

(NEVERKONT-OLA) BIRCH PACK -OLA

by Jacob B. Bull

It was a mild day in November, with light snow falling. The day before a furious storm had ridden the forests, blowing the snow off the heavy pine tops. Now the storm was silenced, and the winter had once again began its silent, merciful work. The fresh snow lay snug as a trembling carpet of eiderdown between the trunks of the forest; the forest stood warm and chubby under its snowy white winter garment; but in teeming, cheerfully myriads the snowflakes came fluttering, drifting like an ocean of cool feathers from the graying air. If one looked up there, through the drifting snow, one would get the impression of infinity's ever changing diversity, deeper and deeper into the deadly cold fatigue; should there be a snowflake landing on the cheeks or hands, one would feel a faint sting, which would immediately get warm; then it would all melt down to a cold drop which wouldn't cope to run off, but would stay put until it was wiped or dried off.

It was deserted and quiet along the narrow timber trails. Not a wing beat of a fleeing bird, not a track of hare or fox; one could believe all life was forever gone.

Anyway, along the narrow pathway towards the cottage at Harsjovollen it was a track; a track after people, half hidden by new fallen snow, but fresher as deeper you came into the forest. And if you reached the Harrendbend, you would see that people had walked here recently, a broad, strong track, which was still clear with a sharp imprint of heel irons and shoe sole; and if you sped up and went further on, you would see him by the lakeside with the birch pack on his back, walking steadily, sometimes halting with a quaint insecure sensation of one who threads a snow covered winter pathway for the first time. It was Birch pack- Ola on his way to a logging company at the lake Harsjo in Rendalen.

Birch pack- Ola was a southerner and had been a year only in the valley up north. He was the son of a cotter and about thirty years old; but few were those who didn't know him by name or reputation. There were no valley he had not been working as a floater, no forest he had not been logging, and everywhere he went words were spoken that if someone got a good contract, it was Birch pack- Ola.

But then again, he didn't do business the same way as other forest people up there in the valleys. He never took an employed job, but worked as a contractor, with the risk on himself. Then he hired help from others and he himself worked as hard as his employees until everything was done, which was likely to be a lot sooner than agreed upon. He knew the nature of a forest better than most people, and he thoroughly made his notes of the conditions and whereabouts of the forest before he took an assignment. But when he first took the decision of an assignment, he worked night and day, as the devil himself, in good or bad weather – he didn't mind.

In this manner he walked from one valley to another, from village to village, always with his birch pack on his back and the logging axe bright and shiny in it, ready to use.

Through all the valleys they had a saying after him. Because the first he said and asked about when he arrived a new place was likely to be: "Is it eelot of forest in this villeege?" And when someone later was curious or ongoing, he usually got the following answer: "Is it eelot of forest in this villeege? him Birch pack-Ola said".

When someone made this quote up in the Northern Valleys, it was obvious they had a grudge for this diligent southerner who always laid ahead of them in getting the biggest and best paid jobs. The nickname they gave him, Birch pack- Ola, was intended to be a scorn. Even as he for many years now always went from assignment to assignment, and always made good money, he never did as everyone else, who carried his proper food boxes and wore a winter-hat. No, he wore his birch pack and his sun-shaded cap both winter and summer.

What few people knew, was that in his birch pack, which he never parted from, he had his accounting books and blue bankbooks, both from the Bank of Tynset, and the Bank of Savings in Hamar, and their total value was as much as the third thousand daler. But he also had his sour bread and dairy butter lump, alongside the old and worn butter spoon and some yellowed old meat.

The other lumbermen used to have both bacon and smoked mutton. Some even had fat cheese and matured cheese in addition to the butter, and their tobacco roll and brandy bottle had it's own place in the absolute back of the scrip. But when those men, who often had a working deal with Birch pack- Ola mocked him for his economic habits and meant it to be a shame to earn so much money and use so little of it, Birch pack Ola usually answered like this: "I'd bettir save, to inable ye guys to live as ye do". Then they were silenced. It was well known that no one paid better than Birch pack- Ola, and they never had to wait for their money. He was a cash payer.

Neither they could accuse him to be a strange kind of man, because he always had a project going, and in every matter he had a better eye to it than other people did. And he was always right when it came to comments about the forest or the timber.

But besides the forest and the timber he knew very little. He didn't speak much either, but he was an eager listener. With all the successful farmers of the villages along the valleys Birch pack Ola was well regarded. For he never made a bad stroke, and he always had one or another big assignment; it was at his mercy they got him to take their assignment, when the timber-men of the valley didn't manage to take the assignment or didn't manage to take it out, which often occurred.

