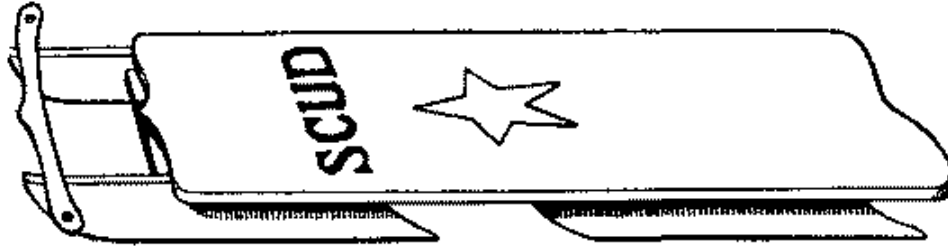


HALF-PAST SEVEN STORIES



2. The Big Bobsled



Teddy the Buckskin Horse and Hal the Red Roan had just come in the yard. They were drawing a big load of lumber from the mill which stood in the woods on the north branch of the River.

Just before he unloaded the boards and planks back by the barn, the Toyman picked out a few of the finest and carried them into his shop. That did look mysterious and suspicious—very pleasantly suspicious.

“I’ll bet that’s for us,” declared Marmaduke.

“You just bet it is!” said his brother.

So each day for almost a week, they lingered around the shop, after school was out. But the Toyman never appeared until long after five. He had his corn husking to do, and he wanted to get all the fall jobs finished before cold weather.

One week went by, then another. It was very provoking, thought the boys, to have to wait so long for that secret.

Jehosaphat did try once to find out about it. He stopped the Toyman as he was coming from the barn with a pail full of bubbly milk.

“Say, Toyman, what are those boards for?”

“What boards?” asked the Toyman—just as if he didn’t know.

“Those boards you put in your workshop,” both the boys answered together. It sounded like some chorus they had learned for Commencement.

“Ho ho!” laughed the Toyman, “ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.”

He was hopeless. He was forever making queer answers and queerer rhymes which Miss Prue Parsons the schoolteacher didn’t at all approve. But Father said it didn’t hurt the children as far as he could see—it just entertained them.

So the Toyman was answering:

“Ask me no questions an’ I’ll tell you no lies;

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Gooseberries are sour but make very sweet pies.”

The boys had to be content with that information, but it was very hard waiting.

There came a day when it rained, and the Toyman couldn't work in the fields, or paint the house, or mend the leaks in the roof of the barn. Of course, he might have fixed Old Methusaleh's harness, which badly needed repairs, but he looked at the sky and said,—

“It looks like snow. I ought to get at that—”

Then he bit his lip and the secret was still safe.

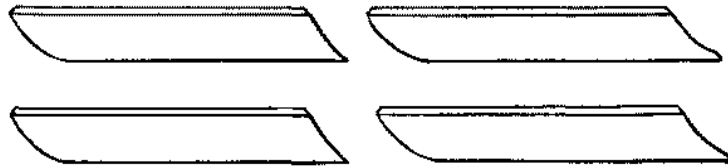
Very mysteriously he unlocked the door of his workshop. And the boys peeked in.

“Where's your ticket, Sonny?” he asked, seeing their two heads in the doorway. That was his way, you see, making a game out of everything.

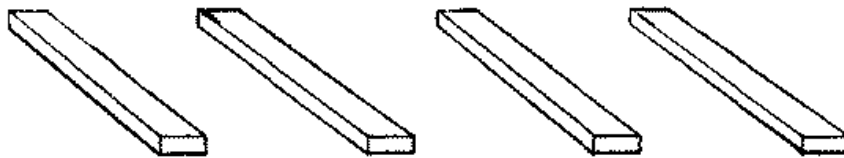
“We haven't any, but oh, Toyman, let us in, plee-a-sse .”

“All right, but don't talk more than forty words to the minute, or I can't plane this straight,” he said, working away at the boards.

