

OLD BILLY
THE SWEET MAKER

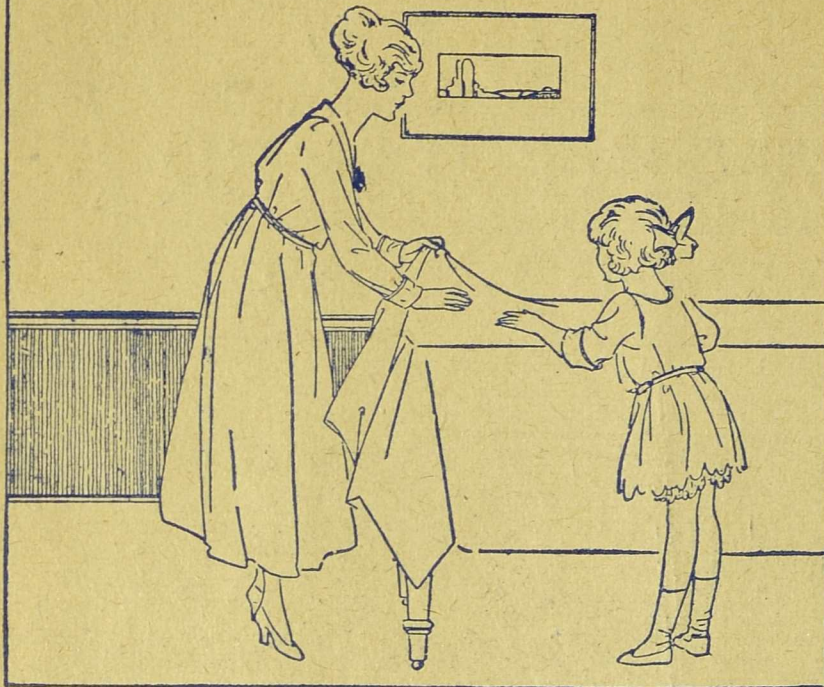
By Gertrude Doughty



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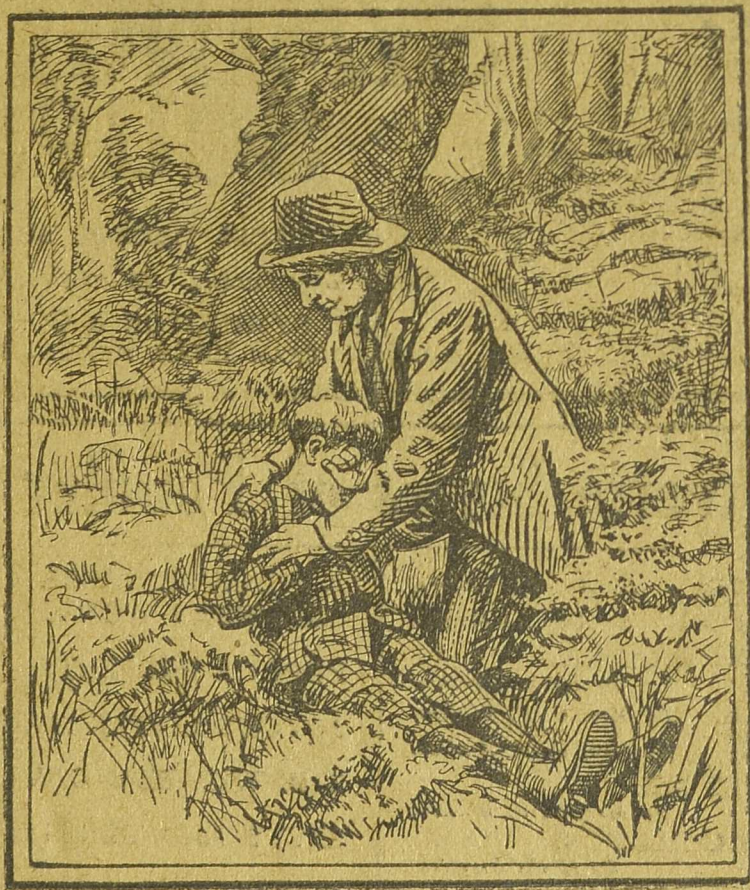
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OLD BILLY, THE SWEET-MAKER

CHAPTER I.

"WHO'LL RIDE BEHIND NEDDY?"

ALONG a country road a donkey-cart was wending its slow way.

It was morning, about eight o'clock, and dew yet hung heavy on leaves and grass; the sun shone gloriously, lighting up the autumnal-tinted trees and causing the flat landscape to glow with colour. It was a narrow lane with low hedges on either side; beyond them marshland, intersected with gleaming dykes. To the west over the marshland, softly veiled in hazy grey this October morning, rose the pointed spire of a village church, while to eastward, beyond the marshes and some rolling heathland, a blue, shimmering line showed where the sea beat upon the coast some mile or so distant.

The sun was hot, the donkey lazy, and the shabby little cart groaned and creaked very slowly over the rough road.

In the cart sat an old man. He looked about eighty, but was really not quite so much, a very small, wizened figure, dressed in rough garments many sizes too large for him, which made his five foot nothing appear more like four feet; his trousers were strapped tightly below

the knees with leather straps, thus shortening them; and displaying a pair of enormous clumsy boots. His coat was a very ancient hunting-coat, the red of it now changed to purple with stress of weather, and on his head was perched jauntily a once black billycock hat, with old-fashioned wide brim.

A quaint enough figure he certainly was, yet a famous character in his way. Far and near was old Billy the sweet-maker known, and, within his circuit of six miles, it would have been hard to find man, woman or child who had not a word of warm friendship for the cheery old man.

As he sat in his cart, with the reins between his fingers, urging on his donkey with sundry and mysterious clicks and clacks of his tongue, the old fellow's face was very pleasant to look at. His wrinkled, shrivelled-up little countenance, the colour of a russet apple, his merry, twinkling black eyes, the thin, white hair standing out round his head in corkscrew curls, all contributed to the picture of happy, simple content.

"Now then, little 'un, best foot forrard, if you please," he exclaimed

suddenly. "Come, pull up, my dear, it won't do to be keeping the children waiting for their sweeties."

With a toss of its shaggy, brown head, the donkey, at the sound of its master's voice, gave a willing spring forward, and broke into a quick little trot, and merrily the cart jolted on towards where a few scattered houses showed the position of a village.

"That's the way to go!" cried Billy, delighted. "The old 'un's a lucky old chap to be your master, ain't he, Ned! Never seed a donkey like you, not in all my born days! You might be a trotter in the Lord Mayor's Show, that you might; this here red coat would do fine for that! We'd make a stir, that we would, up in Lunnon town, Neddy! Hullo, children, mornin', mornin'! Any sweeties to-day? Penny a stick, and such colours as you never see. Whoa, Neddy, whoa!"

Obedying with somewhat startling rapidity, Neddy fell to cropping the gorse bushes which bordered the lane, whilst his master, pulling out a large basket from under the seat, proceeded to display the attractions of his gaily-striped pink and white toffee.

By profession Billy Sanders was a sweet-maker. At home in his little cottage two days in the week he was busy compounding the sticky triumphs, which won him such fame among the children, and each Saturday morning he and Neddy started on their rounds to dispose of their goods.

On lucky days Billy cleared enough to keep him for the following week: on bad days he carried his merchandise home again with his never-failing cheerful countenance, and made up for his losses by running errands for

his neighbours or doing a hand's turn in their gardens, or, for Billy was a Jack-of-all-trades, even earning a few pence by minding toddlers too small for school during those hours their busy mothers were at work.

Happy infants and happy Billy! Almost as much a child as any of them, he thoroughly enjoyed the juvenile company, and fortunately, from the mothers' point of view, his sweeties were wholesome, for Billy was nothing if not generous.

No relations had old Billy, as he would have put it, "not as he knew on." His wife had been dead five-and-twenty years. His sons—he had had two—had vanished from their old father's knowledge; he thought them dead also, and ever spoke of them, with a sad shake of his head, as "my poor boys."

The sweet trade brought in enough for his own and Neddy's very simple wants, the potatoes in his allotment paid his rent, kindly neighbours mended and patched his clothes, and the red coat, next to Neddy, the pride of his old heart, had been, during a very severe winter, the valued gift of the neighbouring squire.

But great as was Billy's admiration for its scarlet glories, flannel linings, and voluminous skirts, yet it could stand but second in his affections, for the chief place in his heart was already filled by what had become almost an idol to the old man, and this was the little brown donkey, Neddy.

For five years now Neddy had been his, from the time when he gave fifteen shillings for the four-month-old shaggy foal to some fisher lads who had picked it up in a coast village in Wales and

brought it round in their smack, and who had been glad enough to sell it for half as much again as they had given for it. It had been out of pity for the forlorn little creature, which the thoughtless boys were teasing and tormenting, that Billy had purchased it with some hidden savings, though he had remembered uneasily that it would be long before it could work for its living, as he led it home to make it warm and comfortable in the shed where he kept his allotment tools.

But the impulsive act soon brought its own reward. The donkey grew attached to its master as a dog, following him everywhere, licking his hands, and rubbing its shaggy, baby head against his shoulder. Neighbours declared laughing that on cold winter nights Billy lay beside Neddy to keep warm, while mischievous boys whispered how Billy and his Neddy lived together in the kitchen, the donkey stretched before the fire on the rug.

Old Billy was always ready to join in a laugh against himself, which was in great measure the secret of his never-failing popularity, and soon “Billy’s brown Dicky,” the name Neddy went by, bid fair to become as popular as his master. His strong little back never felt the weight of a stick; through kindness he learned to obey, to pull the small, rough cart put together for him by the village carpenter, and to trot at command like any pony. No vice had Neddy, no obstinacy either; kind treatment had ever been his share, and a more willing, faithful servant no man ever had, so old Billy was wont to declare.