Every year, when the heat of summer came, Birch pack Ola often went south to Solor. For there, in his home village he had a girl who had been his sweetheart all the way since childhood. To her he said, the first time he left the village, that she should wait for him, and to her he went every year to talk to her.

Every year he let her see his bankbooks and the amount of money he had made, but every year she clapped her hands and got overwhelmed by all the money and said "Now it must surely be enough money for us to get married", he always postponed it for one more year, so that they would be really well off.

And so time went, year after year, until he was well over thirty, and she well past twenty-five. "We're only young folks both of us" Ola always said, and she gave in to his argument every single year.

It was at Christmas. In the winter living at Losett the head of Losett sat by the fire smoking his broad meerscham pipe. The pine log lit up and gave flapping warmth around the fire place. The dark, circling patterned beer bowl stood there, full and foaming on the long farm table; All kinds of foods from that time lay on the food board; sour cream thin cakes, write bread and syrup thin cake. Sliced dried meat on the side.

Empty coffee cups stood scattered around.

It was in the evening. A couple of farmers from the valley had been visiting and were now gone. There were talks about the rising prices of timber, and there had been discussions about how much each farmer should take out and how to best get it done.

Now the head of Losett sat thoughtful by the fire, thinking of these matters. There was no doubt about his abundance of timber, well grown and of the best quality, but to take out a thousand dozen and get it to the timber traders in one single year, even between Christmas and flood time, it was bold and daring. And the timber traders in the towns put a significant fine for exceeded delivery time.

As Losett sat there pondering about this, someone pushed the door handle. The door slowly opened, and in came Birch pack- Ola.

"Goodday".

He came up to the closet and took his cap off.

The Losett turned in the chair, staring at the stranger with his pipe hanging in his mouth.

"Goodday". He took a long glare at him, but didn't know him. "Please sit". He looked at him again. "Oh, no, I didn't mean to sit, though". The stranger moves slowly towards the stool at the fireplace. There he sits down.

Losett is puffing his pipe, heavily, looking at the stranger from top to toe. He is dressed in a simple manner, working clothes. Must be a timber man, homeless traveler or something.

"It's good times" the stranger says. "Yes, they are good", the Losett answered, moving at the same time.

"And where do you come from?" Losett then is asking.

"I come directly from Tyldale – otherwise my home place is Solor." Birch pack- Ola sat with his hands in his lap, slightly forward bent, looking at the Losett.

There is silence for a while.

"You are a timber man, aren't you?" The Losett stands up, moves away from Birch pack- Ola and puts his pipe down.

"Yes, that's my occupation."

Again silence.

"So, what name belongs to this fellow?" the Losett asks, careless looking; he sits down.

"My name is Ola." The stranger sits there, with a subtle smile.

The Losett sits as before. He is only revealing a crease in the corner of his mouth.

"You're not alone bearing that name," he finally says.

They are both grinning.

"No – there are several," the stranger replies, carelessly spitting into the fire.

"They call me Birch pack- Ola" he says, after a pause. The Losett threw a quick glance at him. Then he fixed his eyes on him, and kept it, for a long time.

"Oh, right, you are that man?" He finally says.

Birchpack-Ola is staring into the flames.

"Yes, you're right about that," he is answering, self-consciously pausing before he utters the words.

"it is elot of forest in this villeege," he says after a long pause.

The Losett is sitting, looking straight forward.

"Oh, yes, it isn't bad at all," he is answering.

"Good timber prices these days."

"Oh, yes, it has been lower."

The Losett is sitting secretive straight forward looking .

There is a roaring silence. Birch pack- Ola is coughing. The Losett is coughing and spitting. Then utter silence again.

The Losett is standing up and starts to pace up and down. Then he stops.

"You're welcome to approach the table," he finally says.

"No, thank you, I'm not supposed to do that."

"Yes, come now." The Losett is standing there, waiting.

"No thank you – it's really not right."

"So, come on now!"

"No."

"Yes, come on now."

"Oh, thank you!" Birch pack- Ola moves slowly, uncertain towards the table, quietly sits down, very quietly eating and drinking.

The Losett is firing his pipe sitting down in a distance.

"Are you then presently occupied in work? After a while he's asking.

Birch pack-Ola is grabbing the beer bowl, drinks, put it down.

"Me?" he is asking.

"Yes."