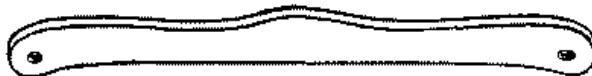
They couldn't yet guess what IT was. And it took a good many hours from his work and chores for the Toyman to finish IT, whatever IT was. But after about a week they saw standing against the wall four curved boards about two feet long:



And four more crosspieces of a very ordinary shape:



And one cross-piece with handles:



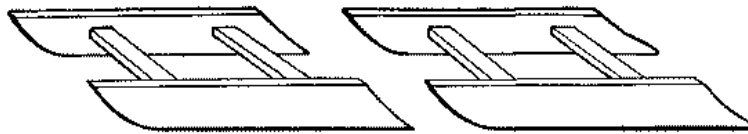
Then one very long board:



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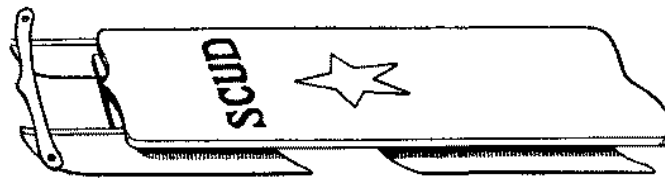
The thing to do was to guess what they would make when put together.

Just then the Toyman arrived with three barrel hoops. And he worked away with his tools until the hoops were almost straight. Then he made little holes in them and nailed them with little nails, very neatly, on the four long curved pieces of wood. Then he fastened these curved pieces together by nailing the crosspieces between. He fastened the other pair in the same way, and the affair began to look something like catamarans, those funny boats the geographies say folks use in Australasia.



B u t when he nailed the big board on and attached the steering gear, it was easy to see what all the time the Toyman had been planning to make. And when he painted the runners yellow with a little blue edge running around them, and the seat bright red, with a white star on it, they decided it was the finest bobsled in the world.

And, oh yes, he had to paint the word “Scud” in blue letters, right near the star.



Yes sir, there was no doubt about it, it was the finest bobsled in the world—the whole world, we mean.

And again the boys shouted, “Hooray!” together as in a chorus, not forgetting to add,—“And thank you, Toyman, heaps!”

Then they happened to think the bobsled was ready, but something else was missing—something very necessary, too.

“Now for the snow!” Jehosophat said.

“I can knock together a bobsled, sonny,” the Toyman replied, “But I haven’t any tools to make that .”

So every night, when he said his prayers, Marmaduke added another sentence to “God bless Mamma an’ Papa an’ the Toyman an’ Wienie an’” all the rest of his friends. Perhaps you can guess what it was. No? Well it sounded something like this:

“An’ please, God, send us some snow,—a whole lot of it !”

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Well, it came in about a week. On the twenty-third of November, to be exact.

It took only an hour to make the fields white, and only about three for the snow to pile deep enough to carry the new bobsled.

The Toyman looked at the sky, then at the ground, and then at his shop.

“Guess I’ll knock off,” he said. He was always knocking off work or something for the children.

But he had to stop their quarreling now. Each one wanted the honor of pulling the big bobsled first. For it was a thing to be proud of, with its yellow runners and the blue edge around them, and the red seat with the white star in the middle.

“You’re as bad as the pigs in the corner pen,” said the Toyman, “where are your manners?”

That settled it, of course. Turns! That was the proper way, and off they went.

But after all, “taking turns” wasn’t as fine as the next thing the Toyman suggested.

“All jump on,” he called, “and I’ll be the cayuse.”

That was a funny word he had learned out West, but by this time the children knew he meant horse. So the three, Jehosophat, Marmaduke, and Hepzebiah, sat on the red seat and were pulled through the snow, oh, ever so swiftly!

It was like riding through fairyland, for the branches above them were furred with white feathery snow, and the woods looked like some great lace design made by the Winter Queen who, they say, knits when the nights are cold and the Winter King is out at the club.

Soon they reached the hill. It was pretty steep and Jehosophat and Marmaduke wanted to get off and walk up so as to make it easier for the Toyman. He wouldn’t hear of that, but just set his shoulders like Teddy in the shafts and puffed and pulled up hill.

On the fields the snow was light and feathery like powdered sugar, but on the hill it had been packed down hard by the coasters. There were so many of them, boys and girls from the neighborhood all around! Some were at the top, and some at the bottom, and some in the middle, sliding merrily down.

When the Three Happy Children reached the top of the hill the Toyman cried:

“I’ll sit in front to steer and hold little Hepzebiah. You boys sit in back, Jehosophat at the end, and hold on to the grips.”

