

## VESLEBLAKKEN

By Jacob Breda Bull, 1914.

Translation: Runa Aadalen, 2014

My first childhood love was a tiny pale yellow colt, which danced and pranced from dusk till dawn up and down the Sorberglien (Southhill) from the highest point along the skigard (a wooden fence with diagonal branches) down to the main road and up again the same route without a brake for hours. Some times it would stop midways, turn around and send his crisp bold whines down towards to Storeblakken who was working on the fields below; then he turned and rushed uphill. This colt was Vesleblakkens beginning.

Father had bought him from a man up North in the Lillelvdalen (Little River Valley), mostly to get a horse who could pair up with Storeblakken, and also because the colt was of a good, well known breed. -But God save us, what a couple it turned out to be! Storeblakken was the broad, heavy one, who lay his ears backwards and slapped his tail over the reins when he got a stroke of the whip up the Church road, but he also put in a tremendous power on the timber load when it mattered, that it made a groan in the timber sleigh; but Vesleblakken grew up to be the greatest disappointment a farmer ever could suffer. When he stood alone to pull the timber, he either pulled his heart out, or he just simply didn't move an inch; if he was harnessed together with Storeblakken in front of the plough, he always took little jumps and lay half an alen (2 feet) ahead for as long as he endured; but if he felt his force wasn't sufficient, he broke into a gallop; - he was quite sadly inefficient for any heavier work. And anyway, despite all his difficulty, Vesleblakken became everybody's favorite. Everybody wanted to touch his light, fair head with those big black eyes and his velvety soft mule. - everybody who knew horses would always attempt to stroke his firm, clean legs or measure the deep, broad chest. And that way Vesleblakken became cuddly, almost humanlike. Eager as fire he never got any taste of a whip; his touchy and easily hurt mind demanded a soft education with praising and sugar lumps which made him so tamed you just had to call his name before he came knighting and whinnying to the front of the Sorberglikneiken (Southhill view) as he overlooked the landscape outside the fence.

Vesleblakken could be around three years when my father put him in front of the wagon for the Annex Church. Ola Jonsen, the farm boy, also called Ola Ugly on Earth, was determined that Vesleblakken could be a good driving horse, just appropriate for the Vicar. Father and Storeblakken was used to drive every other Sunday between the Vicar's farm and the Otnes Annex Church the one and a half mil (1 mil equals 10 kilometers) in three hours one way and three hours back; and it was most likely that Storeblakken was driving, for father was no horseman.

Well. Father was testing Vesleblakken. But Ola Jonsen had to go with them - the first time.

When father was back, one hour and a half earlier than usual, he was not in a happy mood.

"Now, how did you do?" Mother asked.

"Oh, well -," he answered; but immediately left the topic.

At Wednesday, as we were dressing in the morning, it came: "Mother, I ought to buy a

real, steady driving horse. It's impossible with both Storeblakken and Vesleblakken; - I hate every exaggeration!"

Then Borka was bought.

But Ola Ugly on Earth, the farm boy, sat in the farm workers' house smelling of horse telling a story of great entertainment for everyone present what really happened the day the Vicar tested Vesleblakken for church.

Oh yes, outwards all went fine, although the horse lay on the reins so hard the Vicar had to let Ola take them the last half mil; but homewards, as they approached Hornsett farm, it turned bad by the Hornsett's sudden appearance on his way out the gate with his grey trotter approaching the road heading north.

"You ought to drive in front", my father said. "Oh, yes, the Vicar has more patience than I," The Hornsett agreed and sped up.

That was the end of holding back on Vesleblakken. He laid so hard on the harness, the snow flew around the Vicar's ears. "This is going wrong," he said, looking scared. Again he passed the reins to Ola. But as Ola stood up and took the reins, he understood that this would be trot and utter trot; because it was little space between the sleigh's drag arms and the horse's kicking back feet, both upwards and sideways. And the head came higher the faster it went.

The Hornsett trotter was one of the quickest trotter in the village, this developed to be a fast trot; because Vesleblakken preferred to be in front, you must believe. The Hornsett turned around when he reached the first uphill, looking back at the other sleigh. "I guess the Vicar got a new horse," he said.

