

Chapter 8

OUR FRIEND THE HORSE

I REMEMBER HORSES as early as I remember anything. We had two at the store that I remember, Billy, a bay with black points, undoubtedly trotting-bred, and Charlie his successor a lighter bay with white legs and a very stylish way of going, a somewhat bigger horse, but perhaps not quite so speedy.

Another uncle, as long as I can remember and until the days of the motor car and even after always had a good trotting horse sometimes two or three of them. The best of them he said was just good enough not to be able to win races, though had he been raced he could trot in less than the standard 2.30 and probably could travel at the rate of fifteen miles an hour for half the day. There was a black mare named Dolly which was the dam of Frank, a tall raw-boned brown, onto whose back I would be tossed with everybody but me confident that I would come to no harm. There was also in those days a well known standard-bred stud, Clear Grit, and to have a colt by Clear Grit was considered then like having a colt by Citation now. I remember that we had a sorrel horse by him which turned out to be a good looking loafer.

I used to deliver the groceries behind Billy and he was one of the smartest delivery horses in the whole East End. He had only one weakness. He would not permit another horse to overtake and pass him. When he heard the other horse coming he would increase his speed, and rather than be overtaken he would burst into a gallop and run away. Charlie had no fault at all that I remember; but there must have been something about him that had to be watched for I recall my aunt explaining to a new clerk who was about to drive him something or other that he had to be on the lookout for, because the young man said. "*Do you mean that he's a rash horse, ma'am?*" Probably this was the first time I had ever heard the word "*rash*" and the remark has remained in my mind.

Every merchant in the city who delivered goods had a horse or two. Every doctor had a horse. Every man of any social standing had a horse. Every wealthy man had two or three horses. Every hotelkeeper had a horse, usually a slick pacer or trotter, and on Jarvis street on Sunday afternoons there would be a parade, with the drivers "*brushing*" their horses, that is to say speeding them for a block or two, when another speedster drove alongside. In later years there was a speedway built along the Don River, but it must have been soon after this that the motor car came along, and the horse began to fade.

I recall a suggestion that was given respectful consideration by members of the city council that a part of Adelaide Street should be given over to speeding horses at certain hours in the evening. When the danger to pedestrians and particularly to children was pointed out the proposal was withdrawn. But it shows to what an extent the people of Toronto were "*horse-minded*" sixty years ago.

It is an error to suppose that when the motor car began to come into use, the people who used to drive horses sold them and bought cars and that the same people who used to drive horses drove automobiles without any considerable change in ownership. The average horse driver and the average motor driver were not alike, though many of them of course were identical. There was almost the difference between them that there was between the horse and the car.

The horse was never insured. If he was injured the loss fell immediately upon the owner. This might mean a disruption of his business until his horse was well enough to be driven again. Moreover, a man cannot drive and feed and bed and clean a horse for any length of time without developing some personal feeling toward him. Of course, it might be resentment, or even an active dislike, but that would depend largely upon the horse. Ordinarily the feelings were pride and affection. I would work harder to blacken a horse's hooves than I would to blacken my own boots, and hardly ever was a whip laid on one of our horses. Naturally, a driver would take the utmost care to see that his horse was not injured. He would not regard the scraping of the skin off his leg as he would the scraping of the paint off the mudguard of his car. The horse was a personality. No two horses were alike. The owner liked to study the idiosyncrasies of the horse he drove. That is one reason why there was no such toll of accidents and collisions in the old days as there is now with automobiles. Nobody thought if his horse broke a leg "*Oh well; he's insured, and I'll be able to buy a better one.*"

The ownership of an automobile denotes no more than that the owner has had the money or the credit to buy one. The ownership of a horse meant something more. It meant, for the merchants, that horses were necessary for their business. For other people it meant, to begin with, a liking for horses. If the owner of the horse did not himself attend to his wants at least he employed a man who did, and this man automatically must like horses and be interested in them. And the owner of the horse who employed a groom or hostler was likely to know a good deal more about his horse, than the owner of the car who employs a chauffeur knows about the engine. He would be prompt to detect and punish any abuse or even neglect.

So there was undoubtedly between the horse and the horse owner a warmth of relationship that can hardly exist between a car owner and his car. The difference was between a living thing and a dead thing; the difference between the smell of a stable and the smell of a garage.

One of the last horses my Uncle Robert¹ owned was a magnificent looking beast, trotting bred, standing well over sixteen hands, and of a rich brown colour. He won several prizes in the Open Air Horse parade that used to be held in Queen's Park. He had an action almost like a hackney, except that he had greater reach. He was as smooth looking a beast as one was likely to see in the city, and one of the worst frauds that ever wore harness. He was acquired in rather an odd way. My uncle had heard of some horses owned by a Methodist clergyman who lived in a small town east of Toronto.

¹ "Uncle Robert" is R.J. Fleming.

One of them was supposed to be out of the ordinary. But by the time he got round to inspecting the horse the minister, who was moving to some other charge, had announced an auction sale of some of his effects, including the horses. My uncle, however, was roused by the news and made a Sunday journey to the minister's home to see the horses.

It was early in the spring and the barnyard was filled with the manure and broken straw that had been thrown out of the stables during the winter. The clergyman brought the horse out of the stall, and he stood like a statue. My uncle and another expert examined the animal most thoroughly and could not detect a flaw. Then he and the minister discussed price, even if it was Sunday. Both being Methodists it was taken for granted that the sin of the one would be condoned by the other.

The price was a high one, and undoubtedly represented in the minister's mind a something more than the top price that he might expect the auctioneer to raise. But on the other hand my uncle was in love with the horse and at this time a few hundred dollars did not mean anything to him. So they all pored over the horse.

