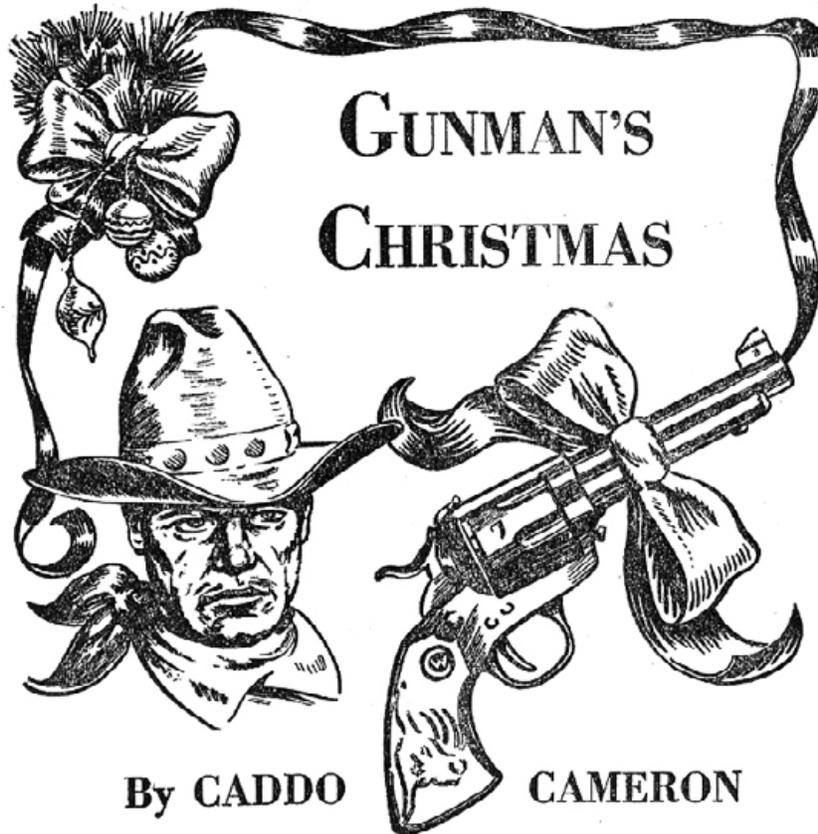


Christmas Was Just Four Days Away, and for All the Fugitive Knew, the Guns of the Law Were Even Closer



CHRISTMAS is just four days away on my range and for all I know, the guns of the law are even closer than that. Far and wide, marshals with posses at their backs are combing The Nations and boys with bounties on their scalps are a-huntin' their holes. They say there's five thousand wanted men in the Indian Territory this winter. Maybe so, but I'm interested in just one of 'em—me, *myself*—so I hit for my hideout in the breaks of the North Canadian and I don't throw off none until I get there. Why am I on the dodge? That's not a fair question in this country, mister, and besides—I ain't never been no hand to talk about my personal virtues and shortcomin's.

I located and built this here sanctuary myself. It's a half-dugout-and-log backed into the high side of a draw under tall trees and heavy brush so that my smoke can lose itself in the trees and me and my horses can take cover in the brush. Five ways out of the place if you know how to find' em, and I do. There's an everlastin' spring in the draw and good feed for any horseflesh that I happen to be holdin' while it gets over its homesickness. Got plenty privacy here, too, and I like that for I always trail alone. Company sorta spooks me, makes my gunhand plumb skittish. I'll admit that I ain't got much of a spread here on the Canadian, but it's home to a man who don't want a home until he gets to needin' a home powerful bad, a quiet

place to rest up or patch up in; and sometimes a fella has to cache a bankroll until it cools down to where it ain't too hot to handle. Fact is, I seen the time when— But I ain't no hand to talk much.

Pretty soon, day-after-tomorrow is Christmas—not that Christmas means anything to a man like me, but a fella will get to thinkin' about company and such round Christmas time—and I'm up on the bluff in a clump of dead jimson weeds about the color of my clothes where I spend more or less time when the law is on the loose, and I've got my spyglass. I'm a-lookin' for company. I don't want no company. After a while I spot a band of riders a-joggin' up my side of the river and before long my glass tells me that the man a-pointin' that bunch is Marshal Heck Henderson. He knows me, Heck does, knows the taste of my gunsmoke and the feel of my lead. He don't like me much. But Heck carries his posse right on by me and I watch 'em until they're out of sight upriver and then I breathe easy like. Reckon he ain't lookin' for me in this part of the country. So I go to figgerin' that this ought to be a right quiet and peaceable Christmas for me. No company.