But we have digressed. Neddy has finished cropping the tenderest

shoots of the gorse bushes, and the smiling children, gathered round the old sweet-man, each held a stick of toffee in their hands; all, that is, but one, the eldest of the group, a boy of about twelve, and his attentions were seemingly entirely given to smoothing the long, silky coat of the donkey.

Billy glanced at the boy, whose head was bent closely over Neddy’s neck, and something wistful and pitying came into his kindly smile.

“Never seed Ned so friendly afore,” he began cheerily, fumbling in his basket as he spoke. “Why, hullo, what’s this! Well, that is surprisin’ now, but here’s a bit of toffee got the end broke off! Dear, dear, no one will be buyin’ that! Here, Jimmy boy, you catch hold; may as well eat it as waste it.”

With a gleeful laugh at his own wit, the little man, leaning from the cart, held out the tempting morsel, but the boy did not look round, or move his head, and the other children broke into titterings and laughter. Billy seemed perplexed and troubled.

“Don’t he like sweetstuff?” he asked, turning to a little girl.

“Jimmy never have a penny,” explained the child with shrill glibness, “and he’ve been a bad boy; he threw stones and cut Eddie’s face ever so bad, and the master took the stick to him.”

“Tcha, tcha!” muttered Billy, shaking his head pompously, while he gathered up the reins. “See here,” he exclaimed suddenly, “who’ll come along o’ me, and ride behind Neddy? I want some ’un to knock at the doors. My pore old legs are that stiff, I can’t climb in and out, not as I used to.”

Just for one second his keen eyes caught an eager glance from the silent figure at the donkey's head, and, waving back the clamouring children, he nodded gaily:

"Right ye are, Jimmy boy, you're the lad for my work. Bye-bye, children! You won't know me with a footman along o' me, will you? Jump in, boy. Whohoop, Neddy, off we go again!"

The lovely, sunshiny morning, the sweet, invigorating breeze just ruffling the sedges in the dykes, the swallows forgetting to fly heavily and dream of coming departure, twittering, and warbling as they hawked overhead,

seemed to have an intoxicating effect on old Billy, and blithely rang his quavering voice as he trolled out a song. Neddy too partook of his master's merriment. Cocking his long ears forward with a knowing air, he laid himself out to do justice to the day, and the pace grew fast and furious. Old Billy whooped and holloa'd him on, as if the red hunting-coat he wore could awake old memories, and Jimmy, the boy, seated yet with downcast face beside him, began to lift his head a little, while slowly, and almost in spite of himself, a smile began to take the place of his sullen frown.

CHAPTER II.

A LITTLE BLACK SHEEP.

"HURRAH!" cried old Billy, in high glee, as he observed this from the corners of his twinkling eyes. "Dear me, what hunters Neddy and me be, to be sure! Expect this here old coat know something about hunting though. Many a time have I seen Squire a-wearing it, while he follered the hounds. Like huntin', Jimmy?"

The boy nodded. His face, as he looked up at his cheery old companion, was pleasant enough now, and, with a sly smile, while Neddy drew up with a flourish before a cottage gate, the old man pulled out of his pocket the same bit of toffee rejected before, and held it out to the boy.

"Now if you'll give an eye to Ned, time I'm seein' Mrs. Withers, I'm sure I'll be obliged," he said. "He'll stand, and don't you be rough with

him, there's a good lad. He's dreadful put about if you lay hold on his ears; you'll not be playin' no tricks with him, will ye, Jim?"

He smiled kindly on the boy, glanced at his donkey, and turned to tramp through the garden, and round to Mrs. Withers's back door.

Jim Blowers was the bad boy of the parish. A "terrible bad boy" the neighbours called him, and indeed they did not complain without reason. His tricks were endless, his mischief annoying to the last degree; so many misfortunes had been traced to Jim, so much trouble had been caused by his naughtiness, that he had become a real byword in the place, and everything that went amiss was sure to be put down, rightly or wrongly, to "that bad boy, Jim Blowers."

Poor little Jim! He did not look

so hopeless a black sheep just now, as he leant over Neddy, fondling his soft nose, and smoothing his long coat, and keeping strict turns with him in licking at old Billy's toffee! He was small for his age, red-haired, and closely freckled all over his face, his wide mouth looked rightly made for smiles, and it was only a certain sullen frown between his eyes which marred what should have been a frank boyish face enough. This frown, however, was not visible just now; Jim laughed gleefully as the petted donkey made petulant and harmless snatches at his sleeve, and when Billy reappeared, followed by Mrs. Withers, a dame of somewhat acid appearance, the old man smiled to find the boy's arms tightly round the donkey's neck, while Neddy's tongue caressed his cheek.

"You be off, Jim Blowers," cried Mrs. Withers shrilly. "I wouldn't let that there boy touch the donkey, not if it was mine, Mr. Sanders," she added harshly, "he's the worst boy for miles round, that he is."

"Thank'ee, ma'am," said old Billy politely, "I'll be sure and call next Saturday. Come, Jimmy lad, we must be going. Neddy and I are in luck to-day," he went on cheerfully, "we got a bit of company. Ain't it curious how the little Dicky knows his friends? The little chap there has a wonderful way with him, and no mistake."

The hours which followed were such as Jim Blowers had never known. There was no room for mischief in the donkey cart, and Billy Sanders was incapable of scolding. The time flew, and the child's face grew rosy and blithe almost as the

old man's, as, his tongue loosed at last, he chirruped to Neddy and chattered gaily with his kind old friend.

Their progress was very slow; now they would stop to ease the donkey, now selling sweets to lighten the basket, now pulling up to gossip with a neighbour, and only too soon was Billy's round over, and Neddy's head set for home. At the entrance gate of a big house Billy pulled up his donkey with his usual "Whoa, Neddy," and turned to the boy at his side.

"Now then, little chap," he said, "we must part here; you run along home, and tell father I hope I haven't kept you too late, and I say, Jim"—Billy leaned from the cart with a friendly and confidential air—"you and I are going to be chums, we are, but we must give up throwing stones, ye know. Come, where's your fist, we must shake hands on it, lad; no more stones for we, I say, not for Billy Sanders nor for Jimmy Blowers, as is chums for ever. That's right, brothers we are from this time out. You'll go along o' me and Neddy again some day, won't you?"

Jimmy's face glowed. He, the naughty boy, the black sheep, was not accustomed to be spoken to so kindly; many more kicks than half-pence, poor little fellow, came to his share in a usual way, but though his face glowed and his heart throbbed with gratitude, yet his tongue was slow, and so he just fondled Neddy and did not speak.

Old Billy climbed slowly down from his cart, and producing a halter began to tie the donkey to the gate, and then suddenly Jim found his voice.

"Let me hold him for you, master," he pleaded, "there ain't no one needin' me, and I'll wait as long as you wish and welcome."

But old Billy shook his head decidedly, it was time for all boys to go home to dinner, and he must be off immediately; and, strange to say, almost for the first time in his life, Jimmy Blowers obeyed at once, though reluctantly, and vanished down the lane.

"Poor little chap," soliloquised the old sweet-maker, "it's a word or two of kindness, that's what he wants. They'll make a reg'lar criminal of him, with their scoldings and that if they don't look out! Wonderful set on Neddy, he is, to be sure!"

The Red House was always his last stopping-place. Here it was that he invariably left sixpennyworth of toffee, and received, besides his sixpence, a cup of tea and a good slice of bread and butter, a gift much appreciated by the old man after his early start and long round with his cart. Here too Neddy was not forgotten, and well the little animal knew this.

During Billy's absence with the basket, the donkey would await him at the gate, his ears forward, his eager eyes, undisguised by blinkers, fixed steadily on that turn of the drive which first allowed a view of the returning red coat, and, as the little man appeared with his quick trotting step, Neddy would strain at his halter, ready to push his hungry nose into the well-known pocket, never yet found bare of juicy apple or slice of bread.

To-day he had not long to wait; the Squire's good housekeeper was too busy for conversation, as Billy's

politeness soon discovered, therefore he had deposited the packet of toffee on the kitchen table, gulped down his tea, and pocketing the dainties for Neddy, had hurried out, munching his bread and butter as he went.

"Come, my dear," cried the old master, climbing stiffly to his seat once more, "we'll get along now, little lad; you and I won't be sorry to see home, sweet home once more, will we?"

Billy's "home, sweet home," as he fondly called it, was very dear to him, and in truth it was a comfortable enough abode for one old man. It was a tiny cottage of two rooms only, standing in its little patch of ground in the very outskirts of the village—far too remote, according to village opinion, being quite a quarter of a mile from the next house. But Billy was of a different mind, and not for anything short of sheer necessity would he have changed his "home, sweet home," for any other in the world. The narrow border below the window he kept gay with flowers, for the sweet-maker was a bit of a gardener in his way, and his "gillies," daisies, tall clumps of white lilies, and chrysanthemums, each in their season, were the pride of his heart.

A rough sandy track, branching from the high road, led to the cottage; in front grew a hedge of box, enclosing the small garden, as high almost as the low thatched roof; in the midst of the hedge a wicket gate opened on to the narrow sanded path which led to the door. Behind the house, and hidden from view, was the shed, which served the double purpose of stable for Neddy's cart and harness and for the shaggy little donkey him-

self, whose special and warmest corner was well littered down with the dry fern which old Billy was at such trouble to collect each autumn from the common behind the house. That common was the donkey's playground. Here on fine days and holidays he grazed the short grass and nibbled his favourite tender shoots of the gorse bushes, returning at his old master's quavering call of “Hi, Neddy, hi, little boy.”

