Some Farm and Animal Stories

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Well, there was **The Cow That Misbehaved**, which came to the herd as one of two scrags as a bargain lot at the end of the local sale, being bought by my boss who was pinched for funds, but needed to boost his milking numbers. Of course, sales are notorious as convenient dumping-grounds for animals that are unthrifty, or otherwise unsuitable, including behaviour problems, and this particular pair of cows were no exception, one being a meek, skinny, and poor milker, and the particular subject of this tale, a wilful animal, no doubt made worse by the previous owner's exasperation. These two confirmed their value from the first milking, not liking each other anyway, the meek one always trying to follow the other, the only real 'friend she had ever had, it seemed! This dependence was made worse by the usual pecking order adjustments in the shed involving the herd-at-large, with plenty of restlessness and effluent voiding as a result, with some butting and bumping that would make a passing shedhand watch out for hoof placement and foot safety. Whatever got into the boss that sale day, I don't know.....

That Fresian-cross cow, tall, rangy, and stubborn, was at least a good milker if the cups could be got on her, and then of course if they could be made to stay on, as she had learned well the technique of kicking them off, then crapping or pissing all over them. This was a two leg-rope cow, for sure, and one across the back for good measure. One particular hot afternoon there was another scene, and I broke the rules, especially for dairying, lost my cool good and proper, and laid into that cow with a handy piece of 4x2, (otherwise used to prop open a door, not necessarily kept for disciplinary purposes), a series of blows that rang on that cow's ribs like the tympany of an orchestra, sounding above the other machine and radio noises of the milking routine.

The cow stopped playing up, and stood stock-still, eyes wide but not rolling, quite taken aback by my display of fury, tensed for the next blow. At that instant, I knew that the cow was intelligent enough to realize that the game was up, and that the playing-up and carry-on was all an act anyway. That bovine bluff should have been called well before now. I tossed the piece of wood into a corner, calmed down, and put on the cups, no leg-rope needed, the milk poured through the sight-glass, and apart from the odd quiver, the cow remained still and quiet, not even looking at me from the corner of her eye, unusual in a cow at any time. From that day on, there was no more trouble, herd relations also improved and even the boss commented to me on the changed behaviour, to which I could only make uncommittal noises in reply. So much for being a "dumb animal"; that cow was certainly anything but...

The Cow That Liked Me

On another farm there was this young heifer that had got herself into trouble at an early age with the neighbour's bull, although it was never really known who got through the fence to whom. Anyway, the end result, so to speak, was a bonny little black and white calf, and a milking heifer that was never to grow any more, and was now the runt and "butt" of the rest of the welcoming milking herd. For some reason, protracted bovine adolescence, being bottom of the pecking order, or perhaps even the weaning of that calf, this young heifer took to following me around the paddock or shed like a pet, waiting to be patted, and mooing and pushing with her head when I did not comply. I do remember that I was the first to milk her when she joined the herd, and had felt sorry for her entering the herd as junior, and at least a year before her time. Perhaps my sympathy for her plight had contrasted strongly with the treatment meeted out by the other cows.

As it was summer, and we were harvesting between milkings, I usually arrived shirtless to start the milking in the late afternoons. That heifer was soon onto a new way of our bonding, as she took up licking my back as I bent and squatted to my duties in the byre. No doubt the a day's salt accumulating under the summer sun had much to do with this, but certainly no other cow anywhere else in my experience attempted this. Much ribald humour from other hands also eventuated, such as the old joke about farmer fore-play and various others, including a possible re-incarnation of some courtesan of historical note, names withheld to protect the 'innocent', and that did include me in contemporary times! But this regular licking was an activity that persisted as long as she had opportunity while standing waiting behind me in the byre, and she was always the last to be milked. It was a wonder she never licked my suntan off!

Anyway, as the heifer had such an ongoing bad time from the other cows, and probably would not develop into a substantial milker, the decision was eventually made to send her to a neighbour's property as a house-cow. Of course, after several unsuccessful and hilarious attempts by others to lead her to her new home, it was obvious that only I was to be allowed to undertake this painful duty that would lead to "our" separation, and so I duly led her quietly to the scene of our final "parting". No doubt she settled to a quiet life as a house cow, boss of her own paddock, with no other cows for company, with whom she did not seem to get on with anyway, and attended daily by humans, in the form of a young family, with whom she would find the sort of companionship that she seemed to prefer. Probably, from time to time, there would have been more black and white calves, though weaned less abruptly than the first.
Certainly, she was an unusual cow, and after a bad start as a herd milker, finished up with a better life than those of her kind who had shunned and bullied her. To which I would add, add, depending on company at the time, that, come to think of it, she could give a pretty good licking, though.....

