



Horace's Christmas Sleigh

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Chapter One

"What's *happened?*" gasped Horace. He put his front paws on the window sill to stare out at the garden. A soft white quilt had dropped out of the sky overnight. Now it covered everything.

"Snow has happened," said Tickety the hamster.

"We've seen snow on TV," added Boo, her brother. "It was on a programme about Monster Ice Trucks. Snow looks like fun!"

Horace agreed. He pulled his lead from its hook, and ran over to Josh with his tail wagging madly.

"Do you want a walk, Horace? Let's go to the park," said Josh, pulling on his boots. "You'll like the snow."

But once he was out in it, the snow wasn't at all what Horace had expected. He thought it would be like a big, warm, bouncy duvet. He didn't know it would be *cold*. And *wet*. And that it would make everything smell strange.

Snow *was* soft, however. Josh showed him how to jump into snowdrifts that had piled up in the hollows of the park. Horace threw himself eagerly into bigger and bigger heaps of snow. *Whump! Whump! WHUMP!*

Then he saw the biggest snowdrift of the lot. It was right in the middle of the park. With a joyful bark, Horace raced towards it and launched himself into the air.

"No, stop!" cried Josh. "Don't, Horace! That's—"

WHUMP went Horace into the snow-drift.

CRACK went ice beneath his feet.

And with a **SPLADOOSH** he sank into freezing, muddy water.

"...the pond," finished Josh.

"Ow! Wow! Yow!" yelped Horace. He leapt out, howling and shivering, and shook himself all over Josh.

"Stop it!" said Josh. "You're filthy! Now I'll have to take you home and put you in the bath. Come on."

So Horace trailed unhappily back home behind Josh, shivering and sneezing.

“Ssh!” said Josh as they reached the house. “Don’t let Mum see the state you’re in.” They both crept upstairs to the bathroom as quietly as they could.

“Into the bath you go,” said Josh. He turned on the taps and emptied a bottle of bubble bath into the water.

Soon Horace was surrounded by bubbles. These were almost as good as snow! They were just as white and wet and fluffy: but best of all, they were warm. And the bath was full of them.

“It’s just like a snowdrift!” thought Horace in delight. “I wonder if I can jump into it?”

He couldn’t resist. Climbing up on to the edge of the bath, he leapt high into the air.

WHUMP went Horace into the bubbles.

CRACK went something underneath him.

And with a **SPLADOOSH**, foamy water began to pour out of the bath.

Joshua gasped. “Horace! You’ve *broken the bath!*”

“Oh, no! So sorry!” howled Horace.

“Shush! Stop howling!” whispered Josh – but too late.

Mrs Hay had already heard him. She dashed in and began to shriek. “My bath-tub! You’ve destroyed it! Just look at that crack! And water everywhere!” She began to mop up with towels.

Then Mr Hay ran in. “That dog’s far too big to go in there!” he shouted. “What were you thinking, Josh?”

“Sorry, Dad,” wailed Josh. Horace wailed in sympathy.

“Now we need a new bath. And who’s going to pay for that, I’d like to know? We’ll have to cancel Christmas this year!”

“Oh, no, Dad!”

“Oh, yes,” snapped Mr Hay. “You can strike those new football boots and rucksack right off your Christmas list, and write BATH-TUB there instead. Thanks to Horace!”

Chapter Two

“No Christmas!” whimpered Horace. “And it’s all my fault!”

He lay slumped in his doghouse in the snowy garden, with the two hamsters, Tickety and Boo.

Kimi, the snake from next door, had come through the fence to visit him. Now she twined herself around his water bowl and hissed,

“What’s sso ssspecial about Chrisstmass anyway?”

“Josh gets presents,” said Horace glumly, “and Mrs Hay gets chocolates, and Mr Hay gets to dress up as Santa Claus, and I get turkey leftovers. But now none of it will happen. Oh, poor Josh!”

“Santa Claus?” asked Kimi.

Tickety explained. “He’s a jolly man with a red coat and a red hat and a white beard, and he carries a sack of presents in his sleigh.”

“It flies through the air pulled by reindeer!” shouted Boo, climbing up on to Horace’s head and leaping off. “Like this!”

“How very odd,” said Kimi, pulling Boo out of the water-bowl.

“But now Mr Hay says there’s no way he’s dressing up as Santa!” groaned Horace. “Josh will be so disappointed. How can I make it up to him?”

