

PRO

by Lydia Torrance

"Heavens to Betsy, Lucreesh! What's that racket?" I cried. It was nearly midnight and we were just finishing our eggnog and on our way to bed, when this caterwauling began.

Lucreesh's eyes lit up. "It's Ratchet and the fellows!" She jumped up and high-tailed it to the door. Sure enough, a few minutes later these six young men came in, all shouting and singing — I couldn't make out much of it but it seemed sorta lewd, and, my, they had been drinking something fierce. They started hugging everyone and everyone hugged them back like they were sober and didn't need a talking to. Some big fellow with a red beard started hugging on me and shouting "Isn't this here long lost Granny Hutchinson?"

"No I ain't, now just put me down, get away!" I hollered, and pushed him. That breath! I could tell he meant it friendly, but I prefer more respect from such as him. And the place was getting pretty noisy.

This brother Ratchet tried to get a forestry degree from the U of A once, but the program was too tough for him. He just loved trees even as a boy, and he didn't care if he didn't have a degree or anything so long as he could be with them.

He worked in a greenhouse in high school, but everything was too small. "I'm really into bark," he told me. "Thick bark and tallness. Like redwoods. Redwoods are like God's own cathedral."

"Yes, I've said that myself."

"Yeah? When did you ever see a redwood?"

"Well," says I, "I never actually saw one firsthand, but I've seen postcards..."

"It's not the same at all," he grunted. He really took his trees seriously. But it seemed a wholesome trait.

"I was in a redwood forest a few years back," Ratchet said, and his eyes got all misty. "We was in California, it was night, and the way they stood — well you know the Druids, who founded the English religion? When the Christians came to the Island the Druids turned themselves into Oaks, and they're still waiting for the Christians to leave so's they can reclaim the place. That's why oak trees look so ancient. Because they're really wise men."

"Really!" I hadn't heard about this before and I've read a lot of history. I love learning new things too, but why would they be scared of real Christians unless they were evil? "How come you know so much about trees?" I asked.

"When I was a baby Mama put me on the porch, summer days, and I'd watch the leaves bob up and down, so pretty soon I — you'll think it's silly," he said and

stopped.

"No, no, I think it's real interesting. Go on."

"Well, they talked to me, see. Trees have a language and they talked to me. I know their language." He looked up as if he thought I'd laugh. But I was thinking: if he really knows their language, boy, he could teach it at the Extension Dept. to scientists and all, it's probably one of those breakthroughs you hear about ...

Suddenly he got up and went to his room. I went over to Lucreesh. "Does he really talk to trees? Ratchet I mean?"

"Did he tell you that?" Lucreesh said and smiled. "Honestly, Lydia, how old are you anyway?"

"Plenty old, little missy!" I asked very indignantly. "If you think I'm a pushover you're wrong. I've been around plenty. But your brother has a winning way — a sincere — and trees aren't my specialty." Now I was mad. Trees talking! What had I been thinking of?

Then Lucreesh told me all about it. After quitting the greenhouse he got a helper's job with a tree surgeon. But he couldn't stand it, he suffered more than the trees. He'd come home at 5:30 all haggard and talked about shattered limbs, and elm disease and woodpeckers, and sob himself to sleep crying "The horror, the horror!" After four months he had to quit because of his health, poor little mite.

So he tried University, and then he went off north with a reforestation program, where they plant baby trees. He liked that, but they found out he didn't have a real degree and he had to move on.

Well it was two years before the family heard from him, and then it was a lumber camp in B.C. They couldn't imagine him working there with trees being chopped down and all.

But when he came home it turned out he was working in the office, with papers and charts! Where he was there were lots of trees and the actual lumbering was two miles away.

He was very happy, but because he was a clerk the lumberjacks thought he was a sissy, so he had to prove himself by drinking and cussing. He'd learned really well, because he had lots of friends and could talk filthy. I wasn't shocked, I'm too old for that, but it was a pity with all the wonderful words in our great mother tongue, and Shakespeare never had to cuss, now did he?

And that's why we didn't have a real Christmas tree in Manyberries. Ratchet made them get a pink nylon tree with balls of silver and baby blue. It was pretty, of course, but somehow it wasn't very Christmassy.



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