

IN STABLE, BYRE AND STY

BY ROSS CHAPMAN



Up till fifty years ago or so, a farmyard in these parts had a general pattern. The sheds for housing animals were convenient to the dwelling house for easy care and attention to the livestock. Before tractor and motorcar became common, the horse was essential for farm work and for transport to town. Mixed farming required at least one horse and its housing was the stable. This building had least one stall where the horse was tied by a rope to the manger for hay and an iron pot for oats and the occasional bran mash. The harness was stored on brackets on the wall behind. The floor was usually cobbled. A good horse was crucial to the success of the farm so he was treated the best, getting the top-quality hay, keeping his feet well shod and having every ailment remedied.

The byre with a few standings for cows or other cattle



was not as high as the stable. Cows were tied by a neck-chain to the firm uprights, which allowed them to lie down and rise as they pleased.

As cows spend much time lying, they were bedded, sometimes with inferior straw or even bracken or rushes. Behind the cow was the groop, or dung, channel, which led to a hole in the gable wall and out to the dunghill. You would see a three-legged stool for the milker to sit on and a bin for meal along the back wall with a graip and yard brush nearby. The byre was a dark, cosy place with little concern for hygiene. Cobwebs lined the roof and the small windows.

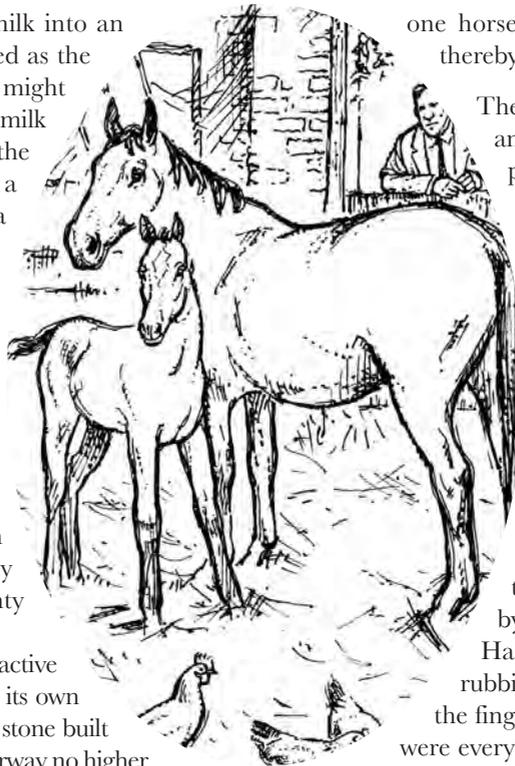
A gentle, patient milker whom the cow had got to know, nestled in close to her, always on the right hand side. One or two cats, which had been dozing all afternoon, came close for a squirt of creamy nourishment straight down the throat.

The sound of the first strigs of milk into an empty tin bucket gradually softened as the bucket filled up. Sometimes there might be a gentle melody sung to help the milk flow. Sometimes, pressing close to the cow's side the milker would get a kick, not from the cow, but from a calf developing within; confirmation that she had held to the bull, and all was well. The adjective 'bovine' implies dull and dim-witted which is unfair to cattle. It must come from their digestive arrangement and their need for peace to lie down for long periods to chew the cud. The verb 'ruminates' is more impressive, with the idea of calmly and patiently giving consideration to a weighty problem.

The pigsty sounds like the least attractive shed in the farmyard and yet it had its own charm. The sty I'm thinking of was stone built with a corbelled roof and a small doorway no higher than three feet. The doorway opened on to a small open pen with feeding trough. The sow used this outside pen as her dunging area, keeping the inner sty dry and cosy. A stout iron barred gate, made by the local blacksmith, let the farmer in for dunging out purposes.

It seems to me that human beings have a natural affinity towards animals. In earlier years, it was farm animals that provided this companionship. Many of us get a deep pleasure from watching animals as they feed and play, fight and relax. The maternal protection shown by a ewe for her lambs is a lesson for us. The faithful nature of a dog makes a great impression on those of us whose steadfastness has sometimes slipped. Every Irish man and woman has an innate delight in viewing the graceful lines of a well-bred well-groomed horse and its style of canter and jump.

The idea that the same Creative Hand creates animals and mankind is told in Scripture. On the sixth day of creation God created the beasts, and specifically cattle, on the same day as mankind. Those men and women whose lives revolved around stable, byre and sty carried a sense that in their farm animals were divine qualities. With the mechanisation and commercialisation of farming these attitudes are lost. How can you call a cow by name when you are milking two hundred? She is only known by the number on her ear-tag. Then, a farm had maybe, three cows and



one horse, each one had its own name, and thereby its personality was acknowledged.