“*You* could dress up as Santa Claus instead,” suggested Tickety.

“No, I couldn’t,” moaned Horace. “Mr Hay’s put his red costume in the loft. Anyway, a dog can’t be Santa.”

“I don’t see why not,” said Tickety. “The beard would hide your face. Surely you can find something long and red to wear?”

“And if you can drive a car, driving a sleigh should be easy!” cried Boo. “It doesn’t even have a steering wheel. There’s nothing to go wrong!”

Horace thought about this. “It’s not a bad idea,” he said. “Um... what exactly *is* a sleigh?”

“It’s like a sledge,” said Boo. “There’s a sledge in the shed.”

“Is there?” Excitedly Horace bounded over to the shed to look inside. There, behind the lawnmower, amidst a veil of cobwebs, was a plastic sledge.

“It’s not very big,” he said, brushing off the cobwebs and perching on the sledge. He overflowed on all sides. The sledge was made for a small child, not a large and leggy Irish Dane.

Tickety scratched her head. “No, that won’t do. You need something bigger. Much bigger.”

“How about a bath-tub?” suggested Kimi. “That would slide across the snow. There’s one outside the house.”

Horace ran to the fence and peered over it.

A rubbish skip stood on the road. And in the skip, on top of a pile of junk, was the cracked and leaky bath-tub.

“Perfect!” breathed Horace. “We’ll wait until dark, and then we’ll get it out. Just wait till Josh sees me dressed as Santa and riding in my sleigh. He won’t believe his eyes!”

Chapter Three

“Some one took our bath-tub out of the skip last night,” said Mr Hay at breakfast.

“Good riddance!” said Mrs Hay. “It’s a shame they didn’t take the rest of the junk out of that skip as well. Then I could put the washing machine in there, and we could buy a new one for Christmas.”

“A new washing machine?” gasped Mr Hay.

“Yes! The old one hasn’t worked properly since it blew up weeks ago.”

Hearing this, Horace slunk quietly out of the kitchen. He hadn’t *meant* to blow up the washing machine. He’d only been trying to help.

He pattered into the living room to find the hamsters, and walked straight into a line of green wool that was threaded from the door-knob to the bookshelf.

“What’s this?” he spluttered.

“I’m tightrope walking,” said Boo from the bookshelf. “An essential skill for stunt hamsters.” He stepped gingerly onto the wool, holding a knitting needle out to help him balance.

“Whoops! It’s not as easy as it looks.” He wobbled, swayed and then toppled over onto Horace’s nose.

Horace sneezed him off. “You’d better tidy all that wool away,” he warned. “Mrs Hay will be here any minute! I’ll lend you a paw.”

But when he tried to get the wool off the door handle, it was very tightly tied. And there was an awful lot of it. A trail of wool led from the door all the way to the sofa.

Horace followed the trail, and found Tickety at the other end, busy pulling wool off a scarf that was attached to a second knitting needle.

“Stop!” he yelped. “That’s Mrs Hay’s knitting!”

“She won’t notice if we borrow a few rows,” said Tickety. “What did you want?”

“I came to tell you that I’ve got the bath-tub – I mean the sleigh – hidden behind the shed.”

“Hooray! We’ll make it fly through the air!” yelled Boo, climbing up the bookcase.

“I’m not too sure about flying...” began Horace.

“Can we be your reindeer?” asked Tickety.

“I don’t really know...”

“Yes! I’m a flying reindeer!” shouted Boo, jumping from the shelf onto the woolly tightrope.

At the same time, the door began to open. It pulled the tightrope even tighter.

“Watch out!” barked Horace, leaping to Boo’s rescue.

P-DOING! Boo was bounced off the rope. He flew so high into the air that he landed on the lightshade.

Horace thudded heavily into the door.

“Ouch!” said the door.

As it opened, Horace was trying frantically to untangle himself from the tightrope. The more he struggled, the more wool wrapped around him.

“Horace?” Mrs Hay stood in the doorway. She didn’t notice that there was a hamster swinging from the lampshade. She was too busy glaring at Horace.

“What are you doing with my knitting? You naughty dog! That’s the scarf I’m making for Joshua as a Christmas present – *ruined!*”

“Oh, no!” whimpered Horace. He lay down with his head on his paws in a tangle of green wool, and whined in misery.

First he’d got Santa Claus banned from the house. Now he’d spoilt Josh’s present. He’d have to get him another one instead. He wanted to make sure that Josh had a truly unforgettable Christmas!

