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Christmas for Ambrose

By Esther Miller Peyton

All the children for miles around know where Jenks' Riding Farm is, because of the pony track. Just at the head of the river road, you'll find the white house hidden in maples. Next to it are twin barns, painted as bright red as Santa's coat. Between the barns and the road, inside a white fence, is the pony track.

In the meadow back of the house, three springs ago, Ambrose was born. His mother, Maude, is a dark-eyed donkey, with long ears and shaggy grey coat. She pulls the children's cart around the track.

The day he was born, Ambrose, a damp ball of shaggy grey, was trying to stand on wobbly legs. His ears stood up like handles. His mother was watching Ambrose and trying to help, when they heard Bob, the owner's son, clattering down the bridle path.

Ambrose turned his head to see a tall boy with thick black hair, in a riding suit and boots, stop his horse and jump off. "Maude," he cried in a harsh voice, as he flipped her back with his whip, "back to the barn with you. You're a disgrace to a pony track."

He called to his father: "Look at this runt! I'll get the pliers and finish it off now. It won't be good for anything except to eat feed."

"Not so fast!" answered his father. "Maybe it can pull a baby cart."

"Never," answered the boy.

As Ambrose got older he hated to hear Bob, for it might be Bob, Ambrose always ran to the farther side of the meadow, knowing if he was close, it would mean a kick, slap, or sharp sting with the whip.

When summer came, Maude had to go to the pony track every day. "Come Ambrose," Bob would say, adding a kick. "You can't do nothing, but you might stand next Maude, and let people see you so they can have a good laugh anyway." Maude was hitched to a newly-painted yellow and black cart. All day she was pulling the cart loaded with children around the track, or standing next to Ambrose.

Scared of the big people and children about him, Ambrose made funny whiny noises, when his Mother was walking around the track, Bob gave him a kick: "Shut up, Ambrose. I don't like your singing, Big Ears!" Ambrose licked the spot where Bob kicked him, but also had the flies to contend with. They stung him so he could not switch them off fast enough with his long tail.

A girl, half as big as Bob, darted toward Ambrose. He tried to run away, but his short rope held him. "Bob," the little girl cried, "You ought to be ashamed treating this cute donkey so mean! Take care of the pony track and leave him alone."

Bob didn't answer but his face got red. A woman in starched, white uniform, came up to the girl: "Susan Black, don't stand there stroking that donkey. He might kick."

"Nurse! Look at his big sad eyes. You can tell he wouldn't kick," answered Susan. "His mouth looks like he's smiling."

"Time to go home," answered the nurse.

"Just a few more minutes. I love to pet this sweet little thing. He's Maude's baby, but he'll never grow big as her."

"We must go."

"I'm coming tomorrow. I'm going to bring Ambrose a lump of sugar and an apple."

Ambrose stood in the sun for hours every day. People poked him, staring and laughing. If people did not notice him, Bob would shout: "Look at our runt donkey? He'd look good in the funny papers!" Bob often forgot to give Ambrose a drink which made his throat burn with thirst. Bob would never tie him in the shade, if he dared, Bob prodded him. Every day Ambrose pricked up his big ears to catch the sound of Susan's voice. Every day she brought him a carrot, a lump of sugar or an apple. Ambrose tried to thank her with his big eyes.

When it was cold and the trees were bare, Susan did not come any more, neither did other children, so the ponies and Maude and Ambrose were put into the stables or allowed to graze in the meadow.

One bitter cold night Maude and the ponies were shut in the stable, but Ambrose was left out by Bob. Ambrose stood at the stable doors and brayed. Maude brayed inside. A cold rain turned into hail and sleet, and still Ambrose huddled close to the barn and shivered. After a time he heard footsteps and saw lantern light. Bob's father came to the barn. "Bob's so careless!" his father said, and opened the door. Ambrose ran in and cuddled next to his mother. The straw was warm to his wet hide. Soon he was asleep, dreaming of Susan.

It seemed to Ambrose he had just fallen asleep, when he was awakened by a push. He blinked his eyes and saw sunshine coming through the windows. He felt like cuddling back into the straw, but a white-haired man was with Bob's father: "My grand-daughter Susan," the stranger was saying, "is always talking of Ambrose. She wants me to buy him, and keep him at my farm, so she can see him every day."

"Ambrose is gentle," replied Bob's father.

"He's so little I don't know what Susan could do with him? He couldn't pull her in the cart, or she couldn't ride him, but I promised, so I've got to bring him," said the man.

Ambrose was wide awake. He heard Mr. Blake ask: "How much?" and saw him give Bob's father money. A blanket was put over Ambrose and he was put into a truck. It was hard to stand still, but he kept thinking of Susan. The truck went up a driveway and stopped in front of a large house. "Ambrose!" he heard Susan exclaim as she dashed out of the house. She jumped into the truck and rode toward the stables: "Ambrose, I'm so glad to have you." She stroked his fur as Ambrose settled down in a clean stall in the corner of a big stable.

"Ambrose's my best Christmas gift," said Susan.

Her grandfather laughed: "He's your gift, but you must give him up for two weeks to the children of the city. I know what he's good for."

"Give Ambrose up, just when I got him?" Susan's lips puckered.

"Next week and the week after we'll use him in the Creche we're going to have in Blake Park for the children of the city."

Susan's face lighted like sunshine after rain. "Ambrose'll be beautiful for the Holy Family group. But he won't like it in the snow and smoke. And if it rains?"

"The Creche is being made now of logs and it has a thatched roof. The mother's very fussy of course and says we'll have a little stall. We can stand there all day and look at the beautiful figures of the Holy Child, the Virgin and St. Joseph."

Susan clapped her hands. "Will there be lots sheep and chickens?"

"Yes, but no live animals, not in the stable with the Holy Family. There'll be figures of the three Kings from the East with their gifts. And over the crèche will be an electric star."

"Will you have some dressed like shepherds to watch and to take care of the collection barrels for the poor children?"

Ambrose didn't understand all this talk. He wondered if people would laugh and poke at him, but when the next week came, Ambrose rode into the city. His rough coat was now like velvet, from Susan's combing.

The noise and noisy smell made his nostrils quiver, but he was led to a stall. There was plenty of sweet hay and he could look at the most beautiful baby in the world, wrapped in white clothes. Over the Baby bent a woman's figure, with a lovely face and back of her stood a tall man in rough cloak protecting her and the Baby from harm. Over all their heads was a strange light.

Susan stood outside the fence and looked. People came. Some read the inscription on a post, which started: "And there were shepherds in the same district living in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night."

People knelt on the salt in front of the Creche. Some had tears in their eyes. No one said an unkind word about Ambrose in this business.

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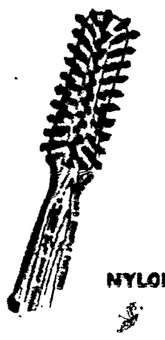

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WHEELCHAIR MANAGER

Capt. Francis E. Mason, Veterans' Hospital Field Director at the Cushing Veterans' Administration Hospital, Framingham, Mass., he shown, with his assistant, Lucie, checking a wheelchair of the strain while in game from the hospital's Cushing Bowers, who wears a brushing and maintaining form at Framingham, Mass., is learning to walk again and hopes soon to be taking a more active interest in the business.

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