

Railroad detective Lanman is all ready to break up the Yule festivities, until—



After trimming the Christmas tree, the tramp put a battered coffee pot over the small fire

Tramps' Christmas Eve

By Johnston McCulley

BEING a railroad detective attached to a division point on a transcontinental line, Jim Lanman had about worn out his eyes looking for tramps and watching them after they had been found.

He hated tramps. He hated them because he resented the seemingly carefree existence they enjoyed and because they appeared to live without working, whereas Lanman had to serve regular hours and

obey orders. But mostly he hated them because their kind caused him considerable professional concern, not to mention downright exasperation.

Tramps used railroad property illegally, and Lanman considered railroad property sacred. They trespassed on rights of way, used old ties for fuel, rode the rods and worried trainmen, and some were not above breaking a freight car seal and stealing goods, despite the fact that such

an act is a felony.

As Lanman patrolled the yards at the division point, he was like a hunter on a hot trail, and he lugged many a tramp up before a magistrate and had him condemned and sentenced to a short term in the county workhouse.

He charged them with trespass, vagrancy, malicious mischief—until word was passed along tramps' mysterious lines of communication for all their kind to avoid the town, or at least its railroad yards.

There was a night yard watchman, but Lanman, who ranked him, often usurped his duties so he could continue his warfare against tramps. He was doing so this Christmas Eve.

“You stand duty during the afternoon, and I'll carry on at night and give you a chance to spend Christmas Eve at home with your wife and kids,” Lanman had told the watchman.

The watchman had thanked him, but he knew Lanman had not shown his friendliness because he wanted a man to be home with his wife and kids. It was because Lanman thought he would have a good chance on Christmas Eve to grab a tramp or two.

IMBUED with holiday spirit, tramps might even resort to larceny to get Christmas presents for themselves and their friends, Lanman believed. He hoped he would catch one breaking the seal on a freight car and have him given a few years in prison.

At dusk on Christmas Eve, then, Jim Lanman left the division headquarters office building and stepped into what was to be a starry night. The wind had a sting in it, but there was no snow.

The principal business streets of the town were gay with Christmas trimming and colored lights, and the sound of little

bells tinkling and a loud-speaker system broadcasting carols traveled around on the breeze.

Lanman buttoned his thick topcoat around his portly form. He had a revolver in one pocket and a blackjack and handcuffs in the other. Lanman was a huge, strong man, and at forty was a past graduate of the school of brutal fighting.

His heavy shoes ground cinders along the main line for a distance, then he started to cut across the yards where chugging switch engines were moving cars and making up trains. He stopped to watch a sleek streamliner limited slip out of the yards and disappear up the track into the gathering night with switch lamps and semaphores blinking their clear-way signals.

Lanman continued his patrol, keeping in the deep shadows, moving as silently as possible, constantly alert, like a beast of prey searching for quarry upon which to pounce.

Suddenly he crouched beside a freight car in the darkness. He had heard shoes grinding upon cinders and gravel, and now he saw a shadow floating along between two parallel lines of rails. The shadow stopped in a streak of light that came from a switch lamp. Lanman made out a man carrying a bundle beneath his arm and something else upon his back.

Far down a track, a switch engine's headlight cut the night's blackness and the beam clearly revealed the man Lanman was watching. He looked like a tramp. The bundle he carried beneath his arm was wrapped in newspaper. The thing upon his back was a small Christmas tree.

The path the man was traveling did not lead toward any shantytown or group of poor dwellings where unfortunates lived, so this was no poor but honest workman on his way home to make a sort of Christmas for his family.

Down that way was the yard limit, where a deep and wide gully crossed beneath the railroad right of way. The gully was a known rendezvous for tramps, a place to which the city police always went first whenever they began a systematic roundup of suspicious characters after some crime had been committed.

The man Lanman was watching walked on, bending forward like a man weary of life and its burdens. Lanman tailed him at a safe distance. He did not want to stop the man and question him, but decided to wait and see where he was going and what he would do when he got there. A tramp carrying a bundle and a Christmas tree—that looked suspicious.