Chapter Four

Horace was stuck.

He had a sleigh.

He had two reindeer – if rather small, fat ones.

He had a Santa costume: a bright red dressing gown that he'd found in a cupboard. He'd never seen anyone in the family wearing it, so he borrowed it and hid it in the compost heap.

He had a Santa hat: a red football sock of Joshua's. It fitted nicely on one ear. He had everything but presents. And now he was stuck.

What could he give Josh? He suspected that Josh wouldn't want a bone, or a chewed rubber ball, or an interesting stick; or any of Horace's other precious possessions.

"Sweets," he growled. "And toys. That's what I need. But I've got no money to buy them!"

He spun round three times to help him think. "Of course!" he panted after the third spin. "I can beg some sweets off Jellybean!"

So Horace trotted down the road to the sweet-shop where his friend Jellybean lived. He crept inside while Jellybean's master was busy in the back.

"Sweets and toys, you say? What will you give me in exchange?" asked Jellybean, a fat little roly-poly spaniel.

"How about a bone? A squashy ball? An interesting stick?" suggested Horace.

Jellybean sniffed disdainfully. "I don't want any of *those*. Can't you offer me something different?"

"Um..." Horace looked around the shop for inspiration. His eyes alighted on a pack of jellybeans. "Fame!" he suggested.

"What?"

"Fame! If you give me jellybeans for Josh, then every time he eats one your name will pop into his head! *Oh, Jellybean, he'll say, wonderful Jellybean! Brilliant Jellybean!*"

“Ooh,” said Jellybean. His stumpy tail began to wag. “I like the idea of that! All right then. Here are some jellybeans. You can have these marbles too. Nobody ever buys them.”

He pushed a packet of jellybeans and a bag of marbles over to Horace.

“Thanks!” woofed Horace. “These will remind Josh of you as well! Every time he rolls a marble, he’ll think, *Oh, wonderful Roly Poly*—”

“He’ll think *what?*”

“Nothing,” said Horace, remembering too late that Jellybean did not like to be called Roly-Poly, even though he was. He grabbed both bags in his teeth and galloped out of the door.

Back home, he showed them to Kimi and the hamsters.

“Presents for Josh!” he said proudly.

“Hm,” said Kimi, eyeing the two small bags. “Yes, those will really fill up your sack.”

“Sack?” gasped Horace. “I forgot Santa’s sack! Where am I going to get a sack?”

“Don’t panic,” said Tickety. “Didn’t you see what was in the skip under the bath-tub? Josh’s old rucksack. That’s a sort of sack. The clue’s in the name.”

“Yes – but it’s ripped, and the strap’s broken,” Horace moaned.

“If you get it, I can mend it,” promised Tickety. “And if we wrap your presents up, they’ll look much bigger.”

“I’ll wrap them up!” cried Boo. “I know where there’s some perfect wrapping paper! How fast will your sleigh fly through the air, Horace?”

“It won’t. It will slide on the snow,” said Kimi, before Horace could answer.

“But will it slide super-fast?” asked Tickety.

“It will if I wax it,” said Kimi. “I’ll bring some wax tomorrow.”

“That’s excellent! Thanks!” barked Horace gratefully.

Now he was really on his way. With Kimi and the hamsters helping, Santa’s sleigh was sure to be a huge success!

Chapter Five

The sleigh was ready. Kimi had waxed the base of the bath-tub with furniture polish until it was slick and slippery.

Inside the sleigh was the sack. Tickety had carefully mended Josh's old rucksack with tiny, invisible stitches in fishing line.

Inside the sack were the presents. "Sixty-two jellybeans and forty-eight marbles," said Boo proudly. "That's a lot of presents."

"It certainly is," Horace agreed. Boo had wrapped every single one in paper covered with pictures of footballers. "They look great – just right for Josh. He loves football!"

"I found a football annual under the sofa, so I tore the pages out," said Boo.

"Josh will be so pleased!" said Horace happily. "Now, let's do a practice run. Are you ready, reindeer?"

"Ready," said Tickety.

"Ready," said Boo.

"Ahem," said Kimi.

"What?"

"There's just one tiny problem," said the snake. "I've been doing some simple calculations of weight multiplied by the coefficient of friction. And I've found that you will need a force of 52 Newtons to pull this sleigh."

