

K. M. DALLAS

HORSE POWER



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Publishers, Fullers Bookshop, Cat & Fiddle Arcade,
Hobart, Tasmania

C. L. RICHMOND & SONS PTY. LTD.
DEVONPORT, TASMANIA

1/12 68

THE HALF BRED

WE used "half-bred" and "half-draught" as synonymous; now some doubts arise. Did the first derive from "half-thoroughbred"? If so, was it applied to those that showed more of the blood and less of the draught? And was "half-draught" the same as "medium-draught"?

Whatever the correct usage, the intermediate types were much favoured on small farms as multi-purpose animals; useful on the land, capable of carrying light loads like pigs to market, cream cans to the factory or the pick up place for the cream lorry, and also as saddle and pack horses. They were the most efficient types for mill tramlines.

Daisy was a black half-bred and our heroine. Many horses had something heroic about them but she had more than most. There were other heroines, from books, like Black Beauty, besides the real people from Stevenson and Ballantyne the brave — kids are like that; the animals are as personal to them as people. Cows, too, were persons but they were placid, timid things — no heroines there. Pets, yes. One can feel only pity for country kids who have nothing but tractors to personify. Of course, we saw more of her than of the other horses when we were very young — riding behind her in the chaise cart, with Dad urging her to her best speed — and she didn't need urging. It was a great day when we were allowed to ride her, with some one leading her, and at last allowed to ride alone.

So she was the idol of childhood, the peerless beauty of an untameable spirit, free from vice but full of cunning. With her the driver or rider had a continual battle of wits; when she lost she accepted defeat always with a good grace. She had no malice in her. Her escapades were themselves the evidence of her superior quality.

She was all black, a glossy black, a sleek smooth coat, a strong and luxuriant mane and tail. There was one small patch of

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white on the off hind foot but, like her faults, too small to notice. She had an elder sister, also black except for a small white blaze on her forehead, who was Uncle Jim's greatest pride. Both were a rather heavy half-bred, got by a pony stallion that grandfather had owned, on a half-draught mare. Of the dam we knew nothing, except the name, Bonny — she was before our time.

Her sire, too, I never saw, but his exploits as a jumper were still told in our time. No fence could stop him. This led to trouble when he jumped out on to the road to mount a passing mare who was in season. In doing this he displaced the rider, a woman. Remembering the prudery of our Victorian forebears, consider the feelings of a *femme uncouvert* passing on the Queen's highway, on a sedate ladies' hack, who finds herself displaced from her side saddle by the head and chest of an ardent stallion to whom any rider would not have been an obstacle. Did she fall or jump clear? Did she fall forward and clutch the mare's neck? Such details were never mentioned in my hearing — mention of the incident probably was made in explaining Daisy's ability to leap four-rail fences. Surmise suggests the spot where it happened: Miss Moody, dressed in visiting clothes, riding sedately up the hill; the stallion, seeing or smelling the condition of the mare, neighing in greeting. Did the mare stop and approach the fence or did he merely trot to the fence, fly over it and with scant ceremony of courtesy force his attention before the mare or rider could do anything about it? Well, that was Daisy's father: probably this incident, and the legal proceedings, caused Dad to get rid of him. He was a menace to travellers. Can you imagine the scene if the lady had been driving a cart? No woman driver could have averted a disaster; a man with a heavy whip might have driven him off and put the mare to flight before she kicked her way out of broken shafts.

To this moment I always pictured him as bay in colour; this is probably true because in describing any horse the colour is always stated. So the dam of Kit and Daisy must have been black, like them. Daisy was a rather heavy half-bred with firm, rounded barrel, a deep and broad chest, shortish legs, heavily boned, and with much hair on her pasterns, but her head and neck showed the Arab ancestry and so she was the most beautiful of all the horses I have known. The neck was thick and strong and proudly arched. The eyes were black and limpid with her lively emotions; the muzzle was softer than velvet and quivered with the intensity of her feelings — if ever she would stand to let you lay hand on it. She was always acutely sensitive to any near approach; tensed up but without hostility. Only in the stable (or when she was harnessed) could we get close enough to stroke her glossy neck but to touch the muzzle was so associated with

the bridle being slipped over it that if she let you do it you knew she had, for that time, surrendered.

