

NOAH'S BARGAIN

'Not being a cat, I don't profess to be a natural judge of horseshoes,' said the night policeman, pushing his helmet back and mopping his brow thoughtfully; 'but I'd cheerfully swallow this helmet if I wasn't better at it than poor old Noah Tibbins. He knew as much about horses as he did about dromedaries.'

'Twas some years back, when this place was beginning to get sizable; there wasn't a person in the place who didn't know the little green hand-barrow, loaded up to the top with fruit and vegetables, nor a resident who wouldn't give a cheery greeting to the pleasant, perspiring face of old Noah behind it.

'For years he'd pushed that barrow round the town, starting early from the little detached cottage, which his busy wife kept as clean as a new pin, and coming home late at night, tired out. And as the place grew, and customers increased, the round became larger and the barrow heavier; and Noah Tibbins reached home a little later and a little tired.

'But he didn't mind, for Sarah and he shared a secret only they knew of. And when Noah's legs ached very hard as he sat down to supper, he glanced up at a bank on the tall mantelshelf. Then he would forget the ache, and, creeping up to bed, dream of a cart, with a real horse between the shafts, and, well, only Noah knew what.

'One day the bank came down from the mantelshelf, and into his hand Noah poured a stream of coins.

'"Wife," he said, forgetting them lovingly, "I think we have enough."

'"How much?" said Sarah, though she knew better than he.

'"Seventy-five dollars," Noah responded, after a pause. "With that we should get a good, sound horse fit to go between the shafts of the cart your Uncle Harry left us."

'"When's the horse to be, Noah?" Sarah asked.

'"Next week," said Noah, emptying the money slowly back into its resting-place. "It's been a hard pull, wife, but thank heaven we've managed it!"

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'"That looks a good one,"

'Noah, with his hand clasped tightly over the money in his left trouser-pocket, looked critically at a big roan mare.

'"Excuse me, sir, but are you looking for a harness horse?"

'Noah and his wife turned at the low, pleasant voice behind them, looked into the smiling face of a tall gentleman.

'"Yes, sir," Noah stammered, somewhat taken aback.

'"I see you are surprised at my being interested in horses," said the man, with a smile. "You are strangers hereabouts, or you would know me. I live in Greenville and have a horse which I wish to dispose of. He's a little too spirited for my wife, who is extremely nervous."

'He laughed a low, musing laugh; and Sarah nudged her husband to intimate that this might be the very horse for which they were searching.

'"You will wonder why I came here personally," added the man. "But I want my horse to fall into kind hands." He lowered his voice. "I don't want it to go to a dealer."

'"What would you want for it, sir?" ventured Noah.

'The man shrugged his shoulders.

'"It is a good horse," he said, "and worth 200 dollars at least. But if I could ensure the animal good food and kind treatment, I would let it go at a low figure—I would take 100 dollars."

'Noah's face fell visibly.

'"I can't afford that," he said, in a low voice. "I'm only a greengrocer in a small way, and—"

'"What can you give?" The man took Noah's shoulder in a friendly grip. "I pride myself on being a judge of faces, and I know you would treat the horse well. I would rather you have it, and lose a few dollars, than the poor thing should be ill-treated. What is your limit?"

'"I can go to 75 dollars," said Noah.

'Good! Now you must come and thoroughly examine the horse.'

'Noah and Sarah exchanged glances of mutual congratulation as they followed the man to the door of a dark stable.

'"Peters," said he to a sedate-looking groom who appeared from the interior, "bring Dobbin out."

'The groom disappeared into the dark stable, and in a few minutes emerged, leading a big, spirited grey, with lovely jet-black markings.

'The animal tossed its head and pawed the air with its fore-foot, whilst its eyes flashed as if in terror.

'"You see he has a will of his own," said the man, with a smile. "But he is not a bit vicious, and would be an ornament to any shafts."

'Noah advanced to the horse critically. It had taken a great many years to save that 75 dollars and a certain amount of caution was necessary.

'He examined the animal's teeth carefully, this being the great test of a horse's age. His experience was not sufficient to reveal the clever way in which they had been filed down, and the natural black markings erased. Nor did he perceive how the hollows under the horse's eyes had been temporarily puffed, or notice the little stain of Indian ink on his hand after he had stroked its glossy coat.

'In short, poor old Noah and his wife, as I've said before, knew as much about a horse as they did a dromedary, so, with many injunctions from the man to treat the dear horse kindly, the little greengrocer counted out the hard-earned money, and, smiling, led his purchase from the fair.

'It's a long walk from here to Yatank and by the time Noah and Sarah reached home they were tired out. Still, the thought of their bargain helped to keep their spirits up, and as they walked up to the little wooden stable at the back of the cottage, Noah was rather surprised to notice that the horse was the tiredest of the three by a long chalk. It looked just fit to drop.

'"He must have had a hard day," murmured Noah to himself. "He'll be better after a feed and a sleep."

'But there was just a trace of anxiety in his eyes when, before going to bed, he glanced up at the empty bank on the mantelshelf.

'The sun had only just called another morning into being, when Noah slipped on his clothes and hurried down to the stable.

'The sleep and the feed had not been so effective as he had hoped. The horse looked dully at its new owner, and hung its head as if it were too heavy for its neck. A deep cavity seemed to have developed under each of its eyes.

'A cold hand seemed to clutch at Noah's heart. He untied the halter-rope quickly, led Dobbin out into the yard, and trotted him up and down. Gone was the high-stepping and tossing of head. The horse ambled loosely after him, dragging his feet in sheer senility.

'Noah gulped as he ran to the stable, and returned with a pail of water. Feverishly he threw the water over the horse, thinking perhaps to stimulate its tardy vitality. Dobbin submitted listlessly, though the black markings on his coat shone with renewed brightness. Noah looked, and stroked Dobbin vigorously.

'Then he noticed the Indian ink on his palm, and the full truth dawned upon him.

'Poor Dobbin was a useless veteran. He and

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