

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

Black Beauty

ANNA SEWELL



Complete and Unabridged

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BLACK BEAUTY

In loving memory of
MICHAEL TRAYLER
the founder of Wordsworth Editions

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CONTENTS

APPRECIATION AND LIFE
OF THE AUTHOR PAGE I I

CHAPTER ONE PAGE 23
My Early Home

CHAPTER TWO PAGE 25
The Hunt

CHAPTER THREE PAGE 28
My Breaking In

CHAPTER FOUR PAGE 32
Birtwick Park

CHAPTER FIVE PAGE 35
A Fair Start

CHAPTER SIX PAGE 39
Liberty

CHAPTER SEVEN PAGE 41
Ginger

CHAPTER EIGHT PAGE 45
Ginger's Story Continued

CHAPTER NINE PAGE 49
Merrylegs

CHAPTER TEN	PAGE 52
<i>A Talk in the Orchard</i>	
CHAPTER ELEVEN	PAGE 57
<i>Plain Speaking</i>	
CHAPTER TWELVE	PAGE 61
<i>A Stormy Day</i>	
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	PAGE 64
<i>The Devil's Trademark</i>	
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	PAGE 67
<i>James Howard</i>	
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	PAGE 70
<i>The Old Ostler</i>	
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	PAGE 73
<i>The Fire</i>	
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	PAGE 77
<i>John Manly's Talk</i>	
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	PAGE 81
<i>Going for the Doctor</i>	
CHAPTER NINETEEN	PAGE 84
<i>Only Ignorance</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY	PAGE 87
<i>Joe Green</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE	PAGE 90
<i>The Parting</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO	PAGE 93
<i>Earlsball</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE	PAGE 97
<i>A Strike for Liberty</i>	

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR	PAGE 100
<i>Lady Anne, or a Runaway Horse</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE	PAGE 106
<i>Reuben Smith</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX	PAGE 110
<i>How it Ended</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN	PAGE 113
<i>Ruined, and Going Downhill</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT	PAGE 116
<i>A Job Horse and his Drivers</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE	PAGE 119
<i>Cockneys</i>	
CHAPTER THIRTY	PAGE 125
<i>A Thief</i>	
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE	PAGE 128
<i>A Humbug</i>	
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO	PAGE 131
<i>A Horse Fair</i>	
CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE	PAGE 134
<i>A London Cab Horse</i>	
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR	PAGE 138
<i>An Old War Horse</i>	
CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE	PAGE 143
<i>Jerry Barker</i>	
CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX	PAGE 149
<i>The Sunday Cab</i>	
CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN	PAGE 153
<i>The Golden Rule</i>	

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT	PAGE 157
<i>Dolly and a Real Gentleman</i>	
CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE	PAGE 161
<i>Seedy Sam</i>	
CHAPTER FORTY	PAGE 164
<i>Poor Ginger</i>	
CHAPTER FORTY-ONE	PAGE 167
<i>The Butcher</i>	
CHAPTER FORTY-TWO	PAGE 170
<i>The Election</i>	
CHAPTER FORTY-THREE	PAGE 172
<i>A Friend in Need</i>	
CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR	PAGE 176
<i>Old Captain and his Successor</i>	
CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE	PAGE 180
<i>Jerry's New Year</i>	
CHAPTER FORTY-SIX	PAGE 186
<i>Jakes and the Lady</i>	
CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN	PAGE 190
<i>Hard Times</i>	
CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT	PAGE 194
<i>Farmer Thoroughgood and his Grandson Willie</i>	
CHAPTER FORTY-NINE	PAGE 198
<i>My Last Home</i>	

An Appreciation and Life of the Author

*He liveth best who loveth best
All creatures great and small,
For the good God who loveth us
He made them first of all.*

COLERIDGE

The year of Grace one thousand eight hundred and twenty was a year fraught with many important events, but little did those who passed beneath the shadows of the old church in Yarmouth know that the faint sun of a wind-swept March day was ushering into the world a girl-child whose pen was one day to be used to her own fame and to the generous service of promoting kindness to that noble animal, the horse.

