

A horse called Christmas

Like the first Christmas that started in a stable, this story is centered around just as simple an abode, a barn on a country farm in Ontario and the influence a horse has on the life of its residents.

The horse is called Christmas. No one knows for sure why, but it provided a story as poignant and memorable as its namesake.

By Jack Carpenter

Robert Biddle is a retired School Principal, (those miserable kids forced me into early retirement) a character full of yarns and stories about his country life. At his request, I arranged to meet him at the old farm on the sixth line. It was not a desperation call but there was a certain urgency in the invitation. Time is taking its toll on old man Biddle and the family farm, but as a long time friend I was a ready listener as he related this, A Christmas Story.

Well, it all started here on the old family farm. The place was in good enough shape, heaven knows we put in enough hours, but it did not pay well and both my father, my brother and me had other jobs. So we survived and lived on the farm.

I had my first teaching job at a one room rural school. Mentally if not financially fulfilling. Having to do a share of daily and weekend chores made me acceptable to students, principals and school board. Industry was recognized in those days. Personally, I don't think we knew any better, everyone accepted you had to work hard to get anywhere, although in the 1930's I was not too sure of which direction we were working towards.

It was the late summer of 1938. On a Saturday evening, the air was hot and still, not even a trace of a breeze. I was living at the farm with my folks. They had got a lift into town with a neighbor and I was just finishing some cleaning up around the barn. We had got rid of the cattle we had and the only livestock around at the time was a couple o' pigs, some geese and chicken and we were doing some hayin' and rented out twenty acres.

I heard some horses hooves, looked up and out of the dust of the sideroad comes a man leading a horse.

"Can I help you?" I says.

"No you can't help me a lot," he says "But you can the horse and I'd thank you kindly if'n you would."

"Is something wrong with it?"

"No, he's sound and well natured."

"So, how am I supposed to be able to help?" I asked.

"I'd like you to take him and keep him for me. All he's got is this bridle and halter. I had to sell the harness and the saddle. He needs feed and we've walked as far as we can together. I have to go on and you're the only living person I've seen for a while. I'm joining the army, so it's a long walk to the Armories in Toronto and Christmas here won't make it."

"but I can't afford to buy a horse."

"Take him. If you can look after him for a while I know I'll be back for him. I'll repay you. You're our only hope. He's all I got. Look after him."

"Well, um, anyway there's oats and water here, no animal need go hungry, bring him round the barn."

He handed me the halter.

"Then come over the house and I'll make some tea."

I led the horse to where I feed the pigs. There was a pail of fresh water and he started to drink. I scooped out some oats and put 'em in the trough. Walked out front, and the man was gone.

I walked part way down the drive where I could see the sideroad. He was nowhere to be seen. I thought I saw a silhouette at the end of the concession, it was saluting, and then it was gone.

The horse was with us all year. How its name got to be Christmas I don't know, but it answered to it every time I called. It stayed healthy, and I got attached to it in a way, not having been given a horse before.

That September war broke out. I had been doing some instructing with the militia. Communications they called it, me a teacher and all. Well, I signed up, and a month later I was on my way to

Europe, assigned to a British signals unit to train for intelligence.

My folks took on the farm and it was me who had to say goodbye to Christmas. I remember saying, "I know I'll be back, look after him." And I can still feel his warm nuzzle when I bedded him down for the last time. Roughly one year to the day of the strange circumstances that brought him to the farm.

I got sent to France with the British Expeditionary Force. We had a signal group close to the front, in some farm buildings on the edge of a village. It was Christmas Eve 1939. There was shelling and an air raid. If a stray German plane flying over and drops some bombs constitutes an air raid. It was our misfortune that the bombs hit the building we were in. I ran outside as the building was collapsing around my ears. I could feel pain in my shoulder, as I grabbed it I fell and some timber and stuff landed on top of me. I was pinned to the ground. I couldn't move.

There was mud under me and dust and rubble over me. I cried out but no one heard me. For all I knew I was alone and I figured it was the end and I was cursing my luck.

What a damnable way to go.

I have no idea how long I was lying there.

Someone shook my shoulder. I looked up. A tall gangling figure stood over me.