"Yes, it is a colt," the Vicar answers. "You oughta drive away; he'll give it all as long as he sees you," Ola Jonsen says as he tightens the reins.

"I ought to, indeed," The Hornsett says; He sat down in the seat of his single sleigh (a small, narrow sleigh for one person). Then they drive away crossing the flat field along the Kvars eddy. The Hornsett speeds up to get away and out of sight, and Ola Jonsen is holding back. Then Vesleblakken is raising up and starts neighing.

"No - no - - this -," the Vicar says frightened and wants to get up. "Yep, then he must go," Ola reckoned and loosened the reins. But then you can believe they got good speed! The Hornsett didn't quite perceive it until Vesleblakken was very close, and just by the field of Harsettstu, he was eager to pass. Then the Hornsett stopped his horse. "The Vicar has got himself a stately driving horse," he says.

"It is a petty I'm not able to hold him," the Vicar answers.

"He's hot, he wants to be in front," the Hornsett says. "The Vicar ought to drive in front," he says, pulling his horse to the side. "Thank you, that was tremendously kind of you," the Vicar says, passing by. "Now it ought to be a smoother drive." But in that moment Ola is smacking his tongue, and away it goes, faster than ever, the wind biting the eyes and the snow swooshing around the ears. "No, Ola, this is impossible," the Vicar yells, he's grabbing the reins. "Doesn't the Vicar think it is speedy enough?" "No, I mean, this will go badly. "if the Hornsett can drive, so can we," Ola replies, once again loosening the reins.

Well down at the flat valley floor, on the last halvffjerding (1,1km) the Vicar turns around, looking back. "Ola, where did the Hornsett go, did you see him?" "He's most probably fallen behind, that one," Ola Jonsen answered. But he realized this was not a suitable driving horse for the Vicar.

From that day on Vesleblakken took a special position at the Vicar's farm. Half pet, half formal wear. Ola Jonsen was the only one to drive him, and never ever would he taste the whip again. Because the slightest use of the whip made him crazy. But he never ever tolerated another horse being in front on the road, and it was a thrill for us little boys during the Christmas weekend, when we late at night were picked up to go home from the Christmas parties around the valley, and where it used to be no less than ten, maybe twenty horses with sleighs in front. Then Vesleblakken pulled in all his power, so the wind was howling around the ears and tears flowed from the eyes, and Ola Jonsen sat on the sheep fur proud as a king yelling: "Half way!" to the entire village.

Little Dun loved children most of all. When we little boys didn't get supervised by our parents and we met the horse behind the stable or behind the barn, we made the wildest game. One was hanging over cross the horse's back, one clutched onto one leg, one gave sugar, and Little Dun stood still as stone. Especially it was my youngest brother, he was about five years old, Little Dun was determined to love the most. He sniffed and stroke his mule on him, by him he could tolerate everything. Their faith got so attached, in such a peculiar and lovely way that I have to tell you about it.

It was midwinter and crackling cold. Indoors every window glass was frozen, some of them with adventurous roses in which the rays of the sun was playing and broke through very gently, other had a grey, dense, chubby frost, letting no light through except where we children had fun melting small circles by pressing the fingertips to the window glass, so we could watch the winter joy outside. Out there was an ocean of sun. The heaven steel blue, trembling of sunlight; the frozen fluffy snow sparkling white with sharp, bluish shadows below fences and bushes, the sparrows along every roof pane and in flocks at the barn bridges as big, grey-brown yarn balls of loose wool thread and every human with a quick gait, with frozen crystals around their face from the breath.

These days we had our games at Prestegardsbakken (Vicar's farm's hill). There we found icicles and fantastic vaults made by the ice, where we were playing house, laying down, make believe we had a warm, cosy home; bumpy ice had frozen there and made strange figures and formations in the little streams, with cracks, where we could see through, at the black, secretive water deep down, listening to it mumbling and telling as we laid our ears close to it. As we were here at the creek where we were holding parties and tending guests with ice cubes and were driving to church on the steel blank, smooth surfaced sloops, my brother developed an illness, a dangerous illness. Now he was laying with a strong fever and short breath, moaning, coughing rust red stripes in the tenacious sticky matter he produced. It was not to be mistaken any longer. It was the illness that

up in the village took the little ones, broke the adults and freed the old – pneumonia. And then it was five mil (50 km, or 28 miles) to Tonsett, for the most nearby doctor.

