

Seven-Up's Christmas

by Charles Alden Seltzer, 1875-1942

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Old Seven-Up came to the door of his dugout as Laskar rode up.

“So you got here, did you?” he said with a wide grin. “Saw you hittin’ the breeze for town day afore yesterday and figgered you’d be back about now.”

He came out to pull the saddle from Laskar’s pony while the latter removed the bridle and staked the animal out in the lee of the dugout wall.

“Got some frijoles in the pot for you. Been bubblin’ right smart since sun-down.”

Laskar felt his soul expand as he followed the old man into the dugout. Hot frijoles and soda biscuits, done to a turn, in Seven-Up’s dutch ovens, was infinitely preferable to cold bacon and canned tomatoes on the wind-swept November prairie forty miles from home.

Which was one reason why Laskar always timed himself to stop off at the dugout on his way back from town. The other reason was seven-up.

This simple card game was Seven-Up's joy and delight. And when an old-timer like Seven-Up, who was sixty-five and still riding line for the Double R, was willing to sit up until near daylight playing seven-up with you, it was pretty good evidence that he liked you. Even if he succeeded in winning nine out of ten games, as was usually the case. Seven-Up took a keen delight in proving to Laskar that the latter had much to learn before he could hope to master even the rudiments of "High-Low-Jack-and-Game." But the cowman didn't mind.

With the table clear came the inevitable invitation.

"Seven-up?" the line rider asked. Laskar nodded. "You ain't got a show tonight," old Seven-Up boasted. "I'm fit, and when I'm fit I can play cards all around the man that made them!"

"You ain't forgot how to blow your own horn none, anyway," Laskar said, grinning.

"I'll ketch your jack for that, first pop," Seven-Up threatened—and did, much to Laskar's disgust.

"Reckon you've got them cards marked," he accused.

Seven-Up laid his cards down and gazed at his friend in reproach.

"You know better 'n that, Las," he said. "I ain't never cheated no man and I'm too old to start now. But there's men do mark their cards, Las—I've knowed them. I knowed one man always marked all the high cards in every deck he played with. Nobody ever ketched him either, except me, and then it was too late."

He laughed oddly and took up the jack of hearts, laying it face down and pressing the end of his thumbnail against its back, to make an impression.

"See that? It's in a corner, but it's round, like the shape of my nail."

"Yes," said Laskar. "A sorta semicircle."

"That's right. Well, the man I'm tellin' about didn't make no semicircle when he marked the cards. He had a thumb which had been smashed sometime and the nail growed crooked, like' the man which owned it. Instead of being round, it was flat, straight across and when he pressed it down in a corner it made a little square. Or he'd make a triangle, or a cross, to show different cards. Oh, he had a fine system. Well, I—"

Seven-Up had seemed about to take Laskar into his confidence, but apparently thought better of it and instead laughed harshly.

"Your deal," he said, and they resumed playing.

By three o'clock in the morning, Laskar was convinced that Seven-Up was unbeatable that night. A little disgruntled, he turned in, with Seven-Up's gloating chuckles sounding in his ears.

Some time later, Laskar sat up suddenly in his bunk, wide awake. The wind was moaning and shrieking around the eaves of the dugout and smashing in heavy gusts against the north wall. The fire in the adobe fireplace was low and Laskar was chilled through in spite of his heavy blanket. He brushed a hand over the blanket and gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Snow!"

Instantly he was out of the bunk and striding to the door. He threw it open and was forced back by a bitter, driving, snow-laden wind that filled the world outside.

He closed the door and stood a moment scowling. Then he went to Seven-Up and shook him awake.

“Roll out!” he ordered. “The bottom’s dropped out of the storm.”

Seven-Up clambered out of his bunk and went to the window, through which snow was sifting into Laskar’s bunk.

“A norther,” said Seven-Up passionlessly. “I don’t ride line today—nor mebbe for several days. And you don’t go home. Forty miles. You’d never make five in this.”

“Don’t I know it!” Laskar said, scowling. “I don’t need you to tell me.”

His wife would worrying about him. Or perhaps not. She might think he had delayed starting from town.