I'm fixin' to climb down and go and mix me a batch of bread when I swing my glass around for a last look. Yonder comes another rider! He's a-trailin' the posse, or I miss my guess, and he's mighty careful to stay out of sight of 'em. When he comes close enough I see that I don't know him and from his looks I don't want to know the cuss nohow; but there *is somethin'* about him that makes me think I'd ought to know him. Imagination I reckon. He keeps on a-ramblin' until I lose sight of him at the bend, so I'm kind of easy in my mind again. Probably no company.

On the way down the bluff I think maybe I'd ought to go to the turkey roost this evenin' and knock over a fat gobbler

for my Christmas dinner. After all, Christmas is—well, it's Christmas. Or maybe I'd better fetch in *two* fat gobblers. With the country gettin' crowded thisaways, I *might* have company for Christmas.

MARSHAL HECK HENDERSON says the devil gave me cat eyes and wolf ears, but he's wrong about that. Of course, most any man can train himself to pick up and recognize, without thinkin', all the everyday sounds and movements around him and if he's a hair-trigger cuss any sound or motion that don't belong there will touch him off. I'm thataway, but I don't see and hear everything regardless of what Heck says. Like now—it's comin' dusk and I'm back in camp, out by the woodpile a-drawin' my turkeys, and the breeze is a-whisperin' through the naked trees and brush and a-rustlin' dead leaves and grass and an old coyote is a-tunin' up over on the bluff and I hear my horses feedin' down on the spring branch, and a fool cottontail goes a-skitterin' past and a twig pops like they do when it's frosty, then in the back of my brain somewhere I realize that *it ain't that cold now*—

And when I come to I'm facin' the other way with a turkey in my left hand and a gun in my right, and it's a-pointin' dead center at a man's belly! My thumb is slippin' the hammer. I barely catch it in time.

He folds his arms slow and cautious-like. His mouth is wide and his teeth look white in his thin, dark face. He ain't makin' a sound, but he's laughin' at me!

I'm mad and I'm shamed because he caught me nappin' thisaway, maybe more ashamed than mad, but I don't let on.

"You're a damned fool, stranger," I tell him.

He nods. "I know it. But when I got close enough to get a good look at you I

knew who you were. I've heard of you. I wanted to see your draw. I'm interested in gunplay. I'll give you ten dollars to do it again."

"Go to hell." I put away my Colt. "Gunslingin' ain't my business."

"But it *is* mine, or rather my hobby." He grins and unfolds his arms plumb careful. "Hate to admit it, but I think I can learn something from you. I'll make it twenty if you'll do that again."

"As I was sayin', stranger, you can go clean to hell and I hope you have to walk every foot of the way."

He looks sorta hurt, if a face as mean as his can show hurt. Knowin' that he could have made a sieve out of my hide before I heard him, maybe I ain't got no call to be so cussed; but by now I've figured out who he is and what I mean, I'd rather wake up and find a rattler in my blankets than to turn around and find that breed killer in my camp. He's half Indian—which nobody holds against him, of course—and he goes by the name of Choctaw. I've heard many a story about his doin's and I never hear a man say a good word for him. Far as I know, he ain't got a friend in the world. Men who would stand up and shoot it out with the devil himself are afraid of Choctaw, or at least they cut a circle around him rather than to face him because you never can tell when he'll burn a man down just to add another notch to his gun. Law officers are his favorite game and he cuts bigger notches for them, tallyin' twelve of 'em I hear. Choctaw is more or less a mystery. They say he don't drink or carouse none, he's got education and talks language and he reads books when he ain't too busy dodgin' the law or a-huntin' it down.

For a short spell now he don't say nothin'. Just stands there tall and wiry in his moccasins, sorta on the balls of his feet like a man fixed to jump in any direction,

meanwhile lookin' me and my camp over good. I've had *my* say. I keep my mouth shut and my eyes open and he can't so much as bat a winker without me catchin' him at it. I've done picked the spot where I'll let him have it—about twelve inches above where his gunbelts cross.

Pretty soon, he says, "I like this place."

"Too bad. I'm here first. How did you ever find it?"

HE GRINS. Puts me in mind of a mad dog tryin' to be friendly. "I'm half Indian, half white. The Indian's eyes found your cleverly hidden trail and the white man's hunger for the society of his breed brought me here. Christmas, you know, and white men need company at Christmas."

I'll gamble he's a liar, but I don't say so. I tell him, "You were trailin' Heck Henderson's posse. Were you a-huntin' company then, or layin' for a chance to earn another credit?"

