

Vagabondia's Christmas Dinner

BY CLIFF MAXWELL

Even Tramps Like to Eat

VAGABONDIA may fare pretty slim the greater part of the year for food, but if a vagabond misses his fancy dinner on Christmas Day, it is his own fault. Mr. Solid Citizen and John Vagabond may not have much in common for three hundred and sixty-four days of the year, but the three hundred and sixty-fifth they do have, and a thing that neither begrudges the other — a good, big Christmas dinner!

There are any number of places and any number of ways in which a purse-empty vagabond can secure a Christmas dinner. Aside from the thousands of private individuals who make it a practice each Christmas to see to it that the stranger within their gates enjoys a good Christmas dinner, there are numerous charitable and benevolent organizations that supply Christmas dinners by the tens of thousands to the homeless and penniless all over the world. You can even get a fine Christmas dinner in jail! I know — from experience!

The first Christmas dinner I ate on the road as a young hobo was in a New Mexican grading camp, a good many years ago. I remember it yet! I might have enjoyed one every bit

as good as it was if I had known then what I know now — and had it without going to the trouble to get it that I went to in this case.

DESPITE the fact that I must have been born with the *wanderlust*, this was my first Christmas away from home, though I was twelve years old at the time. I was beating my way to California, where I had been born. Hazy visions of the blue Pacific, Golden Gate Park, broad Market Street with its four tracks upon which clanging cable cars rolled up and down, were in my mind the Christmas Eve that the long freight train I was riding pulled into the yards at Springer, New Mexico.

While I was still revelling in these mental pictures, the door of the box car in which I was riding was rudely opened and, in the gathering dusk, I could see the hard-boiled face of the "Shack" (brakeman) who, with menacing gestures and in a raucous voice, invited me to "Hit th' grit — an' be dam' quick about it, too!"

Young and inexperienced as I was, yet I had *savvy* enough to know that it would stand me in hand to keep clear of all bulls — they might become suspicious because of my age;

pinch me and hold me for investigation. If they learned that I had run away from home — well, I'd be sent right back home. And I was not anxious to return home — just yet.

After I had followed the Shack's invitation to "hit th' grit," I walked quickly up the track toward the railroad station. The air was crisp and I was cold, hungry and sleepy. In the depot waiting room I had learned from experience that there would be a fire in the stove — I could hug it, if no one bothered me, until the next morning, then go out and see what I could do about rustling up something to eat before resuming my way westward.

I HAD no more than ranged myself alongside the stove when a man with a thin nose, gimlet eyes and a short, sandy mustache opened the door and came into the waiting room. He appeared, at first glance, to be a hobo, himself — then he spoke to me: "Where yuh from, Bub? What-cha doin' in here? Waitin' fer a train?"

There was crisp authority in his tone. I knew he must be the railroad bull or the town cop. I thought fast. Albuquerque was the next big town ahead of me. Why not tell him I lived there and was on my way home? He would likely let me go if I told him this in view of the fact that I *was* going home.

"I'm beatin' my way home — to Albuquerque," I answered, my heart in my mouth for fear he might ask my street address there.

"Well, git th' hell outta this waitin' room. It's not fer hoboes or kids beatin' their way home," he told me.

It was a narrow squeak. So close that I forgot I was hungry — but the weather reminded me I was cold. There would be a sand house at the lower end of the yard — I'd go there. It was just the place.

A group of hoboes were gathered around the red-hot, pot-bellied stove when I entered the sand house. They were smoking and talking light-heartedly of the Christmas dinners they were going to bum the next day from Springer citizens. They did not pause in their talk when I entered, nor did they cease entirely when a young fireman came in for a bucket of sand for his locomotive's sand-box.

Their continual talk of the sumptuous dinners they had had in times past, and what they expected to have on the morrow, brought back my hunger, and it was a long time before I finally dropped back upon the warm sand and fell into troubled dreams of wonderful dinners that continually eluded me each time I sat before one.

