

The HORSE THAT
EDUCATED THE
CHILDREN



A CHRISTMAS STORY
OF THE CANADIAN
PRAIRIE

By

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OF THE CANADIAN PRAIRIE

BY
LYON SHARMAN

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LYON SHARMAN

The Horse that Educated the Children

I

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?"

"No, that's too far back for me."

"I can remember distinctly. Father brought him over from Brandon, when we had been out here about a year. We had only the team of oxen before that."

"Oxen!" the young man sneered; "Just like a dirty Galician!"

The girl laughed: "But good horses were scarce and expensive then, and Dad was hard up in those days, you know." This girl, grown a woman too soon, looked far away into the murky light, thinking of those first pioneer days, which the younger brother at her side could not recall. She broke off her reverie, as if with resolution: "But it's all over now; and next year you will be going East to college yourself."

"I say, Madge, that will be great!" and the young fellow slapped his big left glove against the one that was holding the reins.

"And Will is coming all the way home—just for Christmas; I can scarcely believe it," said Madge.

"I guess the Old Man can afford it with thirty-seven bushels to the acre."

"Yes, a father like ours," Madge spoke proudly. "Think of Old Man Ricker's sons. Why, he had four sections—almost all in wheat. But do you think his boys will ever get a chance at college? Not a bit of it! What does Old Man Ricker do with his money anyway, Tom?"

"He buys more sections and puts in more wheat. Ask me something harder."

Madge's rejoinder was one of those expressive monosyllables which have never been spelled and put into the dictionaries. Then she fell to meditating on the superiority of her parents, who believed in education a little more than in Number One Hard.

City parents, who send their children scampering off to a school around the corner, have no need of convictions about education. The human instinct for shifting trouble and responsibility upon others, makes for the schooling of the young. A natural desire (which even the best of parents share) to get relief for short periods daily from the exacting demands of the little people, helps the school attendance. If through negligence city children are not sent to school, the parents have to face the pointed criticism of neighbors; and neighbors can be very pointed where children are concerned.

It is not so in rural districts. On the frontier of the new West it is very different. If a pioneer's children obtain even a common education, you may be sure that somebody in his family has not only believed in education, but has attended to it. Someone must get the children up before daylight in winter; someone must protect them against the requisition of their help in many emergencies of seedtime and harvest; someone must be daily packing lunches, and oftentimes heating stones to put in the bottom of the sleigh; and in all weathers, hot or cold, moist or dry, someone must drive them to school.

It did not occur to Madge to give herself any credit for the educational achievements of her family. The pioneer hardships had caught her in her schoolgirl years, and had deprived her of most of her schoolgirl rights. When the channel of personal ambition had been cut off, her undaunted aspiration transferred itself to her two brothers. It was she who had taught them their letters in the little log shack which was once their home. When the district school had opened, she had clasped them tightly by the hand and had led them up to that terrifying Unknown Danger, the Teacher. Day after day, year in and year out, she had driven them to school, until she saw them safely pass their "entrance examinations." She it was who had persuaded their father to take the money out of the bank and send Will to Winnipeg to the Normal School. And she had secretly nourished his ambition through the severe discipline of country school-teaching on toward college. Now, having completed one year of the college course at Toronto, he was well on in his second, and—wonder of wonders—coming home for Christmas.

II

"Sis, do you remember the first day I went to school—down there in the village?" Tom gestured off to where two or three lights indicated a prairie settlement.

"To be sure I do; didn't I wash your face, put on your collar, and take you?"

"The kids ragged me so about my cap. It was a funny cap, Madge. Do you remember? Mother made it, didn't she?"

"Mother had to make most of our clothes then."

"It was green, Madge, very bright green!"

"Oh, yes, I know. Mother made it out of a worn-out felt table cover."

"The kids kept calling me Pat or Patrick for a long while after."

Madge laughed. Then lapsing into sentiment she said: "It was Old Ned took us back and forth to school."

"That's right! In thunder-storms and forty below! He's such a steady beggar; I never saw him shy at anything except at an Indian."

"Old Ned hates an Indian; I have often wondered why."

"Probably at some time he belonged to an Indian who didn't treat him right. He seems to like all of us, doesn't he?"

"Dad's always good to his horses," said Madge.

