

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

THAT SLEIGH RIDE.

By Neil Dawson.

I said last year that they warn't goin' ter fool this old jay agin.

"Just you ketch me," sez I till the old woman, 'givin' any of them kids a ride agin, en' 'drivin' the life out of the horses."

"Och, now," sez Nora, and she giv me a kind of a shy side look, "sure, it didn't hurt the horses at all, at all. Why, man, dear, the good it did that one little peaky-faced chap that you sed laughed so hard to see their fat hips shake when they trotted, would more than pay fur all the harm it ever did the horses. En' besides," sez she, "I know every lad in yer sleigh was just proud to get ridin' after such a spankin' pair of blacks, s'posin' they were big, heavy fellows. I'll warrant one thing, that there warn't a fatter or sleeker team in the whole procession."

I just looked at her en' said nothin', fur, to tell the truth, when I thought of the way that we beggar held his sides en' laughed, I jist hed me hands full to keep me face straight. But all the same I jist quietly made up my mind that they didn't ketch me nappin' agin.

But that was a year ago, en' a body do' forget a pile in a twelvemonth. En' now here agin last Sunday if they didn't go en' ketch me nappin' after all. Now, I don't mean that I was really havin' a nap, for our church is no good of a place nowadays fur that, at all, at all, but what I mean is this: you see, bein' that I am a man now of nigh on to fifty, en' bein' that we live five miles out in the country, en' bein' that it was a purty cold mornin', en' the church was purty blamed cosy,—well, such bein' the case, a fellow might surely hev leave to stretch once or twice in the announce ments. For a stretch in announcements or a yawn in the singin' is all a fellow kin git these times with us.

Well, as I was goin' ter say, I was jist hevin' a bit of a stretch en' a look at the comical faces of some wee gaffers in front of me, when the parson sez: "Well, friends, the superintendent of the Sunday school and I have been hearing some very anxious inquiries lately about when we are going to have that sleigh ride."

Just at this point the woman gave me a poke with her elbow, en' I could see a smile on her face. I tried to look very cross, but et the same time, because of something I hed jist seen, I knew it was all up with me. Say, you should hev seen the faces of those little clumps in front when parson mentioned the word sleigh ride. I tell yer what, I wur a study in freckles, en' no mis take. The off lad's red hair wurnt in it any more for brightness. Sez I to me-self, if that's the way it works on them, it would be worth while killing a horse or two.

But when the superintendent collared me, downstairs, I jist sez: "No, ye don't. Ye loaded me too heavy last year."

"Not at all," he sez, "it was the lads all wanted to ride after your pretty, fat horses."

"Well, ye driv too fast," sez I, en' I started for the door.

"Tut, man," sez he, "your horses could beat the whole bunch if you'd only let them go. We'll depend on you," sez he, as I was goin' out of the door.

"Better not," sez I.

Well, the woman never mentioned the thing all the way home. But once she remarked that it wur a shame the way I was stuffin' them horses with oats, en' them fifty cents a bushel. "Anybody ken see," sez she, "that they're fatter en' more glossy then they wur a year ago, when oats was cheap." I knew what she was hittin' at, but I jist said nuthin'. But all the same I gave

the blacks more oats than ever all that week, and very little hay. En' more than that, I spent about an hour every day cleanin' en' rubbin', till I hed their hips jist shinin'.

Then, on Friday mornin', I half filled the big sleigh box with straw, en' at three o'clock that afternoon I drove up in front of the church.

"Hello, here's the fat hips agin," shouted one of the lads, en' he came with a race en' jumped in beside me. I looked at him, en' saw it was the same little peaky-faced chap that hed laughed so much last year, en' I was tickled to see that he was beginnin' already, as he looked first at one horse en' then at the other. I looked round, en' durned if you could tell whether I hed a sleigh at all or not, for you could see nothin' but kids, all boys, and as jolly a crew as ye iver laid yer eyes on.

There was eight or nine sleighs in all, and when all were loaded and the start made, the cheering and yelling was fit to rouse up the laziest horse in four counties. The blacks were fair dancin', and as eager as colts. Up the main street we went, cheerin', yellin', singin', and laughin', with flags aflyin' en' heads abobbin'. Everybody turned to look en' smile. Even that old c'rank, Crusty Williams—whose face is pucker-ed with sixty years of steady frownin'—took the dirty old pipe from between his tough old gums, en' stood there with a broad grin on him, the first I hev seen on him in five year.

Round and round the town we went, en' everywhere it wur just the same—smiles, smiles, smiles. They greeted us in open doorways, in big, bright windows, on street corners, everywhere, and everywhere answering cheers followed one another down the line. Twice I joined in with the lads, and yelled like all possessed. I wonder what the mis'ers would hev sed if she had seen me. But I simply couldn't help it. I haven't felt so good for many a day. Many a side glance I took at the wee, peaky-faced chap as he laughed en' cheered en' clapped his hands.