THE next morning, when I came out of the sand house, a genial looking Irishman listened to my tale of woe and then took me over to a restaurant run by a Chinese, and fed me. He turned out to be the foreman of a grading camp a mile out from town, and he offered me a job as "wather bye."

"An' yez'll be jist in toime fer a g-r-r-and Christmus dinner," he concluded.

Maybe that grading camp cook did not know how to cook turkey in French, but he certainly knew the American method. I would have enjoyed my Christmas dinner no more

if I had stayed in Springer and been fed in a Springer citizen's home where I would not have had to say I'd be a "wather bye" or anything else to get it. As it was I had to slip out of the camp surreptitiously and make my way back to Springer to catch a train out late that evening.

A FEW years later I found myself in Seattle, on the night before Christmas. As usual I was busted and hitting the "main drag" for the price of a "flop." I had no more than approached my first "prospect" with a hard-luck tale when a plainclothes dick approached me — ten minutes later I approached the "can" in a patrol wagon.

There were quite a number of prisoners in jail that night. One group, apart from the others, did not seem depressed. In fact, they were having a high old time. I wondered why, in view of the next day being Christmas.

"Seems to me you stiff's are takin' it pretty easy, considerin' you'll be eatin' a mulligan stew 'inside' tomorrow instead of a Salvation Army crow 'outside'," I said to one of them.

"Th' hell you say!" he returned with a wide grin. "You'll get your Christmas swill right here in the can — an' it'll be every bit as good as any that 'Old Sal' 'll put out tomorrow, fixin's an' all."

He was right. That Christmas dinner I ate at the long mess table in the Seattle can was as good as any I've ever eaten that was given me by any charitable outfit.

This experience in the Seattle can got me into a funny fix a number of years later in Socorro, New Mexico. I was on my way to Mexico City and

landed in Socorro Christmas Eve, busted, hungry and cold.

A dreary sand storm was sweeping down the streets. Grit filled my eyes, nose and mouth. There was no one on the street but an occasional straggler homeward bound.

"Where's the County Jail?" I asked one of them.

He pointed to a large, two-story building. "A Mex is the jailer. I guess he'll be good for a flop," he said, grinning. Evidently he knew the ways of hoboes.

I CLIMBED two stairways and knocked on the only door in sight. A very pretty Mexican girl opened the door. A smile disclosed even, white teeth when she asked me in dubious English what I wanted.

"A place to sleep tonight," I answered in Spanish just as dubious.

She turned and sang out to someone inside that there was someone wanted to sleep in the jail.

A stocky, heavy-set Mexican came to the door, coolly looked me over, and then asked in broken English if I thought his jail was a hotel.

I pointed out to him that I was busted, sleepy, cold and hungry and that, if he refused me a place to stay in "his jail" it would be his fault if I committed a crime that night in an attempt to get money to alleviate these conditions.

Maybe he was convinced for, with ill grace, he motioned me to follow him downstairs to the bull-pen, which he opened and pointed to a big pile of comforters in one corner before locking me in for the night.

It must have been a pretty good jail, at that, for there were two coons serving a sixty-day sentence who

gave me a beef steak they had left over from their supper, together with some taffy candy the jailer had let them make earlier in the day. They entertained me with accounts of the wonderful feed they expected next day. I spent a very pleasant evening and figured to ring in on that feed, myself.

At seven o'clock next morning the jailer came down, opened the tank door, then the street door, and motioned for me to "vamoose."

"But I don't want to leave. I want to stay for Christmas dinner," I remonstrated.

He grabbed me by the shoulders and violently propelled me streetwards, all the time keeping up a steady flow of profanity which, even if I had not understood, I would have guessed from the industrious manner in which he got me outside. My attempt to crash that jail for a Christmas feed was a dismal failure. It was the fat *chef* in the leading hotel who gave me a bang-up dinner that Christmas.

EVENTUALLY I tired of hobo life in America. I wanted to see other countries. I decided I'd go to sea.