Laskar buttoned his coat and went out. He was nearly swept off his feet by the wind—a whirling, stinging, blinding wind that bit clear through his clothing.

The sky was gone, obscured by a swirling mist of white. Landmarks were wiped out. He tried to look north—homeward. The fine, flinty snow blinded him, and the wind took his breath.

He sought his pony and found it huddled against the wall of the dugout. The animal nickered appealingly when it saw him, and he untied it and led it into the lean-to windbreak beside Seven-Up’s horse. He fed both animals and fought his way back to the dugout.

Seven-Up was placidly stirring the frijoles in the pot. “Going home?” he questioned at Laskar’s entrance.

Laskar told him where he could go.

“Tell you what,” offered Seven-Up as they ate. “This here norther reminds me of the one we got last year. About this time too. Sure was a hummer. Early, but it stayed a whole month. I didn’t git to town for Christmas last year.”

“I’m going to be home for Christmas !” declared Laskar.

“Why, sure. Today’s only December first. Reckon this won’t last.”

Seven-Up dished out another plate of frijoles for himself, but Laskar declined a second helping of the beans.

They passed the rest of the day playing cards—seven-up. They went to bed early, and next morning, when Laskar eagerly stuck his head out the doorway, the blizzard was raging with unabated fury. Closing the door, he walked silently back to the fire. He threw a fresh log on it and sat down to stare gloomily into the flames.

They had beans and soda biscuits for breakfast and played cards until dinner time. Neither man being hungry, they skipped this meal and played through until supper time. For supper, they had frijoles and soda biscuits again. Afterward they resumed the card playing. It was seven-up. That was the only game Seven-Up knew—the only one he cared to know. He would play no other.

The proportion of Seven-Up’s victories ran about nine in ten. Laskar had been beaten so much that he no longer saw any humor in Seven-Up’s uncanny luck. Both ceased to joke about the game and played in grim earnest, with a concealed animosity that promised trouble. It was midnight when they quit. Laskar had won three games, Seven-Up twenty-seven.

Next morning, the blizzard, instead of abating, was raging harder than ever.

“We’re holed in, all right,” Laskar mourned, peering through a two-inch opening in the door. “Likely we’ll stay here till spring. There’s some steers drifting—plenty of them. Fences won’t hold them in this storm.”

“Nothin’ll hold them,” seconded Seven-Up. “If the storm keeps up the Mexicans will have plenty of stock next season, if they don’t freeze before they get to the Rio Grande.”

Laskar closed the door and came to the table, yawning. “Might as well play seven-up,” he said.

“Want some frijoles?” queried Seven-Up.

Laskar turned on him in sudden temper. “I’m sick of those beans!” he snapped.

“Shucks,” said Seven-Up, placatingly, “they’re good enough when you ain’t got anything better.”

“Eat ’em, then,” sneered Laskar. “Some folks don’t want nothin’ better. It all depends on how a man’s been raised.”

Seven-Up did not answer and devoted himself to his frijoles. Now, table etiquette was a thing that had never concerned him—nor Laskar, for that matter. Seven-Up ate as he always ate, with his knife, chewing loudly with an open mouth. It was not a pretty sight, nor were the noises nice to hear. And Laskar was hardly better. Yet as he watched, he sneered and his eyes were malevolent.

“Mebbe you’d just as soon stop eatin’ like a pig at a swill trough,” he said presently, his voice writhing with suppressed rage.

Seven-Up looked at him in mild surprise. “There ain’t nothin’ wrong with my eating,” he said. “I’ve always et this way, and I ain’t stoppin’ now.” He lifted another knife blade of beans.

“Put ’em down!” flared Laskar. He jerked out his .45 and shoved its muzzle close to Seven-Up, his eyes burning with anger. “I don’t care how you’ve et,” he declared. “You ain’t going to do no swillin’ whilst I’m lookin’ at you!”