"Oh, I don't know, what to say. some work I got, but ain't sure it's enough."

The Losett sits for a while, silent.

"Would you take on to the Losett forest?" he suddenly is asking.

Birch pack Ola is stroking his mouth with the backside of his hand.

"How mich'll you take out?" he is asking.

"Oh, one thousand dozen."

"That's not a small amount."

"Oh, no, a lot of things are not less," the Losett says, laughing.

"No, but less is mich," Birch pack Ola replies – him laughing too.

"How much will you take per dozen, timbered and taken out?" the Losett asks.

Birch pack Ola sits for a while, thinking hard.

"I don't know the forest and the terrain," he is answering.

"Then you'll check it out first," the Losett replies.

Birch pack Ola sits looking at him.

"We'll go half," he answers. "I do the driving and lumbering, you take it out."

The Losett laughed spiteful.

"No, that's too good for you," he finally says.

"Drive yourself, and see what's left," Birch pack- Ola replies.

And then he's laying out a long explanation on how and where and why, until the Losett sits there, uncertain of what to do.

Birch pack- Ola raises from the table and gives his thanks for the food and drink. Firing up his pipe and sits down again. But the mentioned offer never comes over his lips again.

They talk about the weather and the wind, about people from the valley and people outside the valley, and the Losett is sitting full of astonishment over the wisdom and the sensible discretion of Birch pack Ola.

Suddenly the stranger raises up.

"No, I woun't bother you 'nee more," he says, quietly, grabbing his cap, moving towards the Losett.

"Thank you for now," he says, stretching out his hand.

The Losett grabs his hand.

"How's it about the work, then?" he asks.

Birch pack Ola stands still.

"Well, I don't know," he answers.

"You couldn't do it cheaper?" the Losett asks; but the voice sounds like the one who's going to pay.

Birch pack Ola looks straight forward.

"I never require more än I want," he says.

"Or else I think we both'd be served," he adds.

The Losett stands, staring.

"Yes, you know it counts a lot who's using the forest," he says in a low voice.

"Maybe we'll join forces after all, then," he says after a while.

The silence is present in the room.

"As you wish." Birch pack Ola answers; not one movement in his face.

"But you have to set a bail before you start the work."

Birch pack Ola is standing for a while.

"How big a bail?" he is asking.

The Losett is coughing.

"Five thousand daler," he's answering, avoiding to look at Birch pack Ola.

"Them I'll set," Birch pack Ola answers, soberly as always.

"Who'll be responsible?" the Losett asks, puzzled, staring at the stranger.

"Me myself - I'll give you cash."

"No, ood'you ever be able?"

The Losett had never in his life been as puzzled as this.

"You should never judge the dogs by it's fur" Birch pack- Ola answers, walking out to the birch pack, pulling out his blue books.

The rest of that evening the Losett and Birch pack Ola sat drawing contracts, and the next morning they were finished drawing up the least details about the operations of the forest after the time's standards. A fourth night later Birch pack- Ola was finished marking the logs, and before the end of the month there were lumber men in every sloop, and Birch pack- Ola kept the work going from dawn to dusk, at the point that it was told about up and down the valley.

At the summer council the following summer the Losett and Birch pack- Ola sat settling the winter's work.

The Losett noted to his account ten thousand daler pure profit from two thousand dozen; but no one knew how much Birch pack- Ola had made.

The prices of timber were increasing; the timber trade companies in the capitol needed more timber than they could get their hands on. Then one day, at the office of one of the largest timber trade companies a man came in, clad in homespun working clothes, asking for the head of the company.

The secretary peeked at him, he found it a little peculiar that a farmer in simple clothing could have anything to say to his boss, but anyway he reported the man to the head office; quite often it turned out that wealth was hidden behind simple clothing and contemptible looks.

Inside the inner office the boss sat behind his desk, tall and impressive with a shiny white chest piece and big, starched folds behind a black silk bandana. The grey hair was smoothly combed; his big, glossy grey eyes met the ones of the man silently approaching his office.

The simple dressed man stood by the door with his hat in his hand.

The boss stands there in distraction, staring out of the window as if his mind is strongly taken by something else.

"Please," he says.

The simple dressed man slowly walks closer.

"Good evening," he says.

The timber trader looks at him, but doesn't know him.

"What's your business, my man?"

Birch pack- Ola – him it is – looks straight at the timber trader.

"D'ya need timber?" he asks.

The timber trader pulls up a pen knife, opens it and starts cleaning his nails half hidden behind the desk.