"Yes. . . . When we drove Ned to school, we used to put him up in Bates's stable and get him again as soon as school closed."

"In winter, Tom. But in summer I would drive you and Will to school, and then take Ned home to work."

"And let us foot it home after school in the evening."

"Well, I'm sure six miles never hurt two healthy boys."

Old Ned tossed his head to one side as if he knew he was being talked about. Or possibly it was to remind his driver that they were approaching the railway track; and, unafraid of trains as he was, Ned meant to take no risk at a grade crossing.

"I wonder whether the train is on time." Someone had to make the inevitable remark.

"I do hope so," said Madge. "I can scarcely wait to see Will. But the train is not due yet, is it, Tom? I have an errand over at The Enterprise."

After considerable difficulty in consulting his watch—due to his heavy wrappings—Tom turned the horse's head down the village street to the store, which was trying hard to sustain the name of The Enterprise. With the lights shining out on the snow, and economic bits of holly and cedar displayed in the windows, it looked in a half-hearted way a little like Christmas Eve.

III

The station agent gave Tom the negative assurance that Number Three had not been reported late. So old Ned was tied up under lee of the building with a blanket over his back. Madge and Tom went inside and hovered cheerfully over the little smoky stove.

But of course Number Three was not on time; who ever heard of a train being on time on Christmas Eve? For over a thousand miles Number Three had been losing time, unloading and loading on boxes, parcels and mail bags—the Christmas presents of the East to the West, of the stay-at-homes to the adventurers in the newer country.

Half an hour passed and the train was reported "Late"—how late no one knew; the telegraph was somewhat interfered with by a storm down the line. Tom went out and patted Old Ned, who shook himself and whinnied cheerfully. Coming back to his sister, he reported:

"It blows more and more like a blizzard."

The half-hour lengthened to three-quarters, and then to an hour. The young people waited still.

"Poor Ned!" said Madge. "Isn't it pretty cold for him outside? Hadn't we better put him up at Bates's?"

"But Tom opined that the train would be here any minute. Nevertheless, he went out and added the buffalo robe for the comfort of Old Ned's back.

After a while Madge peered out of the window against which the snow was drifting. She could hear the whoot of the wind in spite of the rattling window sash.

"I think we ought to put Ned up," she said to Tom.

"If the train doesn't come in fifteen minutes by the clock, I'll put Ned up. It looks as if it were gathering for a real blizzard. In that case we haven't any time to lose after the train gets in."

Madge looked again out of the window, where the curling whirls of snow seemed intent on some ghastly mischief, and consented. Her brother whistled a popular air, breaking it off with:

"Cheer up, Madge! It's Christmas Eve!"

They returned intermittently to the stove, and repeatedly studied the printed announcements, still tacked to the walls, of summer excursions long since taken and all but forgotten: to the Rockies, to the Lake of the

Woods, to the States. When the fifteen minutes were up, Tom bombarded the station agent for news of the train.

"Should be here very soon; was reported ten minutes ago from Lewis."

Then Tom went outside and stared down the track. Tiring of that, he consulted the thermometer, which stood about zero; but it felt much colder, so Tom went inside again.

Ten minutes more they waited, while the wind grew shriller, and the snow drifted into white lines under the door. Madge propped her feet on the fender of the stove, not in expectation of much warmth, but to keep them off the drafty floor.

At last the station agent began to bustle about—he got very busy over a couple of express parcels and a mail bag. Presently the train came pounding in (one hour and forty minutes late) spattered with snow and bearded with frozen steam. For exactly one minute Number Three stopped, to let off one passenger, take on one mail bag and two express parcels; then it went grinding on its narrow steel way.

Madge was kissing Will rapturously. Tom shook his hand in the suddenly diffident fashion of the still-at-home brother. Old Ned whinnied as if he feared he might be overlooked. Then Will slapped the horse on his side and tickled his soft, agitated nose.

"Do you mean to say that Ned has been standing here in the cold for an hour and a half?" Will spoke sharply to Tom. But Madge, holding a just balance between these brothers of hers, interposed:

"We were expecting the train every minute, Will. Tom saw the blizzard coming up, and knew we would have no time to lose."

"I guess Tom was right about that," responded Will. "It has been nothing but blizzard for the last hour of my trip."