He's the damndest fella to laugh without makin' a sound. "Won't deny that I'd like to notch my gun for Henderson, but I didn't know that was his posse until I trailed them to their camp northwest of here. Picked up the tracks this morning. I knew they were white men's horses and white men riding them. I followed them because I wanted the company of white men. Christmas, you know."

Comin' out of a face like this, Choctaw's voice is plumb surprisin'—low, soft and easy listenin'. And I'm a-talkin' to him more than I usually talk. Before today I ain't spoke to a man for close onto a month and then I didn't have much to say. Just "Stick 'em up!" as I recollect it.

So I tell this breed killer, "Christmas, hell! Who wants company for Christmas?"

He don't turn a hair. He says right out, "You do. You were a boy not *too* long ago. You've remembered that today.

You've been thinking of Christmas today. You want company for Christmas, but you won't admit it even to yourself. I'm here. Do I stay?"

"Go and fetch up your horse."

Choctaw is a right handy man around camp and he does his share of the chores outside. He talks a blue streak all the time about this and that and everything like a fella will when he's a bustin' to talk. I never let him get behind me. To be fair and square about it though, he don't try to. In fact, he seems to be takin' care not to, as if he thought my back was more dangerous than the front of me. He's a plumb peculiar cuss, Choctaw is. When we're goin' into the dugout, I hold back the buffalo robe door and nod for him to go ahead.

Carryin' his blanket-roll, saddle-bags and rifle scabbard, he grins and makes a move to put 'em down. "It isn't polite for a guest to go armed into his host's house. Want me to take off my belts?"

"Hell, no, 'man! If I ain't got no better sense than to sleep with a rattler, damned if I'll make him shed his fangs."

Choctaw laughed at that, laughed out loud for the first time since he come. Then he sobers up, and tells me right serious, "I've got a confession to make before I accept your hospitality. There was—"

"No need to confess your sins to me, mister. Go and hunt you up a parson."

He grins, and goes on, "Got to do it. There was a man spying on Henderson's camp while I was there. He must have seen me, too, because he followed me when I left. I made no effort to foul my trail. He may show up down here, then you'll have more company. Thought I'd ought to tell you."

I'll never know why I didn't get mad about that. I just ask him, "Why did you make sign right into my place thataway?"

"Didn't know whether I'd find anybody down here and I wanted to make sure of company for Christmas."

I motion for him to go in. "Drop your beddin' on a bunk. Got four of 'em. Don't know why I ever put 'em in."

"You knew that you'd get lonesome, that's why."

By now I think I've figured this gunslinger out. He's got a twist in his head. He really does want to be with folks at Christmas and he's a fightin' down the temptation to kill. If it wasn't for Christmas, I'll gamble that he'd have made a play against me before this. Men like Choctaw will ride miles to test their gunplay with a man if he's got a bigger reputation as a gunsharp, or if they're nursin' a suspicion that he's faster than they are. They'll risk their d lives to prove that he ain't. They're plumb loco thataway. I never did believe in such foolishness.

My six-shooters are tools that I use in my work and the least I have to use the things, the better I'm satisfied.

ME AND Choctaw have finished our supper and we're a-playin' the coffee pot. All of a sudden he stops with a tincup halfway to his mouth and I'm a-standin' there pourin' coffee onto the table instead of into my cup. We hear a man singin'. He's down the draw a-piece and he ain't a-singin' very loud, but his voice carries high, clear and sharp on the frosty air. I blow out the light, set down the pot and we both head for the door.

The moon is up full and it's good shootin' light.

We hunker down in a shadow and listen to the singin' as it comes closer and closer, slow-like up the draw.

Pretty soon, I allow, "That there pilgrim ain't as big a fool as you are."

Choctaw laughs a little. "But he can sing and I can't." He cocks an ear for a minute. "If he's the man I think he is, he's an even bigger fool than I am."

"Can't hardly believe it."

Far's I'm concerned, I can listen to that brand of singin' from now on. It's a new song that everybody is hummin' and whistlin' up and down the range and I hear that a crazy buffalo hunter made it up a short time back. It starts off like this:

I love these wild flowers, in this fair land
of ours,
I love to hear the wild curlew scream
On the cliffs of white rock, where the
antelope flock,
To graze on the herbage so green.
O, give me a home, where the buffalo
roam,
Where the deer and the antelope play,
Where seldom is heard a discouragin'
word
And the sky is not cloudy all day.

After a little while, Choctaw says, "He's the man, all right."

