

news that was at all interesting, the settlers seldom failed to make him produce for their edification the very last item in his budget. It used to be asserted that a man who could tell a good ghost or murder story, might travel from one end of Indiana to the other without being charged a cent for either meals or lodging. In Iowa it was much the same in the early times of which I speak.

Being comfortably seated about the fire, as I have said, I was not long in perceiving that it was expected I would proceed to relate something of my history, something of my travels, of the news at the river towns, or tell a story of some kind. All in the old Dutchman's house hungered for the sound of my voice — thirsted to hear the "stranger" talk.

Between whiffs at his pipe, the honest old Pennsylvanian proceeded to inform me that this Christmas day was the anniversary of an accident that had greatly shocked the settlers. On Christmas day, the year before, a young man of great promise, and a large owner of land, had been drowned by falling through the ice at a place on the river some ten miles below; how a friend had vainly tried to save him, almost losing his own life in the attempt, and in various ways tried to draw me out. The mother and daughters looked at me anxiously, and, I thought, somewhat reproachfully. All the faces about me seemed to say: "Young man, you certainly ought to be able to tell us some news,

a story, or something that would interest or amuse us. You see how we are situated here — away out in the wilderness, where we hear nothing — you must know that a little story about your travels, or almost anything else, would be a great treat to us."

Observing the anxiety of all the family to be entertained, I cleared my throat by three or four preparatory hems, which at once attracted attention and greatly encouraged all present.

"Neighbor," said I, "what you have been telling me about the drowning of the young man here in your river reminds me of an adventure I once had on the Mississippi, between Dubuque and Galena, and, curiously, too, it was on a Christmas day."

"Ah — h!" cried the Dutchman, taking the pipe from his mouth, nodding and smiling. "Ah — h, vas dot so?"

The good wife's rapid fingers for a moment forgot their task, and her eager face said: "Do let us hear about it?" The bouncing girl of eighteen paused in her occupation of dishwashing, and stood, towel in hand, afraid to touch the rattling cups and saucers; the pretty modest lass of sixteen looked up from her sewing, her eyes sparkling a kind and earnest request for the story; the children, playing on the floor, paused in their sports and gazed up at me in round-eyed expectancy — even the great house-dog arose from his warm lair in the chimney-corner, and approaching, yawned

De Quille Sells a Christmas Story

by Lawrence I. Berkove

AMERICA'S LOVE of the tall tale is deep and long-established. Despite hundreds, if not thousands, of excellent examples of frontier humor, anthologies often repeat the same familiar ones: Davy Crockett and Paul Bunyan stories and Mark Twain anecdotes. Dan De Quille's newly rediscovered tragicomedy, "A Christmas Story," suggests what riches lie off the beaten track.

The story was originally published in the Virginia City (Nevada) *Territorial Enterprise* on December 25, 1879. De Quille

had been affiliated with this important western newspaper since 1861 (a few years after he had left behind his West Liberty, Iowa, farm and his given name William Wright; see Fall 1988 *Palimpsest*.) In addition to covering local news and being the paper's mining editor, De Quille also contributed works of humor and fiction to it. His lively sense of humor inclined toward the hoax — what was called in De Quille's time a "sell" but what today we call a "put-on" — a sub-genre of the tall tale. In essence, the sell depended upon undetected exag-

geration. Something in the story had to be literally incredible, but the seller's art consisted of so burying it in plausible details that it was not discovered until the audience completely "bought" it.

Selling could be a demanding art, and the seller had to be adept at gauging his audience, leading his listeners on and on at just the right pace. A single miscalculation could ruin the effect. De Quille, however, was a master among masters of this technique. A close look at this story set in the Iowa of his earlier days can pick up the signs of his skill.

suggestively; rested his black muzzle on my knee, looked appealingly in my face, and began wagging his tail — evidently meaning by this last movement to say: "Let the 'tale' proceed."

Thus appealed to and encouraged on all hands, I at once launched forth on a pair of skates of bright and ringing steel, and, with the old Dutchman and all his family close at my heels, sped away down over the broad expanse of new and glassy ice bridging the "Father of Waters."

Many narrow escapes from gaping air-holes did I have; many times did the thin ice bend and crackle under my weight; often the good Dutchman cried: "Ah, Gott!" Often the knitting needles of the old lady were still; the dishwasher stood with half-wiped cup in hand; the sewing girl bent forward with idle needle in her fingers; the children on the floor gazed up with open mouths, and the dog, in his warm corner, forgot to snore.

Soon, however, the danger is past, and again we are gliding merrily on. The sigh of relief from the father is echoed by each member of the family, and every face is again bright as we look up together through the clear frosty air at the spreading cedars climbing in long rows the many terraces of the mighty bluffs rising hundreds of feet above the frozen river.

We are thus happily gliding along when suddenly an immense air-hole yawns but a few yards ahead. I see the water rippling and flash-

ing before me, but I am going at lightning speed and know not well how to avoid the danger. My first impulse is to make a bold dash and leap the chasm; but I have scarcely taken three vigorous strides before I see that it is too wide. Can I get by on either side? A quick glance shows it to be impossible. Again I rush forward, resolved to attempt it. I have delayed so long that to gain impetus for the final spring I must now run to the very brink of the hole. Within a foot of the edge I bow myself down, but when in the act of rising up for the leap, the ice breaks like an egg-shell beneath my feet. I plunge forward some feet into the ice-cold water, I sink, am caught by the swift current of the mighty river and whirled away *under the ice*.

The old Dutchman and his family have seen, and see, it all. Their eyes are riveted upon me — they scarcely venture to breathe. The cheeks of the sewing girl are white. We are in a situation of terrible peril. I must try to swim back to the air-hole. It is expected of me and I make the attempt.