On down the tracks and through the yards Lanman tailed the one ahead. The quarry was plodding along wearily, stumbling at times. Half drunk, Lanman thought. No doubt he was on his way to the gully to meet other tramps, perhaps to have a sort of Christmas Eve feast of stolen food and drink.

The tramp turned down a spur track toward the gully, as Lanman had expected he would do. Lanman saw him pass through the circle of light cast by a switch lamp, watched him leave the track and cut down into the gully beneath the railroad trestle, following a narrow hard path made by countless tramps.

The railroad property line, posted with the usual signs, ran along the opposite side of the gully. If tramps gathered in the bed of the gully, where a fire would be sheltered from the wind, they were on railroad land and could be taken in for trespassing. He might make a good haul tonight, Lanman thought.

Down among the rocks, the man Lanman followed built a small fire. Lanman made himself comfortable behind a clump of dry brush to watch. The fire

would attract other tramps. He would wait until he could make a good haul before showing himself, Lanman decided. Possibly he would do more this Christmas Eve than grab a few tramps; he might even pick up some man badly wanted by the police.

The fire blazed up after a time, and the man in the gully piled on more fuel. Burning old railroad ties, Lanman supposed. Possibly new ones, for all that. The light from the fire made it possible for Lanman to see what occurred.

The tramp in the gully propped up his small Christmas tree with rocks. He unwrapped the bundle he had been carrying. Lanman squirmed around in his place behind the brush and watched with mingled suspicion and wonder.

From the bundle, the tramp was taking stuff with which to decorate the tree. He had glistening strings of imitation icicles, colored balls, strips of red and green serpentine paper, even a star which he fastened to the top of the tree and which glittered in the light from the fire.

He wrapped the bundle again and put it aside on the ground. Going to a bunch of rocks, he unearthed a blackened, battered old coffeepot and filled it with water from the trickle of a half-frozen creek that wriggled through the gully. He put the coffee-pot on the fire, and from a pocket of his ragged coat took a small sack which contained coffee, and put coffee into the water.

RETURNING to the cache among the rocks, he returned with four small tin cans, undoubtedly to be used as cups for drinking the coffee. So company was expected, Lanman thought. This was to be a tramp party, not a one-man show.

As the tramp knelt beside the fire, Lanman had a good look at him. He was a large man with a large head. His hair was

heavy and gray. His face looked like that of an intelligent man, and his manner was that of a leader.

Educated hobo maybe, Lanman thought. Looks mighty sure of himself. Thinks he's king of the tramps, probably. He's waiting for somebody, so I'll do a little waiting, too, and see who comes and what happens.

Boots crunched on gravel not far away. The man beside the fire stood up quickly and stepped back into the shadows. Lanman saw another man going down the narrow path to the floor of the gully.

When he got within the circle of firelight, Lanman saw that he was a huge Negro, dressed in ragged clothing.

"Evenin', Professor!" the Negro greeted.

"Evenin', Pete! You're the first to come. Make yourself comfortable by the fire. Coffee's on."

Lanman drew in his breath sharply. Professor! So the man who had arranged the Christmas tree was the tramp Lanman had often heard about and often had wished to meet. An educated tramp about whom there was a sort of legend.

He had been a famous lawyer once, rumor said. But some domestic affair had wrecked his life and he had become a vagabond, wandering over the country, associating with tramps and giving them advice. There'd be a small measure of glory for Lanman if he could arrest the Professor and take him in and have him sent up!

The Negro sat on a rock not far from the fire. He, too, had a bundle which he put down beside the rock.

"Comfortable, Pete?" the Professor asked.

"Yas suh. Dis hyar Crimmas business—long time since I fussed around with a tree and sich."

"I always celebrate Christmas, Pete, wherever I am," the Professor said. "Once I celebrated it in jail. Made a speech that brought down the house." He chuckled at some humorous memory.

"We uns may do it this year if that Lanman man happens by," Pete warned. "Been told he's powerful mean."