With this the breed stands up, stretches himself and tries his guns in their leather. I don't like the set of his head, sorta stickin' out at the end of his neck like a wolf a-testin' the air, and I don't like anything about him right now. Temptation is fixin' to get the best of him, Christmas regardless.

So I tell him quiet-like, "Looky here, mister. Start trouble and you make yourself short in this here camp."

That woke him up. He grins quick, and says right gentle, "Mighty sorry. I once saw that man in action and ever since then I've been wanting to meet up with him. Sorry I almost forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"Christmas, you know."

THE stranger sings his way right up to the door. There he stops, folds his hands on his saddle-horn and grins down at us. His hat is a-ridin' the back of his head and the moon holds his face up for us to see plain as day, and right off I like that face. Shore, it's reckless and full of the devil to boot but it ain't a bad face as faces go in this country. Looks so doggoned young, I betcha the fellas call him "Baby Face" when they know him well enough.

There's a laughter in his voice, "Merry Christmas, folks!"

"Christmas ain't hit these parts yet, stranger," I tell him, "but light and cool the seat of your britches until it does."

I ain't hardly got the words out of my mouth before he leaves the saddle as if he's afraid I'll change my mind a split second later and he wants to beat me to it. He's plumb cat on his feet and his eyes don't miss nothin' either. They sorta stumble when they brush against Choctaw, but the stranger don't say anything and he's quick to put out his hand to me.

"Mighty glad to take you at your word, mister," he says, happy-like. "I've been huntin' company for Christmas, wantin' it bad. Call me—call me Kansas and let it go at that."

Kansas don't offer to shed his belts when he has put up his horse and goes to pack his trunk inside, and I see that he don't ever show his back to Choctaw. But that don't seem to spoil his fun, though. He eats like a man that's hungry for food and he talks like a man that's starved for talk, and he eats and talks and laughs and carries on until he has me and Choctaw a laughin', too. I can see that Kansas is one of them salty young devils that is likely to make any kind of a fool play whenever the notion strikes him, but right now he swears he's a-fixin' to celebrate Christmas and I believe him. The breed is a-behavin'

himself decent now. Funny what Christmas does to some men.

Time slides past at a high trot with Kansas a-whoopin' it up thataway and I don't know how long it is before I hear somethin' outside. Like always, I been keepin' one ear inside and the other ear outside. With the outside ear I'm a listenin' to Henry Clay and his woman makin' sweet talk in that tall maple over the woodpile, Old Henry bein' a barred owl mighty nigh as big as a turkey, and when their talk stops sudden-like I know somethin' or other is a-snoopin' round the draw.

So I says cautious to the boys, "Keep up the racket. I'm goin' to scout the camp."

Choctaw holds up a blanket to cut down the light and I slip through the door. I Injun down in the brush by the trail and listen, and shore enough—somethin' is a-movin' my way and I'll swear it's a-walkin' on its hind legs. It ain't long before he shows up and stops ten feet away, lookin' hard at the dugout and a-listenin' just as hard I reckon. I don't show myself first off because if he's got set triggers and explodes at sight of me, I might have to gun the cuss.

So I lay low in the brush, and tell him pleasant-like, "Stranger, if you're lookin' for somebody and want to live to find 'em, better stick your fingers in your ears and keep 'em stuck."

He does, quick. He don't so much as twitch his hide either, so I figure he's been ridin' his feelin's with a powerful tight rein for a long time, or he's made out of stuff that ain't got no feelin's. I walk out while he's standin' there thataway.

He says, "Howdy, mister. Have I drifted into some place where I ain't got no business to be?"

"That all depends," I tell him. "All depends on who you are and what you

want. Drop your hands if you're a mind to."

"Much obliged," he sorta drawls, humorous-like. "Comin' from a man past thirty years old I know it sounds plumb childish to say that I'm huntin' a good place to spend my Christmas, but I am."

What the hell? I think. Another one!

He goes on, "I ran smack onto a posse up yonder a ways, but they didn't see me. I ain't hankerin' to Christmas with a posse, but I did take time to look 'em over and kind of wonder whether any of 'em would know me if I moseyed into their camp. While I'm watchin' 'em I see two other fellas doin' the same thing. After a while they left, one followin' the other, so I lit out and trailed 'em to this draw before it got too dark to read sign. I've been hidin' down below until I figured it was safe to go up to your house and see if I could hear somethin'. In times like these a man has to make shore, don't he?"

I nod.

He grins sheepish. His face is like a brown sandstone rock, but he can grin. He winds up, "I hate like blazes to spend my Christmas alone on the prairie with coyotes and wolves and buffalo and the Spanish pony I'm ridin'. They're mighty poor company."

