

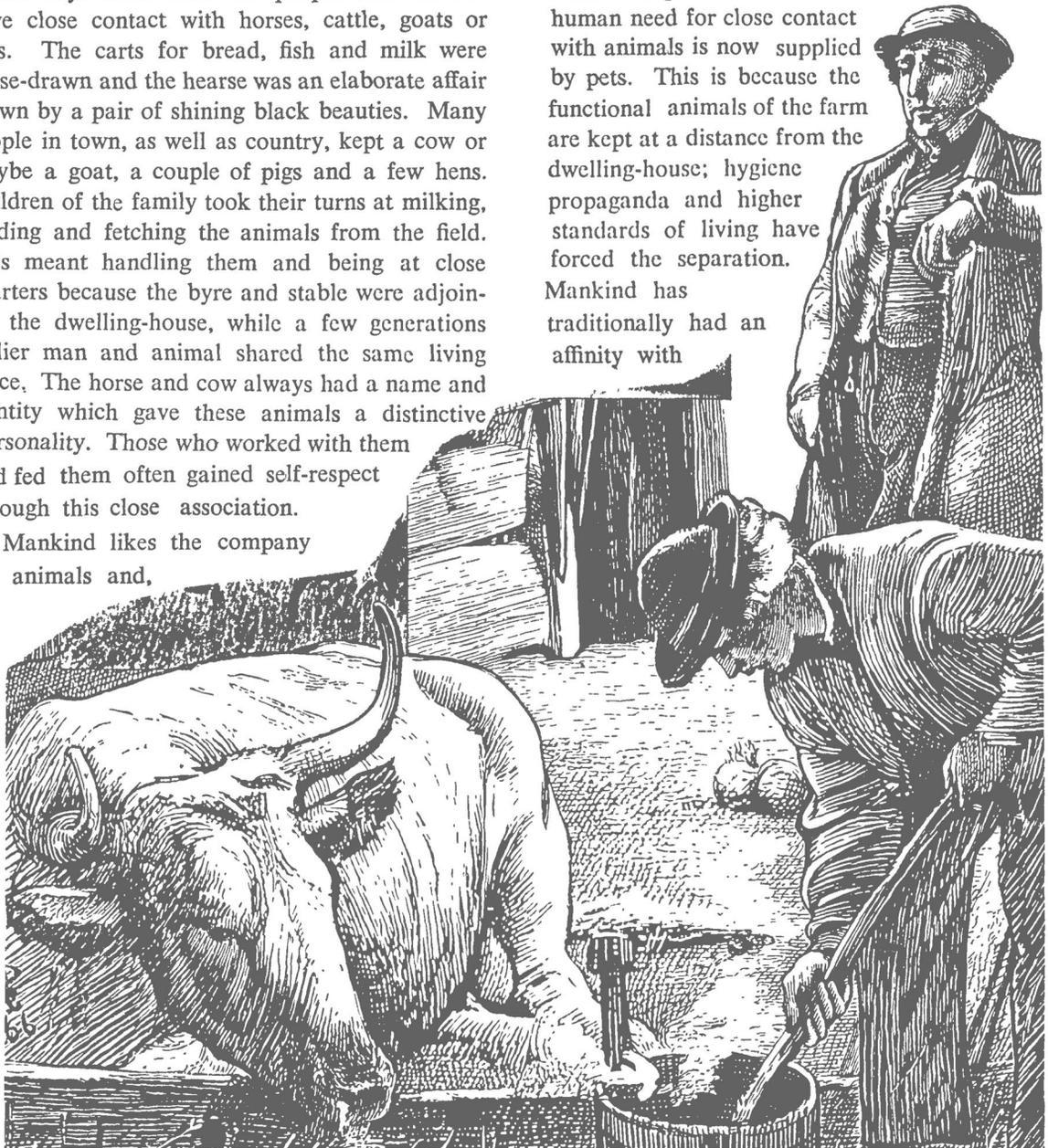
# Animals — their ailments and cures in earlier days

ROSS CHAPMAN

**A**MONG the many changes in our way of life during the last fifty years is a different relationship between man and animals. In earlier days there were few people who did not have close contact with horses, cattle, goats or pigs. The carts for bread, fish and milk were horse-drawn and the hearse was an elaborate affair drawn by a pair of shining black beauties. Many people in town, as well as country, kept a cow or maybe a goat, a couple of pigs and a few hens. Children of the family took their turns at milking, feeding and fetching the animals from the field. This meant handling them and being at close quarters because the byre and stable were adjoining the dwelling-house, while a few generations earlier man and animal shared the same living space. The horse and cow always had a name and identity which gave these animals a distinctive personality. Those who worked with them and fed them often gained self-respect through this close association.

