

*David Watmough*

## **The Horses**

At first I couldn't hear my uncle's voice over the din of the binder behind me and the three horses, as I sat perched high on the bony back of Duke. We had done nearly a further turn around the field of wheat we were harvesting before I looked back.

It was early August, high noon, and the Cornish sun was very hot. Duke sweated freely and my bare legs were chafed and sore in spite of the flour sack Uncle Jan had insisted I place beneath my bottom. The cart horse was too broad for a thirteen year old boy to properly straddle and although the gunny bag minimally protected my thighs it quite failed to do service as saddle or prevent the horse's huge backbone jarring my spine and making my bum cheeks ache.

My turning around was as much a mute enquiry as to when we were to stop for lunch and relieve my sore back and stinging flesh as it was to hear what Farmer Jan was shouting.

I was to be disappointed. "They'm slowing down, boy, 'cos they've forgotten you'm bloody well up there! Give 'em a tickle of that withy I cut and let all three buggers know it b'aint dinnertime yet. You aren't up there like Lady Godiva just to look pretty, you know! I could've used one of the village maids for that!"

I flushed, turned quickly away, and gave Tommy to my left a quick cut with the willow frond. He responded with a start and an angry shaking of the head. Good! He was the only one I hated among the three horses. Once he had tried to bite me as I put corn in his manger while he stood sullenly in the twilight of the stables.

Uncle Jan, who saw it happen, had given the horse a terrible thrashing. But although Tommy bellowed in pain and pranced so

violently sparks flashed from his steel horseshoes on the granite floor, I knew he still hated me. His eyes had grown yellowy white in the enormity of his terror but that fear was reserved exclusively for my uncle.

I turned to the other side of me and gave Violet a similar thwack. She almost started to trot. Violet, mother of the steed on which I was somewhat precariously perched, wanted only happiness for everyone and was always the most eager to please. I was quite sure she regarded me as her lovable little master.

With somewhat more difficulty, I brought the withy branch down on the broad rump behind me—and felt Duke quiver as he, too, strained at pulling the noisy old binder more quickly around the half-mile oblong of still standing wheat.

I was certain he hardly felt my puny slap but I was never really convinced the coal black gelding didn't resent obeying my youthful will. The biggest and strongest of my *troika* was the hardest to read.

I didn't want to turn more fully around to strike him harder because that would have risked catching my uncle's eye again.

I knew very well that the caustic "Lady Godiva" reference was generated by taking off my shirt and placing it on the brass horn of Duke's huge collar. Wearing only brief khaki shorts and sandals on bare feet I was now virtually naked in Uncle's Methodist eyes.

The sensation of exposed flesh and the honeyed tan a week of such harvesting had yielded made me feel good. I was also aware that working down there in the stubble, stacking the bound sheaves the binder threw out, was my sixteen year old Cousin Jan, and that twice since I had divested myself of the shirt, he had glanced in my direction as I rode proudly by.

I peered into the gently waving phalanx of uncut wheat, striving to see what beleaguered and now terrified wildlife crouched there. I prayed there were animals ready to flee when their cover was so consumed by the voracious binder there was no option but to run the gauntlet of men and dogs and seek the safety of the surrounding hedges. This, for me, was the supreme moment of harvesting.

I dared hope for a fox, even an improvident but swift-gliding weasel. The previous August, in Farmer Trebilcock's low-lying meadows when mounted on Duke, there had been a tantalizing glimpse of an otter before it reached the safety of bulrushes screening the Amble River. I knew

there would be plenty of rabbits—and so did the village dogs which had already begun to assemble.

This thrill equalled the satisfaction of securing the attention of Cousin Jan and sustaining his interest when we lay together on the narrow bed which we routinely shared when I came from school for those wartime summer holidays.

As I dutifully touched their haunches as the horses endlessly encircled the field, buzzards glided so high above us their mews sounded as puny as that of kittens. My daydreams bounced between images of a lithe weasel gliding through stubble covered with scarlet pimpernel and the chest of swarthy Jan as I squeezed my smaller body into the S of his before drifting comfortably into sleep.