"The railroad detective stationed here? Oh, I presume he only does what he thinks is his duty. Some men have strange ideas about their duties. Let us hope he is enjoying his Christmas Eve pleasantly somewhere."

"Yassah. I couldn't bring much, Professor, but I brought a little."

"Nothing you stole, Pete?"

"Nos suh! I did me a mite of wuk, he'pin' wrassle boxes and crates for a big store. What I brought I paid for with hones' money, Professor."

"Good! The day must not be profaned by theft."

"Got some sardines and a hunk of baloney and a pint of gin," Pete explained. "A little gin in hot coffee warms a man's bones."

"Very true, Pete."

"Bought y'all a can of pipe tobaccy."

"You needn't have done that."

Boots ground the gravel again. From his hiding place, Lanman watched closely. A third man strode into view and entered the circle of firelight.

"Evenin', Saul," the Professor greeted.

"Evenin', Prof."

"Glad you came, Saul. Coffee's making."

Saul sat down on a rock and put a bundle on the ground. Lanman could see him plainly. He was younger than either the Professor or Pete. His Jewish face was thin as if from privation and worry, and his clothes were rags.

"Nice tree," Pete said.

"Yeah," Saul agreed. "Seems funny for me to be here like this. Christmas—well, it ain't for my kind."

"You're wrong there, Saul," the Professor declared. "At first, what we call Christmas was a pagan festival in ancient Rome. When the Christians were persecuted by the Romans, they wanted to celebrate the birth of their Lord, and they celebrated on the day of the pagan festival. The Romans didn't know they were celebrating the birth of their Lord but thought they were honoring pagan gods."

"Mighty slick," Pete judged.

CONTINUING his little lecture, the Professor said, "You know, our song 'America' is to the tune of 'God Save the King.' During the American Revolution, patriots hummed the music in front of English redcoats, but thought the words we use today. How could the redcoats know what they were thinking? They couldn't punish the patriots for humming 'God Save the King,' could they?"

"Slick!" Pete repeated.

"Look at the three of us. Pete and I are considered Christians. Saul is a Hebrew. I'm of Anglo-Saxon descent, Pete is an African and Saul is a Polish Jew. Different races and different religions. But why can't we celebrate together? We're brothers in poverty and misery, and they make a close brotherhood."

"How this man can sling talk!" Pete said.

"Yeah," Saul agreed.

"There's too much senseless fuss made by folks over race and religion," the Professor continued. "It's what a man's got in his heart and mind that counts. And what he can do. I'm better educated than either of you—so what? Pete can shoot craps better than I can, or Saul. And Saul has a native shrewdness in his make-up that overshadows us."

"Yas suh," Pete said.

"Christmas is a feast day—so let us feast together. That tree is a symbol of friendship, of gift giving. Any decent man of any race or creed has the right to look at that tree and dance around it."

The other two were silent. The Professor tested the coffee and poured some into three of the cans. Pete got out his small bottle of gin, and each of the three poured a little into their coffee. They began sipping the hot brew.

"Sure warms a man's bones," Pete said. "Think I'll stop bummin' and git me a steady job somewhere—yas suh! Reg'lar money in my pants pocket. A little steady wuk won't hurt a man."

"I'm makin' for the West Coast," Saul said. "My health—it's not so good. I'll get a light job of some kind when I get there."

"Each man to his own trail," the Professor told them. "And when trails cross it is time to stop for a moment and clasp one another's hands in friendship. My trail has been a wandering one—and will continue to be."

Behind the clump of brush, Lanman moved to adjust his aching body. What am I doing here, hiding behind this brush and listening to this rot, Lanman thought. I'll wait to see if anybody else comes before I make a move. When they get to drinking and eating, maybe they'll loosen their tongues and spill something that'll give me a chance to nab 'em for more than vagrancy.

Once more, shoes crunched gravel. The three at the fire turned and glanced at the end of the path that came down into the gully. Lanman watched it also. A fourth man stumbled into view.