When times are good, any landlubber can get a job aboard ship, and I found no difficulty in landing one on a tramp bound for Callao, South America.

According to schedule, the ship would reach Callao eight or ten days before Christmas, unload and take on cargo, and be on its way back to the States before Christmas. I decided I would "jump" (desert) ship in Callao. If I had luck, I would eat my first Christmas as a beachcomber in a foreign country.

Jumping the ship was a cinch a day before she left Callao. No one bothered about me and that night I became acquainted with a lad who was bouncer in the La Union Café. He was called "Chips," due, likely, to the fact that he had been the carpenter on the ship he had jumped some months before. There were two or three other Americans "on th' beach" in Callao at the time. Chips provided eats for us most of the time. He wasn't bouncer in La Union for fun.

CHRISTMAS EVE we were all sitting around the café mooning over past Christmases. The air was cool outside, but it was altogether too warm for any Christmas Eve — it is midsummer down there when it is midwinter up here. Chips stood over against the bar grinning at us.

"I'll invite all you bums to a real Christmas feed tomorrow. Up at my dump," Chips spoke up suddenly. "I'll bet none of you will be whinin' about Christmas dinners you've had after you've wrapped your tongues around the one you'll have — tomorrow."

Chips, who must have been fairly well versed in culinary art, showed his Spanish light-o'-love, Dolores, how properly to "roast the crow" — the "crows," in this case, being plump, juicy ducks which were served with nut dressing, and accompanied with jellies and all else that goes toward making up a sumptuous Christmas dinner.

What we did to that dinner left no "scraps" for Chips and Dolores to argue about next day. Nor was that all: Chips, as I've previously mentioned, was not bouncer in La

Union for nothing. We had bottles, plenty of them, of every kind of drink served in La Union. We raised so much Cain that all of us were pinched and later deported. I have always found it easy to get out of the States, but I'm usually deported right back to them after a few months ashore in a foreign country.

THE next Christmas dinner I ate in a foreign country as a busted beachcomber, was in the Hanbury Institute, Shanghai, China. Primarily, this is a "home" for British seamen, but on Christmas Day the "guests" there represent the riffraff from the Seven Seas.

On ordinary days beachcombers were not only frowned upon but, occasionally, jumped upon by the Manager of the Hanbury Institute. He would jump on them for bringing bottles of *samsbu* into the place and drinking it. As there was a big reception room that looked out upon Seward Road, and as *samsbu* cost but ten cents, Mex., a pint, it made it pretty nice for the beachcombers who had gone out on the Bund and bummed a little change, to buy a kill-me-quick brand of poison and drink it in the Hanbury's reception room — if the Manager didn't see them. However, on Christmas Day, all animosity on the part of the Manager toward beachcombers was forgotten and, if he acted halfway decently, any beachcomber was welcome to his Christmas dinner the year I was in Shanghai.

Some of these fellows had been on the Shanghai beach for months. Some were up against the "Black Smoke" (opium), and others were so up against it for clothes that in any

other city in the world, had they appeared dressed as they were, they would have been pinched — all of them were busted and hungry. Judging by the way they one and all wolfed down their Christmas dinner, it must have been their first real, substantial meal since the Christmas before.

The last Christmas dinner I ate as a hobo in a foreign country was in the Mayo Marine Institute, Rangoon, Burma. Nearly a year before I had jumped my ship at Calcutta, India, cruised around upper India for a while, then returned to Calcutta where I booked "deck passage" (living, eating and sleeping out on deck with the native passengers) to Rangoon.

IT WAS late in October, the weather fine, and I had money enough to take me up the Irrawaddy to Mandalay — from there I'd have to go ashore and get over the country in my usual manner. I had a great time for a month and a half before again landing in Rangoon, three or four annas in my pocket and Christmas less than ten days away.

The Mayo Marine Institute is to Rangoon what the Hanbury Institutes are to Shanghai and Hong-kong — for seamen only. My nautical documents identified me as a seaman; my fast talking got me quarters there on credit, against the time I would again take ship.

