

The Horse that Educated the Children

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It was five o'clock on the day before Christmas. The sun had set half an hour earlier; for Old Sol had won his eight-hour day at last after months of sweated labor for the sake of the harvest. Two sun-dogs, which had glowed in the southwest most of the afternoon, had disappeared with the sun. The sky was a tawny fog of formless cloud without the relief of one sunset streak. As far as land may stretch, the prairie spread its ashen whiteness, splotted only with leafless bushes and dead growth. Everywhere the powdery snow ran low and stealthily with the wind.

Through the solitude and the dusk came the cheerful sound of sleigh-bells. Puffing white breath, as a dragon breathes fire, a horse jogged into sight—an old beast evidently. Like the snow-driven plain, he too was ashen-colored with black markings. And the sled matched the old horse: none of your dashing city "cutters" shining black and red, but a substantial box sitting solidly and low on heavy runners. There was space in it for a sack or two of flour, and a seat in front for those who owned it. Two furry masses surmounted this seat, and from these also there proceeded the white breath of life. The horse stumbled in a snow-drift, but recovering himself quickly went doggedly on.

"Poor Old Ned!" It was a young man's voice which emerged, metallic, from the shaggier fur pile—the one which seemed to hold the reins. "It's a rough night to take you out, old fellow. And it looks as if things were shaping for a blizzard. But cheer up! It's Christmas Eve!"

A woman's voice, young too and anxiously sympathetic, came from the smaller peak of furs:

"Yes, it's a bleak night for an old horse. Ned's not as young as he once was. Do you remember when we got him, Tom?"