Seven-Up slowly lowered the knife. “Las,” he said gently, “you ain’t naturally mean. Being holed up here has got on your nerves. So soon, too. I was hopin’ we’d be able to get along. Last year I stood it twenty days before I got to quarrelin’ with myself an’ seein’ things,”

Laskar sheathed his gun, grinning with embarrassment. “I reckon that’s right,” he agreed. “It ain’t your eating. It’s me. Curious how bein’ holed up will bother a man.”

“Right curious,” Seven-Up affirmed. He picked up his knife again and began eating, but carefully, mincing his food with elephantine delicacy.

During the day they took turns at door and window, watching the cattle drift by. There was an endless procession of them, now a mere dribble, now a surging wave of gaunt bodies and tossing horns that no human agency could stop.

Later in the afternoon, Seven-Up gave his attention to the pot of frijoles. Laskar remained beside the window, watching and frowning at this thing that kept him from going home as though he could not understand it.

Seven-Up did not invite him to share the frijoles when he lifted them, steaming, from the pot, fearing a return of Las's anger. He ate his own meal stealthily, keeping a wary eye on his companion.

But Laskar was in control of himself now. His anger had flared out and released some of the tension. He would not lose his temper again, he told himself.

Seven-Up had boasted of his self-possession, but the morning of the tenth day of their imprisonment, he crawled out of his bunk with a strange light in his eyes.

"Them cattle has been goin' past here all night," he said. "Black cattle—all black—a million of them, with a woman drivin' them. That was my daughter. She waved and said she'd be back. Told me to wait for her. But she won't come back. I've waited twenty years."

He opened the door and was about to rush out when Laskar caught him and pulled him back, kicking the door shut. Seven-Up struggled, but his strength could not match the younger man's.

"Lemme be," he pleaded. "I'm goin' out to look for her. She'll freeze!"

"She would, if she was out there," Laskar agreed. "But she ain't. And your own gizzard would be a hunk of ice before you'd traveled a quarter of a mile."

Seven-Up cackled as Laskar carried him to his bunk and put him in. But he subsided and fell asleep. Next morning, when he remembered the incident he was not exactly pleased. He tried to be pleasant to Laskar, but this was something that was becoming difficult for both of them.

The dusk in the dugout was perpetual because of the drift of snow against the windows and the air was stale. As the days passed, the snow crept higher and higher. They could barely tunnel out to feed the ponies.

"Ought to git that snow away from there," Seven-Up said the morning of the fifteenth day, nodding at the windows. "Pretty soon we won't have no light at all."

"Then get it away," Laskar said shortly.

Seven-Up was slowly beginning to feel that Laskar was imposing on him. The younger man had accepted his hospitality and was eating his food. Why couldn't he contribute his share of work? He had known Laskar two years and always thought him a generous, friendly fellow, eager to help a friend. Now he saw him as small, mean, narrow-minded. Why, he didn't want to do anything! He loafed while Seven-Up went to the spring for water. He would not help with the dishes, nor cook, and he complained about the beans.

The one thing he did was to feed the horses. And now Seven-Up began to think he was only doing that so he could favor his own horse.

He decided to investigate, so waited until Laskar seemed asleep. His hand was on the door when he heard Laskar's voice:

"Where you going?"

Seven-Up's eyes blazed with anger. "You're starvin' my horse," he snarled. "I'm goin' out to feed him!"

Laskar slid out of the bunk. "I'm starvin' your horse!" he repeated. "If you knowed that, why ain't you been doin' your own feeding? You're too lazy, that's why!"

Seven-Up stood rigid, hand on door. "I wouldn't say that again, Las."

“Why not?”

“Because I’m tellin’ you so. And if you chirp one little wee chirp again about me bein’ lazy, I’m going to let daylight clear through you!”

So it was out in the open at last—the blind, unreasoning hatred that is born of cabin fever. Now the pretense of friendship was gone. They would lie for hours, each in his own bunk, watching the other, sneering at the little habits each would never have noticed under normal conditions. They liked nothing about one another.

Seven-Up became convinced that Laskar was planning to kill him. He waited until the younger man was really asleep, then slipped out and deftly removed Laskar’s knife and gun. Smiling with secret satisfaction, he got back to his own bunk and to sleep.