"Maybe so," I tell him, "but they're a damned sight gentler than the company you'll find here; Mister—er—"

"Off hand, Arkansaw is the best name I can think of."

"It'll do."

"Do to hang with, you mean," he says, chucklin' down low somewheres.

"Go and fetch your pony."

He nods a "Thank you," pleased as a pig in a punkin patch, and moves off—big, but light on his feet like a bear.

I keep a eye on him and I'm thinkin', yonder goes a *good* man who'd be a *bad* man to monkey with.

ARKANSAW fits into my Christmas company all right. He's a good feeder, likes his coffee hot and black and he talks fit to kill same as the other fellas do when they first come. Kansas and him warm up to each other right from the start. He's plumb sociable to me and Choctaw too, but I can see that he ain't lettin' the breed out of his sight none to speak of. Fact is, all three of us are thataway about Choctaw. It ain't because he isn't all white, either. Men like us who are damned by society and hunted by the law don't ever get uppity about color. We don't judge a man by the blood he was borned with. We measure him by the blood he's got in his veins *now*, 'cause we figure he made it whatever it is—good or bad. The trouble with Choctaw is, he don't use his guns to save his own hide like most of us long riders do. He kills for the fun of it and he's proud to notch credits on his gun. Far as we are concerned, *that's* what makes his blood smell of sulphur.

BUT, aside from keepin' a sharp eye on the cuss, we treat Choctaw as if he'd never done anything more than to stick up a bank or a stage or a army paymaster or lift a band of horses or clean out a gamblin' joint and swap lead with the law while makin' his getaway. In other words, we treat him like he's one of us. I'll say this for him, too: he's a-fightin' that old temptation to show the world and himself how good he is, and to earn credits. Christmas, I reckon. Time and again I see him a-studyin' how Kansas and Arkansaw pack their weapons and handle theirselves generally, and more'n once I feel his eyes on me. I can stand big cold, but when I feel Choctaw's eyes on me thataway my backbone freezes solid.

My pillows are stuffed with buffalo hair and my bunks are filled with soft buffalo grass and everybody has plenty

blankets, but I betcha nobody gets much sleep that night unless maybe Kansas does. I know I don't. Every time a man moves or even draws a long breath that dead grass whispers a warnin' that sounds mighty loud in a dugout full of hair-trigger men who don't trust nobody. Kansas might have done some sleepin', though, 'cause he's the take-it-as-it-comes kind. Anyhow, he's the first man in his boots in the mornin' and he choruses the balance of us out of our blankets at the break of day, a-raisin' hell like a frisky colt, and he stirs up the fire and puts on a chunk and takes the coffee pot out of the ashes and fills our cups, and he reminds us that it's Christmas Eve and Santa Claus is no doubt a-whackin' his eight-deer hitch down the Northern Trail already.

"I figure he'll hit The Nations about two minutes before midnight," allows Kansas, "unless he gets caught in a Nebraska blizzard."

"Huh!" I grunt. "He'd better stay clean away from The Nations. Betcha there's a warrant out for him and a posse on his tail before he's been in this country a hour."

"And you ain't talkin'," declared Arkansaw. "The marshals will corral him and they'll feed his deer to reservation Indians and they'll take him to Fort Smith, and Judge Parker will hang Old Santa there."

Choctaw spins the cylinder of his right-hand gun, maybe to make certain that nobody ain't unloaded it during the night. He grins across at us, and says, "Maybe Old Santa will give Judge Parker the slip. I have, twice. That hanging murderer has been trying to get his bloody paws on me for years. Some day I'll file a notch for him, a big notch."

Ordinarily men like us could talk all day about the Hangin' Judge and what we'd like to do to him but somehow or other he ain't interestin' subject on

Christmas Eve. Nobody taken up where Choctaw left off. Kansas allows that we'd ought to have a big feed tomorrow, Christmas, so right after breakfast set the boys off to do some work while I go up the bluff with my spyglass to look the scenery over. With a posse a-nosin' round it don't pay to get careless. The guns of the law don't take Christmas off.

Everything looks natural, not a soul in sight from the bluff. All of a sudden it comes to me that Old Heck and his deputies are probably huntin' the trail of the fella that stuck up that English lord and his guide and two flunkies a short time back. That happened more than fifty mile northwest of here. The Englishman was a-headin' for the buffalo range to show the American boys how to kill 'em in style, and he had five thousand in cash on him and a lot of fancy grub in his wagon and him and his men were set afoot out there—there saddle stock and wagon taken a likin' to the stick-up man and followed him off, and— But I ain't no hand to talk much.