In that little house beneath trees that were already dreaming towards the spring, within hearing of the bells of the Church of St Nicholas, on this thirtieth day of March, Anna Sewell, the author of *Black Beauty*, was born.

There was no silver spoon in the tiny Anna's mouth, for things were not going too well with her father, Isaac Sewell. Whilst he rejoiced in this acquisition to his family, financial clouds were crowding upon his business horizon.

A few days after Anna was born her father made the discovery that he had been overreached and swindled in a business venture that he had entered into a short time before, and the husband with so young a wife, and now further domestic responsibilities, had to look about him for new business openings.

But Isaac Sewell came from a hardy stock that had, through many decades, been accustomed to a harsher

persecution than the lack of money, so he took heart in memory of the Friends who were both his wife's and his own ancestors, and took a little house just off Bishopsgate Street, London, and opposite a gin palace. In this he had been badly advised, for the same fate that had met his other business at the birth of Anna came upon this new enterprise with the birth of his only son, Philip.

This bad fortune must have been very trying for his wife, Mary Sewell (*née* Wright), for Mrs Sewell was a woman of a very sensitive and artistic nature as is shown by her well-known works, *Mother's Last Words*, *Our Father's Care*, *Thy Poor Brother*, and many a homely ballad.

Trying as these troubles were her staunchness of spirit is shown by the remark in her diary when, in writing of Anna's birth, she says, 'to be an unclouded blessing for fifty-eight years, the perennial joy of my life'.

Isaac Sewell, on his second stroke of bad fortune, had to begin his business life all over again. He chose Dalston, and there the little family lived for nine or ten years that were full of happiness despite the strictest economy and hard work. Happiness had come because the fret and harass of both debt and care were absent, and in this bright atmosphere Anna and Philip thrived.

The two children had been their mother's playfellows and helpmates from the moment they were old enough to be so, and they spared no pains, as they grew older, to help her in every possible way. Mary Sewell had trained her children to find glory, not degradation, in work. Work was the finest outlet for Anna's high-spirited nature, for she was very highly strung and courageous.

Anna soon developed a great love for Nature and art as well, and as quite a child made pen and ink and pencil drawings of the beauties of nature which were most admirably done.

Had the authoress of *Black Beauty* been stronger it is

highly likely that the world would have acclaimed her as an artist, but she was not fated to maintain the healthy vigour of those days at Dalston.

It was at Dalston that Mary Sewell's first little book was written, and there was the spirit of sacrifice in Mrs Sewell's desire to give expression to her thoughts.

She wrote to earn money with which to buy books to educate her two children.

Mrs Sewell must have been a splendid teacher as well as a devoted mother, for she instilled not only knowledge into her children's minds, but she taught them to be fearless. Neither Anna nor Philip were in the least afraid of animals or insects of any kind, and darkness held no terrors for them.

One of the happiest recollections of the two children was a visit to their grandparents who lived at Buxton, just outside Norwich.

It was the first of many visits; and here they found the unfettered freedom of the country and a grandfather who knew the heart of a child, and fostered their affection for all the wonders of the countryside.

It was at Dalston that Anna sprained her elbow, and, when spoken to of this painful accident, Anna said simply, 'I bored it well.' It was typical of the patient courage and cheerfulness under suffering that she showed throughout the whole of her tranquil life.

Anna could not have had a better example to follow than her mother, for Mrs Sewell was never happy unless she was ameliorating the conditions of those who suffered, and in those days there were many crying evils that flourished under the mantle of justice.

The fortunes of Isaac Sewell were slightly on the mend and, in order to make more room for his growing family, he purchased an old stable building lying near his home, and this he remodelled.

Anna's grandfather suggested a scheme whereby their income might be supplemented by the keeping of cows, but the new interest met with misfortune owing to the dishonesty of the man who delivered the milk to the various customers that the Sewell family had obtained.

There was now a new occupant of the home in the shape of Anna's uncle Richard and, as Mrs Sewell could find no time for her lessons with Anna, it was arranged that Anna should go as a day boarder to a school about a mile distant from her home.

The Sewell family was now in troubled waters, but the worst was yet to come.