He was tall, skinny, looked to be middle-aged. He acted furtive. Any police officer would have taken him in for investigation at sight.

He shuffled toward the fire and made a

gesture with his right hand. Watching from his hiding place, Lanman identified the gesture. It was one a professional tramp uses to indicate to others of his ilk that he is one of them.

"Saw the fire," he told them. "Thought some 'bos might be around. I'm called Jaybird 'cause I chatter so much. Mind if I come into camp?"

"Welcome, friend," the Professor said. "We are about to have a feast. Want some coffee?"

"With gin in it?" Pete added.

"Very fancy, very fancy," Jaybird praised. "I'll take a gulp, yeah. Heavy with the gin."

"I'll make more coffee, and we'll get ready to eat," the Professor told them.

He poured the last of the coffee, filled the pot at the creek again, and emptied his coffee sack and put the pot on the fire after adding more fuel. The Professor unwrapped his bundle.

"Loaf of fresh bread, a small apple pie," he chanted. "A hunk of cheese—"

"Very fancy," Jaybird said.

"I brought sardines and baloney and the gin," Pete added. "Did a mite of wuk."

Saul undid his package. "Can of beans, can of peaches, can of chili we can heat," he reported. "I didn't have much money, Professor, and couldn't bring much."

"You did well, Saul."

JAYBIRD'S eyes widened with surprise. "Money? Mean you bought the stuff?" he asked.

"No stolen food on Christmas Eve," the Professor told him sternly.

"Christmas! Huh! Means nothin' to me!" Jaybird declared.

"Whatever your faith, you can celebrate with us."

"Faith? You guys believe in any of that religion stuff? You're thick in your heads. Get sense! I believe what I can see and

nothin' else."

"A pagan!" the Professor judged. "You must have an idol to worship. You can't carry your religion with you wherever you go. However, you are welcome. As I was remarking a short time ago, Christmas, as we call it, was first a pagan festival."

"Anyhow, it's time to eat," Jaybird said. He reached for a large inner pocket of his ragged coat. The watching Lanman had seen many pockets like that. A baggy coat, a large inside pocket into which loot may be dropped by a clever pickpocket or sneak thief.

"Thought somebody'd have a fire in the gully tonight, so I brought a couple of steaks," Jaybird told them. "The butcher shop was crowded with folks buyin' their damned turkeys, and it was easy pickin' these up. Thick, juicy ones, too."

"You stole them?" the Professor demanded.

"Why not? An easy pickup. Nobody but me knows where I got 'em, and it's hard to identify a steak. Got a quart of whisky, too. Liquor store was crowded. Get your cans ready, boys. Wet your whistles right. Steak enough for the four of us. I didn't pick up little thin slabs of beef."

The Professor suddenly towered over him.

"Take your steaks and your whisky and get away from my fire!" he ordered. "This is Christmas Eve. No stolen food will be eaten here. No stolen drink will be swallowed—"

"Are you nuts?" Jaybird squawked, a little alarmed at the Professor's belligerent manner. "What is all this? I thought this was a 'bos' fire. You guys got religion?"

"On occasion, some of us may pilfer a little," the Professor admitted. "But we eat honest food when we're sitting beside a Christmas tree. That's the agreement here—Jew and Gentile, black and white.

For one hour out of the year, at least, we can be decent without it hurting us.”

“Yeah, you’re nuts!” Jaybird judged. “Suit yourselves. I’ll cook and eat my own steaks and drink my own booze—and good stuff it is!”

“You’re welcome to eat some of our honest food, but you won’t cook stolen stuff at this fire!” the Professor declared. “Nor drink stolen liquor. We’re forgetting differences in race and creed here tonight—but a thief is a thief in any language.”

“A little more of your soundin’ off like that, and I’ll be gettin’ mad,” Jaybird warned.

Watching closely, drawing his feet beneath him so he would be ready to spring up, Lanman prepared for action. He knew the man who had called himself Jaybird was ready to jump to his feet. And he saw Jaybird’s right hand creep toward a hip pocket in his ragged pants, and Lanman guessed a knife or gun might be there. He did not move, but continued to listen.