Yes there were grips, too, for the Toyman hadn’t forgotten anything that goes with a perfect sled.

“All aboard! Toot, toot!” he shouted, and Jehosophat yelled,—

“Clear the way!”

And down the hill they shot. It wasn’t like any other kind of travel in the world. Perhaps it was more like flying than anything else, but that was funny, too, when you come to think of it, for when you fly you usually go up, and they were going down.

They reached the bottom all too soon, but the trip was worth the trouble of trudging back, especially as all the hard work was done by the Toyman.

When they reached the top again, once more he shouted, “All aboard, toot, toot!”

Some folks thought he was silly, and Mrs. Hamm, riding by in a buggy, on the road below,

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said to Mr. Hamm,—

“There’s that good-for-nothing Frank Clark again, hollerin’ like a wild Injun with all those children.”

“Yes, Maria,” agreed her husband. “I’d send him to the work’us if I was on the Township Committee.”

But the Hamms, like many other people, were very stupid. Was the Toyman worth while? You just ask Jehosophat and Marmaduke and Hepzebiah and Wienerwurst, and hear what they have to say.

Once during that long and glorious afternoon they had trouble. Fatty Hamm started it. It was the only thing he was good at—trouble and eating. And, of course, Reddy Toms and Dicky Means had to help him. Anyway, Fatty pushed Hepzebiah into a deep snowdrift—when he thought the Toyman wasn’t looking. And Hepzebiah fell into the snowdrift head first so that only her legs could be seen, and they were kicking wildly in the air. Now the Toyman was busy untangling the rope, which had gotten mixed with the steering-gear, and he hadn’t noticed Fatty and Reddy at their old tricks. But her two brothers pulled her out of the drift by her little kicking legs, and brushed her off and dried her tears. Then they went for Reddy and Fatty. Reddy ran away, but Fatty stood his ground, for he was much bigger than they. They had their fists clenched, and were going to punch him, very hard, I guess, when the Toyman looked up from his work and called,—

“What’s the trouble, son?”

The boys explained it, but they kept their fists clenched just the same. They were rather excited, you see, and as soon as they were through telling the Toyman all about it, they wanted to pitch into “that ole Fatty.”

But Fatty tried to lie out of it.

“She just fell herself,” he said, half scared.

“She didn’t, either,” Jehosophat yelled, “he pushed her in.” And he started to rush for the fat boy when the Toyman called,—

“Hold on there, let me settle it.”

He came over, and squinted his eyes thoughtfully like a judge, while Fatty twisted and squirmed and squirmed and twisted.

“I wouldn’t hit him,” said the Toyman, “Fatty’s so fat it wouldn’t do any good anyway. Your fists would only sink into him like dough. So I guess you’d better wash his face in the snow—hard now.”

So they did—very hard, as the Toyman had told them.

“Why, he’s actually blubbering, the great big booby,” said Jehosophat, “shame!”

Now there’s no word in the language in which boys and girls join more readily than this same word “Shame.” So they all took up the chorus, everybody on that hill. You know that chorus, and your parents know it, and your grandparents, and great grandparents, too, sang it, long, long before you were born.

“Shame, shame, puddin’ an’ tame.

Everybody knows your name.”

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What pudding has to do with it probably none in the whole world knows. But it is a very effective song, and they one and all shouted it, dancing around Fatty and Reddy, and laughing at them; and the fat boy started to run away, yelling at the top of his lungs. But he stumbled over the bobsled, and the tangled ropes caught his feet and started him rolling down the hill. He didn't exactly roll, either, for he was so fat that he seemed to bounce like a rubber ball; and little Wienerwurst, who thought it all very fine sport, ran after him, nosing and snapping at him all the way down that hill. Then, when he reached the bottom, coward Fatty picked himself up and "made tracks" for home.

It was to—be sure, an odd sort of punishment that the Toyman ordered for Fatty. It was just such things that made Mr. and Mrs. Hamm and all the neighbors shake their heads over the Toyman and say he was crazy. But Jehosophat, who had heard it said that Solomon was a wonderful judge, knew one that could beat Solomon—and he was the Toyman.

Perhaps he was right. At all events, the children were ever so happy, as they coasted down, down the hill on that big bobsled, which they did till the stars came out, and, far over the fields, the supper bell sounded.