

## A Bush Christmas

(By Beverley Asmus)

*“Good King Wenceslas went out  
On the feast of Stephen...”*

My father’s voice was pleasant enough to hear when he was taking a shower but on this boiling hot day, in the middle of a blistering North Queensland summer, it was getting on my ten year old nerves. It wasn’t polite to be singing about some lucky old King walking about in nice cool snow as eddies of dust swirled around our feet – rising and falling, rising and falling – and we were near fainting from heat exhaustion.

It was no use complaining. ‘Traditions aren’t made for breaking’, my father would say. So, the three of us trudged along in his footsteps on the annual quest to find the perfect bush Christmas tree.

My friend Valerie was taking a turn at carrying the axe. When she asked my dad if she could, he had smiled and agreed. I thought it was unfair that he would allow her to have the sharp axe and not me. Anyway, the handle was far too long for her arms. Valerie, pony tail hanging in a limp twist down the centre of her back, dragged the axe behind her, making little zigzag patterns in the thick bull dust.

Every so often my fair, curly haired cousin, Elaine, dabbed at her forehead with her lace edged, initials embroidered in the corner, organza hankie that dangled from its mooring on the front of her frilly, pink, puff sleeved, ‘tie at the back’ dress. A sparkling, miniature gold safety pin attached the hankie to her dress. The pin caught the light and I felt just as jealous of that as I did of her dress. I dragged out my own striped cotton hankie, which I’d stuffed in my shorts pocket, and figured that even if my handkerchief *had* been attached to my boring cotton shirt, it would have been held in place by a plain old silver pin. My mum didn’t go in for the fancy stuff like her sister.

Not for the first time, I wondered what it would be like if my book reading, serious mother was more like Auntie Joyce, who not only provided gold safety pins for her daughter, but also hand-made all the lovely dresses Elaine got to wear. Aunty Joyce was also famous for her Christmas decorations. Last night she had instructed us in the art of making Christmas decorations from junk. Things that other people considered rubbish turned into treasures in Aunty Joyce’s hands.

We had used hundreds of foil milk bottle covers from school (my brother had done a superb job scrounging through the school rubbish bins) and twisted them into various shapes before threading them on cotton strings. Aunty Joyce had also shown us how to dab red and green food colouring on chook feathers and bind them into pretty little bundles. Then, using a tin opener, she had cut patterns in the thin metal of empty

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sunshine milk cans and placed red and white candles inside them. Tonight, was Christmas Eve, and Aunt Joy said she would light the candles as soon as it got dark. She promised us they would make a lovely show.

While we were doing this stuff, Mum and Dad had done all the usual boring things with crepe paper. Red, white and green daisy chains crisscrossed just about every room in the house, and above every door there was a colourful crepe bell or ball. All that we needed now was dad's perfect tree to hang the amazing decorations on, and then everything would be complete for Santa's arrival tonight.

I snorted because a persistent fly had wanted to use my nostril for a tunnel, and I waved my hand in front of my face to chase away any others who thought they might try the same trick. Gosh, I felt hot. If we didn't find the right tree soon, I was going to die.

"What about this one, Gillie?" Valerie pointed to a scraggly sapling beside the track.

*Doesn't your mother teach you any manners?* I niggardly thought. *My dad is Mr. Kerswell to you!* I didn't say this out loud though because I knew Valerie's mum was kept really busy doing other people's ironing, and never had much time to spare. Valerie's dad got killed in the war, and Valerie never got chastised for anything. I sometimes dreamed about what it would be like to have people always excusing your bad behaviour just because they felt sorry for you. I thought it might have some advantages.

"No Val, that one's far too skinny." My dad answered in a very kind voice. Then he looked at the way she was dragging the axe. "How about I give you a break from carrying that heavy weight now? You must be worn out! How would you like a piggy back for a while?"

Valerie dimpled her agreement and dad hoisted her up on his back. Elaine and I both bent down to pick up the axe. It was going to be a tug of war to see who would get to have it next. Not for long though. Dad soon put those sorts of thought to sleep. He held out his hand, and we meekly handed the axe into his safe-keeping.