"What's a Newton?" asked Boo. "Is it as big as a hamster?"

"Let's just say that you will need about five hundred hamsters to get this sleigh moving."

"What about stunt hamsters?"

"Four hundred and ninety of those," said Kimi.

Tickety and Boo looked at each other. "Oh dear," said Boo.

Horace was dismayed. "Then what shall I do? *I* can't pull the sleigh!" he cried. "I've got to sit inside it!"

“Ask your friends to be the reindeer,” suggested Tickety. “Silver’s a big strong dog. And there must be others who would help you.”

“That might work,” admitted Kimi.

“I did want to be a reindeer,” Boo said with a sigh.

“We can be Santa’s elves instead,” Tickety decided, “and ride with Horace in the sleigh.”

“Stunt elves?”

“Sure.”

“Great!” barked Horace. His tail began to wag again. “I’ll go and ask the other dogs right now! If they wear branches on their heads, they’ll even look like reindeer.”

“And when are you going to give this tremendous treat to Joshua?” inquired Kimi.

“On Christmas Day. That’s in two days time. I can’t wait to see his face!”

Chapter Six

It was Christmas morning. Horace was behind the shed, putting on the red dressing gown which he had just retrieved from the compost heap. The rucksack full of presents was in the sleigh, with Boo guarding it.

Meanwhile Tickety was keeping a watch on the kitchen window, waiting for Joshua and his family to come downstairs.

“We’re ready to haul the sleigh, Horace! Where shall we stand?” asked Silverside. The big butcher’s dog stood panting in the snow.

Ragbag came running up behind him. “Sorry I’m late!” she barked. “It wasn’t easy getting out of the house. How do you like our antlers?” Like Silverside, she had a small branch balancing behind each ear.

“Very nice! Though I’m not sure if they should have leaves on,” said Horace.

“Ah! Holly twigs. How appropriate,” said Kimi. “Now, let’s get you hitched up to the sleigh.”

Ragbag looked around. “Hitched up with what?” she asked. “Where are the reins?”

Horace was aghast. “*Reins!*” he howled. “I forgot the reins!”

Kimi slithered rapidly across the garden to the washing line. She reared up and pulled off a pair of Mrs Hay’s purple woolly tights.

“Reins,” she said. She passed the tights to Tickety, who wound them round the bath taps. One leg of the tights was tied to Silverside’s collar, and one to Ragbag’s.

Silverside gave an experimental tug. The bath-tub lurched and slid a little way before it stopped again.

“It works!” cried Horace.

“But I can’t hear the sleigh-bells,” said Silverside.

“*Sleigh-bells!*” howled Horace. “I forgot the sleigh-bells!”

“We’ll just shout Ting-a-ling,” said Boo. “Josh won’t know the difference.”

“Ting-a-ling!” yapped Ragbag. “I like your Santa costume, Horace. It smells lovely.”

“Thank you,” said Horace, adjusting his Santa hat, or rather, sock. It fitted his left ear perfectly.

“But where’s your beard?” asked Ragbag.

“*Beard!*” howled Horace. “I forgot the beard!”

“You just need something white and fluffy,” said Boo.

“Snow?” suggested Silverside, scooping up a paw full of snow and slapping it onto Horace’s face.

“No!” spluttered Horace. “Snow will melt!” He shook it off, and ran into the shed. Surely there was something here that was white and fluffy? He couldn’t see anything but spades and saws and paint tins, all covered with a layer of cobwebs...

“*Cobwebs!*” said Horace. He scooped a mass of cobwebs up and applied them to his chin. They stuck quite well.

He marched out of the shed proudly displaying his new beard.

“Joshua and his parents are coming downstairs!” squeaked Tickety. She ran up Silverside’s leg and jumped into the sleigh.

Horace sprang in after her. “Ready, elves? Ready, reindeer? Then let’s go, with a *Ho Ho Ho!*”

Chapter Seven

“Ting-a-ling! Ting-a-ling!” shouted Tickety and Boo at the very tops of their voices.

“Ting-a-ling!” growled Silverside at the very bottom of *his* voice. He and Ragbag pulled hard on the reins.

The sleigh began to move, sliding down the snowy path towards the house.

“Yes! Here we go!” cried Horace happily as it gathered speed.

The three faces in the kitchen turned towards the window. Three mouths dropped open in amazement. Josh ran to open the back door and stare at the sleigh as it rushed towards him.