Such incongruous reveries ended abruptly when Jan's grouchy father on the binder seat finally yelled a halt to the labors of all those scattered about the partially harvested field.

Men, women, and children streamed from a dozen directions to congregate in the shade of a clump of tall elms. In seconds a damask tablecloth was laid below the hedge bank, and wicker baskets crammed with either pasties or apples placed strategically along its length.

Grease-stained straw hats were discarded; workworn hands run through damp and flattened hair. There was the chink of cider jugs against mugs as liquid refreshments were poured; raucous laughter from the village muscle that had been hired to help stack the sheaves into neat little pyramids.

The ubiquitous dogs barked and begged for food while growling at potential competitors. The girls from our village of St. Keverne retorted with pert quips to the lewd comments from the younger men.

I listened to the exchange of news, of deaths and dire accidents, learned in remote moorland village pubs visited when working other cornfields for other farmers during this labor-hungry harvest season.

Then I turned away to tend the horses; tethering them to the stoutest branches, providing them with buckets of water and seeing their halters enabled them to graze on the lush grass at their massive feet.

As I serviced my charges with food and drink I lunged angrily at the evil looking horseflies which zeroed into the harness-chinking shade for their own sanguinary meal. I had a keen proprietary sense over my foot-stomping giants.

I was not a tall boy for thirteen and was rather slight. These factors gave impetus to my feelings of power and superiority over my three huge if obeisant animals. I was also aware of being eyed professionally by the cluster of sprawled helpers as they idly watched me work.

I protracted the activity as long as I could before the delicious aroma of stewing beef and potato insisted I turn to the rapidly diminishing piles of pasties which had not yet been stuffed into hungry mouths.

In distinction to these ravenous oafs, I selected one small enough for a refined taste—and then, just as importantly, sought a congenial spot to eat it. My heart quickened when I saw a space at the foot of an oak—a little removed from the elms and the main assembly of harvesters. There, in the cool shade, slumped the recumbent figure of Cousin Jan.

He was talking to Silas Jago, a toothless old man who had brought his dog for the rabbit chasing when the cutting was completed. His whippet's name was Sport but everyone called it *Sportstha* behind his back because the retired roadworker for the parish lisped.

I waited patiently to get a word in but the old fool kept Jan's attention, persuading him to lay a bet on his stupid dog. And when that was over, instead of answering my question about the village fete which was coming up, Jan turned his back on me and started to talk to Molly Pentreath who everyone knew was both illegitimate and wanton.

I finished the pasty standing up. Without a word of goodbye from Jan (who was too busy making fatuous remarks to Gross Tits from Lanoe Farm) I made my way disconsolately back to the horses.

I killed two horseflies on Violet and plucked a clump of succulent clover leaves for Duke to eat from the palm of my hand. I retied Tommy to a sapling ash at whose base the grass grew longer and patted Duke's white muzzle and by blowing up his nostril made him sneeze and splutter as he always did in response.

Even that failed to lift my spirits. It seemed hours before Uncle yelled at everyone again and it was time to put the horses back in the shafts and for me to remount Duke.

When Jan grinned at me just before the last patch fell to the chattering teeth of the binder's knife, and only humdrum rabbits scattered in all directions, I just scowled in return.

Back at Polengarrow I deliberately avoided him when it was time to wash up and sit down for supper. I had decided I would punish him until

it was time to go to bed and only then, under the sheets and in the dark, would I whisper forgiveness.

I took my resolve to remain aloof further than ever before. After supper I volunteered to take the horses from the stable and let them loose in the field called Bullen. This was something Jan usually did each night.

Uncle gave me a funny look but said I could if I was careful to hang up their bridles on the proper pegs in the stable and lead them by rope halters up the steep hill to where they'd graze for the night. I was also to make sure the gate was closed after I'd set them free.

My aunt had the nerve to query whether I was big enough for the task but as usual he squashed her with an oath and ordered her to stop spoiling me at the expense of his son, Jan. I sat there and smirked at my cousin.

Once outside, though, my attitude altered. It had grown dusk while we were at supper. There was also a mist rising about the various outhouses.