*"Gather slave, come stand by me,  
If thou knowest telling,  
'Yonder peasant who is he,  
Where and what his dwelling..."*

With Valerie perched on dad's back and her feet digging into his sides, his voice was coming out in short, breathless bursts. He was still laughing though, and every so often he would give a little hop. I wasn't sure if this was to adjust his load, or if he was just expressing his happiness. My dad had a lot of happiness that just oozed out of him and Christmas always gave him extra bounce.

Then it happened. There, up ahead, shimmering in a hazy mirage, was what Elaine claimed was the perfect Christmas tree. I thought it must be because her mother could see

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interesting shapes in junk that gave Elaine the same gift. It looked like an ordinary tree to me, although it was a slightly bushier than any of the others. Elaine danced around it, grabbing at the lowest branches and testing their strength to hang our decorations. "It's beautiful!" she exclaimed in a dreamy voice. "Look at how bushy it is."

Dad obviously agreed. He gently bent his knees for Valerie to step off his back and he took a pace back to consider the tree. I knew he was assessing the height.

We all held our breath.

"Righto," he finally said. "This'll do! Good girl, 'Lanie!" He told us to stand back and, after checking to see we had obeyed, swung the axe in a perfect arc.

From deep within the branches of the falling tree, there came a fluttering sound as the tree toppled to the ground.

Valerie was jumping up and down in delight, and Elaine wore a smile from ear to ear. I thought my friend and my cousin were getting over-excited about a tree. I shook my head, rolled my eyes, and looked to Heaven.

Against the bright blue, cloudless sky I saw a lone butcher bird circling. A perfectly formed nest holding two tiny featherless birds, chirping distress, their little beaks raised to the sky, caught my attention on the ground. Tears gushed from my eyes. Up above, the mother bird wheeled about and fixed our group with a steely gaze. She flattened out like an arrow.

The mother swooped and we ran for cover.

The perfect tree stayed on the ground defended by the mother bird, squawking and flapping her wings as she jumped and hopped from foot to foot.

Dad muttered to himself something about looking before he leaped. I could see he was really upset about chopping down this tree.

"We can't leave the nest on the ground, can we, dad?" I knew that the babies would not last an hour before some animal made them into its dinner.

"What? No, of course we won't do that, Bevie," Dad answered. "Give me your hats, girls, I'm going to need them to protect myself."

"Be careful, Dad," I advised, stating the obvious.

Dad rammed his own hat as far down over his forehead as he could get it to go. He put my felt hat with its drawstring over his back and Valerie's straw boater was used like a shield in front of his face. He looked a bit comical, but no-one was laughing.

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Our hearts racing, we watched him launch himself in the direction of the nest. We were expecting the worst to happen, and felt for sure he was going to be pecked to death.

It was like a miracle. Something amazing happened. The mother bird flew off to watch the proceedings from a distance. She was still making a lot of noise, but she didn't even make one attempt at a dive bomb.

Dad hoicked up the nest and relocated it in a neighbouring tree. We all cheered, and after he came back he got a lot of hugs and kisses from three very relieved girls. Dad remarked that the breeding season seemed to be bit late, but he should have checked anyway. He gave us a long look as if to see how we might take the news, and said there would not be a tree this year, out of respect for the birds. None of us minded. We three girls were still awfully upset, eyes moist with tears. We really were not in a fit state to continue looking for another tree.

Then Valerie said something puzzling. She said her mother told her to remember that sadness is the flip side of happiness.

I thought hard about that. I understood how Christmas might always be a bit sad for Valerie and her mother. I took hold of Valerie's hand. My father put his big hand over my other hand and gave my fingers a squeeze. Elaine walked on the other side of Valerie with her hand draped over Valerie's shoulder and we trudged back down the dusty path towards home.

I was looking forward to seeing how Aunty Joyce would use our tree decorations without a tree to put them on, and I couldn't wait to see what the candles would look like when they were lit.

Dad began to sing softly at first:

*“Brightly shone the moon that night*

Then a little louder:”

*“Though the frost was cru-e-l...”*

Then it got a bit more raucous because we all joined in the singing, even though we didn't know all the words. We laughed and sang all the way home and I thought there was no better day than Christmas Eve, and no better father than mine.