The third night, early in the morning, just as Ola Ugly on Earth sat in the farm boys house getting something to eat, father came in, looking pale and moved.

"You ought to get the doctor, Ola, immediately," he says from the door.

"Is it that bad t'day?"

"yes, bad enough, you see, Ola."

Ola is quickly grabbing a couple of mouth full's, cleaning his spoon in his hand and stands up.

"When will you be back then, Ola?"

"Oh, I dun know; - It's a ten mils drive and the Tonsett keel is bad this time of year."

"So then I can not wait for you until the morning breaks then, Ola?" Father looks worried.

Ola Ugly on Earth stands thinking about it. Suddenly he gives a comforting look into father's eyes. "I take Vesleblakken," he says.

Father weeps his eyes, takes two steps and then stops. "Then maybe you'll make it back early this night then, Ola?" he says.

"I'll be quick," Ola Jonsen says, taking his woolen sweater down from the loft.

"Yes, you do the best you can this time, Ola; for it may save a life."

"I'll do my best."

Father walks out.

At six sharp Ola Ugly on Earth put the light church sleigh in front of the stable, harnessed Vesleblakken and fixed him to the sleigh.

The horse stay there, dense and strong, with the dumbbell wreath worn high above the lifted neck and the big black eyes glowing of power. Father comes out in the open door.

"The boy is worse now, Ola. You'll have to drive as fast as the horse can make."

"Yes, as the Vicar wants," Ola says, taking the reins.

"-Wait, Ola." The Vicar goes inside and returns in a moment. He reached Ola the whip.

"You must use this today." "Yes, if it's needed," Ola says, harsh, but he accepts. Father turns to Little Dun, pets him on the neck. "Yes then, in God's name!" he says. Ola drives away.

The day grew long, both for Vesleblakken and us back home. The illness increased. And I was big enough to read mother and father's faces; the danger increased too. A strange unrest drove me; There were no peace inside, and none outside; what about to happen took a fearful shape in my fantasy; I saw death. I was watching the ceremony, I was watching all our misery. And I could see the doctor arrive; I could see the rescue, the daily recovery and all our fragile joy.

I stood like that out in the biting strong coldness, bare headed, glowingly hot at the earlobes and the lashes sticky of frozen tears, listening for dumbbells, whispering in between: "Within the evening time, within the evening time": because at that time Vesleblakken was supposed to reach his final destination. I remember very well that I was praying to God, that he would make some miracles happen, so that Vesleblakken would reach back in the evening time, and my brother to live through the illness and not die; if only the doctor arrived, then - - -

Worried I stealthy went indoors again; sneaked inside on my toes, in to the sick room where my father strolled up and down with careful steps and mother sat hoary and slumped by the small bed. I could hear the little boy through the darkness, uneven and anxious breath, pity in between; now and then a coughing, short, tired, fruitless – and then the same all over again. Scared breaths. Each time a cough came, my mother turned to us and looked despaired at our direction.

Father stopped. "He will perhaps be here until midnight." He whispered.

"What's the time now?"

"Five PM sharp."

"Then it will be too late – that is so many hours!" – Mother were crying.

No! – this was unbearable. Stifled by tears I quietly went down again to my loneliness, no one noticed me, where I went or what I did. Then again I stood in the doorway with my bare head and the hot face suffering all the bitter, childish grief. "The many, many hours! –" And I counted them loudly, straight from five to twelve, counted every half hour, every quarter, every minute; - and through all that time he had to lie there, not getting any help. I experienced this as so terrible, so impossible, so helpless of our Lord; and Vesleblakken which maybe not yet were any longer than Tyldalen and still had Midtskogen and Ellevoldsmoene ahead of him and all of the mountains!