IV

Even as they settled themselves in the sled, a fine snow began to fall. But Old Ned gaily tossed his mane, and the bells jingled rhythmically with his steady trotting. It was as if he were trying to say:

"Cheer up, everybody! It's Christmas Eve!"

Faster fell the snow and faster. Soon it was flying hither and thither, everywhither. They had scarcely got out of sight of the last village lamp when Tom mumbled back of his turned-up fur collar:

"The trail is nearly covered already."

"Let Old Ned find the way," said Madge wisely.

"Trust Ned! He's never lost a trail yet," said Will.

The way home was an old Indian trail. No one pretended to use the "road allowance" yet. Like all the public highways of the prairie it had been surveyed with mathematical exactitude, but its straight lines and right angles took no account of sloughs or wooded thickets. Until the rural municipalities should seriously undertake road making, the "road allowance" remained an impracticable highway, though useful enough as a boundary between farms. The old trail, on the contrary, kept clear not only of visible obstacles, but of some long since disappeared. Yet with all its windings it was a smooth and comfortable trail, and Old Ned knew it to its last curve.

Every swing in the trail which brought the travellers against the wind, made conversation difficult, for the hard snow pelted their faces like sharp sand. So the three of them sat silent, while the faithful fourth plodded on, plunging a little in drifts, tipping the sled occasionally to one side. At each of these irregularities Tom would pull reassuringly on the reins and say:

"Cheer up, Ned! It's Christmas Eve!"

Before they had driven ten minutes the horse began to lag as if travelling heavily, and then unaccountably slipped. Tom pulled him up short.

"I'm afraid we're off the trail," Tom spoke with a stern suppression of feeling that made a shiver run down his sister's back. Throwing the reins to Will, he leaped from the sled. Through the snow he dug with the heel of his boot. He uncovered the smooth ice of a frozen slough.

Nothing was visible by which he could get his bearings; there was only blinding, muffling whiteness everywhere—white flakes which seemed to float and soar instead of settling as flakes should do. Will was out of the sled in a moment, and suggested following their track back. This they succeeded in doing until they got clear of the ice. Then they came to a wind-swept area where their track was as completely obliterated as if they had

travelled that way hours before.

"We'll just have to keep going now," the brothers agreed. So they walked on either side of Old Ned in the blinding pother, watching as best they could for a building, a straw stack, a light—anything which meant proximity to a human habitation. And as they walked, horse and men were feeling with their feet for the hardened ruts of a trail. They stopped short at the scratch of branches; shifting to one side and making no headway they realized that they were on the edge of a poplar coppice.

"Gee, this is rum! We're up against a bluff," said Tom.

"Then there is nothing to do but circumnavigate it," said Will. He knew that movement in some direction was their only course of action unless they wanted to lie down and freeze.

"Hadn't we better keep headed against the wind? It's our only guide now. Its general direction was at our backs as we went to the village."

"Good idea!" assented Will. "We'll keep against the wind."

To each of the brothers the thought came: "What if the wind should shift?" But their optimistic intention toward each other withheld them from uttering it.

V

With his long neck dropped dejectedly from his shoulders, Old Ned plodded on. He had lost the trail for the first time in his life and he evidently felt the shame of it. On either side of him walked a human friend, one of whom could not remember a time when he had not trusted this horse. And they bore him no grudge now. Tom stroked his shoulder kindly and said:

"Cheer up, Old Ned! It's Christmas Eve!" But the old horse had no heart left to appreciate attentions.

They were lost absolutely in the blizzard. They might have been within a half-section of home; they might have been anywhere. On they floundered, stumbling at unevenness, tangling in protruding bush and weed, or slipping on sheets of ice; and incessantly men and beast were feeling, feeling with their feet for the ruts of a trail.

"All right, Sis?" Tom shouted back. Her reassurance

could just be heard, although she shouted it in the teeth of the wind.

As she sat alone in the sled there kept coming to Madge's mind certain stories she had heard: how Jack Craven went for a doctor on such a night, but never got to town, and was found a day later lying stiff in the snow a half-mile from his home. There was the case, too, of the big bachelor, Hugh Grady, who set out from town for his shack when a blizzard was threatening, and was found later—in his own dwelling to be sure, but dead of the cold before he could light the fire which was to save his life.