Inside the stables I had to strain my eyes to fulfil Uncle Jan's instructions and by the time I emerged, pulling on the tethers of the three horses, stars pricked the night sky where bats piped shrilly. The scent of jasmine from the farmhouse porch hung heavy on the air.

As twelve hooves clattered and slithered noisily on the lane's granite hill past the well, I noticed something else. My daytime steeds had lost their distinguishing color.

There was no longer a fawn Tommy, a sorrel Violet or an ebony Duke. Each great shape was now mysteriously dark. Only the white blaze on the head of each stood out ghostly in the feeble light. Their heads nodded in unison as they lumbered up the slope. Their eyes were coals of fire.

All three gave vents to loud snorts as we climbed the last few yards to the gate of Bullen field. Violet added a soft whinny. They were excited by what was about to happen. I knew a tremor of anxiety through my body which now felt cold through the thinness of my summer shirt. I shivered.

Up to the moment I had carefully replaced the wreath of binder cord over the gatepost, even if my spirit did begin to fret, I could still find reassurance in familiar things. Inside Bullen, though, all that changed.

The mist swirled in grotesque wraiths up there. The hedge separating the two parts of the turf-clumped field had largely dissolved from the rabbits creating their underground warrens.

Someone had told me "*bullen*" was a corruption of a Celtic word meaning "harelipped man." As I led my progressively independent charges to where I intended to loose them, I thought I saw a face fashioned in the mist. It possessed an unsmiling mouth which sported an ugly fissure midway along its upper lip . . .

I realized I was not going to go further. The horses were now far too excited. Apart from even louder snorting and whinnying the rope of the halters grew ever tauter. I was afraid one or other of my charges would tug theirs out of my hand.

I rushed quickly to Tommy and leaping up as he raised his head in alarm I managed to yank the halter over his ears and set him free. Violet was a shade more co-operative. Although still whinnying madly, she did fractionally lower her head. That allowed me two hands for the giant Duke.

When the rope fell away from him he did something which froze me in fear. I thought I would never breathe easily again. He rose on his back legs to an almost vertical position, came down with a smashing thud to the mound of the rabbit warren and then rolled over and over like a gigantic puppydog.

Then they all let out enormous farts. There was nothing humorous about it. Only an elemental defiance. The explosion of their cooped up wind said go away!

By now the three monsters were all rearing up on their hind haunches to paw at the stars. Their stomachs rumbled like thunder and weird *unequine* sounds arose from their throats.

They started to run in mad circles, stopping only to flop with an enormous thud to the ground and roll over and over in crazy glee before clambering noisily up once more and galloping faster than ever as if chasing one another's cropped tails.

Then they were no longer horses. Gone was benign Violet, her secretive son Duke, and testy old Tommy who resented small boys. Instead, there were the three sacred centaurs from Ancient Greece I had discovered last term at school: Philyra and Cronus and Philyra's son Chiron whom Zeus had sent as a star in the sky.

I scanned the heavens for Centauras, knowing I would not find it. How could I, when one or other of those looming shapes in the thickening mist was in fact the tutor of such Hellenistic heroes as Asclepius, Jason and Achilles?

And then we were back from the Aegean to the Atlantic—to three transformed carthorses on a Cornish farm. From their thunderous dance of freedom they turned to gentle loving. Arched necks were rubbed by soft muzzles; chafe marks from human bondage were kissed away and the great feathered hooves drummed songs of mutual encouragement to vibrate through the earth.

I moved slowly back towards the lane. Not seeking safety. I was no longer frightened—only anxious to do their will and remove myself from the intimacy of their rites and games.

Cousin Jan was sitting up in bed reading by the light of our oil lamp when I joined him. For once he initiated conversation, asking if the horses had been put up field and I had remembered to shut the gate.

I merely nodded as I undressed and put on my pajamas. Instead of striving to engage him in gossipy chat as I usually did when we got into bed, I gave him my back as he continued to read. And then I forgot him and slept—caught up in a sea of arcane dreams where horses lived without the benefaction or even knowledge of the human race.