

A Christmas Story

Under the Ice A Thrilling Adventure on the Upper Mississippi

by Dan De Quille

Reprinted from the Virginia City (Nevada) *Territorial Express*,
December 25, 1879

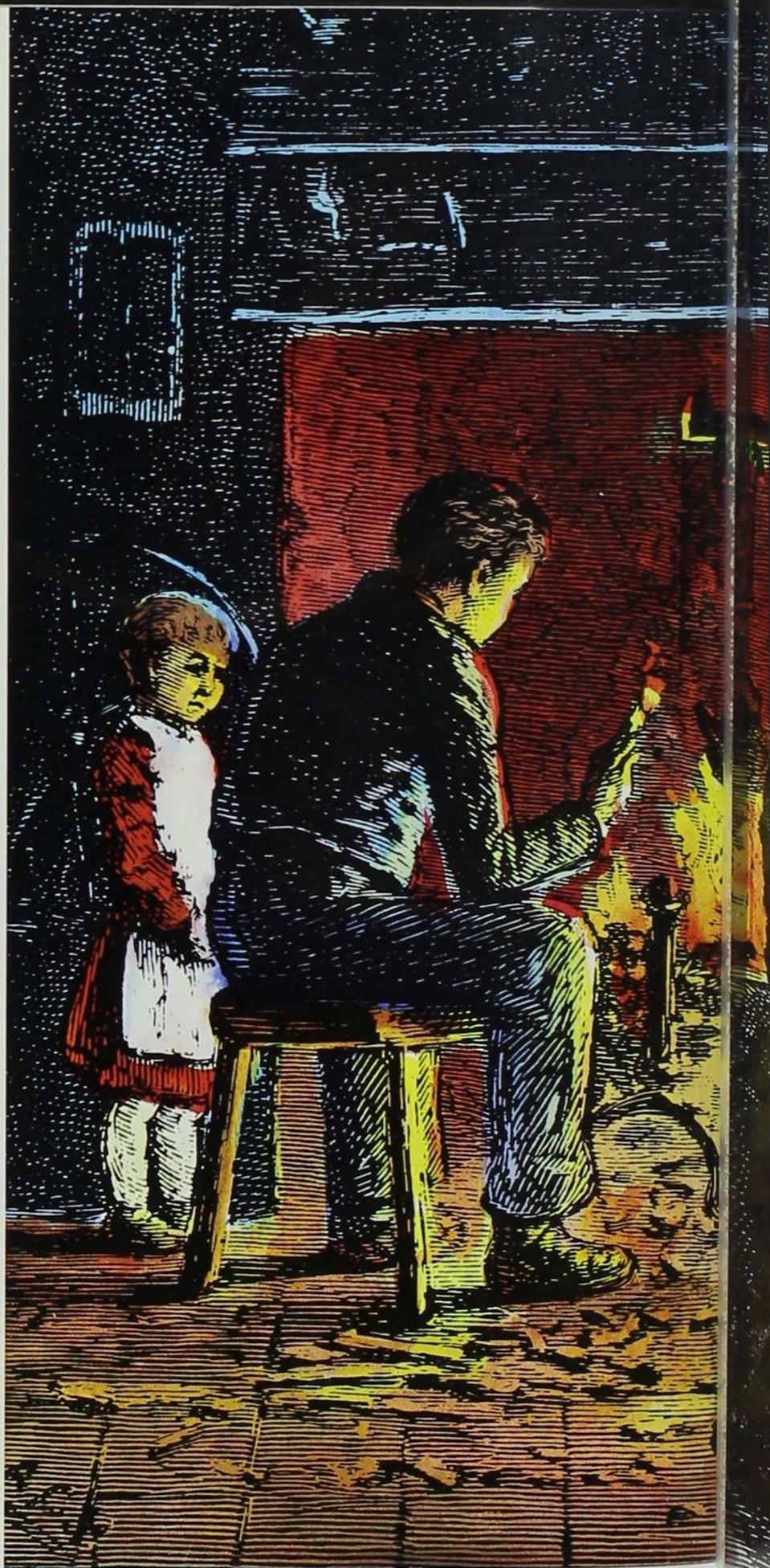
ONE DOES NOT always tell his story well. There is much in being in the proper humor. Agreeable surroundings and attentive and appreciative listeners are also of vital importance to every story-teller. When every eye is fixed upon the narrator — when every ear greedily drinks in his words — when not a shade of his countenance passes away unnoticed — when not a wave of his hand is lost — then his heart expands, his face beams, and his soul goes out in his utterances.

I think I never told the story of my adventure under the ice on the Upper Mississippi, with more satisfaction to myself, or to a more rapt and sympathetic audience, than on one stormy Christmas night, many, many years ago, in a cabin on the banks of the Red Cedar River, in Iowa.

I was then a traveler, and, for the night, was the guest of an honest old Pennsylvania Dutchman. The cabin boasted but a single room, and in this the whole family slept, ate and carried on all the indoor operations of the household.

After I had seen my faithful saddle horse well provided for, I shared with the family in a supper that was not only the most substantial, but which also showed some parade of luxury, in honor of the day and season. Occupying the center of the table, and a large place in the minds and hearts of the family, was a huge earthen bowl of large, rosy-cheeked apples. These the old farmer had caused to be brought from the nearest town on the Mississippi — sixty miles away — at considerable cost of money and trouble, in order to give his family a Christmas treat that would remind them of their old Pennsylvania home.

At last the grand Christmas supper was over.



The apples, nuts, and other good things were things of the past. On one side of the broad fireplace, wherein was a roaring and crackling fire of hickory, sat, puffing his pipe, the head of the family — a hale, kind-hearted, ruddy-faced man of fifty-five — while I, quite as earnestly puffing my cigar, had possession of the opposite side of the great hearth.

The wife of the good old Dutchman — bright-eyed, full-faced and forty — sat near her lord, industriously plying her shining needles



ILLUSTRATION FROM MARCH 1880 ST. NICHOLAS; COLOR-ENHANCED BY BRENDA ROBINSON

upon some piece of knitting work. A girl of eighteen, handsome and bouncing, was engaged in washing up the "supper dishes"; sewing on a child's "frock" was a miss of sixteen — slender and lithe as a willow wand, timid as a fawn and sweet as a pink. A much younger girl — a rosy-cheeked child — and a little curly-headed boy, the only son, and the pride and pet of the household, sat on the floor building a corn-cob house.

In those early days mail facilities were

exceedingly limited; the post-office nearest to many of the settlers was frequently distant from fifty to eighty miles, and often was not visited by any one in the settlement for a month or six weeks.

As the people of the "back settlements" seldom saw a newspaper, they knew very little about what was going on in the great outside world. In these places a traveler was looked upon as a God-send and if he was in the least good-natured, and knew anything in the way of

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