To-day when the cart reached the entrance of the lane, Billy climbed

down once more, and leaving the reins loose in the cart, he toiled on foot through the sand, while Neddy followed him closely. Arrived at the house, he unharnessed his donkey, rubbed him down, fed and fondled him, and then, retiring indoors, sat down to eat his bread and cheese, and smoke his old pipe, his one and only luxury. Soon, under its soothing influence, his head began to droop on the red coat, his eyes slowly closed, and gradually he sank into his peaceful after-dinner sleep.

CHAPTER III.

“HOW MUCH FOR THE DONKEY?”

It was a month later. The weather, so promising earlier, had kept faith with itself, and the autumn was a glorious one. The swallows were gone, it is true, but, as if to keep up the pretence of summer, butterflies yet flitted weakly round what old Billy called his “christianthemums,” and the humming of bees helped the illusion as they tried fruitlessly, poor things, one flower after another for the honey which was not there.

Jimmy Blowers raised his stick and struck at and missed one, as he raced up the lane on his way to the cottage. It was the school dinner hour, and all the children were out at play. Echoes of their merry voices and ringing laughter followed after the boy as he ran, but he did not heed them. Hurrying along through the dry sand, he kicked it up with his shabby boots, in childish enjoyment, till he reached the little house, and tore round to the back door.

It was Friday, and Billy and Neddy would certainly be at home, Neddy at any rate, for his indulgent master never took him out the day before his long Saturday round. With happy assurance Jimmy pushed open the back door and peeped into the kitchen; but it was empty, and the fire had gone out. Billy Sanders was evidently away at his allotment, or at some other job, and Jimmy turned his attention to the stable. Here he was not disappointed; there was a rustle of dry fern as he opened the door, and Neddy's soft muzzle was against his shoulder in an instant, rubbing it gently up and down in the confiding way which had so taken little Jim's heart.

“Eh, little boy,” he whispered, laying his own rough head on the shaggy coat, “you know Jim, don't 'ee, lad? There, see what I've brought Ned to-day—good little fellar; you like a bit of bread, don't 'ee, little chap!”

With eager fingers he hastened to unwrap the newspaper from a parcel of bread, his own dinner, and all he would have to eat till night. With anxious gravity, he divided this into two equal portions, eating up his own share with haste, only after Ned's appetite had been appeased.

The meal over, he fumbled among the harness at the other end of the shed, pulled out an old brush, and fell to dressing the donkey, brushing the silky coat till it shone, smoothing the mane, and touching the long ears with deft gentle fingers, to all of which Master Neddy submitted with a patience extraordinary.

For three long weeks now this weekly dressing had been carried out by the small boy, whose pride and delight it was to turn the donkey out spick and span for the Saturday's expedition. That afternoon when old Billy had shown such tender compassion and help for the little waif, shunned and disliked by everybody else, had wrought a great change in Jimmy. A very warm heart beat in his naughty little body, and the touch of unexpected kindness had filled him with such gratitude as must find an outlet. Every possible moment he spent now at the cottage, and nearly every week saw him proudly seated beside the sweet-maker in the cart for the Saturday round.

To forbid his company would have been the greatest punishment to them both, and it was an understood thing between them, that this was only to be inflicted in the case of a very flagrant bit of mischief. But so far Jim was certainly improving; he had hardly been naughty at all since his friendship with the old man; perhaps

he had not time for tricks when so many little jobs awaited him at the cottage, and the thought, too, that Billy would be grieved if he fell into disgrace helped to keep him straight.

With a last proud pat Jim smoothed down the donkey's mane.

"There we are!" he exclaimed. "What shall us do now, Neddy? School bell won't go for near an hour. There, if I wasn't forgetting that trick of yours! You'll have it perfect to-day, won't 'ee, Ned? Come now, this is the way."

Springing forward he took up a place in front of the donkey, and held out a brown hand invitingly. "Mornin', Ned!" he cried loudly. "Shake hands, lad."

Instantly the donkey lifted its right foot, and laid it in Jim's eager hand. He shook it up and down in supreme delight.

"Good little boy!" he cried. "Won't the old master be just proud now! He hain't never seen you do that trick, not yet he hasn't, but we'll surprise him, won't us, Ned! Tell you what, lad," he went on, still talking aloud, as was his wont, "you and I'll go abroad a bit. The sun shines lovely, Neddy, and you shall have a bit of gorse, 'cause you was so good. Mr. Sanders won't mind, not if I go with you. He wasn't thinking I'd be with you, when he said I weren't to take you out 'cept he was there. He thought you'd run right away, that was it for sure. Now then, just for five minutes, Ned, and we'll be out and in again before the old master gets back."

Pushing open the door, Jim stepped out into the sunshine, and with a toss of his head Neddy, at one bound

was past him and careering up the common.

Jimmy cast a half-guilty look before and behind. Well he knew how naughty he was, and how he was disobeying Billy Sanders's most strict commands, but no one was in sight, therefore he shook conscience to the winds, and with a ringing cheer pursued the donkey at the top of his speed.

What a race they had! Neddy in front, kicking up his heels in abandonment of joy, while behind him ran Jimmy, bounding and jumping with glee. Far away up the common, out

of sight of the cottage they raced, till his spirits sobered at last Neddy pulled up to crop some grass, and, panting and hot, Jim threw himself down on the turf to regain his breath.

"Nice little donkey!"

A strange voice spoke close beside him, and Jimmy sat up with a start. Under a furze bush, a yard or so from him, he saw stretched the long figure of a lad of perhaps eighteen. The thin brown face and contemptuous smile as he glanced at Jim through half-closed eyelids, were quite unfamiliar to the boy, and he stared back without speaking.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RACE.

"Nice little donkey," observed the lad again, as he rolled lazily over on his back, "and how much for the donkey?"

Jim shook his red head stolidly, without moving his eyes from the stranger's face.

"He ain't for sale," he said at last unwillingly.

"Not for sale!" repeated the stranger. "Oh, ain't he? Thought you must be showing him off on purpose; still, if he ain't for sale it ain't no use my sayin' what I thought."

"What?" asked Jim curiously.

The brown-faced lad did not reply, and after a moment Jim got slowly to his feet, and called to Neddy, who instantly trotted up, and put his nose on his little master's shoulder in his usual petted way.

"He's fit for a king!" suddenly drawled the stranger, regaining his feet also, with startling rapidity, and coming to stand by Jim. "You're a lucky chap to have a donkey like that! Ain't many in the world like him, sure and certain; puts me in mind terrible of a donkey of my own."

Jim smiled proudly, as he stood quietly stroking Neddy's nose.

"Ah, you may smile," went on the other boy quickly, "but I speak truth. Trot! I should think my Dicky could trot! I'd run alongside him, and he'd beat me holler, though I can run a bit too. Now this 'un of yours don't look to do that, don't lift his feet not like mine did. No, I reckon he ain't much of a goer."

"Ain't he just then!" burst out Jim, reddening furiously. "A lot you know about Neddy! He'd run a heap

better than your old Dicky; he'd leave you some bit behind, that he would."

The stranger laughed mockingly at the small boy's indignation. "Well, I don't mind a-racing of him," he said coolly; "but if I win, you must own up, young man, as how my Dicky was better than yours."

"Win!" repeated Jim, with the most scathing contempt he was capable of.

"Well, come on, we'll soon be seein' who's in the right," cried the lad good-humouredly. "You stand back now, and Neddy and me'll start fair. Which way shall we go?"

Jim pointed silently, away from Billy Sanders's cottage. His heart thumped painfully, his conscience tormented him; he dared not even think of what his kind old friend would say, but he stifled the uncomfortable prickings. Neddy's honour once vindicated, he would turn home immediately. Meanwhile the stranger cautiously approached the donkey, and the confiding little beast, responding to the coaxing voice, allowed him to come close to him, and pass an arm over his neck while Jimmy watched anxiously from the rear.

With another mocking smile, the stranger suddenly turned and waved his arm, his hat in his hand; then with a loud "Get up, will 'ee," he twisted his fingers in Neddy's mane, and urged him down the hill at the topmost speed the donkey's short legs were capable of.

With straining eyes, Jimmy watched them, at first full of ill-concealed pride in his Neddy: then with a sudden anxiety, which drove the red blood from his head and blanched his ruddy

cheeks. A cold chill ran down his backbone. They were going too far; they must come back. He raised his voice and shouted.

Billy Sanders came in for his tea, tired from his work. He had been tidying a neighbour's garden, and doing a little digging, and his back was aching, as he busied himself with kindling a small fire, and preparing his simple meal.

He wondered once or twice where Jimmy Blowers could be, for lately the boy had often been in and done this work for him, delighting in his never-failing surprise, and almost unconsciously he had come to depend a good deal on Jimmy's help; there was a wonderful deftness about the small rough hands, and Billy, lonely old man that he was, appreciated to the full the child's warm heart and grateful ways.

It had been a silent joy to him to observe the change which was surely and steadily creeping over the little black sheep, though no longer indeed did Jimmy merit that name. Under the sunny influence of love and kindness he was fast growing from a sullen bad-tempered boy into both a gentle and lovable one, with an almost adoring fondness for the sweet-maker, his first and only friend.

Never so happy as in his company, those hours he could spend with him were red-letter days indeed, and Sundays, formerly miserable days to the forlorn naughty boy, were now the happiest of the week, as he sat at Billy's knee, and helped spell out a chapter from the Good Book, or listened, enthralled, to the beautiful Story of Old, which the old man in his simple language loved to tell.

And on his side Billy Sanders had grown attached to the boy as to his own child.

"Wonder where the little chap can have got to," he murmured presently, as he swallowed his second cup of tea. "Hope he ain't fell into no mischief; it ain't often he don't come and help me get my tea. I feel to miss his company, bless his heart."