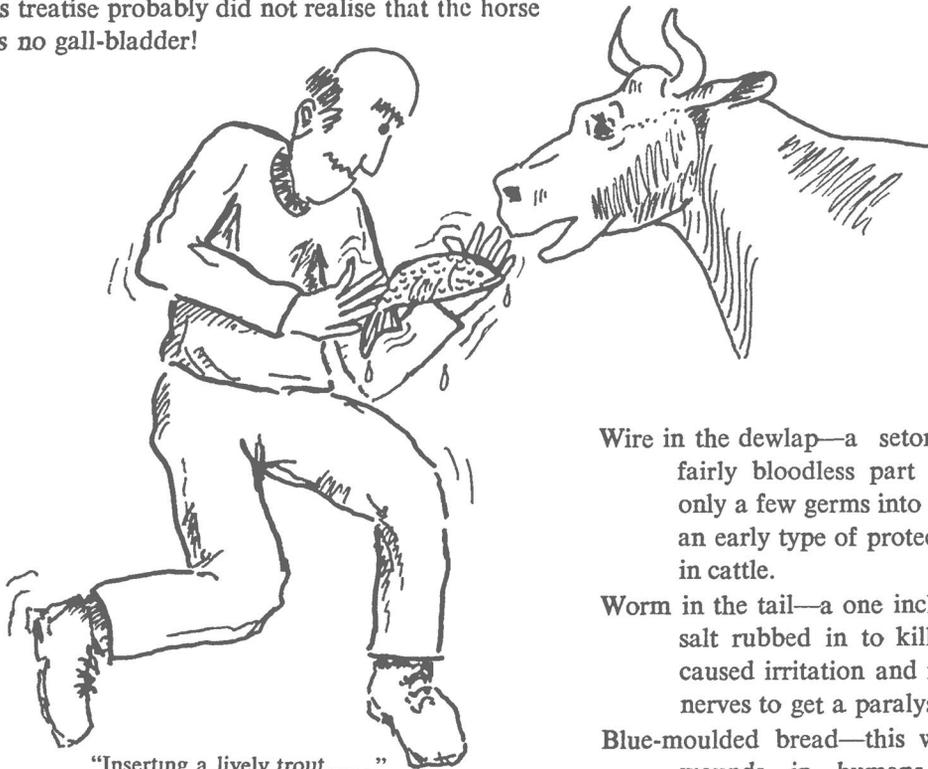
Mankind likes the company of animals and,

apart from using them for food and for work, there is a pleasure in watching them feed, play and relax. Every Irish man and woman delights to see the action and graceful lines of a well-bred horse. The human need for close contact with animals is now supplied by pets. This is because the functional animals of the farm are kept at a distance from the dwelling-house; hygiene propaganda and higher standards of living have forced the separation. Mankind has traditionally had an affinity with



animals—maybe remembering that we are created by the same Hand and so share some divine qualities. Animal behaviour is now an academic study but man has always learned from observing animals and gained wisdom from them. The prophet Job wrote: “Ask the beasts and they shall teach you”.

The ancient Greeks, Romans, Persians and Chinese all studied animal diseases and have left some writings on their ideas. Books written in Irish in the 1500's are available but, as in human medicine, there was a tendency at those times, (and until recently), to propound drastic and dramatic remedies. In a case of obstinate constipation in an ox a cure was “confidently promised ... A lively trout taken from the stream was committed to the gullet of the patient, under the assurance that it would soon work its way through all impediments and speedy relief be afforded.” Neither ox nor trout survived. Sometimes there was misleading information issued, for example, a book entitled “Diseases of the Gall-bladder of the Horse”. The gullible purchasers of this treatise probably did not realise that the horse has no gall-bladder!