At last, when we had been goin' about an hour, the head of the procession swung around a corner out towards the Main street. I knowed at a wink it was down the Main street once more, then across the bridge to the church, en' done. I held the blacks in fur all I was worth till the others had got around the corner.

"Boys," I sez, "keep as still as mice, en' we'll hev some fun. We won't turn here; we'll go straight down to the next corner, en' then turn en' head them off at the market on Main street. But ye mustn't let them hear us, or they will beat us, fur they hev a big start. At a slow trot we passed the corner without turning, en' any in the other sleighs that saw us thought the big blacks were playin', en' we were dropping out. But jist as soon as we were hid by the buildings there was a change.

"Come here, boys," I sed, en' I giv the whip a crack. The blacks jumped fur like a pair of jack-rabbits. It was down grade, en' they were soon runnin' like a pair of deers.

"Go it, boys! Go it, I tell ye!" en' I shook the lines over their broad backs. Away they went at a wild gallop. I could see the boys silently clapping their knees, en' punchin' each other en' grin-nin'; but not a cheer or a laugh was to be heard. The wee lad beside me held his hand squeezed against his mouth, en' I could see he was jist bustin' in with laughter, as he watched the fat ashakin' on their big hips.

"Frank! Joe! Go on, ye rascals!" I sed, en' I gave each of them a smart cut of the whip. I tell yer what, there was somethin' adoin' about that time. Lucky fur us there was no police donderin' about; en' lucky fur everybody that nothing got in the road.

The boys watched for an opening between the buildings. At last they caught a glimpse of the other sleighs, en' I heard the whisper, "We're goin' to do it. We are, sure." En' I saw them pound their knees harder than ever. Then another opening came, en' I heard the boys say, "Oh, they're driving hard. I wonder if they saw us. I hope we beat." I jumped to my feet, wildly out the air with the whip, shook the lines over them, en' gave the blacks a cheer. I wish you hed seen them. It was grand. I didn't think it was in them. They fairly flew. When we came in sight of the corner we hed two rods to the good, but we hed to make the turn while the others were straight. The superintendent's blood was comin' like a whirlwind.

"Boys," I sed, "cheer like mad!" I didn't hev to tell them again. You'd think the half of the world was yellin'. The blood shied off en' hesitated. I knew he would et that volley, en' we swung in ahead, en' led the way down Main street. En', say, the racket was worse then if there hed been an election.

But now it's all over, en' the town is left behind, en' the blacks er steamin' like fresh boiled praties, as they trudge quietly along, with the lines hangin' on the dash-board, en' I'm starin' at the old buffalo robe en' wonderin' if it was worth while.

Worth while! Of course, it was worth while. Why jist think of the dozens of little hearts that have been made glad en' happy. How the memory will hang on, too, en' gloat over this day's fun! Poor little chaps en' timid little girls that perhaps would never be asked to hev a ride again fur a whole year. Why, I heard one bright little monkey say: "Say, folks, isn't it good to get hev'in' a sleigh ride when you know the man really wants you on. It's different to jist hangin' on to a bob."

Worth while! Yes. Just see all them smiles, all along the way. An article that's far too scarce in this old world.

Worth while! Why, yes. I've been a boy again this afternoon myself, en' that's the worth while even if I did make a fool of myself.

We Canadians sometimes complain of our long winters, but all the same, we wouldn't like to give up our sleigh rides. I know of at least a hundred and fifty hearts that tonight have no quarrel with our Lady of the Snows.

A sleigh ride! Yes, sir, I pity the fellow that tonight has no jolly sleigh ride that he can look back to. It makes me smile yet to think of one I had nearly thirty years ago. There was a whole pile of us big boys en' girls. I tell you it was jolly. The girls were full of fun. They would throw snow at the fellows, en' poke it down our necks, en' throw off our caps, en' so on. En' then there was Nora M—, the girl that a fellow would give anything to hev even hit him with a snowball, but she wouldn't. She might make free with others, but with the one she thought most of she was as shy as a bird. How it made a fellow tingle all over to even touch her hand as he helped her from the sleigh. En' when he hung on to her little mit till he pulled it off, en' then teased her by givin' her a handful of snow when she reached for it, en' she so far forgot her reserve as to playfully pull his ear in return, how it made him ridiculously happy and put a smile in his heart for a week afterwards.

En' then those big sleigh loads that we used to gather up when we had the cottage prayer-meetings. I tell ye it was gran' the way we used to sing hymns when we were goin' home, till the woods would ring. En' then in every pause there was the merry jingle of the sleigh-bells.