I writhe and struggle with the current which is pressing so fiercely against me — pressing me, in spite of all my efforts, downward under the ice to death!

As I thus fight for life the veins swell upon the good Dutchman's forehead; his teeth are set hard together; his hands open and close as if he were clutching at something, and in the

In addition to telling a humorous story that turned out to be a hoax, De Quille's "A Christmas Story" also tells a serious story about telling stories. The narrator, for example, is a carefully conceived character. In contrast to the "honest old Dutchman," the narrator is relatively well educated, traveled, and sophisticated. He is also observant and sensitive to what is going on around him. He understands that the family "thirsted" to hear him talk, but he delays until the eagerness reaches a peak. He waits for precisely the right moment, when he perceives an unspoken anxiety in the entire

family for "news, a story, or something that would interest or amuse us."

When the host gives him an opening, the story of a drowning, the narrator quickly invents a story that fits in naturally with the subject. As he tells it, it "curiously, too" occurred on Christmas. Cast as autobiography and rich in plausible detail, it brings an authority that disarms skepticism.

By using the historical present tense, the narrator achieves a sense of immediacy which quickly engages his audience. His graphic description of his poignant struggles under water grips the imag-

inations of his audience. Time is erased; they see, they feel, they struggle with him. When they can, they lend him support. As he prepares to succumb, the host calls, "Schtick it out!" When the man in the water grasps some object before him, the host quickly leaps to a conclusion in the romantic tradition: "Dank Gott! . . . it vas a rope and you vas safed!" The narrator milks one last bit of suspense from the situation. No, it was not a rope. And then he springs the sell on the audience.

But who is the audience? The naive family is only imaginary. The real audience is the reading

A Christmas Story (continued)

faces of all about me I see pictured suspense — suspense almost amounting to agony.

On I struggle. I seem to be gaining upon the cruel current; I strain every muscle; my painfully distended eyes peer ahead through the yellow water for the light that should mark the opening in the ice — bravely I struggle, but cannot see that which I would give the wealth of the world to behold — the open water.

I am holding my breath till my eyes seem starting from their sockets. I would give millions on millions for a single breath of air, though drawn in the foulest dungeon or the most loathsome charnel-house the world ever saw. I feel that I must breathe or die, and to attempt to breathe is to die.

My arms are growing weak; their strokes are short, feeble and convulsive. I merely hold my ground against the current. I am not gaining an inch. Oh, God! no sign of the opening I seek. Lost! lost! I am going backward. I will breathe in the cool, clear water and die.

"No! no! for God's sake, don't do dot!" cries the good old Dutchman, leaping from his chair and rushing toward me with outstretched arms — "don't do dot. Schtick it out! Schtick it out!" The old lady's knitting work rolls from her lap; the dish-washer lets fall a plate, and it is shivered on the floor; the sewing girl rises and cries: "Oh, sir!" then sits down, blushing.

We are still under the ice. The family control

their emotions and I continue: I am struggling but feebly. The temptation to breathe and at once end all is fast overcoming me. All that I have ever seen or heard seems rising before me. * * * But what do I see? Before me and almost within reach of my hands appears a large black object. A few fierce strokes and I have gained it — have grasped it in my hands.

"Dank Gott!" cries the Dutchman, "it was a rope and you was safed!" The faces of all the other members of the family show that they, too, are mentally thanking God for my having at last found some thing upon which to cling.

"No," I answer the honest Pennsylvanian; "No, it was not a rope."

"Was fur ding, den, was it dat you grabs?"

"It was the roots of an old tree that I found, far down there under the ice. Once I got hold of the roots I crawled into the forks of a large one and camped there till Spring. When the ice finally broke up I kept close watch and, letting go my hold, plunged up through the first big air-hole that came floating down."

The good old Dutchman took his pipe from his mouth, drew a long breath, gazed at me sorrowfully for a full minute, then said: "Young man, in my obinion dat schtory vot you tell is one tam big swindle — *on top of de ice!* Katterina — gals, young man, shildren — I dink we was all petter go to ped."

What does the reader think — taking into consideration the fact that to-day is Christmas?

De Quille Sells (continued)

audience. In *our* eagerness to hear something that will amuse or entertain us, we drop our guard and make ourselves vulnerable to a fiction. We do this, of course, with every story we're told, from the ancient tales of the *Arabian Nights* to the most recent detective or sci-fi story. The storyteller always, always exploits the preferred gullibility of the audience. Coleridge classically defined the condition of successful narration as the audience's "willing suspension of disbelief." De Quille's story, therefore, is didactic not only in showing us the process of how a storyteller casts a spell, but

also in exposing how eager we are to be enchanted and how vulnerable we then become. His Christmas gift to us consists of showing us these things about ourselves without penalty; what might have ended tragically ends comically. But truly, we are as naive as the members of the "honest Dutchman's" family, and we are equally susceptible victims of the one who is not honest — the storyteller. Curiously, like the family, we cherish illusions and resent being disenchanting.

De Quille's ironic estimate of the human mind is shared with other authors of his time. The

transition from chapter 32 to 33 of Mark Twain's *Roughing It* (1872) turns on exactly this point. Chapter 32 ends romantically, and the reader "buys" it. The embarrassing truth of the hoax is uncovered in the second paragraph of chapter 33. And Ambrose Bierce's great short story of the Civil War, "A Son of the Gods," originally subtitled "A Study in the Historical Present Tense," reveals the tragic consequences of the ease with which the human mind is manipulated. De Quille, like Twain and Bierce, left us with stories that entertain but also teach us things beyond entertainment.