“Inserting a lively trout . . . .”

Examples of the drastic remedies are blood-letting using the fleam, firing using red-hot firing irons and purging using drenching-horn, enema syringe and balling-gun. There was an urge to interfere in the healing process when a gentler approach may have had the same result with less pain inflicted on the animals. It is well known that many complaints get better through self-cure, the powers of the body being able to restore health. Some of the old folk treatments could have some scientific basis, for example—

The fire-walk—walking through embers or passing a flaming torch around the body. Maybe fire was seen as a disinfectant.

The murrain-ford — walking animals through running water. Maybe this cleaned them up and reduced the parasites.

Bone in the chimney — a bone from an animal which had died (perhaps from anthrax) was stored in the smoky atmosphere. Later the bone was taken out, ground up and given to cattle as a protection. Maybe this was a forerunner of the vaccine.

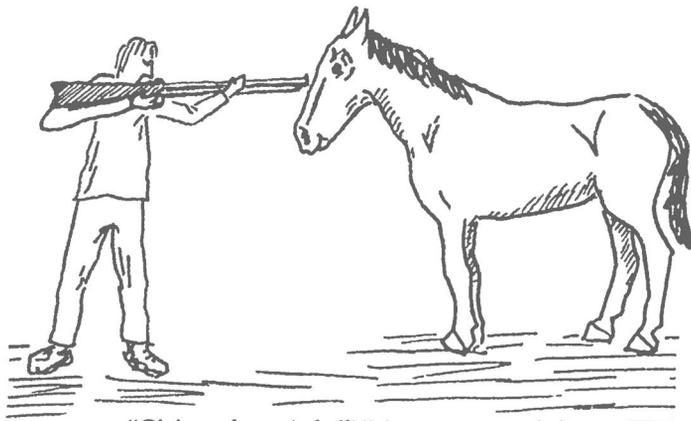
Wire in the dewlap—a seton imbedded in this fairly bloodless part of the body allowed only a few germs into the system. This was an early type of protection against blackleg in cattle.

Worm in the tail—a one inch cut in the tail with salt rubbed in to kill “the worm”. This caused irritation and maybe stimulated the nerves to get a paralysed cow to her feet.

Blue-moulded bread—this was used on infected wounds in humans and animals long before penicillin was “discovered”.

In those times there were people whose importance lay in their power to treat and sometimes cure animal diseases. The farrier who specialised in shoeing horses or the blacksmith who did that as well as other general iron work, were to be found every few miles over the country and were respected for their knowledge and 'knack'. The 'horse-doctor' was the forerunner of the veterinary surgeon and a hundred years ago the distinction between qualified professional and self-trained handyman was not so clear-cut as it is now. The veterinary profession grew gradually in the early to mid-1800's. While vets were able to make a good diagnosis, their treatments were often no better than those of the traditional quack.

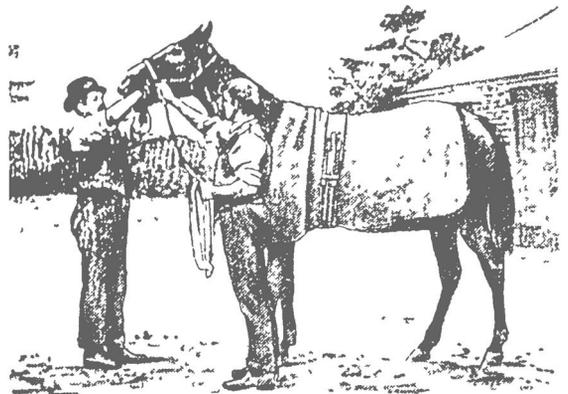
In looking at how treatments are discovered, sometimes by mistake, the common ailment of dairy cows known as milk fever is interesting. Up to about a hundred years ago, when a cow went down in a coma with milk fever after calving, the treatment might have been "cold water supplied to the head, mustard along the spine and enemas of warm water given frequently". It was a great advance when Schmidt in Denmark found that two drachms of potassium iodide dissolved in one and a half pints of warm water and injected up the teat into the udder, was a frequent cure. This



"Giving a horse 'a ball'" (not recommended!)

treatment was made public and came to be used generally till one day a vet was called to treat a milk fever case miles from home. Imagine his dismay to find that he had forgotten to bring the potassium iodide. The cow was far through and it was too late to go back for the drug, so he just

injected pure water into the udder. The cow responded just the same, so potassium iodide had nothing to do with the cure! It came to be seen that the damming back of the flow of milk within the udder was a simple mechanical pressure and could be cheaply and simply done by pumping up the teats with a bicycle-pump, then tying them with a bandage to keep up the pressure. Some years later it was shown that calcium rapidly leaves the blood stream into the milk after calving, so injections of calcium are the present day remedy.