I had forgotten Christmas. The twenty-fifth of December in the tropics is a great deal different from Christmas Day in northern latitudes. One loses track of Christmas Day, particularly when he sees nothing to remind him of it — certainly, dark

visaged, be-turbaned Hindus are not suggestive of the Day. It was not until the day before Christmas that I had it thrust upon me, so to speak, when I passed through the dining room in the afternoon and saw the entire native staff busily engaged in decorating the place in bright colors and imitation holly berries.

Even though I was a "credit guest" there, I was a plebeian beachcomber in the eyes of the Institute's executives — I might add that I held no illusions, myself, about my social status. Anyway, all hands forgot about social status — theirs and my own — that night when the Superintendent of the Institute came into the dining room and, wishing us a good evening, told us a regular Christmas dinner would be served next day and for none of us to miss it.

THERE were only two beachcombers in Rangoon at the time: a middle-aged Swede, who had been on the Rangoon beach for months — I was the other. The Swede's everyday welcome had been worn out at the Institute, so that now the only time he ate there was when he dug up the money to pay for it. My welcome was becoming threadbare, and I thanked my lucky stars that Christmas Day was happening along at this time rather than a week later.

The dinner we sat down to was almost a full dress affair. Officers in their "soup and nuts" from their ships anchored out in the fairway, or warped alongside the docks; marine officials from up town, dressed in like manner; the Superintendent, in all his sartorial elegance — and the Swede and myself.

The Swede wore a neat pair of

mohair trousers, a clean, silk shirt, and an expectant smile. I wore "shorts," a white duck coat, and a bit of a blush. But, so far as the Superintendent or any of the guests were concerned, we were "one of them." And the dinner — well I hope I always get one as good Christmas Day as that one was. Although I got fired out of there in less than a week after Christmas because I wouldn't take a ship, the memory of that Christmas dinner will remain a long time with me.

THE last Christmas dinner I ate as a vagabond was here in New York, three or four years ago. It was supplied by the Seamen's Church Institute, of No. 25 South Street. As a dinner it certainly left nothing to be desired.

It is proverbial what happens to Jack ashore with money in his pockets. It is an unusual seaman, indeed, who has the price of a feed or a flop in his dungarees a month after he has left his last ship. The executives of the Seamen's Church Institute know this and, because they are a bit philanthropic, anyway, they make it a point to serve their guests a fine dinner every Christmas, and if seamen who are not guests at the Institute happen to attend the dinner, they eat along with the rest.

The dinner I speak of, at which I was a grateful guest, was served behind big, plate glass windows, under artistic electric lighting fixtures, on spotless linen — until we sea cunies got started — in a first class restaurant, which the Institute rented for that day.

Mrs. Janet Roper, House Mother of the Institute, Miss Frances Kel-

logg and the Rev. Mr. Renison, Chaplain for the Institute, officiated at this affair, and it must have been an incongruous sight to the passer-by who looked through the clean windows to see all of us sea gypsies being served a swell Christmas dinner by waiters in dress suits.

I do not expect to eat any more

Christmas dinners as a hobo or a beachcomber, but, if the occasion arises, I am sure that I can go to any of these three executives of the Seamen's Church Institute, if I happen to be in New York at the time, and any of them will gladly give me a "ticket" to the dinner they will serve Christmas Day.

Sonnet

BY ROWENA BASTIN BENNETT

LIFE, press me not so hard with lash of toil
 As ancient Pharaohs pressed their helpless slaves.
 I am not indolent — afraid to soil
 My hands with labor — but my spirit craves
 A pause in which silently to explore
 The realms of beauty. Does the sea not beat
 With less monotony upon the shore
 On dreamy days, and cool her weary feet
 Among the singing shells, and to her breast
 Clasp snowy clouds? Does not the frost whose task
 It is to seal the lips of rivers, rest
 And crystallize her thoughts in stars? I ask
 This boon: enough of leisure to commune
 With these dark hills that dare to lift the moon.