He listened for a moment, but could hear no steps; so putting aside the tea-things, he settled himself in the elbow-chair for half an hour's rest before beginning to prepare the basket of sweets for the morrow's journey. This was not a long job. Soon the pink and white sticks, made the day before, were all laid out, the basket covered with paper, and, straightening himself with an effort, Billy proceeded to fill a small measure with corn, and opening the door trotted out to give Neddy his evening feed.

It was nearly seven o'clock, and a

beautiful evening, giving promise of a fine day to-morrow, and Billy glanced up at the sky and round about him with a satisfied nod.

"We be having a wonnerful spell of weather, and no mistake," he said, as he lifted the latch of the stable door. "Hi, Neddy, hi, little boy! Friday night, Neddy, and a good dinner. Come, little fellar! Wherever have 'ee got to, rascal?"

The shed was dark, and Billy peered round him blinking. "Seems my sight ain't as good as it was," he muttered uneasily. "Where can the little critter be?"

He took a step more on the dry fern, then a slow flush dyed his face crimson. "He ain't here," he said dully. "Neddy ain't here."

The stable was quite empty.

Billy shivered slightly; it felt so cold and bare without the presence of his favourite. He remained standing for a moment, shaking his head sadly.

CHAPTER V.

HOW NEDDY WAS STOLEN.

"EH, dear, I'm feared it's Jimmy," Billy murmured, "and I'd come somehow to trust the little lad. Mayhap though it was my fault too. I was a silly old man not to see to Ned when I just come in, and now he'll be right tired, and we've an extra long round to-morrow; it's a bad job and no mistake. Ah, Jimmy, Jimmy! I'm feared you've been a naughty, disobedient boy."

He left the stable with slow steps, setting open the door behind him, and looked up the lane anxiously,

expecting to see the boy bring back his donkey. The cheerful old face had a shadow on it; but it was not brought there by anxiety about Neddy. There was no doubt, he thought, that Jimmy had yielded to the temptation of taking him for a run, sitting astride on his rough back, his most supreme treat, and only permitted by old Billy on very special occasions.

The pair would certainly speedily return, but it was the thought that the boy could so deceive and disobey

him which really grieved the old man. He turned over in his mind the words he must say to him, and how, sadly against the grain, he must forbid his company on the morrow.

"Poor little chap," pleaded the tender old heart; "poor little bad Jim; I'm feared we can't be callin' you perfect yet, Jimmy. Well, well, boys will be boys, I suppose. I mustn't be too hard on you."

He re-entered his kitchen, and sat down again to wait; but it was dull and lonely sitting there, and vague fears began to fill his mind as time went on and still the truants did not return. When the tall clock in the corner struck eight Billy roused himself with a start of dismay.

Eight o'clock, and where was Neddy?

Taking his hat, he rammed it over his white hair, and left the cottage. One more look in the empty stable, and he opened the garden gate and stepped into the lane.

"Hi, Neddy! Hi, little boy!" came the familiar call. All was silence.

"Jimmy," he shouted, after a pause, "where are you, lad! If you're playing tricks, give over now." He listened eagerly for an answer, stooping low to peer under the hedge on to the common, for it was growing very dark. A lump of something black on the other side caught his eye, and pushing through a gap he hastened to examine it more closely.

"Jimmy," he cried, a quiver of alarm in his voice, "what is it, boy? Come, look up; art hurt, poor little lad? See, it's old Billy; don't be feared of Billy."

Face downwards on the ground,

his head buried in his arms, hidden quite under the thick hedge, lay Jimmy Blowers. He did not get up in response to Billy's pull on his arm, only struggled to hide his face more, while his body shook with painful sobs.

Silently the old man passed his hand over the small legs and arms to find if there might be any hurt, then, raising him in his arms, he forced him to display his face—a face swollen out of all recognition by reason of the tears he had shed.

"Oh, master, master!" he panted, grasping a corner of the red coat tightly in his hand, "whatever shall us do? He've stole our Neddy, master, and it's all my fault!"

How Billy got the boy to the cottage he could hardly have told. When at last he succeeded in pulling him to his feet, Jimmy shook as if he had the ague, and he could hardly stand; his sobs were pitiable, he seemed almost beside himself. Indeed old Billy, who was terribly frightened, feared the child had gone out of his mind. However, by dint of force and persuasion, he at last got him in the kitchen, and seated in the big elbow-chair.

Poor Jimmy! In spite of his twelve years he looked a very small and forlorn object among the faded patchwork cushions, and the old sweet-maker screwed up his mouth anxiously as he observed the stricken little face.

"There, there, little lad," he murmured soothingly, as he trotted about, to and fro, with the kettle, pouring water on the still warm tea-leaves, and stirring the fire to make a cheerful blaze, "there, there, Jimmy boy;

you'll be feelin' better presently. Wonnerful good a cup of tea is when you're chilled like; we'll soon have you spry as a kitten again. Come, drink a sup o' tea, and tell old Billy what's come to you."

But what between excessive fatigue and abject misery, it was not possible for Jimmy to obey the kind words; he was incapable of even holding the cup between his fingers, and it was left to his old friend to feed him like a baby. When a few spoonfuls of the hot liquid had been forced down his throat he seemed better, and Billy nodded his head cheerfully as he drew up another chair and seated himself beside him.

"Now, little chap," he began, clearing his throat, and carefully refraining from looking into the downcast face, "we's chums, you and I, and don't have no secrets from each other, so make a clean breast of it, boy, and we'll have a try, both on us, to put wrong right, if we can."

But the kind voice was more than Jimmy could bear. With a very bitter sob, he slipped from his seat, and, kneeling beside old Billy, he buried his rough head in the red coat,

and in miserable, halting words, told what he had done.

That night Jimmy Blowers did not go home. An hour later Billy left him asleep on his own bed, worn out with emotion, while the old man himself, his head sunk on his chest, sallied out alone to seek the advice and help of the village policeman.

Poor old Billy! His eyes smarted with actual tears as he pictured Neddy, his petted favourite, in the rough, nay, maybe cruel, hands of the gipsy lad. Very hot had been his anger as he heard how Jimmy Blowers had been tricked and the theft carried out, but it was not possible for old Billy to be angry long, and anger had soon softened away into pity for little Jim, as he told painfully how he had followed after the thief; how he had seen him spring on Neddy's back and urge him on with a stick; how still he had followed for many miles, meeting no one to help him on the lonely common, till from a hidden dip another gipsy man had suddenly sprung to meet him, who, using dreadful threats, had driven him back in terror of his life, poor little fellow, the way he had come.

CHAPTER VI.

"WHAT A TO-DO ALL ABOUT A LITTLE DICKY."—THE SQUIRE'S TOFFEE.

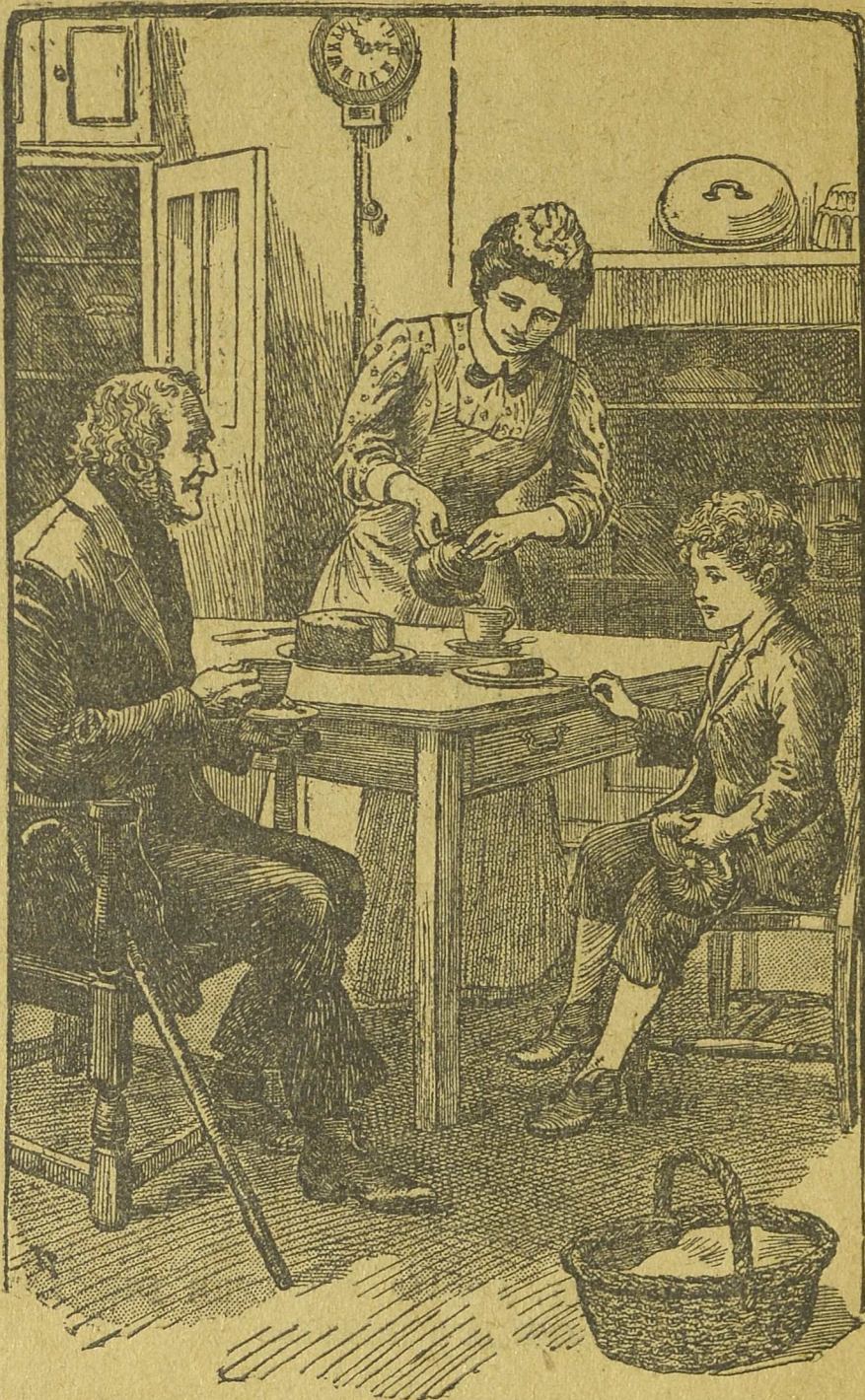
BILLY'S visit to the village constable soothed also some of his anxiety. Fortunately he was to be found at home, and he listened gravely to what Billy had to say, promising to set to work at once in the matter,

and replying to the pathetic look on the old man's face with a—

"Don't you worry, Mr. Sanders. I've no doubt whatsoever that that little Neddy of yours will be standing in his own stable to-morrow. We've

had our eye on them gipsies for some time now, and if it wasn't for your trouble, we'd be right down glad to

Billy who returned home to the cottage to pass what remained of the night in his big elbow-chair.