"Hold on and I'll get you out."



he said. He started to move the chunks of rubble, then put his arms under mine and pulled me free.

I tried, but couldn't stand.

"Don't worry," he said, "I'll get you out. Here, put your arm around my shoulder." He paused, looked at the flashes on my battledress and says, "You're from Canada?"

"Yes..." I said.

"Me too," he replies.

He had me on my feet but I couldn't move.

"I think my leg is broken."

He looked at me. "We'll manage."

I'd seen that face somewhere before. "Do I know you?" I asked.

"Did you befriend a horse called Christmas?" he said.

"Yes...By God, it's you. Never thought I'd see you again, least not here."

"You did us more than a favour my friend, now it's my turn, I can help you."

With that he lifted me onto his shoulder and started walking.

"What's your name?" was all I could breath.

"Duncan Portage," he said. "I joined with the English. First battalion Warwickshire Regiment."

I passed out. Later I learned he carried me about two miles to a clearing station and the transport that took me to a field hospital.

I had a fractured leg and a gash in my head and shoulder. Although I asked around no one knew what happened to the man who saved my life.

I was sent back to England and was still there after Dunkirk. My enquiries to H.Q. eventually traced Duncan Portage.

He had been killed in action, in France. November 1939.

Two years later, suffering the air raids on the south coast with a radar unit, some coastal command barges had broke loose in a storm. It was Christmas Eve. I was going on a three day pass that evening and we all got called to help sandbag a broken pier the barges had

hit. It was wet and cold, with the sea and rain lashing us and the coast. We were manhandling these sandbags to shore up around our installations and the pier. The local people could see what was happening and they helped out with some hot tea and sandwiches.

Then part of the pier collapsed. I was knocked into the water and was having a hard time keeping my head above water while I tried to wade out of the slush and rough sea.

I was beginning to panic, my uniform and boots heavy with water, when a horse walked into the sea straight towards me. I grabbed for its mane, put my arms around its neck and it just walked me to dry land. I let go, patted the broad neck, and it nuzzled my hand.

I know that feel. It was Christmas.

"How on earth did you get here...come on, let's get dry."

I turned towards the village, but the horse walked towards the open field and was swallowed up in the mist and darkness.

I searched but never saw him again.

I was demobed in '46 and came home to the farm and teaching. The family told that Christmas had died on Christmas Eve 1942.

The following Christmas Eve I had parked the car in the barn and was walking towards the house when I thought I heard the clip-clop of a horse coming up the drive.

It was the same sound I had heard when Christmas first walked into my life.

I waited. There was nothing there.

I couldn't get the sound out of my mind. So, late that evening I went to the barn and put out food and water. It's always gone the next day. I haven't seen a horse, or anything for that matter, but many times I hear a horse's hooves around the barn. I know it's Christmas though, I just know.

Why am I tellin' you? Well, as you can see, the barn is getting

beyond repair and it's most likely to be coming down... and I'm getting old. I won't be around much longer.

I don't so much worry about me, I wonder what will happen to Christmas. You see, years ago when I was younger I saw and knew Christmas. Now what I have is just the spirit of Christmas to live with.

It doesn't dim with age, because I think the spirit of Christmas will go on forever. But you have to tell others, that's why I'm telling you. As you can understand, I have good reason to be around here, I have memories that are filled with wonder.

I just hope someone, somewhere, will give time and share the spirit of Christmas.

Now you will have to excuse me, I have some chores to do. Getting close to Christmas Eve and I need to get some oats and water.

Postscript:

I heard that Robert Biddle had to give up the old place and there was no one living there. It was by chance I passed by the snowbound farm on Christmas Eve. With the help of an obliging but skeptical neighbor, in the remains of the old barn we placed a cardboard box of oats and a pail of water.

The next morning as the sun was rising over a frozen landscape with a fresh layer of snow I drove to the farm. The neighbor joined me as we walked the snow covered drive to the barn.

The oats were disturbed. It could have been the wind or mice. Who knows?

It was the pail of water that riveted our attention.. it wasn't frozen. Merry Christmas and long may the spirit of Christmas live.

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