

A Deerslayer Christmas

Peter sighted down the barrel of his Kentucky long rifle at the magnificent buck at the top of the hill. It was still a few days until Christmas, and he weighed the moment carefully. He decided to pass on the shot, knowing the miles he had to travel before that day of days.

This Kentucky woodsman was lean and tan, with his coonskin cap often being mistaken for the actual varmint itself. His leather coat and breeches spanned down to winter moccasins, designed for stealth and hardiness at the same time.

As he lowered his rifle, the buck looked his way as if to acknowledge what had transpired, flicked his white tail, and bounded away over the hill. This was the way the hunter decided to proceed.

As the deerslayer topped the hill the buck had just left, he saw a scene down below him that his eyes could barely comprehend. A temporary lean-to was suspended between two tall pines, the green bows cut from surrounding firs to form a stylish roof.

Inside the shanty were two people, a man and a woman, looking down at a new-born baby. They were in direct line of fire to the spot where his bullet would have passed.

He hailed the camp. "Greetings, strangers. What brings you way out here in the middle of the woods?"

"We were on our way to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and the baby decided to come before we got there. This shelter was the best we could do at the moment." The father looked up at him expectantly. "Could you spare a little food?"

"Sure," he replied. "Just happen to have a little hard tack and a little jerky. I am headed that way myself."

Bethlehem? A little baby? Christmas? A little too many coincidences to let the matter drop.

"Don't suppose your names are Mary and Joseph, are they?" He shoved his cap back and waited for the reply.

“Actually, you are right, mister. We remember that story from the Bible, and get Christmas questions when we say who we are.” The young woman smiled, and held the baby carefully in her arms.

“You folks OK?”

“Well, we are trying to get to our family’s house before Christmas, and could use a little help if you’ve got it.”

“Well, wait here a minute, said the deerslayer. “I might be able to help.” He noted the one horse beside the stable, and the need for better transportation.

Pulling a small ax from his knapsack, he felled two long slender saplings, lashed smaller poles between to make a travois, with green branches as a soft bed for the ride. He strapped a pole to each side of the horse. Mary laid down the makeshift stretcher with her babe in her arms and the few possessions they had at her side, Joseph mounted the horse, and the woodsman led them down the path toward Bethlehem.

“Don’t place too much truck in that Christian stuff,” remarked the deerslayer. Always been able to handle everything on my own.” Just as the words came out, he fell to the ground. A feather-tipped Cherokee arrow was in his shoulder, and he was suddenly weak with loss of blood.

They all looked up the hill, and no war party appeared. So Mary got up to walk. Peter, his arm now bound with bandages from the baby’s blankets, was now the passenger.

“Here.” Mary spoke gently. “If you will hold Jesus, I can ride our horse, and Joseph will lead him.”

He sank into a restless sleep, the thoughts of the day running through his head. He awoke late that night with an enormous realization.

If he had not seen this baby, and had not built the travois to transport him, he would be dead now. He could no longer survive on his many years of experience, he had to depend on what the tiny baby had made possible.

He saw his own wife and children running toward him, the starlight illuminating the scene. He said, with all of the meanings that the words could have, "I have found Jesus, and he saved me."

He saw Jesus often in the next few years, as he grew up and worked in his father's carpenter shop in Bethlehem. Jesus always smiled at Peter, for his parents had told him the story of the journey in the woods.

"I'm glad you helped build the church, mister. A lot of folks don't realize that God sent his son here to save us from our sins. They end up living for themselves, and never see the wonder and life God can bring.

The deerslayer hoisted the big buck high on his shoulders. "We are having a great feast tonight at our cabin, and I'm going to tell everybody there just that!

"A blessed Christmas to you," said the boy. "Thank you for saving me."

"No. Thank You for saving me. Now I know what Christmas is all about!"

Peter rubbed the scar on his shoulder, and thanked God for that day once again.