"I DARESAY JIMMY LIKES A BIT OF SWEETSTUFF, TOO."

have a case against them—a low thieving lot they are, and time they was put off the common."

Therefore it was a lighter-hearted

Jimmy woke next morning to find the old man standing by his bed. He was dressed ready for his usual Saturday's round, his hat was on

his head, and he held a stout staff in his hand. Jimmy sat up and stared at him. Not all at once could he

Billy shook his head. "Why, no," he said cheerfully, "not yet he ain't, but he'll be here by-and-by, so don't



THERE STOOD DEAR LOST NEDDY HIMSELF,

collect his thoughts, but in a moment all the trouble of yesterday returned to him, and he sprang up with an eager "Have Neddy come back?"

you fret. I'm just a-goin' to try a new sort of hobby to-day." He screwed up his rosy little face into a smile, and tapped one of his short,

thin legs. "Ever heard of Shanks's mare, Jimmy? Wunnerful animal to go is Shanks's mare, and we're just about to start, she and I."

Jimmy did not return the old man's attempt at merriment, and he did not reply, only jumped up hastily, and began pulling on his clothes, keeping his head bent to hide his tearful eyes.

"By, by, lad," went on Billy, kindly, "p'raps you might be lookin' in to tea. I shall have right a lot to tell you this evenin', I expect."

"I'm a-goin' to carry the basket," the little boy said earnestly. "Please, master, I'll be a good boy; let me come along o' you. I can't stay here, with Neddy gone, and all the folk a-talkin' at me."

He gulped down a sob as he pushed past him into the kitchen, and seizing the basket of sweets standing ready on the table, he hung it over his arm, and stood waiting.

"Tcha, tcha," said Billy doubtfully, "folk have no call to say naught to you, Jimmy. I'll tell you what it is, we'll just keep our business to ourselves, lad. There ain't no one knows but what I told you to give our Ned that run on the common, and nothin' else do consarn them, not what I can see.

"But I doubt you ain't fit for a long tramp to-day, boy, feel a bit tired, most-like. Suppose you was to mind house for me; and you might do a hand's turn in garden, that path look somethin' shockin'."

"Nay, master. Please, Mr. Sanders, please, please let me go along o' you," pleaded Jimmy earnestly, "I'll be a good boy, that I will, and carry the basket ever so careful. Don't leave me behind, master." The tears rolled

down his cheeks as he stood grasping the basket, and gazing imploringly at the old man.

Billy sighed heavily. "Well, well, little chap," he turned to go, "I can't be sayin' no to you, seein' you're set on it, so we'll just travel along together, same as we usual do." Then, regaining his cheery tone, he went on brightly, "Why, Jimmy, how you and I will be a-laughin' to-morrow or next day, to think what a to-do we have made all about a little Dicky."

They set out immediately, plodding down the sandy lane till they came to the high road, Billy, staff in hand, moving rather more stiffly than usual, after his night in the elbow-chair. Jimmy, walking sedately beside him, carried the basket on his arm, and pressed as close as he could to his old companion, while he looked into the kind old face with an air of solemn protection which would have amused a casual onlooker.

So they proceeded for a mile or so till they reached their first stopping-place, the house of one of Billy's most regular customers. Here many exclamations of wonder at their arrival on foot, horrified uplifting of hands on hearing the explanation, and much questioning, and voluble advice as to what to do awaited them.

But Billy was very silent. He listened to and thanked the kind folk hastily, left his sweets, pocketed his coppers, and hurried on. At each house it was the same; sincere sympathy was felt for the sweet-maker in his great loss, and, in consequence, many more pennies than usual were forthcoming, and his goods were lavishly purchased by his many friends.

"Master, the basket's nigh empty."

Jimmy broke a long silence, turning back the paper as he spoke to display the few remaining pink sticks. They had covered but half Neddy's round, and Billy was walking wearily; his feet in the great boots felt like lead, and he remembered sadly that he was growing old. He smiled at Jim now, and let his eye rest for a moment on the basket, while he jingled the coins in his pocket.

"Aye, lad, we've done good business to-day, that we have, and we'll be turning home soon now; but Squire must have his sweetstuff first, same as he always do. I've left that parcel reg'lar each Saturday for twenty year, Jimmy. I were near sixty when I begun the trade, and Squire he were the fust to take my goods, and I never missed not once since to call every week at the Red House.

"Mighty fond he must be of sweetstuff," went on the old man innocently, "mighty fond that he be; but Squire, he's like me, not so young as he were, and likely he find my peppermint better than doctor's stuff to him; he get through right a lot in a week, and always ready for his next sixpennorth."

The sweet-maker's well-known knock at the back door of the Red House brought Mrs. Sykes herself to answer it.

Mrs. Sykes was the Squire's cook, an active young woman with smiling face.

"Well, I'm sure, Mr. Sanders," she cried, "you're late to-day, sir. I began to think as we weren't to be seeing you this morning. How lovely the air do feel, to be sure, it's quite a pleasure to stand at the door; but

walk in, please, and sit down for a bit. I'm sure I hope you're well, and Jimmy too, and the little, dear donkey. I have his apple all ready for him; but step in, please, I'm sure you must be tired."

Billy removed his hat and passed his hand over his curls, as he followed her into the kitchen, and Jimmy pressed close behind him. Mrs. Sykes busied herself with pouring out tea for them both, and cutting a large slice of cake for the boy, and then, having seen her visitors seated and prepared to enjoy their meal, she subsided into a chair opposite.

"I hope you've had a good day, Mr. Sanders," she said presently, lifting the paper of the basket and peeping inside. "Dearie me! only one, two, three sticks left! You've done well, for sure!"

"Yes, ma'am," replied the old sweet-maker, "we've done right well to-day, has Jimmy and me."

Mrs. Sykes's beaming face broke into broad smiles as she turned to Jimmy:

"I daresay Jim likes a bit of sweetstuff, too," she said kindly, and cutting him another slice of cake as she spoke. "There, you can keep a bit for Neddy, my dear, if you like. Mr. Sanders, he was telling me only last Saturday how good you was to the dumb animal. I'm right glad to hear of a boy who don't think poor donkeys is just made to be beaten." She smiled again benevolently, but Jimmy's cheeks crimsoned, and he glanced at old Billy appealingly.

"Thank 'ee, ma'am," said the sweet-maker sadly; "Jimmy don't mean to forget his manners, but we're in a sore bit of trouble, he and I, over

our little donkey. Well, there, we be foolish, I suppose, but we do think a lot of Neddie, and to have had him stole from us do seem terrible cruel."

"Stolen from you! Neddy stolen!" echoed Mrs. Sykes, in horrified amazement.

"Yes, ma'am," went on old Billy, wistfully, "stolen he've been for sure; that was a strange young man what took him, most like one of them gipsies who come to the common, particular in the autumn. It's the thinking that he may ill-use the little critter that makes me feel so bad. You see, Mrs. Sykes, ma'am, I'm getting an old man—near on my eighty, I be—and I daresay as how you'll laugh, but I fare to miss his company; he meant a lot to me, did Neddy, Dicky though he be." He laughed tremulously as he got up to go.

Mrs. Sykes's easy tears rose to her eyes—sympathy, grief and anger were blended rather comically on her fat face.

"Sit down, sir, sit down," she cried in great perturbation, "the master must know at once as how you've lost Neddy. Dearie me, to think of it! And gipsies, and all! Well, I never! A deceiving lot is gipsies—a bad, deceiving lot! But the master will see to them, Mr. Sanders, so don't you fret about nothing, and if you don't get Neddy back my name ain't Sykes."

She sailed out of the room with

these last words, and Billy sat down again obediently.

The Squire was more than willing to listen to the story, and, as he promised to take all inquiries on himself, and to speak to the police about the donkey, his hearty voice and manner cheered the old man's drooping spirits, and Jimmy, too, felt childish certainty in his warm assurances that everything would come right directly.

"Well, I hope you've not forgotten my toffee in all your trouble," the Squire called after them, as he stood at the door to watch the old sweet-maker and his small companion go.

"No, sir, no," replied Billy, his face crumpling into ready smiles, "it's on the table right enough. I was telling the little chap here, sir, what a wonnerful sweet tooth you have, but that's wholesome stuff, though I say it as shouldn't, and won't do you no harm. Good morning, sir, and I return you many thanks for all your kindness."

"Be sure and let me know when you get news of the donkey," called the Squire again.

The old man touched his hat in reply, as he trotted off down the drive. In her kitchen Mrs. Sykes was laying away the unopened parcel of sweets along with many similar packages in her big cupboard, with a half-uttered—"Dearie me, I do wonder whatever the master intend doing with all this stuff."