But his dreams were troubled things.

Aroused by his muttering, Laskar awoke and listened.

“Twenty years,” Seven-Up mumbled. “Ain’t seen sight of her. Likely she’s dead, or worse. Bill Henley, he’s got her. He couldn’t play square—only thing square about him was that square thumbnail—and he cheated with that.” Then his mumbles grew incoherent, and Laskar stopped listening and drifted back to sleep.

The following morning saw an end of their food. By scraping the pot they got enough frijoles for breakfast, no more. Had not Seven-Up been obliged to share with Laskar, he would have had plenty, even with the blizzard, until the Double R wagon came round again. He yielded to bitterness.

“You’ve done et more than your share,” he complained. “You’re a blamed hog, that’s what you are.”

“You’re a liar!” said Laskar. His eyes were horribly malevolent.

“I say you’re a blamed hog!” repeated Seven-Up. ’

Laskar clutched at his empty holster.

“I knowed it,” said Seven-Up. “You been wantin’ to kill me all along. That’s why I took your knife and gun. They’re hid out! I reckon I fooled you.”

Laskar’s eyes took on a designing gleam. “I wasn’t going to kill you, Seven-Up,” he said. “I wouldn’t do nothin’ like that. Gimme my knife and gun and I’ll go out and fetch your daughter. She can’t be far.”

Seven-Up laughed discordantly. “You ain’t foolin’ me none,” he said. “You just want to get your knife and gun back. Don’t you worry about my daughter. She drives them black steers past here every little while. When she comes past again, I’m gittin’ her myself.”

Laskar went to the window and scraped the frost from the glass. “I reckon we’re done for,” he said. “There’s no sign of a let-up.”

He knew his own self-control was going, for he thought he saw things in the snow which could not be there and sometimes he heard himself laughing when there was nothing to laugh about.

Once he thought he saw a rider on a black horse approaching the cabin. The rider looked frozen, lolling in his saddle. But Laskar said nothing about it because he knew there was really no rider there.

Seven-Up's reference to his daughter kept recurring to Laskar. There was something familiar about this story. Had he heard it before, or had it happened somewhere in his own experience?

"Seven-Up," he asked, "what's your right name?"

The old man stopped twirling his thumbs and his eyes flashed with a cunning light.

"You want to know my name so you can tell Bill Henley to look out for me. But I ain't telling! I ain't telling nobody but Bill Henley, and when I find him I'll tell him!"

Late that afternoon, the sky cleared, the snow stopped, the wind died down. A cold sun bathed the world in a shimmering, glittering, blinding light. But neither man knew it. They had sunk into a complete lethargy, without even the energy to hate any more.

For two days they lay in their bunks, not even stirring out to feed the horses. On the twenty-fourth day of their imprisonment, Laskar staggered out of his blankets into the perpetual darkness of the dugout.

"Pile out, you old fool!" he grated, shaking Seven-Up. "We're going to play our harps pretty soon, and we might as well tune up. Let's play seven-up."

Seven-Up crawled out of his bunk. It was easy to see that he was not standing the strain of hunger and lonesomeness as well as Laskar. There was an unnatural color in his face and an insane look in his eyes. Only the latter part of Laskar's speech interested him.

"Seven-Up?" he said. "Sure, I'll play seven-up. That's my name, ain't it?"

Laskar drew out a roll of bills, "Let's play for something," he said. "I'll put up this money. If you win, you get it. If you lose you tell me your right name. Is it a go?"

"My name," Seven-Up said thickly. "My name. You can't win, Las. I can beat the man who made the cards. Sure, it's a go."

Laskar did not win. Seven-Up swept his money away and cackled jeeringly. Broke, Laskar took from his pocket a gold chain and locket and put them on the table.

"I'm putting this up," he said.

Seven-Up drew the locket to him. The sight of it wrought an amazing change in him. The insane light died out of his eyes and was succeeded by a cold, metallic gleam. The hectic color in his face changed to a queer pallor.

"Las," he asked, "where did you get this locket?"

"It's my wife's. What's it your business?"