The close relationship, which bound farm animals to mankind, is now fulfilled by pets. But the attachment to pets is rather too emotional, romantic and idealistic. The pet has no purpose in life but to please its owner. Yet, in this present time of sophistication, pets are evidence that human beings require close contact with animals to stroke and handle, to learn from and to observe. An obsession with hygiene has made many people suspicious of handling animals.

This is a huge change, a huge loss to the comfort and reassurance received by the sense of touch and smell.

Harnessing a horse, hand-milking a cow, rubbing a sow behind the ears, giving a calf the finger to teach it to drink out of a bucket were everyday procedures on the farm of 1950.

Am I right in thinking that nowadays you would be warned not to do such things without wearing rubber gloves?

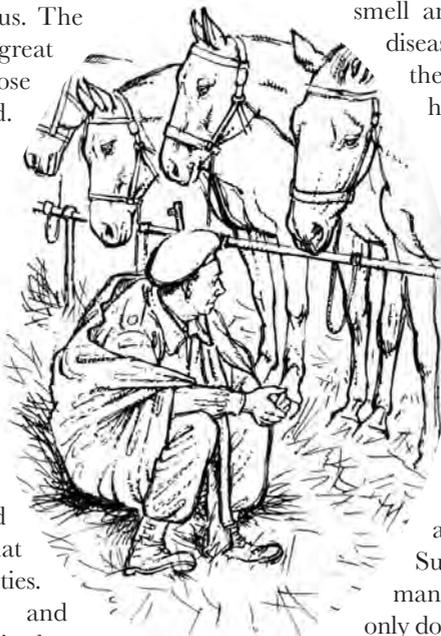
Families growing up on a farm in those times were involved in all the events in stable, byre and sty. The proximity of dwelling house to farm buildings shows clearly the contrast to today's arrangement where the animals are housed a hundred yards or more distant. It seems to be important now that the wife and children can enjoy a suburban style of living, insulated from the smell and dirt and danger of the supposedly disease carrying animals. At that earlier time, the stable was often adjoining the dwelling house, sharing the same roof construction.

This was borne out by W.F. Marshall's lines about the old bachelor living a lonely existence, with few sounds to break the silence:

***'The place is like a graveyard,
bar the mare would give a
stamp.'***

The man lying in bed could clearly hear the mare, through the wall, stamping her iron-shod hoof. In earlier times, hundreds of years earlier, man and animals shared the same housing.

Sure, wasn't Christ himself born in a manger? Animals do in public what humans only do in private and so all bodily functions were observed and no remarks passed. Mating, giving birth and dying, eating, chewing and passing manure are necessary and normal, not subjects for sniggering and embarrassment. Before there were weighty manuals on



marriage guidance, parenting and child psychology, men, women and children learned natural facts of life and behaviour from what went on in stable, byre and sty.

The words used when speaking to animals must have an interesting history. To a horse the commands such as 'hup, gee-up, whoa, bike,' were clearly understand. To a cow, 'cheh' was a call to come in from the field or to settle down a fidgety animal in the byre while 'tarrish' was a severe

reprimand to stop her hiping about. 'Turry, turry' called the pigs while 'chew' was the command to a dog to stop floostering. These are all words, which are never written, only spoken so they look odd when in print.

Other words and phrases, which are dialect, or maybe taken direct from the Irish, were the standard way of asking for help with an animal in the 1940's. Are they still in use?

...*'That cow's elder is all swelled with dry felon. It's full of corruption. I can't strig anything out of it.'*

...*'Have you any jalap, that sow needs redding out.'*

...*'The bull got a jeg from the graip and now it's beelin.'*

...*'Thon wee calf is dwammy, it never got its beeslins.'*

...*'Can you do something for them suckers, the skitters flying out of them? When they are mended will you come out and dress them?'*

...*'I think the sow's trying to boke.'*

...*'The roan stirk is covered in angleberries.'*

...*'Our moilie cow is peching. Come out before she kicks the bucket.'*

...*'The chestnut mare is not at herself. Have you anything for the bats?'*

...*'The old cow's reed is popping in and out; she needs a stitch in the bearing'*

...*'Have you anything for proud flesh between the two cloots?'*

...*'I threw her in a bottle of hay but she's only maunging at it.'*

...*'The blue cow is looking away this morning, should I try the bull with the hard hat?'*



Experience shows that those who own and work with animals generally find them a refining influence. So we are privileged to have known those fine men and women whose restricted lives revolved around stable, byre and sty.