Then my uncle said, *"Would you mind letting him step a little?"* The minister hesitated. He said, *"Well, you know what the ground's like; hard, rough and somewhat slippery. If the horse was to strain himself it would be no use offering him for sale. No, sir, I don't dare take a chance."* This seemed reasonable. *"But,"* continued the minister, *"I don't mind letting him step round the yard here on a lunging rein."*

So the lunging rein was attached and with the minister standing in the centre of the yard the horse stepped round a circle of perhaps forty or fifty feet in diameter. He stepped like a prize hackney, the forelegs coming well up, and thrusting far forward, and the hind legs also being picked up stylishly after a long powerful thrust. That was enough. The money was paid, and the horse subsequently delivered in Toronto.

Then when the mild weather came he was hitched to a buggy and my uncle took him out. At a trot, of perhaps a rate of nine miles an hour his action was simply perfection. But when he was urged beyond this, he broke into a gentle canter. My uncle was not less horrified than if the beast had broken out into smallpox. He steadied him and tried again, with the same result. It was impossible for this magnificent looking beast to get up any speed whatever at the trot. He was useless as a driver. He was good only for winning prizes at a show where there was no test for speed, only for action and conformation.

Thus my uncle plainly had been swindled, and he was one of the hardest men to swindle in a horse deal in the country. But he proved an easy victim for a Methodist preacher, who perhaps was as honest a man as lived with the exception that when he wanted to sell a horse for a good price, the only idea in his mind was that he wanted to sell the horse, and not necessarily at the same time to make a good impression on a fellow Methodist.

Other sights than the dragging of drunken men and women through the streets have vanished with the growth of the city. One was the runaway. In a day when thousands of citizens had riding or driving horses, and every physician a carriage and every merchant of any standing a delivery wagon, it was common enough for a horse to become frightened and seek by flight to escape from whatever fiend was haunting him.

Sometimes the driver was thrown from the rig at the first jolt. Often enough the horse galloped away when for a moment it was left untended. So he would come dashing down the street at a gallop, ears pinned back, with the reins trailing on the ground and the vehicle swaying from side to side. As long as a horse kept at the trot the equilibrium of the wagon would be maintained, but as no runaway horse was content to trot, even though generations of his ancestors had been trained to do nothing else, as soon as he broke into a gallop the wagon would sway. And often as not it would turn over and the horse would be seen dragging after him the forewheels and a fragment of the body.

The cry of "*Runaway!*" was sufficient to send women rushing into the streets to herd their children to safety, while men would dart out to dance briefly in front of the approaching horse, waving their arms and shouting. Sometimes this would be effective, and the horse, rather than trample a man would stop. Occasionally a bold and agile soul would leap on the vehicle as it passed, and would haul himself up to the seat. I have seen men from this position climb out on the horse's back and get hold of the bridle. Again the horse would fall down, in which case the thing to do was to sit on his head. As long as his head was pinned down he could not rise.

Another frequent sight was the dog fight. There were as many dogs as humans in Cabbagetown, or so it appears in my memory, and they chose the street as the scene of their combats. It was not infrequent too that a dog and a bitch became locked in an ecstasy which would turn to anguish as they were chased and pelted from the public view, one dragging the other. Such cruelties were almost of everyday occurrence, but nobody thought of the cruelty. All thought the sight was either comical or indecorous.

Terriers and cats earned their keep by helping householders, and particularly storekeepers, keep the rat population down. Even commoner than amorous dogs or runaway horses was the morning sight of a citizen, often Uncle John, emerging from a cellar with a rat in a trap. He would go out to the middle of the road, perhaps whistling a dog, or if not there would be other dogs on the alert. Then he would open the trap and the rat would bolt out, into the jaws of some eager tyke.

The water cart has long since disappeared from the large cities. It was a large wooden tank horse drawn, and was used to lay the dust on roads, from a sprinkler arrangement in the rear. Children used to follow it with their pants' legs turned up, shouting. Merchants were responsible for laying the dust on the sidewalks in front of their own premises. This was done with watering cans after which the congealed dust was swept into the roadway. Our own sidewalk, like that of many others, was covered by a wooden verandah, extending from the front of the shop to the curb. These verandahs, I was told by one of an older generation, used to prove nuisances in the day of the volunteer fire

brigades, which preferred to charge along the sidewalks rather than take the roadway. Verandah posts were scarred or even knocked down and fire fighting apparatus damaged when rival crews sought a short cut to the fire. The section that arrived first received some sort of bonus.

When I speak of physician's horses I recall one Charlie owned by Dr. James Ross, our family physician, who lived on Sherbourne Street. Charlie would walk up on the sidewalk for an apple or a stick of candy whenever his owner called at our house. There was another doctor who had one of the largest general practices in the East End, who lived on Jarvis Street, and who had two sons who became eminent in the profession many years later. This good doctor was a source of great anxiety to his wife for he had the lamentable habit of returning from his morning rounds obviously, if mildly, under the influence of liquor. His horse used to stop at every saloon without any signal from the doctor, and the doctor seemed to feel that somehow or other the horse was responsible.

So his wife thought of a way to check his drinking habit. She insisted upon going with him as he visited his patients, and as he would not stop at a saloon, leaving her in the gig, this worked very well for two or three weeks. Then the good lady observed that although he never entered a saloon, he would nevertheless return from the visits pleasantly inebriated, and that the longer was his circuit the more pronounced was his state. As Aunt Polly would have said, "*He was not at himself.*" It became plain to her that her husband was getting his drinks from his patients, and later on this was proved to be the case. It was discovered that when the doctor was called to a case the first thing he did was to order a bottle of whisky. The patient might get some of it or he might not. But it was certain that the doctor would not go dry whenever he made a call.