

the pioneer lines in their faces gouged a little deeper—saw an ox plod slowly up to their house through the trackless snow. In the sled with the strange dark-faced driver were their three children waving hands in greeting.

“Merry Christmas, Mother!”

“Merry Christmas, Dad!”

“Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas!”

Long before they reached home the trio had conspired to make light of their night's hazards. They thought they could easily lead their parents to believe that, owing to the lateness of the train, and the blizzard, they had spent the night in the village.

It may have been because it was Christmas that both parents made a brave pretence that they had not worried. At any rate there was to be no communal recognition of the fact of anxiety on Christmas Day—the day, too, of Will's home coming. The father went so far as to admit aside to his daughter that “Mother was a bit worried.”

“I could see that your father was anxious,” said the mother confidentially to Tom.

It went no farther than that, until the inquiry came: “Where's Ned?”

Then three young faces grew serious, and with many incoherences and some kindly meant misrepresentations, the story came out bit by bit. When the pioneer farmer began to clear his throat noisily, that set them all off. It was not less honorable to the memory of Old Ned that the manifestations of feeling which followed were also a relief from the pent-up anxieties which all had felt for one another. The mother found the first words:

“Poor Old Ned! It was Ned who educated you children.”