

The Night Rider

A Christmas Tale of Candle-light Days by Edith G. Bayne.

THE stage coach lumbered heavily along through a seemingly endless labyrinth of bush. The rough road zigzagged and dipped, and rose and fell again with dull monotony, and the late December evening was rapidly closing in. It was fifteen miles from York village, where Elizabeth Blake had been to the trading post, to her home on the lake shore, and she was now returning with laden baskets and in company of Mistress Ogilvie, widow of Major Ogilvie, late of the Fort.

Master Treadwell, the driver, being cold and lacking company on the box, had had recourse to his usual solace in times of stress or loneliness, a square green bottle, and the faithful horses plodded on unguided, for the reins had slackened and Master Treadwell slept.

Within the coach, seated opposite one another, were the two women, the elder short and stout with a sonsy rosy face, and the younger slender and fair with great blue and brown curls that peeped coquettishly from underneath the grey beaver bonnet.

"I wish we were at home, Aunt," said the girl, clinging to the window-ledge

falling snow she discerned a black horse and a rider at a standstill a few feet away.

"Ho, ho the coach! Hillo passengers!" called the deep voice again.

Having elicited no response from Treadwell on the box, the rider now rode close and saluted Elizabeth.

"Your Jehu is drunk as an owl, madam, and you are standing on the brink of a great hole in Crossman's Bridge."

"Mercy-a-me!" shrieked madam from within.

Elizabeth glanced beyond the rider, and in the thickening gloom spied a wide black chasm not ten paces from the horses' heads.

"Tis the mercy of heaven!" she murmured, dazedly.

"And the instinct of your beasts, madam—or is it Miss? Zounds, 'tis but a lass and a pretty one!"

"Have done!" cried Mistress Ogilvie, who had now appeared at the door, "Have done, sir!"

"Hush, aunt; he has saved our lives, whoever he is."

"I thank you, sir—we both thank you."



Children gazing at toys during the Christmas holidays

with a small, white-mitten hand, for the coach wheels had sunk to their hubs in a deep rut. "Father bade us hasten. The Indians—"

"Glance out child and see if you can discern lights," returned Mistress Ogilvie, "your eyes are sharper than mine, and methinks we should be approaching the settlement."

The woman sat bolt upright, swaying from side to side with the erratic movements of the vehicle, and balancing herself by aid of a great green umbrella.

The girl lowered a window, and thrusting out her head, peered into the deepening twilight.

"I see no lights," she said, "but I hear hoof-beats. And 'tis snowing harder!"

"Ah, 'twill not be a green Christmas after all!" ejaculated the dame. "Close the window quickly, Betty, lest the candles be blown out!"

Two feeble tallow dips in their sconces above spluttered and wavered, threatening to retire into ultimate gloom, so the girl made haste to obey.

For a few moments the stage labored along as before. Then of a sudden it gave a violent lurch, and the horses, with a series of convulsive plunges and staggerings, came to a halt.

"What can the matter be!" exclaimed Mistress Ogilvie, startled out of her phlegmatic calm.

Hoof-beats near at hand fell upon the ear, and a deep voice now broke the winter stillness.

"Put thy head out, child, and ask what is wrong," directed the dame.

Elizabeth opened the coach door and peered without. Through the heavily-

Pray tell our driver to step down a moment," said the woman.

"Madam," responded the rider, "your driver is past stepping."

"Oh!" from the lady, then "Betty, child, what under the canopy are we to do?"

The girl surveyed the stranger. His features were indistinguishable under the squirrel-skin cap, but he was very tall of form and wore a dark great coat, leggings and riding boots.

"Will you help us ford the stream, sir?" she asked.

"Gladly. Step in again ladies, and trust to me. The river is swollen and rapid just here, but I think not deep."

With much trembling and hesitation and many outcries on Mistress Ogilvie's part, and a furtive fear and swift heart-beats on Elizabeth's, the stage was backed away, the horses were led downhill south of the bridge, and soon the icy water splashing and surging over the wheels and washing against the windows, told the passengers that they were in the act of crossing the stream. Once or twice a tentative pause or an indeterminate lurching of the vehicle paled their cheeks and gave them vivid nightmares of a watery death. Lowly and steadily and very carefully, however, the rider in the van led the reluctant team on, and after a seeming great while—in reality but ten minutes—their fore-hoofs touched the farther bank, and they clambered chill and dripping up the incline, landing safely upon the road once more.

"Ha! your driver is awake!" cried the rider. "Now, man! Thou hast come un-

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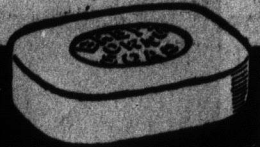
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