I listened again, though it was in vane. Go outside, listening with an open mouth. It was a dumbbell, wasn't it? Oh no – I think not! Not dumbbells anyway. But anyway there was a strange singing in the air. I heard the dogs barking both at the Bergsett and further north; but no bells. Now that peculiar singing again! Disappears and then reappears! It must be bells, but not from a running horse, not in a rhythm, no tune, but as the entire air was filled of distant tunes blasting out, out! It is bells! Now I can hear it: It is dumbbells! It is our, yes, it is our! I can hear it so clearly, the heavy tingle ling, with its distinct, crisp sound, singing its tone so clearly, so broadly, as a stream of fire through the frost, constantly, constantly, like a stream of warmth through myself! And closer and closer the song gets, loud and clear and strong carried, and in between the short rhythm of hoofs, three and four per second. I hold my breath, staring intently up against the Bergslien. Now the jingle ling bells brakes through strong and rippling; - if only it's them! Yes, there, already, I can see the dear yellow-white head, high held; - I make an abrupt turn and run indoor, up the stairs, falling and then up again, arriving the sick room heading for the bed: "Mother, Vesleblakken is coming!"

"What do you say?" She raises up, as she got stung.

"You must be wrong, my boy," father says, his face running red, walking quickly to the window.

"No, it is Vesleblakken; do you hear?" I say loudly and eager, pushing my way to the window to see. Then I hear my father sob, a couple of strange sobs; - the doctor is just arriving in the yard. "Yes, it is Vesleblakken, my boy," he says with a thick voice, turning away, then quickly facing me again, stroking my hair several times, then straightening up with a quick touch on his bandana, takes his hat and walks out.

But down there in front of the hallway is Vesleblakken standing, foaming, sweaty, with hoarfrost around the nostrils and in his curly, wet fur. He's throwing his head, chewing his bridle, stomping his legs, shivering all over, utterly excited. He has run ten Norwegian miles through snowstorm past the Midtskogen and the Tonsett Ridge back and forth in twelve hours.

Father stood in the hallway receiving the doctor; - the quaint smell of medicines following as he went inside. But in the doorway father turned around, went outside, threw his arms around the horse's head, stroking his foaming wet neck. He whined, searching for the usual lump of sugar, but that was forgotten today.

"Ola, did you use the whip?" father asked.

"Yes, did as the priest said," Ola answered, he was removing the locking pins from the harness. "it was a matter of life and death, right," he slowly added, took the horse by the bridle and went to the stable.

He was right: It was a matter of life and death.

As the doctor the next day sat up in the sleigh with Borka in front, my little brother was saved. Father stood moved, almost solemnly in his mood.

"Yes, next to God we now have the doctor to thank for us keeping our little boy," he said and shook his hand for goodbye.

"No," the doctor said, finding a good sitting position wearing his wolf fur coat; "It was Vesleblakken who saved the boy; because, if I had been here one hour later - well, then, fare well, fare well, Vicar!" - The doctor drove off.

To me, who stood by listening to all this, the experiences from yesterday came up again. I could hear the loud, strong chime of the bells and the strong, eager hoof steps; I could see Vesleblakken with his high held head thrown from side to side to give space for the trot - the strong, resilient body jogging uphill and the long vast plains, enduring hour by hour, half day through.

Three days after these events, Ola Jonsen came upstairs, asking to see the Vicar.

"Now, Ola, what's on your mind?" father says, looking up from the protocol, with the feather quill between his teeth.

"Vesleblakken isn't doing good", Ola says helplessly, looking down at his crooked fingers.

"What's wrong with the horse?" Father has turned pale and rose up.

"I think he's got pneumonia," Ola answers, weakly.

Father approached as in anger. "Then you drove him too hard, Ola."

Ola turns his fur hat over and over. Then he looks up. "It had to be either your li'l boy or your horse," he says, sharp. Father is quiet; - he remembers.

"Get the veterinary immediately," he says.

"He's here already," Ola answers.

"What does he think about it?"

"He'll do what he can, he says; but he doesn't know."

- Father takes his hat and coat heading for the stable. Ola follows.

Vesleblakken stood in the stable, shaking. His head hung down, his ears hanging, his eye dead and suffering, short breath and coughing in between. And as little Johannes was lying in his first, calm sleep, pale, but with steady breath after the endured crisis, Vesleblakken stood with all the pains of the sickness, carried to save the boy's life.