CHAPTER VII.

SHANKS'S MARE.

IT was the twentieth of December, and a true old-fashioned winter; the ground was white with snow, and a bright sun shone overhead. The air was very still, therefore, though the thermometer was, in truth, below freezing point, it did not feel so very cold, and old Billy, enveloped in his red coat, and with comforter tied many times round his neck, his hands in a thick pair of mittens, knitted for him by his friend Mrs. Sykes, felt as warm as toast, as he swept away the snow from his garden path. His wizened face under the white hair was rosy and cheerful, and, as he worked, he hummed a tune to himself as cheerfully as a boy; truly a wonderful old man for his age was Billy Sanders.

Presently, racing through the snow, came Jimmy Blowers, his cheeks glowing in the fresh crisp air, and his "Oh, master, let me do that!" rang out blithely, as he sprang through the gate and seized the broom from the old man's hands. "This is my job, you know, and you'll make yourself right tired."

"Tcha, tcha," cried Billy fondly, "listen to the little chap a-teachin' of the old man! Well, there you are, little lad, sweep away and welcome." He gave the broom into the boy's willing hands and stood a moment to watch his energetic work with a world of pride in his eyes.

Jimmy Blowers had become Billy Sanders's boy in good earnest.

A few weeks after the loss of the

donkey, his father, his one surviving parent, a wild fellow who had little love for his only child, had left the neighbourhood with his carpenter's tools on his shoulder to seek work elsewhere. As he never returned, Jimmy had, as a matter of course, come to old Billy, to be received by him with open arms.

All he possessed the old man was willing to give him, a bed in the corner of his little room, half his meals, and the whole of his warm old heart, yet so sore and aching with the loss of his favourite, poor, shaggy, mischievous Neddy.

For alas, the mystery of Neddy's loss had remained a mystery; the gipsies had disappeared from the common, and contrary to all expectation, and in spite of the police, and the most strenuous endeavours of the Squire, who had taken the matter up hotly for his old friend, no possible clue had been found which could lead to the recovery of the donkey.

Outwardly Billy bore his loss bravely, even assuming a merriment which deceived no one, but in his cottage, alone by his fireside, the old man's spirits failed him, and he felt lonely, and often very weary after the long rounds on foot to sell his sweets. Consolations were freely offered him; many a kindly neighbour came to proffer the loan of a pony and cart for the Saturday's journey; the Squire would have filled his empty shed again with another donkey, as worthy as or worthier than Neddy had been,

but old Billy shook his head; no other animal, he said, could take the place of the one which had grown up in his service, and he declared he would never have another.

"You see, sir," he explained once to the Squire, who had paid him a visit and was urging his acceptance of the gift, "you see, sir, it's like this here; I was right down foolish fond of Neddy, and I feel somehow as if I couldn't, so to say, put another in his place. No, no, sir, thank'ee kindly all the same, but Shanks's mare must be my hobby now till she's wore up too. I get along capital on Shanks's mare."

His obstinacy was not to be shaken, and the Squire had left the cottage discomfited.

And then had come Jimmy—Jimmy, with his red head, and heart overflowing with love for the old man; Jimmy, homeless and penniless, the cause of all Billy's trouble, yet a sincere sharer in his sorrow, whose outburst of childish sobs as he stood again in the empty stable, soothed and comforted old Billy's heart as nothing else had done.

Slowly with the boy for company, the old man became his cheery self once more. Neddy, however, was never forgotten; each day as Jimmy ran off to school, Billy would trot out on to the common, and, raising his quavering voice, give forth his familiar cry—"Hi, Neddy, hi, little boy," the hope, which he refused to relinquish, being that some day the gipsies might return to their old haunts, and that the master's call might bring his favourite back.

"There, that'll do, we're as smart as possible," said Billy presently,

when the snow was swept neatly from the path, "now come along in, Jimmy boy, and tell us how schoolin' got on to-day."

For all answer the boy pulled from his pocket a silver coin, and held it out silently before the eyes of his old friend.

"Eh," cried Billy, peering at it with astonished eyes, "half-a-crown, lad! What's that to do with schooling?"

Jimmy smiled. "Squire come in and had us read, and he give me that 'cause I didn't holler my words out," he explained modestly.

"Dearie me," chuckled the sweet-maker delightedly; "so Squire give 'ee that, did he? 'Cause you read to please him! Why, they'll make a scholar of 'ee yet, Jimmy, as never was! What a happy old chap I be to think as how my little lad pleased Squire."

"It's all for you, master," said the boy, looking into Billy's face wistfully, "that'll do nice for your new boots, and you'll get 'em come Saturday, won't 'ee?" he went on coaxingly. "Shanks's mare want shoein' bad, you said only this mornin'. Shall I run with 'em to Mr. Rose? He'll patch 'em up."

"Nay, nay," Billy shook his head decidedly, "put it away, lad, put it away; that'll look fine among the coppers in your box, and Shanks's mare don't want shoein' not this long time, that was only one of my little jokes, that was, so don't you fret your head about no boots."

But though Jimmy obeyed and put it away, yet his half-crown certainly weighed on his mind. Over and over again during the day, he looked at it as it lay shining and new among the

scanty coppers in his money-box. Half-a-crown! It was wealth untold to the boy. What would not half-a-crown buy! His mind worked busily, and he was so silent that Billy wondered a trifle uneasily what ailed his little chap.

They were going to bed earlier than usual that night to save fire and candles, when Jimmy said suddenly, "May I go to Wortham-Market tomorrow, master? Some of the boys has been, and I'd like to go too."

Billy nodded. "That's right," he said heartily, "you go along with 'em, Jim, and see the shops and that; they dress them up fine for Christmas up at Wortham-Market, that's quite a show come Christmas, so they tell me."

Early next morning Jimmy raised his red head from the pillow. It was dark except for the moon, which shone straight on to the face of old Billy, who lay resting as peacefully as an infant on the other side of the little room. Jimmy rubbed his eyes and sat gently up in bed to look earnestly at the quiet old sleeper. He stared long and silently, and then his eyes moved to where he could dimly see the great boots which, alas, shod Shanks's mare so inefficiently, great rough boots in which, as the boy knew well, the old feet grew so weary; with the big staring holes in them, where the snow squelched chillingly this bitter weather. Jimmy gazed once more at the kind old face which seemed, even in sleep, to smile at him, then he gulped down a lump in his throat, and whispered below his breath—

"Shanks's mare shall be shod, and Jimmy'll do it too. Oh, master,

Jimmy won't be a naughty boy no more."

Getting out of bed he kneeled down very quietly, and repeated his prayer. The words were very few and faltering, but they came from the bottom of his childish heart: "Please, God, make me a good boy, please make me a good boy, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen."

Then he dressed himself quickly, pocketed his little round money-box, and gathering one of the great boots under his arm, he crept very softly down the stair. Here again the moon lighted the little kitchen, shining with ghostly silvery light across the common, and in through the curtainless window.

Jimmy glanced round thoughtfully, pulled out from under a table Billy's carpet slippers, and stood them side by side in front of the big chair. Then with clever fingers he laid ready in the grate a tiny fire, set out matches on the table within easy reach of the chair, filled the kettle, put it on the hob, and, opening the little pantry, he peeped inside.

Like Mother Hubbard's cupboard this was painfully bare, yet with an old wise look on his round face, Jimmy decided there was just enough for the master's breakfast, and he hastened to lay the round table, measuring the tiny allowance of tea in the pot, and seeing that all was ready with an unexpected thoughtfulness.

He lingered a moment, eyeing wistfully the small piece of bread on the table, but Billy's constant example of self-denial had taught many a lesson to little Jimmy, and, with a valiant attempt to forget how hungry he was, he turned bravely away, took up again the big boot, seized his cap

from the nail, and opening the door he quietly left the cottage.

It was very cold, the ground frozen hard beneath the thin layer of snow, and the sound of the boyish feet running down the garden path partially awoke the old sweet-maker in his bed above. He turned over drowsily, muttering, "Surely that ain't never Neddy broke loose," and then slept again, and along the lane and out into the high road ran Jimmy, hurrying partly to warm his cold feet, partly because the sounds of his footsteps were company to him in this silent hour of morning.

Soon his run settled down to a walk, and he plodded on steadily; he had a long expedition before him and a great object in view.

During the watches of the night, on his little rough bed, he had arranged an elaborate plan of action. The town of Wortham-Market was but five miles distant, and the town of Wortham-Market was full of shops, and among others, there would be, of course, boot shops. Surely half-a-crown would buy at least one boot for dear Shanks's mare. Had not the village cobbler said that the right boot could only be mended by a new one, and therefore to what better use could Jimmy put his beautiful new half-crown than to buy a gift for his kind old friend? Lying on his pillow he arranged it all; he would rise early, and, almost before Billy would have had time to miss him, he would slip away and be back again carrying his present.

Already he felt a glow at his heart as he pictured the old man's surprise

and joy. The boot he carried with him was to serve as guide to size, and, so simple and childish was little Jimmy, he had no doubt but that with the half-crown to pave the way for him he would bring home another and a new one.

Wortham-Market is a fair-sized, very quiet country town, with many shops, good, bad, and indifferent. This morning as Jimmy entered the streets were unwontedly gay, Christmas decorations flaunted themselves everywhere, and happy folk bustled to and fro with Christmas smiles and merry greetings.

The confectioner's window at the corner increased Jimmy's hunger, which had been growing painfully during the two hours he had been walking, to an almost unbearable pitch. He stopped, therefore, felt to see that the money-box was safe, and then pressing his face against the glass, he began to choose the bun on which to lay out one of his precious pennies.

