

# GETTING CHRISTMAS DINNER ON A RANCH

BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

ONE DECEMBER, while I was out on my ranch, so much work had to be done that it was within a week of Christmas before we were able to take any thought for the Christmas dinner. The winter set in late that year, and there had been comparatively little cold weather, but one day the ice on the river had been sufficiently strong to enable us to haul up a wagonload of flour, with enough salt pork to last through the winter, and a very few tins of canned goods, to be used at special feasts. We had some bushels of potatoes, the heroic victors of a struggle for existence in which the rest of our garden vegetables had succumbed to drought, frost and grasshoppers; and we also had some wild plums and dried elk venison. But we had no fresh meat, and so one day my foreman and I agreed to make a hunt on the morrow.

Accordingly one of the cowboys rode out in the frosty afternoon to fetch in the saddleband from the plateau three miles off, where they were grazing. It was after sunset when he returned.

It was necessary to get to the hunting grounds by sunrise, and it still lacked a couple of hours of dawn when the foreman awakened me as I lay asleep beneath the buffalo robes. Dressing hurriedly and breakfasting on a cup of coffee and some mouthfuls of bread and jerked elk meat, we slipped out to the barn, threw the saddles on the horses, and were off.

The air was bitterly chill; the cold had been severe for two days, so that the river ice would again bear horses. Beneath the light covering of powdery snow we could feel the rough



We Dismounted to Examine Them.

ground like wrinkled iron under the horses' hoofs. There was no moon, but the stars shone beautifully down through the cold, clear air, and our willing horses galloped swiftly across the long bottom on which the ranch house stood, threading their way deftly among the clumps of sagebrush.

A mile off we crossed the river, the ice cracking with noises like pistol shots as our horses picked their way gingerly over it. On the opposite side was a dense jungle of bull-berry bushes, and on breaking through this we found ourselves galloping up a long, winding valley, which led back many miles into the hills. The cranies and little side ravines were filled with brushwood and groves of stunted ash. By this time there was a faint flush of gray in the east, and as we rode silently along we could make out dimly the tracks made by the wild animals as they had passed and re-passed in the snow. Several times we dismounted to examine them. A couple of coyotes, possibly frightened by our approach, had trotted and loped up the valley ahead of us, leaving a trail like that of two dogs; the sharper, more delicate footprints of a fox crossed our path; and outside one long patch of brushwood a series of round imprints in the snow betrayed where a bob-cat—as plainsmen term the small lynx—had been lurking

around to try to pick up a rabbit or a prairie fowl.

As the dawn reddened, and it became light enough to see objects some little way off, we began to sit erect in our saddles and to scan the hill-sides sharply for sight of feeding deer. Hitherto we had seen no deer tracks save inside the bullberry bushes by the river, and we knew that the deer that lived in that impenetrable jungle were cunning whitetails which in such a place could be hunted only by aid of a hound. But just before sunrise we came on three lines of heart-shaped footmarks in the snow, which showed where as many deer had just crossed a little plain ahead of us. They were walking leisurely, and from the lay of the land we believed that we should find them over the ridge, where there was a brush coulee.

Riding to one side of the trail, we topped the little ridge just as the sun flamed up, a burning ball of crimson beyond the snowy waste of our backs. Almost immediately afterwards my companion leaped from his horse and raised his rifle, and as he pulled the trigger I saw through the twigs of a brush patch on our left the erect, startled head of a young black-tailed doe as she turned to look at us, her great mule-like ears thrown forward. The ball broke her neck, and she turned a complete somersault downhill, while a sudden smashing of underbrush told of the flight of her terrified companions.

We both laughed and called out "dinner" as we sprang down toward her, and in a few minutes she was dressed and hung up by the hind legs on a small ash tree. The entrails and viscera we threw off to one side, after carefully poisoning them from a little bottle of strychnine which I had in my pocket. Almost every cattleman carries poison and neglects no chance of leaving out wolf bait, for the wolves are sources of serious loss to the unfenced and unhoused flocks and herds. In this instance we felt particularly revengeful because it was but a few days since we had lost a fine yearling heifer. The tracks on the hillside where the carcass lay when we found it told the story plainly. The wolves, two in number, had crept up close before being discovered, and had then raced down on the astounded heifer almost before she could get fairly started. One brute had hamstringed her with a snap of his vise-like jaws, and once down, she was torn open in a twinkling.

No sooner was the sun up than a warm west wind began to blow in our faces. The weather had suddenly changed, and within an hour the snow was beginning to thaw and to leave patches of bare ground on the hill-sides. We left our coats with our horses and struck off on foot for a group of high buttes cut up by the cedar canyons and gorges, in which we knew the old bucks loved to lie. It was noon before we saw anything more. We lunched at a clear spring—not needing much time, for all we had to do was to drink a draught of icy water and munch a strip of dried venison. Shortly afterward, as we were moving along a hillside with silent caution, we came to a sheer canyon of which the opposite face was broken by little ledges grown up with wind-beaten cedars. As we peeped over the edge, my companion touched my arm and pointed silently to one of the ledges, and instantly I caught the glint of a buck's horns as he lay half behind an old tree trunk. A slight shift of position gave me a fair shot slanting down between his shoulders, and though he struggled to his feet he did not go 50 yards after receiving the bullet.

This was all we could carry. Lending the horses around we packed the buck behind my companion's saddle, and then rode back for the doe, which I put behind mine. But we were not destined to reach home without a slight adventure. When we got to the river we rode boldly on the too-headless of the thaw; and about midway there was a sudden, tremendous crash, and men, horses and deer were scrambling together in the water amid slabs of floating ice. However, it was shallow and no worse results followed than some hard work and a chaf-bath. But what cared we? We were returning triumphant with our Christmas dinner.

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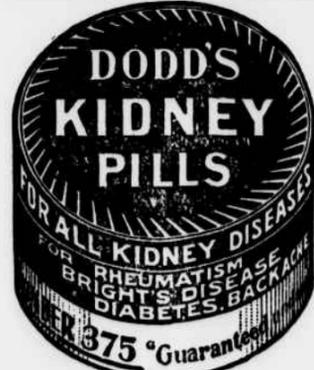
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