Pain and Suffering

Cruelty on farms is an issue seized upon by those in search of an easy cause, but although farm life has an expedient side, no farmer worth the name is needlessly cruel, and such practices are counter-productive anyway. Certainly, anthropomorphising about animal pain is of doubtful veracity, as humans are far less stoical and enduring in extremes of climate, recovery from injury, fluctuations in health or other conditions like feed, or water availability. Those idealists who have a rosy view of what it means to be "free" should understand the advantages domesticated animals have in relation to wild animals, including veterinary help, food and water, predator protection, and no decline into helpless old age. These same idealists should pay more than lip service to freedom, in that for humans, at least, it is not to be confused with licence, or freedom from responsibilities, of which farmers themselves have an abundant share. In my memory, beyond such necessary livestock management such as tailing, marking, de-horning, difficult births, and the usual run of such events, I do remember two occasions when I was responsible, directly and indirectly, for inadvertently inflicting real pain on an animal, regretting that infliction sincerely.

On the first occasion, I was an apprentice shearer, and, at that time, shearing lambs. On particular lamb, more of a wriggler than normal, twisted shapely as I grasped a front leg to restrain it. Against the palm of my hand, I felt the leg snap like a twig, with a dry sort of crack, only faintly heard above the sound of machinery. The lamb let out a piteous little bleat, and wriggled no more. When I finished shearing, I called over the farmer, and explained what had happened, the lamb was taken to have the leg splinted and bound, with the expectation that all would be well. The last time I saw it in the back yard, it was almost a pet, and seemed no worse for wear; the young bone on a healthy lamb had healed quickly and well. What could be called a greenstick fracture in human terms, perhaps? In future, I was always to be aware of the perils of putting too much stress on small bones like that again; certainly, they are not nearly as strong as those on a fully-grown sheep. Live and learn.

On the second occasion, I was setting out to bring in a herd of Friesian cows for milking, and just happened to have one of the dogs with me, off the chain, and tagging along as dogs are wont to do. Usually, those cows come with a call, albeit slowly on a warm afternoon such as that day. The dog was anxious to help, so I sent him off to chase them up a bit. I just happened to be looking at a late starter as the she was lifting her head and saw the dog coming at her. She started and pivoted, big, healthy and heavy as she was, and dislocated her nearside shoulder as she lurched; I saw the misplaced joint bulge and push against the inside of the hide, like a huge fist being pushed into the body of a large black overcoat.

The cow let out a bellow, and that front leg was from that point useless to her for bearing weight. I called off the dog, and he slunk away knowing that somehow things were not right. As the herd moved toward the race, I and the injured cow followed slowly in the rear, me with a bad feeling in my stomach, and her lurching forward on three legs. She was milked that night, and attended to, but not with great success, the leg was never the same since, and she was just too big for a complete recovery. She went ‘down the shute’ although she was fortunately insured for such an eventuality. Since then, I have always been wary of startling cattle of any kind, with or without dogs, and never have I taken a dog to bring in dairy cattle again, if I could possibly avoid doing so.

Friesians, especially, as I further learnt that day, are prone to that sort of accident, due to their great size and weight, and especially when on soft ground, which good dairy pasture often is. Tradition and normal practice would dictate that one should bring in cows more or less moving by themselves, keeping regular times, having the cows within reasonable proximity of the shed or customary access lane beforehand, practise good quiet handling, have ready something tasty in the byre, and a bit of music. Plus some human and canine patience, of course.

A Lot of Bull

Once while driving a stock truck, I had to go to the local AI centre to pick up two bulls whose time had come, so to speak, and they were headed for the works on this, their last journey. I took a full-size cargo crate, divided in two with a heavy partition of steel pipes. That container could have carries eight yearlings with room to spare, but I was told these two bulls were BIG.

And so they were. When I arrived at the Centre, one was already tethered by his nose in the loading bay, an immensely squat Friesian, which would have been big by any standards, heavy of limb, with an enormous neck, and a solemn look in his eye; I could just see over his withers as he stood in the race. The Friesian had to be loaded first, as there was another bull to be bought up to the yard, and this had to be done separately, as the two bulls "did not get on", and I would probably have to use my brakes a few times to settle them both down on the journey, just as a hint of possible supervisory actions to be taken on the journey.