"That might be so."

Once again he looked up at the simple clad man.

"Do you have much?"

Birch pack- Ola turns his cap in his hands.

"I ain't got anything myself, but I can get it."

The timber trader looks at him, puzzled. This was something else.

"What's your name?" he asks, keeping his eyes on him.

"Ola Jonsen."

That was not much enlightening.

"Where are you from?"

"From Solor. else wise I am well known through all the valleys up."

The timber trader sits, no more enlightened, turning and twisting the pen knife between his thumb and index finger.

"Yes, how will you pull this off?" he asks, almost smiling.

Birch pack- Ola is standing there, immovable and cross certain.

"I'll go in company ship with you." He is looking at the trader bravely.

This one is smiling; his smile turns into a low, good laughter. Then he looks back at the simple dressed man.

"Indeed, so that's what you will do?"

Birch pack- Ola smiles too.

"Yes, that was the intention," he says.

The trader has become cheerful. He lay down the pen knife and strolls up and down the room, giving a low whistle, smiling occasionally.

"I would think it would be a strange company," he finally says.

Birch pack- Ola stands, watching him seriously.

"Why'that?" he asks dryly.

The trader makes a quick, startled movement, stops and looks at him.

"What on earth do you want?" he asks.

Birch pack- Ola takes a step closer.

"I'll take the responsibility to get ye all da timber ye need – o' the best there is. O mich'll ya give me doing so?" he asks.

The trader's big, wise eyes suddenly stands still, staring stiffly out into the room.

"Are you well known through up the valleys?" he finally asks.

Birch pack- Ola stands as before.

"I am," he says.

The trader takes a few paces, but stops again.

"What did you say your name was?" he asks.

"Ola Jonsen. Or they call me Birch pack- Ola."

The trader made a sudden turn. He had heard that name earlier.

"Wait for a moment," he says, turns again and walks out to the front office.

Ola sits down.

But out among the clerks who were well informed about the timber contractors and their business, the trader got all information about Birch pack- Ola and his reputation to be the most enterprising and the most reliable timber man – and floater-manager, and the fact that this firm had to turn to him in several occasions to solve unfulfilled contracts.

As the trader were back in his office again, he went straight to his locker, took out a contract to fill in and sat down to write.

One hour later Birch pack- Ola went out the door with a signed contract in his drawing book. He had demanded half a daler per dozen he supplied, but was committed to produce at least 50 thousand dozens a year of the best quality, with the easiest contracting and he had to be responsible for it all to be in place at the right time.

In the following years Birch pack- Ola contracted more than a hundred men in timbering and floating in the Osterdal forests. He got the best deals, and he always sold first to the big company which he was in a secret liaison with.

After three years he had made a fortune of 150 000 daler, and then he went to the priest and demanded announcement. Now the girl would not wait for him anymore, and he thought it might be enough, though he would have felt better if he had rounded 200 000 daler.

When Birch pack Ola had reached forty years of age, he was, through buying and selling farms and forests, one of the richest men of Osterdalen. He lived on his own big and well groomed farm with the railroad close by and all the culture's newest remedies and technology to his service.

The word went all over the valley about Birch pack- Ola and his adventurous emergence. The old families of the valley had their own silent war going on against him and his indefinable happiness, mocked him now and then for all the new remedies he introduced, but never managed to knock him down.

As the highest triumph of his victory he let build, on top of the most conspicuous mountain of the valley, a grand, shiny hunting castle he never used, but always kept at the best standards in case he would need it.

It was no doubt that Birch pack- Ola had some trouble following the rapid development of the timber fraud's years in Osterdalen. And it was no doubt he began to look like a weird creature. Many were the stories about him, told by the criticizing people of the valley. Most probably spiced with a good pinch of fantasy. But never the less, they should be told as they originally were preserved people.

There was a great party at Bigstad, were Birch pack- Ola was supposed to meet with the king. He had insisted that he and no one else, should have the honor of doing so, partly because his farm lay so unreasonable conveniently close to the railroad, partly because he actually had the largest house and the finest hunting castle in the whole valley.

It was autumn day, and at Bigstad everything was in it's brightest shine. The monstrous house was decorated with flags and twigs with green leaves; the doors throughout all the house's rooms were open, so you could see through the whole building.

Birch pack- Ola, or as he now was known as, Ola Bigstad, stood in his finest regalia's at the gate receiving when the king arrived.

"You're willcome heer in the vallee," he said and stretched out his hand.