Returning from school one day Anna, racing up the carriage drive to the garden gate, fell and sprained her ankle very severely. It was destined to result in Anna being something of a cripple for the rest of her life, but as Mrs Sewell says in her diary: 'Little [did we think] that henceforth her dear life was to be coloured by this event, *not* discoloured.'

Everything that could be done *was* done, but there were doctors who made mistakes and Anna Sewell became more and more crippled.

Mary Sewell never abandoned hope that one day that high-spirited child would run and walk and ramble as she had done during her nature trips, but alas . . .

All those who knew Anna Sewell in those days of affliction loved her, for she was an example of most persevering industry and cheerful patience. Her sufferings never made gloom or a cloud in the house. Anna never brooded over her loss of power, or loss of the changes or amusements which others enjoy. Her own mind was always a storehouse of refreshment to herself; it was a rich garden which circumstances never allowed to be fully cultivated, but it was full of thought and ready appreciation of the genius and talents of others. She was her mother's sunshine

always. 'There never came the slightest cloud between us,' writes Mrs Sewell.

Mr Sewell removed to Brighton in 1836 to take up his position as manager of the London and County Bank's Brighton branch, and there a remedy to cure Anna was tried. It proved to be worse than her disease. A doctor bled her severely and to this draining away of life her mother attributed the many disablements which subsequently afflicted Anna. Her health was full of fluctuations, but as time went on she gradually grew worse and her loved employments had to be laid aside by tired hands. In Brighton days though, she must have possessed some walking power for in a journal written there in 1844 she tells of pleasant walks with her friends, trips to London to visit the picture-galleries, and other things which suggest some measure of activity.

It was in the year 1845 that the Sewell family removed to Lancing, and in order to get Mr Sewell to the station a pony chaise became part of the household staff, and it was Anna who was accustomed to drive her father to and from Shoreham Station. No doubt Anna Sewell learned to love horses more and more through this self-imposed pleasure and duty.

The following year Mrs Sewell took her children to Germany for a holiday, but Anna was left there for treatment which proved so satisfactory that she returned with the use of both legs – she walked!

Anna Sewell had the artist's instinct for form strongly developed. Her own drawings prove that; and it was this gift of form that made her so admirable a critic of manner and arrangements in word painting.

Nor was she a lenient judge. 'Oh, if only I can pass my Nannie, I don't fear the world after that,' said Mrs Sewell, accepting her own child's criticism with eagerness.

In the autumn of 1857 the family paid a visit to Santander

in Spain, and on their return they settled at Blue Lodge, Wick, near both Bath and Bristol, and at Wick Mrs Sewell's chief works were written. Mrs Bayly, the author of *Ragged Homes and How to Mend Them*, mentions a very pleasant visit paid to Mrs Sewell at Blue Lodge, Wick, in the summer of 1863: "The mother was then writing the last chapters of *Thy Poor Brother* in which Anna was assisting her. I was once with mother and daughter when Mrs Sewell was reading aloud something she had prepared for the Press. It was beautiful to witness the intense love and admiration and pride which beamed in the daughter's eyes, but this in nowise prevented her being, as I could see, a severe critic.

'It was the future author of *Black Beauty* who drove me to the station, and she evidently believed in a horse having a moral nature if we may judge by her mode of remonstrance: "Now thee shouldn't walk up this hill – didn't thee see how it rains? Now thee must go a little faster – thou would be sorry for us to be late at the station."

'I think it was during this drive that I spoke to Anna about something Horace Bushnell had written about animals. It was never forgotten.'

Soon after the publication of *Black Beauty*, Mrs Bayly says: 'I had a little note written from her sofa in which she says: "The thoughts you gave me from Horace Bushnell years ago have followed me entirely through the writing of my book, and have more than anything else helped me to feel it was worth a great effort, to try at least to bring the thoughts of men more in harmony with the purposes of God in this subject."'

Poor Anna Sewell! The maladies from which she suffered were mainly of a very painful and depressing character, and had her face been marred with grief no one would have been a whit surprised. It was a wonderful evidence of the triumph of the spirit over the body that her face was not