“Christmas Eve is not a proper time for a man to lose his temper,” the Professor was telling Jaybird. “But you might as well understand that, for the moment, I’m the boss man here. I built the fire, decorated the Christmas tree after lugging it here from town.”

“I suppose you bought and paid for the thing?” Jaybird asked.

“I did. They were closing out their stock. It was a branch tip off a big tree, and I got it for twenty-five cents, if you care for details. And I bought the decorations, too. Some of ‘em were a little marred and I got ‘em cheap. If you want to stay at this fire and eat honest food, it’s all right. But you won’t cook stolen meat or drink stolen whisky here. Pete and Saul will bear me out in that.”

PETE and Saul were bobbing their heads to indicate that they would, Lanman saw. But he was watching Jaybird the greater part of the time. And now, just to be on the safe side, Lanman got out his gun and held it ready.

The railroad detective was upset mentally. The Professor was a tramp; but there was a certain dignity about him. Pete and Saul were behaving themselves. The three of them had gathered here, had a decorated tree and were preparing to eat of an unbalanced meal—they reminded Lanman of how, when he had been a boy, he had gone with other boys into the woods to build a fire and have a feast.

Jaybird was the disturbing element in the setup. He had confessed to stealing the steaks and the bottle of liquor. He had talked against the things the others respected. Not all tramps were alike, Lanman admitted to himself grudgingly. Some of them kept in line, at least partially.

Jaybird was up on his feet, bending forward slightly, his hands upon his hips. The Professor stood straight and strong a few feet in front of him, nothing of fear in his manner. Saul and Pete were a little off to one side; they appeared ready to rush to the defense of the Professor if such a move became necessary.

“You’re makin’ too much big talk, and I don’t like it,” Jaybird was telling the Professor. “You ain’t runnin’ this gulch, as I’ve heard.”

“Not trying to run it. But I am running this fire for the time being and everything that happens around it.”

“Yeah? You’re balmy, if anybody asks me. Messin’ around with kid stuff like Christmas trees. For a thin dime, I’d smash the thing and toss it into the fire.”

The Professor’s eyes gleamed in the firelight. “Don’t try it, friend,” he replied.

“Who’s to stop me? You? The chocolate drop and the Hebe? I’m goin’ to cook my steaks at this fire, and I’m goin’ to drink my liquor while they’re cookin’, and afterward, and nobody’s goin’ to stop me.”

The Professor regarded him steadily and said nothing. Saul and Pete moved in a little closer, their fists clenched. Jaybird glanced around swiftly at them all.

“We aimed to have a nice peaceful little party tonight, and why should you spoil it?” the Professor asked finally. “It’s three against one to say you’re welcome here, but not to use the stuff you stole. What special power do you have, to say that one outvotes three?”

“Right here’s my special power!” Jaybird barked. His right hand moved swiftly toward his back pocket and reappeared holding a stubby gun.

The Professor did not move. Pete and Saul gasped and froze.

“Don’t you know,” the Professor asked Jaybird, “that it’s a prison offense to pack a gun unless you have a permit?”

“I’ll take care of myself! Stand back! I’m goin’ to cook my steaks. Bother me, and I’ll do what I said—toss your fancy Christmas tree into the fire. Stand back!”

Lanman was upon his feet behind the clump of dry brush. The time had come, he decided, to interfere. The Professor did not seem to be the sort of man who would back down; and Lanman certainly didn’t want gunplay and possibly a killing when he was in a position to prevent it.

“One side!” Jaybird yelled at the Professor.

Lanman emerged from behind the brush.

“Hold it!” he barked. “Get your hands up, all of you! This is the Law talkin’!”

He half crouched as they whirled to look at him. The light from the fire revealed him and the gun he held ready.

All except Jaybird slowly put up their hands.

“It’s dat Lanman man,” Pete said, like a man who suddenly has lost hope.