It took some minutes to make his choice, but his mind was presently made up, and a kind-faced young woman, amused at the quaint little figure with his burden, was at the pains to pick out the very one he pointed to from the tray in the window; still smiling, she accepted the penny he solemnly offered.

Jimmy left the shop, munching his bun and wishing earnestly that it had been double the size. Up one side of the street he walked, moving very slowly, and staring anxiously into each window as he passed it, but nowhere could he find the shop he wanted.

CHAPTER VIII.

GOOD BUSINESS FOR SHANKS'S MARE.

PRESENTLY, not looking where he was going, Jimmy stumbled violently against the front wheel of a bath-chair. He recovered himself quickly, but the precious boot slipped from his grasp and fell on to the pavement. Jimmy pounced on it anxiously, and gathering it safely from the snow he glanced up to see what he had fallen against.

In the bath-chair sat an old lady. She was dressed all in black, with soft thick furs about her neck and round her shoulders, and her face was so amused and kind as she looked at the little red-headed boy with the great boot in his arms, that Jimmy, remembering the manners which Billy had taught him, smiled shyly as he touched his cap, and said, "I beg your pardon, ma'am."

A neat maidservant was pushing the chair, and she began to move it on again, but the old lady forbade her with, "No, no, Maria, wait a minute, I want to speak to this little boy."

She smiled at him in such a sweet merry way that Jimmy's wide mouth laughed also, though he knew not why.

"Have you got the boot safe, little boy?" she said brightly. "Dear me! You are going to give Santa Claus a lot of work! I suppose you will be wanting him to fill that big boot with all sorts of nice things on Christmas Day!"

Jimmy smiled still, though dumbly. He had not an idea what the lady meant, but something in her face suddenly gave him extraordinary

courage, and pressing forward close up to the bath-chair, so that his rough little arm brushed against the beautiful furs, he raised an imploring face to hers.

"Please, ma'am, I beg your pardon, ma'am; but please, ma'am, does they sell boots in this here town?"

The lady looked down very kindly on him.

"Certainly they do," she answered gravely. "And you want me to tell you the way to a shop? Well, you must go up this street and down the next—but stay," she nodded her head and turned to speak to her maid, "we will show the way, Maria, if you will start the chair, please. Now, little boy, walk beside me, and I will take you to a shop where you can get what you want."

Jimmy shifted Billy's boot to his other arm, and the quick eyes in the chair noted silently its disreputable condition.

"Are you going to take the boot to be mended?" she asked gently, as the chair proceeded silently along the pavement, and Jimmy trotted beside it.

"No, ma'am," said the little boy solemnly, "it's too far gone; it can only just be mended by a new 'un, that's what Mr. Rose said."

A great amusement stole into the old lady's face, and she laughed softly as she said, "I think Mr. Rose was quite right. Now here we are at the boot shop: you had better go in and buy Mr. Rose his new boots."

"'Tain't for Mr. Rose," said Jimmy, raising honest eyes, "the new boot is for the master, 'cause Shanks's mare do want shoein' so dreffle bad." He touched his cap again, as he uttered these words, and, pushing open the glass door, he vanished inside the shop.

"Maria," said the old lady imperiously, "help me out and give me my stick. You know all my faults and failings, and how I suffer from the illness of curiosity. I must find out what that funny little red-headed boy means by Shanks's mare. Poor little fellow, does he really think he can buy one boot?"

Inside the shop Jimmy marched to the counter, having pulled off his cap as Billy had taught him to do on entering Mrs. Sykes's kitchen, and, in a clear decided voice, demanded confidently, "A new boot exactly like this here," at the same time thrusting Billy's foot-gear in all its forlorn dilapidation into the smart shopman's hand.

With an air of disgust the man passed it hastily back again, saying sharply, "This is not the shop for you, boy, we don't stock boots of that kind here."

Poor Jimmy flushed scarlet with surprise and mortification, and at the sound of a stick tip-tapping across the floor, the shopman, not deigning to bestow another glance upon him, hastened forward to meet one of his oldest and best customers.

"Good morning, my lady," he murmured deferentially, "and what may I have the pleasure of showing your Ladyship this morning?"

"You can attend to your customer over there," she said quietly. "I

think I heard him ordering a pair of boots."

"Certainly, my lady," said the man suavely; "but I fear we have nothing likely to suit his requirements."

"No shooting boots," said the old lady suggestively, seating herself on a chair rather behind Jimmy, who stood yet forlornly undecided at the counter swinging the pattern boot by one of its string laces. "I will wait," she said, drawing out a newspaper from her muff and signing to the shopman to leave her.

Very gingerly he again took the boot from Jimmy, and cast a hasty and disgusted glance at the size of it.

"So you want a pair of boots of this size and shape?" he addressed the small boy curtly.

"No, sir," replied Jimmy calmly, "I am not wanting a pair of boots, 'cause the left 'un's all right. I only want one to go 'stead of this here."

"But we don't stock single boots," said the shopman irritably. "But who are the boots for?"

"Please, sir," said Jimmy again, fingering his cap nervously, "please sir, won't you sell me one boot, 'cause the master ain't wanting two, not just yet he ain't?"

The stick from behind the boy rattled rather sharply on the floor, and the perplexed shopman glanced quickly over Jimmy's head, then he smiled, and bent down quite pleasantly to his little customer.

"Ah," he said, "I quite see, my little man, father has had the misfortune to lose a leg, I suppose; of course, in that case one boot would be enough, but I'm afraid——"

Suddenly the stick rapped again

sharply, and Jimmy broke in eagerly—

“No, sir, please, sir, it ain't that. The master has two legs right enough, but now our little Dicky has been stole, Shanks's mare do have a lot of walkin', and the right boot can only be mended by a new 'un, Mr. Rose said; and please, I got the half-crown here to buy the new 'un.”

“But——” said the despairing shopman.

“See, ain't it just a beauty?” went on Jimmy, drawing the coin forth and holding it up proudly. “Squire give it me yesterday, and I want to spend it all on Shanks's mare.”

Suddenly, almost as if in answer to some unspoken command, the shopman turned away, and, opening a box, he pulled out a pair of boots, strong, hobnailed, thick-soled shooting-boots, and set them on the counter before the delighted Jimmy.

“How's that?” he said. “Think those would fit the master, lad?”

With due solemnity, and without hurrying himself, Jimmy laid the pattern boot sole to sole with a new one, and compared them gravely; then, his cheeks flushing deeply, he said slowly, “They be exact.”

“Very well,” said the shopman with a sigh of relief, “then you may take that pair to your master, and ask him to send me the money—the price is——”

Jimmy turned his head quickly, surely someone was speaking behind him; but no, the shop was empty except for the sweet-faced old lady, and she was reading her newspaper busily.

“The price is——” went on the shopman, who had paused for a

minute, and who now looked at Jimmy with a gleam of laughter in his eyes, “the price for the two boots is—half-a-crown.”

“The two on them!” exclaimed Jimmy, in radiant astonishment. “Both them great boots for half-a-crown! Well, we certainly *has* done good business to-day! Shanks's mare won't know himself with both his feet new shod. Please, sir, here's the half-crown, and thank you.”

A subdued chuckle sounded suddenly from the chair, and the old lady got up slowly. “I think I won't wait any longer,” she said to the shopman. “I will send and settle our little business.”

As she went out she lingered to murmur a few words in an undertone, and Jimmy wondered why the gentleman was laughing so, as he put the new boots in a box, and handed them across to the boy.

Never had any child a prouder moment. Two big boots for dear Shanks's mare! Purchased with his own half-crown! And besides the new boots he carried back the old one, which would still do for summer weather perhaps. The joy of that moment could never be surpassed in Jimmy's life. Radiantly happy looked the small round face, and from her bath-chair, which yet waited outside the shop, two delighted eyes noted his childish joy.

“Well, little boy,” said the lady, smiling at him in a very friendly way, “you liked that boot shop, didn't you, and what are you going to do now?”

“Please, ma'am, I be goin' home,” said Jimmy, smiling back fearlessly;

"it's a long way home and I must be getting along fast, for the master'll be needin' me."

"Is the parcel very heavy?" she asked again, noting how he kept shifting it from arm to arm.

"That's beautiful heavy," sighed Jimmy fervently.

"Suppose," laughed the lady, "you were to put the precious parcel down here by my feet, and walk beside me a little way, and then you can tell me a great many things I want to know. First what your name is, and then where you live, and most of all, who and what, my little friend, is 'Shanks's mare,' who is to have these beautiful

new boots? Come, Maria, we will start, please."

Many a little rough boy like Jimmy Blowers has a slow tongue, and finds it hard to express himself; but there is a wonderful key which can unlock most hearts, and this wonderful key of sympathy the sweet-faced lady in the bath-chair possessed in the highest degree.

Soon Jimmy was chattering away to her as freely as he chatted to old Billy in his home, sweet home; soon she knew everything there was to be known, everything about Billy, and Jimmy himself, and even about poor lost Neddy.

CHAPTER IX.

"WHO IS SANTA CLAUS, MASTER?"

THIS small boy, with the red head and honest eyes with the tearful glaze over them, as he told of the theft of the donkey, touched her kind heart, but she said strangely little. When they reached the end of the street, and the country road began, Jimmy's way home, she bade him gather up his parcel, and wished him farewell in her brightest way.

"Good-bye, Jimmy," she said, laying her hand for a moment on his shoulder, "and a very merry Christmas to you, little friend. Remember to watch for a visit from Santa Claus. I rather think he will call upon you about the very middle of Christmas Day, so be sure and be ready and looking out for him. Good-bye, now run along, and remember what I say."