When I get back to camp, Arkansaw has dug a good pit for turkey cookin' and Kansas has gone to the claybank where I sent him and fetched down plenty clay for mortar and Choctaw has gone to the thicket where I told him he'd find a nice young buck—good eatin' size. He's huntin' with a bow and war arrows that I taken off one of Peta Nocona's warriors who wouldn't need 'em no more. I hunt with that bow when gunfire ain't smart. Arkansaw and Kansas are gatherin' dry blackjack oak to make coals without much smoke, and they're laughin' and carryin' on like a brace of boys a-campin' out. I watch 'em for a minute and I'm listenin' to 'em, and I'm a-thinkin', company for Christmas ain't so bad at that.

Pretty soon Choctaw comes in with the buck over his shoulder and I can see that

the hunt has done him good 'cause that there temptation ain't a-workin' on him so hard now.

He looks at other men like they were men instead of marks to shoot at. So I send him up onto the bluff with my spyglass and we take turns a-standin' guard up there until sundown with never a sight of a human: just buffalo, antelope, deer, mustangs and such.

MEANWHILE we're all busy as prairie dogs. I take the liver, heart, sweetbreads and a slice of tenderloin from the buck and make us a larrupin' son-of-a-gun stew for supper, and Arkansaw he fixes a dried peach cobbler that's big enough for two meals, and Kansas goes to a pool downriver that I tell him about and comes back with a dozen big catfish for breakfast Christmas mornin', and Choctaw sees a cottontail and right away decides he wants a rabbit stew for eatin' sometime today—he ain't particular when—so he takes the bow and arrows again and comes back with six rabbits, and durned if I ain't makin' another stew before I know it. I reckon men on the dodge eat more than other men when they get a chance. With the law sniffin' and a-growlin' at your hocks, if you stop to eat you won't live to eat.

Watchin' me and Arkansaw a-mixin' this and that, Choctaw wants to know, "Where did you ever get all this fancy stuff away out here? White flour, long sweetening (sorghum), short sweetening (white sugar), canned milk, spices, onions, sweet potatoes, lard, and all kinds of dried fruit. Where did you ever get it?"

I look at him. "Personal question, Choctaw, and nobody but a durned fool ever answers a personal question."

Choctaw allows he's plumb sorry and Arkansaw says he'd ought to be, and then everybody laughs fit to kill, and I'm

thinkin', company for Christmas ain't a bad idea.

The big event of the day, as a fella says, comes when I put the turkeys down to cook. It's full dark and everybody is there and I reckon nobody is thinkin' about gunfightin' and killin' and the law and hangin's and such, 'cause all we're talkin' about is this here turkey bake. We've got a big bed of redhot coals in the pit. I mix me a clay mortar and plaster the gobblers, feathers and all, about three inches thick with the sticky stuff and lay 'em down there on the coals, then we cover 'em with dirt and build a slow fire on top of 'em and we stretch buffalo robes around it and the green deer skin over it to hide the glow.

When we're finished, I tell the boys, "Them turks ought to be about right for eatin' by tomorrow, and that's Christmas."

Kansas is a-starin' into the fire sorta dreamy-like, and he says, "A Christmas dinner with all the fixin's."

Regardless of the fact that we play fourhanded Seven Up until midnight and don't sleep much after that, this fool Kansas rousts us out when it's comin' day on Christmas mornin'. Ain't he got a brain in his head, that kid. He swears he heard Santa Claus on the room last night and I tell him that all he heard was Old Henry Clay a-crunchin' a packrat's bones, and Choctaw declares I lit in the middle of the floor with a six-shooter when the first bone popped and I tell him he's a liar, but Arkansaw swears it's so and dadblame me if they don't mighty nigh convince me that it is.

Then Choctaw says, "As I told you, I'll give you twenty dollars to show us that draw of yours."

I shake my head, pourin' him some coffee.

"I'll make it fifty, cash, if you'll do it slow.

"Go to hell," I tell Choctaw.

That old temptation must have been workin' on him in his sleep, and I'm thinkin', Christmas don't look none too promisin'.

But a wallop in' breakfast of corn pone and fried catfish topped off with a middlin' big helpin' of left-over rabbit stew sorta smothers the temptation and Choctaw behaves right human for a while. He pitches in and helps Arkansaw and Kansas fry a stack of venison steaks to be warmed up in their gravy and go with the turkey, and I say I'll mix a bakin' of cush to go with both of 'em.

"What's cush?" asks Kansas.

"Cush? Ain't you never heard of cush? It's outlaw cake and I was brung up on it."