The horse got plenty of rubbings and blankets, turpentine and black coffee to drink, and every morning Ola had to present the bulletin of the night. And every hand on the farm was in grief, because of Vesleblakkens pneumonia.

It was Sunday morning. Little Johannes was already out of bed and past all danger; but the sadness of illness lay over the house; in the stable it was still a fight for life and death. Involuntarily the girls opened doors quite soft and silent, and the talking was muted outdoors and indoors - for the wellbeing of Vesleblakken. I was late for breakfast that day, didn't have much appetite either, amongst those serious faces. Anyway I managed to eat the sandwich; Because no food at that age just didn't do. Then I was on my way to the stable.

The strong, warm smell of horse met me today as always; Storeblakken stood gnawing the nutritious hay between his teeth as usual; Borka drank water from the bucket, noisy and splashing; but as I approached Vesleblakkens stall, I couldn't see the beloved, golden white head anymore. An indescribable anxiety came over me. Almost fainting I crept up on the stall wall to look. The stall was empty. But in the center of the stable floor, where the winter sun lay its diagonal, cold stripe through the peep hole in the stable door, Vesleblakken lay straight out stiff.

It ran as cold water over me. "Vesleblakken!" I whispered with a choked throat.

"Vesleblakken!" He didn't whine, he didn't lift his head. It was all quiet. Only Storeblakken Chewing as nothing happened, and Borka stomping her foot hard on the floor.

I came down from the stall, crying, out of the stable and straight in to mother, hanging over her lap, sobbing.

"What is the matter, my boy?"

"Vesleblakken is dead, mother! He doesn't live anymore, mother!" And I wept. But mother stood up, as abrupt as she had got a cut from a knife.

- Soon every hand at the farm stood in groups of two and three, talking and looking and explaining in the distinctive singing tone of countrymen in grief.

The milkmaid claimed that "Vesleblakken would have lived if they had sent for him Per

Fonnaas; 'cause he knew best how to cure the sickness, him." "The cow with lummony last fall, got well, but the one the animal doc tended last year, it went."

Helge, the smallholder tenant, meant this; "Never could the Vicar ever get a horse like this; it's match he would have to look for around all the villages – yes, hardly for a hundred spesiedalers, even though the Vicar only gave fifty for this one."

And Marja, the kitchen maid, wondered what the Vicar would say when he arrived from church getting this news; - "He had such affection for this horse; - yes, it most mostly like a human too."

Soft and mellow fell every word, with long pauses between. Then mother got courage. She approached the horse and pet him on the neck. "Well, God bless you, Vesleblakken, and Thanks for all," she said firmly, but low. Then they went, one by one, as they had come.

But the one not saying, not doing anything, was Ola Jonsen Ugly On Earth, the farm boy. Pale he stood, leaned up against the stall, staring down.

"Are you not coming, Ola," mother asks from the door.

"I'm not good to walk away," it came quickly and abrupt, then suddenly the strong man brakes out in a crying.

Mother is silent. This strong grief for an animal touched her, mostly because she knew this animal gave his life for her child.

"It had to happen, Ola," she says softly, stroking his shoulder.

"Darn sure, it had to," he answers. That was all. Mother went. I don't know how, but it became like this. As soon as we two, Vesleblakkens's best friends were alone, I came on my knees onto the wet stable floor with my hand on Vesleblakken's head. "You dear, dear Vesleblakken," I whispered; - and Ola Jonsen stood silent in the same spot he stood earlier, and let me caress the dead animal. It was a poor image, and maybe not much to write down; the dead horse with it's big, sorrowful eye staring wide open into the merciless death; the farm boy who grieved over his lost friend, and a small, unhappy boy at his knees in the half dusk where one single sunstroke cast it's light – that's all. But then the church bells started chiming, almost merrily, wild. And in my childish fantasy it became as Vesleblakken had arrived in heaven, and had turned big, so big, with bells chiming all over heaven's vault; - but it was only the bells of Rendalen church calling for service this sad Sunday morning.

Here Vesleblakken's story ends. And I have raised this simple memory.