"What's your wife's name?"

"Amy."

"What was her last name before she married you?"

"Legget," said Laskar, his interest now aroused.

Seven-Up closed his eyes for a moment. "Las," he said, "It's a curious thing that I never noticed before you'd lost a thumb. When did you lose it?"

"When I was thirteen years old," Laskar said coldly. "What's that your business?"

"You're a liar!" shrieked Seven-Up. "You're Bill Henley!"

He reached for his holster, to find it empty. Making queer throaty noises, he staggered to the door, flung it open, and fought his way through the snow to the lean-to, where the horses were tethered. Laskar followed, a growing fear in his eyes.

When Seven-Up reached the lean-to, he fumbled under a pile of snow-covered straw, bringing forth the knife and gun he had taken from Laskar. He was straightening up when Laskar hurled himself forward, striking savagely at the hand that held the weapon.

He succeeded in knocking the gun from Seven-Up's grasp, and it hurtled several feet away to bury itself in a snow drift.

Seven-Up snarled like a cornered wolf and tried to use the knife, but Laskar seized his arm.

Locked tightly, they reeled around in the snow, fighting silently and desperately. Seven-Up's age was against him, but he was fighting with a ferocity that had twenty years of brooding for vengeance behind it.

A dozen times he came near twisting his knife hand free. But Laskar's ability saved him and his muscles did not fail.

They crashed against a corner of the dugout and rebounded to the edge of a huge snow-drift. There Laskar exerted his strength, forcing Seven-Up back into the snow.

Seven-Up lost his balance, dropped the knife, and went down, Laskar on top. The younger man lay with his full weight on Seven-Up.

"Don't," complained Seven-Up feebly. "You're hurtin' me, Las. Git off." He whined with pain. "Git off, Las. I'm layin' acrost a rock."

Laskar wriggled to one side, but to make sure, he swept a hand under the old man.

He struck something hard that was not a rock and that caused him to pull his hand back suddenly.

"Help me!" he panted.

Together they clawed away the snow and disclosed the body of a man, frozen and rigid. The face was the face of the man Laskar had seen riding the black horse many nights ago. He stood up and passed a hand over his eyes. Where was the black horse? Mechanically he glanced around at the lean-to. The black horse was there, snuggled between the other two.

Suddenly he realized what Seven-Up was doing.

"Hey!" he cried.

Seven-Up was astride the dead man, clutching at his left hand and screaming with rage. "It's Bill Henley!"

In proof, he held up to Laskar's view the left hand of the corpse on which was a curiously deformed thumbnail.

Laskar did not stop to examine it. He pulled Seven-Up to his feet. At once he had a new fight on his hands. He was trying to keep the old man away from the body when he heard shouts and saw half-a-dozen cowboys approaching—his own men.

They got Seven-Up back in the dugout and plied him with whisky and food. They told Laskar how his wife had worried about him and how as soon as the storm ended they had come out to look for him.

That night they played cards, they danced, they sang, they played cards and yelled in pure joy.

It was all sweet music to Seven-Up and Laskar.

Christmas day dawned clear and cold. Seven-Up, still weak but rational now, awoke to the smell of cooking food and the sound of cheerful voices.

“Say,” he said, “are you real gents, or am I still seein’ things?” He looked at Laskar. “Did I hear you say your wife’s name was Amy Legget? Don’t lie to me, Las,” he pleaded.

“I reckon, you wasn’t dreaming, father-in-law,” Laskar whooped, passing over the whisky bottle.

Seven-Up passed a hand over his forehead. “And was I seein’ things when I thought I’d found Bill Henley out there in the snow?” he asked hesitatingly.

“That was Bill Henley, all right,” Laskar said. “The boys searched him before they planted him, and found letters and such to prove he was Bill Henley all right.”

Seven-Up sighed deeply and lay back in the bunk. “Las,” he said, “there’s one more thing I’d like to know. I always thought Bill Henley had somethin’ to do with Amy leavin’ home. Did he?”

“Hush, you old fool,” said Laskar softly. “That’s another story—one Amy will tell you when we get back home tonight.”