So I take some stale wheat bread and crumble it and mix it with corn meal and soak 'em in hot water, then I put in hog fat—bear fat will do—and some raisins 'cause I got 'em, and salt and plenty pepper, and I cook my cush in a skillet until it's nice and brown and fit to go with any fat gobbler.

Meanwhile the boys are so wrapped up in fixin' our Christmas dinner, nobody ain't offered to stand guard on the bluff and I don't say anything about it. Damned careless, I know. But, to tell the truth, I reckon all of us are burnt out on eternally standin' guard, asleep and awake, and we're mighty glad to sorta forget the law and The Hangin' Judge for one day at least. Now that I think of it—one of the best night's sleep I ever got, I got in jail. Next day I busted out and didn't get no sleep for a week.

It ain't no ways time for dinner, but the boys keep a-wonderin' out loud whether them turks ain't burnt to a crisp and such talk—I'll swear they're like kids—until I can't put up with it no longer, so I tell Kansas and Choctaw to go and dig them gobblers up. There ain't a sign of a leak in

their clay shells, which makes me right proud. When we crack 'em open feathers and skin come away with the shell and there's our turk, plumb juicy like Nature made him. Nothin' gets away, not even the gobble, and his meat is a-fallin' from his bones. I mighty nigh have to hold the boys off with a six-shooter.

We set the table inside right stylish and the boys' eyes pop out when I go to puttin' on a linen tablecloth and silver eatin' tools and English jams and jellies, but nobody asks me where I got the stuff.

Choctaw goes to his saddle-bags and finds two quarts of champagne. He gives 'em to me, sayin', "I've been saving these for Christmas. They've taken up room that I really needed for ammunition."

Arkansaw has been diggin' in his towsack morral. Up he comes with a pint of Old Crow, and hands it over. "'Tain't much, but it'll give us a taste of Christmas cheer."

Kansas fetches somethin' from his warbag. He looks sheepish and he talks thataway, too. "Here's a jar of wild plum jelly. A week or so back a squatter's old lady gave it to me for my Christmas dinner wherever I happened to be. Said she lost her own boy this time last year. Killed in a gunfight at Pond Creek."

LIQUOR and Old Temptation work in double harness and I'm afraid of what this team will do to Choctaw. I watch him close.

But he just sips a little champagne and stops at that and nobody else drinks much, which sets me thinkin' that if every man in the country was a gunsharp the anti-saloon preachers wouldn't have much to preach about. No gunfighter with a lick of sense will slow himself down by drinkin' when he's in fast company like this here Christmas gatherin' of mine.

I know we're a-celebratin' Christmas

in a hole in the ground and the guns of the law may be linin' their sights on us for all we know, but we eat and talk and laugh and eat some more just like other folks do and I betcha we're havin' more fun than they do 'cause we ain't had a chance to celebrate this-away since we were boys, maybe some of us never before. Kansas is havin' the time of his life. This sorrel-topped kid raises more Cain than any of us, and when it's gettin' dark and we build up a big fire in the chimney and shove the table out of the way and get our tobacco to goin' good, he starts to sing in that fine voice of his. Nobody talks then. Everybody listen—listens and thinks, I reckon.

Kansas sings about Christmas and happy folks who can show a light without fear of the law, and he sings of pretty things until my dingy old dugout commences to show spots of cheerful color, like bright curtains in place of a slab shutter on its window, and holly berries and mistletoe a-hangin' here and there, and a yellow tomcat a-sleepin' in front of the fire—his name was Slug—and over in the corner a little old cedar saplin' is all dressed up with red paper and cotton and red candles, and there's three pair of black stockin's a-hangin' on the tree, all of 'em darned a-plenty, and the longest stockin's are mine, and—

Hell! I'm a-seein' things that I thought I'd done forgot. I go and pour me some coffee. Choctaw holds out his cup. He's got a faraway look in his eye. I wonder, maybe he's a-seein' things, too.

Arkansaw is just a-settin' there on his bunk. He's watchin' Kansas and a-listenin' with his eyes half shut part of the time, and he ain't a-talkin'. In the light from the fire and the oil lamp his face looks more than ever like a sandstone rock that's weathered and chipped, and I'm wonderin' what serious thing he's got on

his mind. So I ask him if he can't spin us a yarn that will make good listenin' on Christmas night.

Arkansaw grins, mostly with his eyes, and says, "Yes, boys, I reckon I've got a story I can tell." He looks at his watch. "It's gettin' along. My story is a Christmas story, so I'd better get goin' on it 'cause Christmas will soon be over."