Madge was trying to dismiss these dreadful stories from her thoughts, when she was rejoined by Will, whom Tom had peremptorily ordered back to the sled to rest up a bit.

"We may have to take turns at this before morning," Tom had said.

When Will got into the sled, Madge was ready with a suggestion.

"Wouldn't it be better if we sat on the floor of the box and rode with our backs to the wind? We shouldn't feel the cold quite so much, and we could keep our eyes open more easily, and look out sharper for a light."

"It's worth trying," Will agreed. "Tom will look out ahead anyway." Whereupon Will tied the reins to the seat, removed his suitcase to the front, and settled down on the floor of the sled close to his sister.

For a very long time they were still, both of them too anxious to talk. There was only the ironic sound of their cheerful sleigh-bells, and the jeer of the wind which threw the sound back to them.

Abruptly the sled stopped. Tom thought he had detected the three parallel ruts characteristic of a trail. Will was beside him in an instant, and together the brothers searched with feet and hands.

"Glory be! It is a trail," said Tom.

"It can't be a much travelled one," objected Will.

"Any trail will do for tonight."

"The question is: Can we follow it?"

"We'll follow it step by step."

To do this they had to turn aside several points from the wind. For perhaps a half-hour they progressed at a

snail's pace, feeling always for the trail ahead. In this work Ned was as alert and careful as either of the men, and much more canny. Suddenly something loomed against them. They had only to put out their hands and feel—what? A haystack! Confident that there must be a stable or shed of some sort beyond, they pressed forward. The horse ploughed heavily through a drift, where the snow had been checked by the stack. They went a few steps beyond, but there was no sign of a building. Guiding themselves as best they could by the wind, they strove to make a small circuit in the thick storm in search of the buildings, which they were satisfied could not be far off. They reinforced their searching by shouting at the top of their voices to attract attention. Suddenly they found themselves on ice treacherously snow covered. Then they realized in a flash that they were as much lost as ever. By token of the ice they understood that they had found nothing but a marsh haystack by a slough, where some farmer had cut the rich native grasses of the prairie lowlands, stacking them on the spot to be hauled away as needed in winter. This farmer's house might be miles off.

If they could find the haystack again, it was just possible that they might follow the faint trail back to where it joined a better travelled one. This the brothers set themselves to do. Steering as correctly as they could by memory of the angle of the wind at their approach, they labored on. Ten minutes or so they moved slowly, but there was no looming of the haystack in the night-ridden snow, nor any hardening of the prairie under their feet. Old Ned's head dropped lower and lower. Confessing at last that they were lost again completely, Will sent Tom to the sled to take his turn at rest, while he and Ned took up the aimless plodding forward.

VI

It seemed an interminable time after, when Madge said to Tom: "Is that a light yonder, or am I only fancying it?" She pointed toward the left rear. Tom peered steadily into the white-flecked darkness, and said that it seemed to him a light, but he could not be sure; in any case it was a flickering light. Nevertheless it was a clue; so he hailed Will, who stopped the horse and looked very hard in the direction indicated, but could see nothing. However, he turned Old Ned's head that way. Persevering

over exceptional roughness, they became convinced that it was a light, and rejoiced. Any light meant rescue. The poorest Galician in the tiniest shack in the wilderness would not turn away a lost traveller on such a night.

They had traversed only a short distance when they found themselves against a low fence-wire, beyond which was a fitfully shining window. Will stepped easily over the wire, and with some fumbling found the door. After much loud knocking he obtained a response from a dark man half dressed, whom he could see by the firelight was a Ruthenian. Will explained that three of them were lost and very cold; might they not come in? But the man seemed not to understand English. He turned aside and spoke to someone in a foreign tongue. Presently a little girl of about ten years appeared, wrapped in a shabby blanket. She addressed Will in English, and he said:

"Why, hello, Irma; is it you?"

It took only a moment for the child to interpret between her father and the visitor. Then Will returned to the sled and brought Madge and Tom to the house—into an atmosphere warm, very ill-ventilated, and smelling of garlic.

"This little girl," he explained, "was a pupil of mine, when I taught school at Warren."

"So we are in the district of Warren, are we?"

"Only ten miles from home," said Tom. It was greatly to the credit of the three that they could laugh at their predicament.