Jaybird snapped a shot, doubled over, started to run past the fire and across the gully. The bullet zipped past Lanman’s head with only inches to spare. Lanman fired and missed. Then Jaybird was behind some rocks, in the darkness, crashing through the brush.

Lanman charged down the path toward the fire. The three there were standing motionless. As he ran past them, dodging the fire, Lanman shouted:

“You three stay right here!”

He went on behind the rocks, half expecting a shot from the darkness. But none came. Stopping to listen, he heard feet pounding the hard ground along the main railroad line. The sounds indicated that Jaybird was rapidly putting as much distance as possible between himself and the fire.

Pursuit was useless, Lanman knew. He was not a fast runner, and fear of capture and imprisonment was putting wings on Jaybird’s feet. Panting, Lanman stood for a moment clutching his gun, then turned to retrace his steps.

WHEN he walked around the pile of rocks, he was surprised to see the three still standing as he had left them beside the fire, except that they had lowered their hands. Gun still held ready, Lanman strode up to them and looked them over.

“I’m a railroad officer,” he announced, to make it legal. “How come you didn’t skip out while you had a chance?”

“We have been doing nothing wrong—only having a little Christmas Eve party,” the Professor replied.

“I’ve been watchin’ ever since you came here,” Lanman told him. “Saw and

heard everything.”

“Then you know we have done nothing wrong,” the Professor said. “I decorated a tree, and we have some things to eat. You are welcome to our little party—”

“A Gentile, a Jew, a Negro. Then a crook—and now a cop,” Lanman said. “Any of you wanted men?”

They all shook their heads. “We have no homes, but that’s no crime,” the Professor replied. “We’re poor, but so are thousands of others. We’re—oh—what you call tramps.”

“I’ve heard of you, Professor. You’ve got quite a rep. That Jaybird—I’ll have him picked up. He won’t get far away. He can’t run around packin’ an illegal gun and threatenin’ everybody.”

“And what are you going to do with us?” the Professor asked. “Must we spend Christmas Day in jail? We could have run while you were after Jaybird, but we didn’t. As I said, we are doing nothing wrong.”

“No? You’re trespassin’ on railroad property, buildin’ a fire on it, messin’ around eatin’ and drinkin’ and stickin’ up Christmas trees!” Lanman informed him.

The Professor turned toward Pete and Saul.

“I’m sorry I got you into this, boys,” he told them. “I suppose we’ll have to spend Christmas in jail.”

“Who said you had to spend Christmas in jail?” Lanman bellowed at him. “But you’ll stop breakin’ the law when I’m around. You see that railroad sign.”

“I see it, sir,” the Professor said.

“It says that the land on this side of it is railroad property. But beyond that sign isn’t. Anyhow, there’s a better place there for a fire, and the rocks keep the wind off. Pete, come here!”

Eyes bulging, the Negro advanced.

“I’m trustin’ you, Pete, and heaven help you if you turn crook on me! Here’s five bucks.” Lanman handed him a bill. “You hit for town and buy some more grub and a few bottles of beer and hurry right back. While you’re gone, I’ll help the Professor and Saul move the Christmas tree beyond that sign. And I’ll help ‘em start another fire over there. Coffee will be ready by the time you’re back—”

“There’s no more coffee,” the Professor interrupted.

“No? You buy coffee, Pete. And hurry!”

“Yas suh!” Pete disappeared up the trail and behind the brush.

“Let’s get busy!” Lanman told the two others. “You move the tree, Professor. Saul, you help me put out this fire and gather fuel to start another up by those rocks. I’m acceptin’ your invite to the party. But we’ll hold the party over there where you won’t be trespassin’. I’m a cop, and I can’t help you smash the laws.”

Smiling slightly, the Professor went toward the tree. Saul blinked rapidly and prepared to put out the fire. Lanman turned aside to see if there were some old boards scattered around that could be used for fuel.

“I must be goin’ crazy,” he muttered to himself. “Don’t know what’s got into me, that I’m doin’ this. Kinda makes me feel good, though.”