She had been thoroughly schooled to good manners — once you had her in the stable — but she asserted her right to swing away and gallop free if approached in some paddock corner. When really trapped, as in a small yard, she submitted like a perfect lady who knew her manners, but you could not presume on her acquiescence — on each occasion you had to prove your need of her and that she was outwitted. She was never coerced, never punished. This is mentioned only because some may think that such actions may improve a horse's manners. It is not so — to punish a sensitive animal for being sensitive is criminal and breeds vice and crime. We respected her integrity.

As her breeding was for an important purpose she was given special schooling. Her trainer was one of the best in the district and had sole charge of her to train her for saddle and harness. He trained her to come when called, even in a paddock — we were told she would walk right up to him and put her head over his shoulder. Dad could not command this of her except when in the stable, when there was little merit in it. She stood in the farthest corner, head averted; he called sharply once, twice; she turned and came half-way, then stopped; head high, nostrils flaring wide, eyes a little wild; on the next call she moved quickly right up to him, head over his shoulder, and stood still as he put his hand on her neck.

Such training was never tinged with cruelty. Home-bred animals were not brumbies — neither were they pets. Daisy never came seeking tibbits nor would she have been deceived if they had been offered. When we were allowed to ride we often caught other horses with a wisp of hay — usually leaving the bridle at the gates and seizing them by the forelock to lead them back to it. Never with Daisy. She was interested in the hay if you approached quietly but took it with a quick snatch as she swung away out of reach.

Men fared no better. The only way to catch her was to drive her into a small yard or stable. Three men might drive her into a corner; as one drew near to hold her she broke away, raced under the orchard trees to the high fence, stood breast up to it and flew over like a bird. She would then lead them a merry dance, jumping from paddock to paddock, until they drove her back to the farmyard or stable.

She had strength — and speed — and you never had to call on her for it; she was always ready to go. It was a case of holding her in to a moderate speed. Harnessed in the heavy chaise cart she perforce dropped back to a walk in climbing hills but you never had to shake her up once the top was reached — she broke

into her clean trotting gait of her own accord. On Sundays she took us all visiting Uncle Jim or our Aunt (great aunt) Grace Walker whose native Scots dialect was always beyond our comprehension. The chaise had a high tail-board which was let down, suspended by two chains, for the older kids to sit on, dangling their legs over the back. Going back home at night, under the light of frosty stars, with Daisy's hooves beating out a smart trot on the soft gravel road, was a magical experience. Above the muted rumble of the wheels the noises of the night were clearly heard, frogs in the swamp, mopokes or the night winds in the tall trees. The only artificial light in that travelling was, for us at the back, the red eye in the back of the cart lamp and the faint yellow glow thrown by its candle on the blur of the spokes of the wheel.

Those lamps were merely to warn other travellers of your approach; the gravel road gleamed faintly under starlight; the horse had night vision and kept the middle of the road; the driver watched for any unusual obstruction (a fallen limb on the road, straying cattle, pedestrians) and relied on hearing any unusual sound to warn of trouble — a loose chain, a loosened shoe — but the horse was your surest warning of any approaching dangers and the driver had to be instantly aware of any sign she might give.

The run to Stanley was eighteen miles of level road and she took it at coaching speed — a smart trot the whole way with a stop for water where we drove through the long pool below the low bridge over Myrtle Creek. Even then the myrtles had vanished. It was a great novelty to drive thus into deep water, clear and clean, flowing over brown and white gravel. The cart stopped in the middle of the ford; reins were slackened to let the mare cool her muzzle and drink her fill. Horses are fastidious drinkers; usually they strain the water through lips and whiskers. If very thirsty they bury the muzzle and drink in big gulps. With stagnant water they first blow strongly through their nostrils to disperse the floissam and then drink in sips. After a heavy drink they raise the head high and allow the rinsings to dribble from the sides of the mouth, expelling the breath vehemently and heaving sighs of contentment.

