



That Book Woman

My folks and me we live way up as up can get. So high we hardly sight a soul—'cept hawks, a-wingin' in the sky and critters hid among the trees.

My name is Cal, and I am not the first one nor the least one neither. But I am the oldest boy, and I can help Pap with the plowing and I can fetch the sheep when they take a-wander.

And I can bring the cow home too, come evening-time, which is right handy, seeing as how my sister Lark would keep her nose a-twixt the pages of a book daybreak to dusky dark if Mama would allow. The readenest child you ever did see—that's what Pap says.

Not me. I was not born to sit so stoney-still a-staring at some chicken scratch. And I do not fancy it one bit when Lark plays Teacher—the onliest school a jillion miles back down the creek. And even Lark can hardly spread her wings and fly. So now she aims to school us herself. But me, I am no scholar-boy.

That's why I am the first to hear the clippitty-clop and spy the sorrel mare—red as clay. I



am the first to know the rider is no man at all, but a lady wearing britches for all the world to see.

'Course we make that stranger kindly welcome and she's friendly as can be, and after sips of sassy tea she lays her saddlebag upon the table and what spills out might just as well be gold the way Lark's eyes shine penny-bright, the way her hands they won't keep still, reaching out to

grab a treasure.

Now what that lady brings it's sure no treasure, not to me, but books! Would you believe? A passel of books she's packed clear up the mountainside! A hard day's ride and all for naught, I reckon. For if she aims to sell her wares just like the tinker-man who travels 'round with pots and pans and such, it's but a plain and simple fact, we have no greenbacks here, no shiny coins to spend.

Least-ways not on dumb old books.

Well, Pap he takes one look at Lark and clears his throat.

"A trade," he says. "A poke of berries for one book."

My hands double fist behind my back. I yearn to speak, but daren't. It is the very poke I picked—for pie, not books.



To my surprise that lady shakes her head real firm. She will not take a poke of berries nor a mess of greens nor any thing Pap names to trade. These books are free, as free as air! Not only that—why, two weeks to the day she'll come again to swap these books for more!

Now me, I do not care one hoot for what that Book Woman has carried 'round, and it would not bother me at all if she forgot the way back to our door.

But here she'll come right through the rain and fog and cold. That horse of hers sure must be brave, I reckon.

Comes on a time the world turns white as Granpap's beard. The wind it shrieks like bobcats do deep inside the dark of night. So here we sit tucked 'round the fire, no thought to howdy-do's this day. Why, even critters of the wild will keep a-hid come snow like this.



But sakes alive—we hear *atap tap tap* upon the window-glass. And there she

be—wrapped tip to toe!

She makes her trade right through the crack to keep *us* folks from catching cold. And when Pap bids her stay the night, she only shakes her head.

"My horse will see me home," she says.

I stand a spell to watch that Book Woman disappear. And thoughts they go a-swirling 'round inside my head, just like the whirly-flakes outside our door.

It's not the horse alone that's brave, I reckon, but the rider, too.

And all at once yearn to know what makes that Book Woman risk catching cold, or worse.

I pick a book with words and pictures, too, and hold it out.

"Teach me what it says."

And Lark, she does not laugh or even tease, but makes a place, and quiet-like, we start to read.



Pap says it's written in the signs how long or short the winter stays. This year the signs they all foretold of deepest snow, of cold eternal.

And even though most days we're tight as toes pinched into boughten shoes, I do not mind. A puzzlement, I know, but true.

It's nigh on spring before that Book Woman can stop to visit a spell. And Mama makes a gift—the only precious thing she can—her recipe for berry pie, which is the best grub earthly.



"Not much, I know, for all your trouble," Mama says, and then her voice goes low with pride, "and for making two readers outta one."

I duck my head and wait until the very last to speak my mind:

"Wish there was something I could gift you too."

That Book Woman turns to look at me with big dark eyes.

"Come here, Cal," she says real gentle, and I come close. "Read me something."

I open up the book I'm holding, a new one brought this very day. Just chicken scratch, used to figure, but now see what's truly there, and I read a little out.

"That's gift enough," she says, and smiles so big, it makes me smile right back.



Author's Note

This story was inspired by the true and courageous work of the Pack Horse Librarians, who were known as "Book Women" in the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky.

The Pack Horse Library Project was founded in the 1930s as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration in order to bring books to remote regions where there were few schools and no libraries. High in the hills of Kentucky, roads were often just creek beds or rough trails. A Book Woman would travel, by horse or by mule, the same arduous route every two weeks, carrying a load of books—in good weather and in bad. To show their gratitude for what came "free as air," a family might make a gift from what little they had: garden vegetables, wildflowers, berries, or cherished recipes passed down through generations.

While there were a few men among the Pack Horse Librarians, the jobs were mainly filled by women, in a time when most people felt that "a woman's work was in the home." The Book Women were remarkable in their resilience and their dedication. They were paid very little, but they were proud of what they did: bringing the outside world to the people of Appalachia, and sometimes making readers out of those who had never seen much use for "chicken scratch."

In Kentucky, creek beds and trails eventually became roads. Horses and mules gave way to the kind of Bookmobiles that still exist today. All across the country, dedicated librarians continue to bring books to folks who need them.

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