The king gave his thanks, looked around at the farm and said, as he turned to Birch pack- Ola:

"Well! Here you live as a nobleman!"

"More like a king, lad," Birch pack- Ola answered. The king smiled. They went inside.

The king admired the monstrous rooms.

"Yes, now ya'll stay here, then I'll walk inward, then ya'll see how small I get," Birch

pack- Ola says, attempting to do so. Then the king laughed. "You don't have to; I know it anyway," he says. His companions was laughing with him.

They sat down at the table.

"Now ya'll eat as much as you can take; - it is more were it comes from," Birch pack- Ola says when they were ready to eat.

The king is smiling, promising to do his best.

After the dining it was time to offer cigars. The king accepts one, hesitating. He is quite uncertain of the quality of the cigars.

"No, take more, take the whole box," Birch pack- Ola says. As they after the dining are sitting in the big living room, the king is noticing two pianofortes, one on each side of the entrance door.

"But my dear Ola, why do you have two pianofortes?" the king is asking.

"Oh, ya know, it's gotta be symmetry," Ola replies.

Throughout the evening the topic of foreign countries came up, and Ola Bigstad, who's fad was to brag about his trips abroad, could not keep silent about it.

"Have ya been to Paree, then?" he's asking the king.

Yes, the king had been there.

"Yes, I bet you never saw bigger a city," Birch pack- Ola starts.

"Ya wouldn't believe, I rode a horse carriage all day long, but we never reached the end of the city. God knows 'ow it would end, if I hadn't seen the word "Vendome". You better turn around, I said to the driver; for here it says "Vendom," and then I will not go farther."

Big laughter for his Majesty and his companions.

"Sure is he got it; them Paree people are good at foreign languages. Damned I say, I believe those li'l boys were no more than six, seven years, but sure is they spoke French as good as anee one. The worst thing was the food. They had a dish called "Menu", but never did I get to taste it, even if I ordered. But then I got mad and requisitioned the whole eating note. Then they got it. Then I got enough to eat."

His Majesty and his companions withdrew to the garden after all this information, and Ola went with them.

"Have ya seen a barn with a railroad inside?" he's asking the king.

No, the king had never seen it.

"Well, then ya'll see it here," Ola answered.

So then, either the king wanted or not, Ola didn't stop until he had displayed all the fixture, which was quite practical concerning both feeding and removing of manure.

"Ya'd have such as this, you who are king," Ola says.

The king had an excellent night's sleep in Ola Bigstad's beds, which was specially ordered for the occasion from Oslo, and when he the next day went to the big hunting castle, he had more than one merry moment. Ola went with him and gave him in short, drastically moves his whole life story, all the way from the time he travelled by foot with

his birch pack on his back, timbering in the cold forests, and up to these days, where he sat as a king at his own castle here up in the ranges.

"Here I rule," he said, standing on the open balcony, pointing out to the valley. -

The king suggested it could be those who were less easily managed there in the valley too.

"Oh, it works when ya have monnee," Ola said. "Ya've 'nough of it too, don't ya?"

The king replied he believed he had enough to manage.

"Yes, because, if ya'd need more, jest come to me," Ola said sincerely, taking the king's hand.

The king thanked him.

There was hunting for several days, and the game was not of the small kind. It was moose, yes, even bear.

"Neva' would I believe you were such a man, shooting a bear though," Ola says.

"I've heard these kings were wimps," he added. "But surely ya're mich better than the words tell!"

The king feels visibly flattered and takes farewell with many thanks.

"Greet your queen then," he said at the gate.

"If she fancy's, she's welcome too. Though it isn't fun to bring women up in the mountains."

The king gave his thanks on behalf of the queen and left the Bigstad hunting castle and the Bigstad farm with a new and quite original impression of the civilizations influence of the Norwegian people's character.

But to every visitor at Bigstad, Ola told what an ignoble man the king was, and how nice a time they shared together.

Ola Bigstad got old. His children grew up and got married into the richest families of the valley. But when he, at the age of nearly eighty, died, they found his secret hidings, among costly items made of gold and silver an old rusty logging axe, and up in the loft a dusted birch pack with a double bottom, that same birch pack which through many exhausting years had created the family's wealth.

The peculiar about his funeral, was the absence of his wife. She sat grieving and silent at the outskirts of the forest by the farm, refusing to see anyone. But before the end of the month she went to bed and never stood up again. For her the life at his side had been like an adventure; now that he was gone, life was gone too.

Translation: Runa Aadalen, www.runaa1.no