On one such journey Daisy was knee-deep in the pool and drinking deeply. As she raised her head, mouthing on the bit as the excess dribbled down, she gave the convulsive shudder that commonly follows deep drinking, a spasmodic relief after stress of fast travelling. The whole body shivers. The violence of it shook her winkers off and they splashed in the pool under her neck. Dad, had, as always, been watching her intently. No driver gazes round idly while his horse drinks. He must note every sign of

his condition — how he is standing up to the work ; signs of wellfaring or distress must be seen. So, even as the winkers fell, he sprang. Quicker than thought, as convulsively as the shudder that shook them off, he leapt the front board of the cart, landing in the water at her head, and seizing her firmly by the muzzle. The crisis was past before she was aware of it. He replaced the winkers and buckled them firmly.

Hesitation of one second would have been enough to bring disaster. The mare, startled by the splash, and the sudden free vision, would have started forward, and faster as she left the pool, would have dashed out of control along the road, the winkers and reins tangling her fore feet. You can guess the rest. Only a lifelong discipline of alertness to every sign could give the instant response to the imminent danger. No thought of his Sunday-best clothes ; no thought that he was on the wrong side (you always approach a horse from the near side — that is strict etiquette). Also that he had to grasp the muzzle in the right hand — usually the left does this. No driver would anticipate that winkers may fall off ; he must be ready for anything. To the direct call he must give instant response. As old Rocky told us : "There's no bell an' curtain in this yer play — you gotta be thar waitin'." No driver is trained for this ; he must be alert and quick off the mark if he is to avert the panic which follows the fright. A powerful horse, first startled, then in fear of something unknown, goes into panic flight. You must act before the start gives way to fright. Once panic has come events will take their course.

Panic does not bring disaster if the horse has room to run. The sobering effect of strenuous action, checked by reins and brake — if there is one — will restore control but disaster comes if there is no free room and time for a driver to do this. Even the steadiest horse will panic but the spirited ones are quickest off the mark. It is not merely the immediate damage to horse, man and gear, that is involved ; one such experience may spoil a horse for life — as Daisy showed us, almost at the same spot, some years after.

She had one searing experience from which she never recovered when coming down a steep hill near home. We were watching them approach. Dad driving a chaise cart with a young cousin of ours beside him. We saw the cart tip up backwards as the mare broke into a gallop and could hear the smack as she kicked at the trailing wreck and see the smashed wood flying. She galloped on, the cart dragging by one trace on its side, and then broke free and galloped on to the stable door, where she stood all trembling with the reins and traces trailing round her. We learned that both shafts had suddenly broken and the cart ran on to

her rump. Her forward plunge caused it to tip backwards, spilling driver and passenger on the road. In panic flight she kicked herself clear and came home. She had never been known to kick before.

She stood there wild-eyed and trembling. Dad walked down and unharnessed her ; then he led her quietly back to show her the wreck. This, I think, was unwise. She snorted and started back as he took her up to it. Had he put her in another cart right away and taken her for a long drive to get it out of her system things might have been different. After this she always showed fright at any heap of timber on the roadside. About a year later he was driving her in a four-wheeler buggy on the way to Stanley. There was a heap of posts by the roadside. She pricked her ears and tried to swing away but he held her hard and she passed it safely. Two hundred yards farther on lay another heap and, thinking she would take no more notice, he was off his guard. In one convulsive bound she swung off into the rough heath but was stopped dead as the front wheels lodged in a shallow ditch. Nothing broken. We knew that she was unreliable in harness ; that only a strong driver could hope to travel safely.

The sight of another cart on the road ahead was enough to make her strive to overtake. Once she was pulling the chaise cart with our whole wool clip on it, two bales and two bags on top, and Dad and I on the load. On the way to town a flash turnout spun past, a light trotter in a jinker with two passengers. She clapped on speed of her own accord and all the way had her nose nearly on the back of that jinker. We talked of that for years. Sometimes, just to show off a bit, Dad would scold her and urge her on. She would then hit a racing speed, head out, mane streaming. This was never done in mere competition with other carts but merely to incite her to show off her spirit.