Giving a horse a ball

Sometimes the vet might be asked to come to a sick horse and in an effort to conceal his inability to do anything helpful, he did something dramatic, something which the ordinary five-eighths would not attempt. The common means of giving medicine to a horse was by drenching. This meant climbing up a step and carefully pouring the liquid down the horse's throat from a drenching-horn. The horse could rear up, losing precious medicine or might choke if forced to swallow too quickly. So a slicker, safer way was used by the skilled man. An oval ball containing a drug was made up to about one inch by a half an inch in size. This could be pushed straight down the throat by an experienced hand. Those less dexterous, or who had had their knuckles marked by sharp molars, preferred to use a balling-gun to deliver the ball. On one occasion the owner of a valuable ailing horse left word that he wanted the vet to come and "give it a ball". The message was passed to a man with more of a military background than a veterinary one. He gave it a ball all right—a ball

of lead between the two eyes! It is better that we do not know the subsequent conversation.

A further way of administering liquid medicine to a horse is by stomach-tube. This technique was practised by vets but care had to be taken when removing the tube that the last trickles did not get into the windpipe. The way to get rid of all dregs from the tube is to blow down it before withdrawing. "What would happen?", asked a wee boy one time ... "What would happen if the horse blew first?"

Vets are by reputation great talkers and able to blather their way out of awkward situations. This was necessary when requested to do something for the lump at the back of a cow's tongue, when all cattle have a lump like that! Or when asked to knock out the wolf-tooth of a horse for no good reason except maybe to disguise its age or because grandpa always did it; or to cure the lampas by lancing the roof of the mouth when no such treatment was necessary. The most famous vet in Ireland in the 1890's, lived in May Street, Belfast. When doing post-mortems on pigs, the guts gave him the idea of air-filled tyres for his son's tricycle. The idea was successful and a great company was founded by the inventor. His name was John Boyd Dunlop.



"A cure for which there is no known disease!"

