around here in living memory, there isn't much choice. I suppose I could have got a goose last fall, but where would I keep it?"

When he was through, he put the beaver, cleaned and stuffed, in an iron roasting pan and stowed him away in the outside kitchen. Dawn rose with a gladsome shout over the river. The sun poked a rim of red over the horizon, painting low-lying clouds in gold and ochre. The old man built up a big fire and had the beaver in the oven by the time the first big flakes came down. By noon, there was a roaring blizzard on, enshrouding the cabin in a billowing white curtain. Snug and warm inside, with the smell of roasting beaver adding its rich pungency, the old man couldn't have cared less.

Round about noon a timid knock came at the door and the old man opened, letting in a rush of snow out of which emerged four pairs of bright, inquiring eyes. The eyes belonged to a dark-haired lady, two small children and an older lady, all of whom stood peering at the old man as though he was some kind of apparition from another world. The Old Man of the Snows, perhaps.

"Come in, come in." The old man bellowed. "Don't stand there, freezin' the place." He made a number of suggestive gestures signifying that they should enter, which they did, timidly, with much peering and halting and mutual grasping and clutching.

The old man slammed the door and got a broom and swept the snow under the stove where it quickly melted. He was notoriously tidy. By now, they were not paying any attention to the old man. They were standing in a half-moon around the stove, their noses, like so many pointers indicating that they had tracked down the rich and pungent scent which had lured them, to the cabin through the blizzard — the smell of roasting beaver.

"This here's my Christmas dinner," the old man said. "If you're hungry — and you sure look hungry — I'd be pleased to have you share it with me. I don't get many visitors at Christmas, as thoughts chased through his mind of other Christmases, years ago. The old farm house, rich and warm inside with Christmas love and giving while outside the Prairie winds whistled.

The old man made signs of eating and pointed to the oven and the four heads nodded rapidly up and down to signify assent. He took them for Indians, although there hadn't been any Indians around this place for fifty years. He made them all sit at the table, including the old lady and

got the beaver out of the oven. When he lifted the lid, allowing the rich aroma to gush forth, it seemed to pull them away from their places like a magnet. The old man became conscious of them all around him, like so many flies. They must be even hungrier than he had thought.

But they weren't content with just looking. Chattering in bird-like tones like so many magpies, they whisked around the cabin, putting out knives and forks, cutting bread, making tea, in a way that made the old man wonder whether they hadn't been there for months without his being aware of them.

The beaver lay on a platter at the head of the table, all crackling and simmering, garnished with strips of bacon, stuffed with bread and onions and other delicacies of the old man's selection. It was a culinary symphony. It lay there like a noble sacrificial victim of some ancient ritual, while the four pairs of eyes never deviated an iota from its vaporous form.

The old man used a clean skinning knife to carve. And such delectable slices of golden meat; such crackling gobbets of fat; such titillating tidbits of dressing as he purveyed to his unexpected guests; not a word of whose constant and steady chattering he could understand.

When it was all gone — chewed up, eaten up, mopped up, swept up — and the dishes had been washed by the old man's enthusiastic visitors and put away and the old man was in his chair by the stove and was in the act of getting his pipe going, there was another knock. The two men who came in wore heavy jackets and fur caps. They were policemen.

"We're looking for some missing Vietnamese", the first policeman said.

"Don't have any of that around here," the old man said.

Peering over the old man's shoulder the policeman saw the occupants of the room.

"I guess this is it, Harry."

The other policeman nodded as they stepped inside.

"These people are refugees from across the sea," the first policeman explained. "They were on their way into town to stay with a family there, when the car broke down. The driver went to phone. I guess they thought he abandoned them. When he came back, they had disappeared. I'm glad we found them. This was the last place. We checked everywhere else."

The old man nodded. "We had Christmas dinner together. Finest Christmas I ever spent. I'll be sorry to see them go." He shook hands with the young lady and the old lady and gave each of the children a pat. He thought for a moment and went back and came back with a rich velvety pelt.

"Otter," he said. "Been savin' it for a special occasion" He handed it to the young lady, who held it wonderingly and acting on instinct, put it around her neck.

"That should keep you warm," the old man said. More birdlike chattering, followed by much bowing and smiling, as the little group struggled into ill-fitting garments, obviously donated, and prepared to depart.

"Merry Christmas to all," the old man said, as they went out, striking across the field to the highway where the police car was parked.

He closed the door and went back and sat down in his chair and lit his pipe and smoked for a long time, watching the blue tendrils curl ceilingward.

Merry Christmas

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