She would not suffer whip and no one ever dreamed of wearing spurs when riding her. The mere sight of a whip was enough to upset her. I made this mistake — once. I was allowed to ride her to bring in the cows so I mounted bareback and cantered off along the road. Had I carried a stick she would never have stood for me to jump on, hand on her withers, and swing my leg over. There was a high bank by the roadside. Reining her in close I pulled a light stick and trimmed the fronds off as she cantered on. Even that was enough to make her dance with alarm. Through the sliprails and across the grass paddock she went at a lively canter — she was broadbacked and very easy to ride. As she circled the herd, rising from their rumination, I merely swished the stick in the air and on the instant found myself sitting hard upon the hard ground as she cantered away for home. She had shot clean from under me. The mere swish (she had an open

bridle and could see it) without even grazing her flank, was enough. No bound, no buck, no swerve — just acceleration from canter to gallop in one stride, her rump sinking as her withers rose, and I was left in the air to sit with an awful jar upon the turf. So I walked home behind the cows with bruised buttocks and a good lesson in etiquette.

My last recollection of her as a saddle horse — well she was about seventeen and showing her years. Four of us went riding one Sunday to the sea, across the marsh which served for our country racecourse. We struck the track about three furlongs from the finish. The turf was springy and soft underfoot. Darcey dug his heels into his Arab gelding for a sprint and Daisy was away with him with only the inside running in her favour. I was following on a young mare, one of Daisy's foals. I was galloping her, too, but could hardly keep my seat for laughing as the clods whistled round my ears. There was the old girl belly to grass and laying it down so that she held the gelding neck and neck right to the judge's box. Her rider was urging her on but it wasn't needed; she was running her own race against a horse half her weight and half her age. You only had to hold on.

In all our world Daisy had no equal except her sister Kit. We were told that on one occasion Kit had beaten her on a road journey, both pulling chaise carts. We never spoke of it; it was one of those cases where reason and belief conflict and belief wins. When it was clear she was unsafe in harness her third foal was trained to replace her. One or two devices were tried to make her more responsive to the bit but this was hopeless. She was not hard-mouthed and some gadgets I recall were unthinkable cruel to any horse. Nothing can stop a spirited horse from bounding clean off the road, though some gadgets may help in regaining control — if you are still there.

All her foals were good of their type but none of them had that indomitable spirit. So she became a spare farm horse, working on the wing of the binder or drill and even on occasions in the road team. Even in the binder, with long hard days, she always had her nose in front. She may have been given some advantage on the draught horses who also had the weight of the pole to carry but right through the day her traces were taut and that noble neck was arched to the pull of the taut reins. She was the best example of that all-purpose type so common on small farms — with speed enough for a road journey and power enough to haul light loads to market; good saddle horses for bush work; serviceable in farm work and smart enough to take the family to church or sports meeting.

That type died when the world it had helped to make was dying. There was a railway; there were more cars on the road

and the growing of hay was ceasing to be profitable. (The cars did not make roads unsafe for horses — well-schooled animals soon got used to them. On the other hand the nail stubs of cast shoes persisted in road surfaces for years and made motoring arduous by the recurring mending of punctured tyres.) Young men were buying motor bikes and farmers "T" Model Fords. So Daisy was merely not wanted and lingered out her last years in idleness. The land over which she had so often sped, disdaining attempts to capture her, received her bones. Forty years ago.

Looking back one can understand the lessons that we learned from her and her kind. You could never take her for granted. Coax her, outwit her and win her and she was your firmest friend, game to the limit of her powers, but treat her like a common jade or insult her by flourishing a stick and she might jump from under you — but she never showed malice. Once outwitted and stabled, her manners were impeccable but you had to prove your need and act in good faith. There is no point in disputing whether animals have souls or whether they are capable of reasoning. She was a product of her times, with qualities drawn from her ancestry but brought out by the training of skilful, sensitive men. She was trained to play her part in the world she knew and to help in its growth and change. She was one of our family. None of us would ever have thought of selling her and I have no recollection of any of us even lending her to friends and neighbours. It is doubtful whether any of them would have thought to ask us to lend her. So when the world she had helped to make had grown away from her she was half-forgotten — most remembered when heirs and successors did not measure up to her performance. Her spirit inspired a generation which is also gone. She was truly a bright spirit who lived longer than most of her kind and still lives in the minds of those who were taught and made by her. Let the imagery such creatures added to our language afford her epitaph: "The gamest thing that ever looked through a bridle."