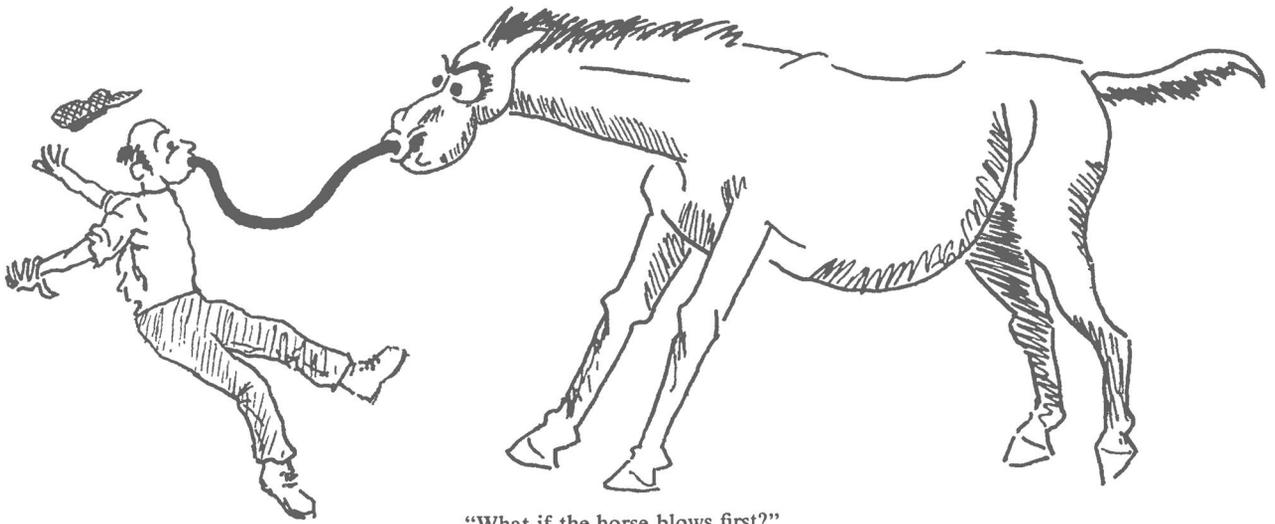


Balling-Gun

When we consider cures for animals diseases we should remember that each species has its own instinctive way of self-cure. Under modern farm conditions it is not possible for cattle to pick bark and ivy, though the Soil Association members who sow a strip of deep-rooting weeds, such as chicory, at the headrig of each grazing field, believe that variety in diet helps the health and contentment of the herd. Goats and donkeys are two of the healthiest animals, perhaps because they choose to browse on weeds and branches. The dog eats grass as a corrective to indigestion. After a car accident and subsequent X-rays on a broken pelvis, our cat disappeared for ten days. He reckoned that his own cure was gentler and safer and he proved this.

If an animal stops eating, even that fasting can be a form of self-cure. Mankind in its attempts to help animals does well when it remembers — "If you can't do any good, at least don't do any harm".

Even in these days of scientific farming there are still amazing and inexplicable events, the like of which have been going on for centuries. Is it faith or is it magic at work when a cow with red-water can be cured by a 'phone call to a man ten miles away who only wants to know the colour of the cow and which field she is in? More easy to explain and accept are charms and cures given by people who touch and speak to the animal. There have always been those with a gift for making nervous horses relax and gaining the confidence of snarling dogs. Traditional cures using natural things have a new appeal nowadays when powerful synthetic drugs are looked on with well-deserved suspicion. There are still whins to use for worms in horses, docks and honeysuckle for an itch, prim-

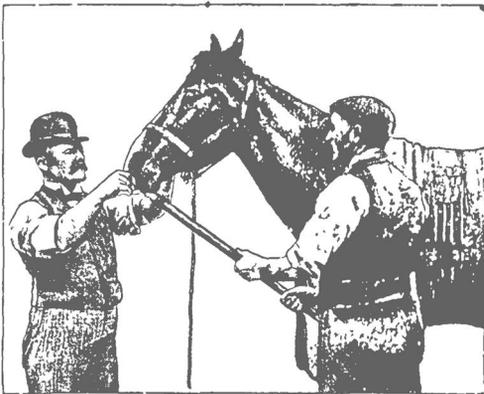


“What if the horse blows first?”

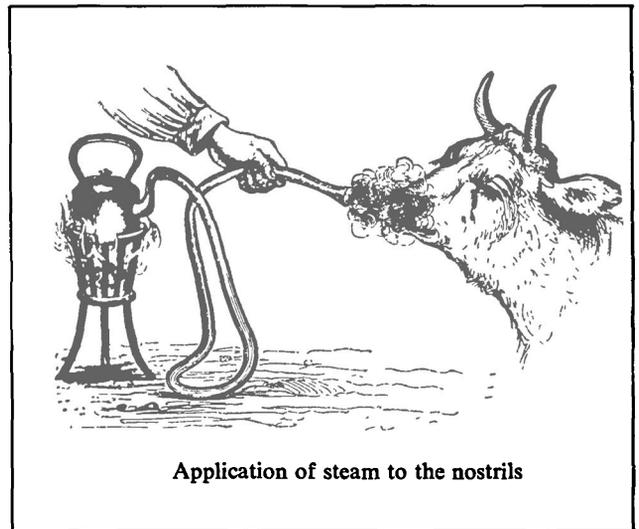
roses and goats milk for strangles, horseparsley as a sedative, egg-yolk and salt for harness sores, juice of a house leek for blistering and spider’s web or puff-ball fungus to stop bleeding.

There have not been many people actively interested in preserving the instruments and recipes used on animals in Ireland. At the Veterinary

College in Dublin the reference library has some interesting old books, while in Omagh at the Veterinary Laboratory there is a growing collection of old instruments. The great source of human memory is waiting to be drawn on and recorded so that the wisdom, experience and mistakes of previous generations can be kept safely.



Applying the twitch



Application of steam to the nostrils