“**HO HO HO!**” woofed Horace. “It’s Father Christmas! **HO HO HO!**”

He reached for the sack of presents. “Get ready to slow down, reindeer!” he told the dogs. “**HO HO – AARGH!**” he yelped, as a large and frightened spider crawled out of his beard and perched between his eyes.

“Help! Get off!” shouted Horace, dropping the reins to flap at the spider. “Whoa!”

“I can’t stop!” yelped Ragbag. “The path’s too slippery!”

“I can’t stop either!” yowled Silverside. “We’re going to crash! Look out, Ragbag. *Jump!*”

The two reindeer jumped to either side. The purple reins tore in half. But the sleigh did not slow down at all.

It shot straight down the icy path and through the door. It shot straight through the door into the kitchen.

It shot straight through the kitchen and landed with a thunderous **CRASH** inside the washing machine.

The sleigh cracked from side to side. So did the washing-machine. The sack toppled over and spilled presents all over the floor.

Horace leapt out of the shattered sleigh, frantically trying to pull his beard off.

“Escape hatch!” squealed Boo. He dived down the plughole behind Tickety. The pair of them scrambled out of the bottom of the tub and disappeared beneath the fridge.

“Horace!” bellowed Mr Hay. “What are you doing with that bath-tub? And what are all these scruffy bits of paper?”

He picked up some of the presents. “Why – these are pages torn out of Joshua’s new football annual!” he cried. “We were going to give it to him for Christmas. So it was *you* who took it!”

“And that red dressing-gown!” exclaimed Mrs Hay. “That was a present for Josh too! I hid it specially. Just look at it now – it’s filthy!”

“And what about our washing machine?” roared Mr Hay. “It’s a wreck! A fine Christmas this is turning out to be!”

Josh had picked up Santa’s sack. He tipped the rest of the presents out of it. But he did not open them. Instead, he stared at the sack in astonishment.

“Hey, this is my old rucksack,” he declared. “Look, Mum, it’s fine! No holes! I *told* you not to throw it away! It’s as good as new. Cool!”

And he flung his arms round Horace and hugged him.

“I didn’t want a dressing-gown for Christmas,” he whispered in Horace’s ear – the one without the sock on it. “I didn’t want a silly green scarf either. And I’ve got loads of football annuals. What I *really* wanted was a rucksack exactly like my old one. Thank you, Horace! Thank you!”

*

Some hours later, Horace decided that Christmas hadn’t really gone too badly after all. Despite Mr Hay’s threats, Josh seemed to have plenty of presents as well as his rucksack, jellybeans and marbles.

By now the Hays had finished their Christmas dinner and were watching a film in the living room. Horace had been left in the kitchen, but he didn’t mind. He had a bowl full of leftover turkey.

Tickety and Boo scampered in. “It’s a dreadful film,” Tickety told him. “No car crashes at all.”

Boo began to collect some of the parcels that had rolled into the corners of the kitchen. Josh had only picked up a few of them.

“Can we have the marbles as a Christmas present?” he asked.

“Certainly,” said Horace. “Would you like the jellybeans as well?”

“No, thanks,” said Boo. “I prefer raisins. Give the jellybeans to your reindeer.”

“Happy Chrissstmass!” Kimi slithered in underneath the garage door.

“You’ve gone purple,” said Tickety.

Kimi was wearing one leg of the woolly tights. “They’re the perfect sssize for a winter body-warmer,” she explained. “A nice present for myself.”

“I’ve got the red dressing-gown for Christmas,” said Horace. “Mrs Hay said it was so smelly and dirty that I’d better have it as a dog-blanket. She can’t wash anything until she gets a new washing machine.”

“That’ll be a nice present for *her*,” said Kimi. “So everybody’s having a happy Christmas... except maybe Mr Hay.”

“He’s happy because he’s got lots to shout about,” said Tickety, unwrapping marbles. “Who wants to play at Boo bowling?”

“How does that work?”

“Like ten-pin bowling,” said Boo, “except there’s only one of me.”

“Sounds good. After that, I’ll let you have a game of snakes and ladders,” offered Kimi. “Or snakes, at least.”

“And I’ll give everybody rides on Santa’s back,” said Horace joyfully, as he snuggled in his sweetly-scented dressing-gown. “Happy Christmas! **HO HO HO!**”

The End

If you would like to read more stories about Horace the driving dog, look for the series of full-length WHEELers ebooks all about them!

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