"These people will let us stay here until morning; then if the blizzard is over we can get home." This was Will's summing-up of the program.

With the blanketted child's help they managed to make it clear to the slow-witted Ruthenian that they must put their horse up. Lighting a lantern and donning an evil-smelling sheepskin coat, the man led the way to a small thatched shed very near the house. In this an ox and one cow were sheltered. These animals were tethered aside to make room for Ned, who seemed content to accept this humble hospitality. As Tom patted him good-night, he said: "Cheer up, Old Ned! And a Merry Christmas!" Then carrying Will's suitcase and Madge's parcels, he and the Ruthenian returned to the shack.

Meanwhile the hospitable little girl had mended the dying fire, and Madge and Will were sitting near it talking to her. In the stronger firelight the single room, which

the shack boasted, lay partially revealed. It was none too clean, and strewn about untidily with a litter of tinsel, paper festoons and other debris of Christmas Eve festivities. On a table lay some bottles uncorked and empty. In one corner of the room on a tumbled bunk a woman in her daytime clothes slept heavily. The bottles probably accounted for her not having wakened with the rapping. There were at least four children asleep in various parts of the room, chiefly on the floor. Sitting on Will's knee with her blanket about her, the eldest child of all prattled of the high celebrations of the evening, to which was due the late flickering firelight, which had guided the lost travellers to the window. Indeed, the father had just retired, and the child herself had been too excited to get to sleep when the rap came.

Madge was becoming concerned to get this small person off to bed again, when Will had a happy inspiration. After a few words aside to his sister concerning the packages bought at The Enterprise, he whispered mysteriously into Irma's ear about a Santa Claus plan. If she would promise to go to bed directly after, he would let her step ever so softly about the room and put pieces of candy right beside each of her sleeping brothers and sisters. This was accomplished with much surreptitious glee on the child's part. Then she explained to her father at Will's direction, that the guests needed no attentions of any sort, and only asked to be allowed to sit indoors until daylight. Straightway the father and child retired—if going to bed in the same room with an entire family and three strangers can be called retirement.

Tom consulted his watch and was reminded to say "Merry Christmas" to the other two. The old, old greeting was exchanged in whispers. Then the three settled themselves near the stove to doze as best they could in uncomfortable positions. The morning was yet six hours off.

VII

It was almost eight o'clock when daylight glimmered; a half-hour later the sun rose clearly visible. The blizzard was over and it was creaking cold. Presently the Ruthenian began to bestir himself, and to stir up his heavily sleeping wife. She seemed in none too good a humor at discovering her guests, although the situation was doubtless adequately explained to her by her husband

—enough Ruthenian words were exchanged. Next the eldest child arose, and seemed inclined to hospitalities as before. As the other children wakened one by one there were cries of delight at the discovery of the candy, followed by an awed hush, during which they gathered in various stages of negligence and dirt to inspect the bountiful visitors. Again availing himself of his interpreter, Will explained that they would set out as soon as they could hitch their horse. The Ruthenian put on his sheepskin coat and led Tom to the thatched shed.

The minute the door was opened, Tom called cheerily:
"Hello, Old Ned! A Merry Christmas!"

But there was no answering whinny.

Stepping into the dusk of the shed, Tom could make out that the horse was lying on the straw. Thinking that the animal had been seized with some distemper, he slapped his flank and spoke again. But Ned did not lift his head. Tom would not believe the suggestion that shot painfully through his brain, so he slapped Ned smartly and spoke once more. But it was no use. Ned's legs were too straight and his neck prone.

From the doorway the Ruthenian stared at the prostrate animal with a frightened expression, as if he feared he would be blamed for the horse's death. Unable to speak his language, Tom passed him by and went into the house to bring Madge and Will.

Madge scated herself on Ned's neck and ran her hands through his mane, while Will and Tom and she were saying:

"Poor Old Ned!"

"Dear Old Ned!"

"Is it any wonder?"

"Just think of his age!"

"And the long exposure!"

"He seemed downhearted after he lost the trail, didn't he?"

The thing which they could not talk about was how the dead creature's life had been bound up with their lives.

VIII

An hour after noon of Christmas Day an impatiently waiting mother and an anxiously comforting father—with

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.”