"My lady," suddenly said Maria,

who was waiting patiently while her mistress watched the small figure out of sight, "my lady, begging your pardon, but I wouldn't, not if I was you. This one do seem to suit you so beautiful, and think what a time we was a-searching for one! I really wouldn't, my lady; it may be a pack of lies for all we know."

But "my lady" only smiled for answer, while she shook her head at her faithful maid.

"Maria," she said, "I am an old woman and I love Christmas, but never, since I was a small child, have I looked forward with so much pleasure to a Christmas Day as now I do to the one which is coming."

* * * *

"Is they fine and comfortable, master? Does they fit exact?" Jimmy was kneeling at Billy's side

the better to examine and admire the new boots, which the old man was to wear for the first time this Christmas morning. They were both ready for church; Jim in his shabby suit, brushed and neat, wore a new blue tie—old Billy’s Christmas gift—and the old man himself, in his red coat, his white curls smoothed into respectability, his face full of ill-concealed pride and rapture, gazed down upon the new boots and the little boy with delighted smiles.

“Comfortable!” he repeated, “comfortable! I should just think they was comfortable! Why, Jimmy boy, Shanks’s mare feel fit for a twenty-mile trot in these here boots!”

He laughed loudly, and Jimmy joined in shrilly, while old Billy stamped and strutted up and down the kitchen, holding back the red coat the better himself to observe his feet.

“Eh, little lad, little lad,” he cried tenderly, subsiding suddenly into the elbow-chair, “to think as how you gave me all you had! What would Squire say to that, I wonder? Why, Jimmy, this here is the happiest Christmas I seem to remember for many a long day, and ’tain’t all the boots neither,” he finished simply, “it’s the havin’ my own little chap to be along with me, that’s what it is. I ain’t had no company not for Christmas Day not since my poor boys was alive, and that’s many a year gone now. I be a right happy old man, for sure.”

Jimmy nestled close to him, but he kept his head down and said nothing for a moment; then he murmured, “You had Neddy, master.”

“Aye,” said the old man dreamily, “I had Neddy for sure, and mortal fond I was of the little crittur; but

he was took, and—well there, lad, us won’t fret after nothin’ to-day, mayhap Neddy have found a good master—see, its half-past ten, and we must be thinking of church, you and I. Hear the bells, Jimmy? Wonnerful beautiful they are! There’s naught like Christmas bells to my mind. Now then, best foot forrard; only”—he laughed merrily—“Shanks’s mare ain’t got a best foot now, both on ’em being best! Wonder what Squire’ll say when he see ’em come in!”

Jimmy’s pride made him almost speechless as he walked sedately by his old friend down the lane towards the church. Each new print of the strong, hob-nailed soles left in the sand behind them caused him a pleasure too keen for words, and his heart was dancing, and his eyes shining, as he took off his cap reverently at the church door and followed Billy inside.

The pews were nearly full, but, among all the happy faces gathered in the old building, none wore such a look of simple gladness as the old sweet-maker and the little red-headed boy. The Squire turned to observe them, and could hardly repress his own smiles at the expression of Jimmy’s face. Perhaps he was thinking of the story he had listened to the day before, a story told to him by one of his oldest friends, a lady known far and wide by reason of her charitable ways.

He glanced again at the two faces, and his own kind heart rejoiced to think of their happy Christmas. Neighbours, too, had a silent greeting for the old sweet-maker, and children smiled at him openly and unhidden from every pew.

“Hark! the herald angels sing”—

the hymn rose thrillingly, and Jimmy sang with all his heart and voice.

Looking down the church, the clergyman noticed the little boy's rapt expression, recognised the once black sheep of his flock, and learned a lesson himself of what love can do.

The joyful service was soon over; then came the merry greetings, the laughing congratulations on the new boots, the Squire's admiration and excessive surprise at the wonderful purchase, and then it was time to turn towards home, ready to eat with good appetite the bountiful Christmas cheer, a heavy basket of which had arrived from the Red House the day before, packed by Mrs. Sykes's own hands.

Jimmy's spirits burst forth as a cork from a bottle; he jumped, and ran, and whooped with all the strength of his lungs.

"Master," he cried suddenly, tear-

ing up to Billy, and breaking in on a conversation between him and Mrs. Sykes, "master, that'll be near the middle of Christmas Day when we've eat our dinner, and the lady said as how some'un would visit us then most like. Santa Claus she called him. Who is Santa Claus, master?"

"Dearie me," laughed Mrs. Sykes, "and don't you know who Santa Claus is, Jimmy! Oh, he's a very kind gentleman is Santa Claus. Didn't no one ever tell you to hang a stocking or a boot out, and see what he put in it? Perhaps it isn't too late now."

"Where shall I put it?" asked Jimmy breathlessly. "Will he come to the door, Mrs. Sykes?"

Mrs. Sykes laughed again, and nodded her head, and Jimmy sped off to find Billy's old boot and to arrange it invitingly outside the back door.

CHAPTER X.

THE VISIT OF SANTA CLAUS.

DINNER was over at last, and Jimmy had put away the remains of the feast, plum pudding, mince pies, and, greatest wonder of all, the sugared Christmas cake, in the little pantry. Old Billy leaned back in his big chair, his feet stretched out to the blaze, his pipe in mouth, the picture of lazy content, and on the stool at his feet the small boy curled himself to bask in the warmth of the fire.

"Master," he asked again, "is it the middle of the day yet?"

"Aye, Jimmy, clock's gone two. Art thinking of Santa Claus, lad?"

The boy nodded, a trifle sleepily. The big dinner and unwontedly rich fare had made his eyelids heavy, and the heat of the fire had completed his drowsiness. Santa Claus, Billy's big boot waiting on the doorstep, the kind lady in the bath-chair, and the Squire's half-crown, all seemed to mingle strangely in his thoughts, thoughts which speedily changed to dreams as his eyes closed and he

slid off into sleep. Billy, too, laid down his pipe for his after-dinner forty winks, and the kitchen became very silent. Soon there was nothing to be heard but the breathing of the sleepers, the ticking of the clock, or the occasional fall of a cinder on the hearth.

And so an hour passed, and then Billy awoke. He opened his eyes in a dazed way and peered round him. Jimmy still lay curled at his feet fast asleep. He glanced at him, smoothed back the white hair from about his own ears and looked round again, but the kitchen was empty except for themselves.

"Seems I must have dreamed it," he muttered, "there ain't no one here."

He closed his eyes once more and composed himself to finish his nap, but soon he stirred again nervously, and sitting forward in his chair listened intently. A sort of sighing sound had reached him faintly, a heavy sighing which puzzled him, for Jimmy lay peacefully asleep, breathing softly and evenly. Billy started again, as another heavy sigh echoed through the room, and then got up very carefully and slowly, to avoid waking the boy, and creeping across the floor to the back door, he had his hand on the door to open it, when he felt small fingers in his.

"Is he come?" whispered Jimmy hoarsely; "is it Santa Claus, master?"

"Santa Claus!" echoed Billy, chuckling, as he closed his hand over Jimmy's. "Maybe, lad, maybe, anyhow we'll soon see who it is."

He pushed up the latch and opened the door.

* * * *

How can I tell you who or what

stood there? How can I describe the scene which followed? The exclamations of bliss, of joy untold! How can I tell of old Billy, who, laughing and chuckling and crowing with rapture, yet had the tears running down his wrinkled old cheeks? Nor yet of Jimmy, mad with delight, who clapped his hands and hugged Billy and ran backwards and forwards like a boy possessed.

What need to tell of all this, for there before them, turning his shaggy head from one to the other, stood Santa Claus' Christmas gift—dear lost Neddy himself!

Yes, it was Neddy. There was no doubt whatsoever of that. Neddy, caressing with his soft muzzle the old master's sleeve, his long ears twitching with excitement as he felt Jimmy's rough little hand smoothing down his coat. Neddy, alive and well, bearing new marks of work about him, and sundry cruel cuts and scars on his back which had not been there before, and which brought a lump to Jimmy's throat as he passed his fingers over them, still Neddy, the spoiled darling of old Billy's heart.

Surely such a Christmas had never been since the world began.

"How did Santa Claus bring 'ee, Ned?" cried Jimmy. "Oh, master, what a wonnerful gentleman he must be!"

And Billy pursed up his mouth, and nodded his head and chuckled again, he had no room for wonder in his simple heart. Neddy was back again, and Christmas was the most beautiful time of all the year.

* * * *

Away up at the Red House the Squire was speaking to his groom, and, as he listened, he laughed and rubbed his hands.

And far away in Wortham-Market "my lady" was rejoicing too, as she thought of Shanks's mare and little red-headed Jim.

The only person who did not feel the same gladness was Maria, "my lady's" maid, and perhaps there was some excuse for her soreness of heart.

Had she not been present a month earlier when her kind-hearted mistress had purchased a poor little over-driven half-starved donkey? Had she not listened to the severe words of warning addressed to the gipsy-man, who had been cruelly beating it as it stumbled along under a heavy load? Had she not helped her lady to wash its sores and feed and pet it back into life again? Had she not witnessed her mistress's growing affection for the little beast, and had she not hoped that the time was near

when Neddy would draw the chair in place of herself?

We must perforce sympathise with Maria. It had been hard to see this donkey of her heart decked out and sent away secretly on Christmas Eve, to the Red House, there to be inspected by the Squire, and to hear that it was to be handed over to its lawful owners, especially when that owner happened to be a certain small boy to whom, Maria considered, her mistress had already shown ample bounty.

Yes, it was hard, and Maria's face was grim as she went about her duties this Christmas Day.

And yet—could Maria, like us, have looked into the little house up the lane, her good heart would, I know, have melted into tenderness, for never surely, had such love and happiness been seen, as shone in Billy's home, sweet home, that night. For Neddy lay warm and cosy in his stable once more, and Billy sat by his fire, with his "little lad" beside him.



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