We settle down to listen—Choctaw tilted back on a stool in the corner by the fireplace, Kansas on his bunk straight across the room and me on my bunk same side as Arkansaw.

"If this should happen to be my last Christmas, boys, I want you-all to know that it's the best I ever had." That's the way Arkansaw started out. "And it has set me to thinkin' hard about a boy who a never had a Christmas. I'll call him Bud for short. Early on the mornin' of the first Christmas that Bud can remember good, a noise woke him up and he figured it was Santa Claus a-climbin' down the cabin chimney. It was Comanches. They killed his maw and paw and carried Bud off."

Arkansaw keeps still for a minute, a-drawin' on a cold pipe like he sorta hates to go on with his story. Pretty soon he does, though.

"Bud missed five Christmases while the Indians had him. Then the Rangers got him away from the Comanches and an old bachelor down in Texas adopted the boy. This ornery old skinflint didn't believe in Christmas any more than the Indians did. All he believed in was makin' money and hangin' onto it and he worked Bud from mornin' to night, winter and summer. The boy would hear other kids carryin' on about Christmas and sometimes he'd catch sight of a Christmas tree through a window or in somebody's yard, but he never had a Christmas of his own. That went on until he was comin' fourteen. Then the day before Christmas he took the

old man's rifle and six-shooters and lifted a horse and lit out. Of course, they had the law on his trail that very day. Bud celebrated *that* Christmas a-straddle of his pony, cold and hungry and a-ridin' hard."

Arkansaw stops for a long breath, then he says, "The posse cornered Bud on the Brazos. He fit 'em like a wildcat and got clean away. Nobody was killed, but he did wing a few of the lawmen and that made the boy an outlaw with a bounty on his scalp."

Arkansaw stops to load his pipe. Kansas is settin' back against the wall with his arms folded and his long legs crossed, a-takin' in every word. Choctaw sits up on his stool soon as ever talk about gunfightin' and shootin' lawmen commences. Me—I'm a-thinkin' about a heap of things that happened when I was a boy.

"From then on it's the old story," says Arkansaw when his pipe is goin' good. "The law hounded Bud from pillar to post, tacked crimes onto him that he never committed, and before long folks were callin' him the Boy Bandit and the Daring Desperado and such foolishness until there came a time when he had to shoot or bluff his way out of any town he stopped in. His gunplay had made a reputation big enough to stir up the jealousy of badmen who could not stand for anybody to be faster with a six-shooter than they were, and they went lookin' for Bud. He downed several of 'em in fair fights."

I CAN see that his line of talk ain't doin' Choctaw a particle of good. It's playin' right into the hand of Old Temptation. The breed is a-settin' there like he's fixed to dive for cover or slap leather any second, and I ain't never seen hotter eyes in a meaner face than his'n. I'm wishin' to hell that I hadn't asked Arkansaw for a story.

"In all those years Bud never had a

chance to celebrate a peaceable Christmas," he's sayin', " 'cause the law and gunsharps keep him on the move. In a shootin' scrape some time back he saved the life of a young fool who had no business to be where he was and Bud taken this Young Wild West home to his dad, then rode off in a mile-high cloud of dust before the old man hardly had a chance to thank him. This old jasper is rich and he thinks a heap of his boy. When he finally got the whole story out of the kid he hired detectives to learn all they could about Bud's history, and to find him. They got the history all right, but they never got Bud. The old man never gave up, though. He swears he'll find Bud and fight his case through all the courts in the country if need be to clear him. This old cattle king fired the detectives and hired a Deputy United States Marshal who was on leave and told him to go and find Bud, if the outlaw was still above ground, no matter how long the trail or where it took him."

Arkansaw looks at his watch, puts it back in his pocket slow and careful-like. "Dog-goned if it ain't two minutes after midnight and Christmas is over."

Then he grins, and says, "Well, Bud, you've had your Christmas at last."

He's lookin' straight at Kansas!

Kansas disappears behind a cloud of smoke. So does Choctaw. Arkansaw's smoke slaps me in the face. Dishes rattle and the log roof bounces and the lamp goes out. Arkansaw jerks back. Choctaw is slammed against the wall, then he topples onto the stool and hangs there like a dead wolf.

I grab a holt of Arkansaw. So does Kansas.

With a hand inside his shirt, the Deputy grins, and whispers, "Ain't hurt bad. He peeled a rib for me, that's all. Fast work, boys, mighty fast. Much obliged."

I blow the smoke from my gun and put it away.

And I'm thinkin', company for Christmas is a powerful fine idea.