Then I saw the next bull, an enormous red and rangy Santa Gertrudis, being led by the nose by an old grey petrol Ferguson tractor that seemed so small and frail beside such a huge beast; it looked as if, tight-hauled as he was by his big nose in a special frame at the back of the tractor, he could have flipped the lot over, driver and all, with one toss of his head. He was the biggest bull I have ever seen, before or since; I could not see over his withers, not without a step-ladder or a large box to stand on, that's for sure! As he approached the race, and saw or smelt the other Friesian, he began to get restless, his eyes rolled in his huge head, great slabs of muscle roiled and tensed all over his body, and the huge hump lurched and quivered as he walked unwillingly behind the tractor. We were in for an interesting ride, and suddenly that old Bedford looked a bit frail for the job!

The Santa Gertrudis, anxious to confront the other bull, now moved willingly enough into the second compartment of the crate, and they started their aggro there and then, so I did not waste my time getting the swaying, lurching truck up to speed, and then slamming on the brakes a few times to bring them to their knees. As things quietened down topside, and I began to relax a bit, I noticed motorists staring and pointing, and even slowing and giving the truck plenty of room as they passed. It was then that I realised that the Santa Gertrudis now had his head up, and was looking out, head **over** the side of the crate, and apparently enjoying the wind in his big floppy ears, or whatever, with his mind now off mixing it with the Friesian. At the right angle, I could see all this in my side mirror. A sight to behold, and quite rare where ordinary cattle were concerned. As I said, he was **BIG** ....

When I arrived at the Works, and drove in through the main gate, the Santa Gertrudis was now looking in the windows of the offices as we passed, and behind us, staff came out of the these offices to stare in disbelief at what was being carried in the back of the truck. Both the Friesian and the Santa Gertrudis had to stand angle wise in their compartments to be comfortable, but The Big Red it was who was drawing the crowds. Sad to say, neither bull was a herd improver, but their lives, though cut short in their prime, would not have been all that bad! Later I learned that the Santa Gertrudis had a dressed carcase weight of over 1500 lbs; when you consider this could have been only a few percent more than half his live body weight, he was A Lot Of Bull in his day....

The Insurance Hoaxer

There are human stories connected with farm life, of course, and the ones about outsiders and townies are often are the funniest, naturally. There was one I heard concerning a cattle drive, from foothills down to the coast; a hundred or so miles of

highway that took nine days overall, due to traffic, gates, bridges, side-roads, lost-and-founds, and even other strays. Such a trip would not be attempted to-day, but it must have been a great, if trying experience. Of all the tales associated with this droving yarn, one about a townie stands out, not least because other townies and road users had often been so graceless towards the hardworking drovers and their horses, dogs, and cattle along the way.

On one particular bridge, while the cattle were wending their slow way through the usual impatient motorists, one woman in a late-model foreign car, with big-city registration, passed over the bridge, tooting constantly at the bemused cattle, then stopped a mounted drover on the far side to complain about a dent in a mudguard. The drover, who had been watching the entire cavalcade as a matter of duty, had seen no incident involving cattle and car; the small dent proffered in evidence still had a healthy road film on it, and anyway, was obviously un-be-smudged by any accidental contact with a hairy Hereford hide, or even a glancing blow from an errant hoof.

The drover could not be bothered arguing, and pointed to another drover on horseback at the other end of the bridge form whence the motorist had come, saying that he was the boss, and that the motorist should speak to him. So, instead of waiting for cattle to pass, and the drover to arrive in the normal course of events, the woman turned her car around, and drove all the way back tooting through the rest of the herd, to talk to the "boss" on the other side. Being a man of few words, he was not about to waste any of them on such a rank and transparent opportunist, and completely ignored her. Needless to say, nothing further was heard of the "damage".

Dogs

There could be no collection of farm stories without the mention of dogs, given the valuable role they play as protectors and helpers of farmers and their interests. I could imagine a world without cats, and certainly a world without such pests as rabbits and foxes, but I could never imagine a world without dogs. Usually I would qualify this by saying a dog is a dog if it weighs 45 lbs or more, but this should be revised down to 30lbs or so to include those stalwart smaller-boned working dogs like kelpies. An intelligent young dog, well-trained as a member of a pack, human and/or animal, and also trained to have a sense of responsibility and usefulness, is no different to a human as far as establishing potential for turning out well as an adult. A good home and tucker, and firm but fair leadership, appeal well to the senses of fairness and example in the young of both species!

Dogs do have brains, and can perform beyond just the levels of human training requirements, as many stories will testify to; stories of loyalty, endurance, and saving of lives, of humans, their own kind, and other animals. I cannot top stories of dogs on graves or tucker-boxes, but had a few experiences of my own that convince me the dog really is a superior among animals, and superior in their own special ways to humans in certain important matters, like memories of smells, locations, directions, intuition, and often in duty and loyalty too. Also, a dog is intelligent enough to have a sense of guilt or shame, something I have not noticed among cats, or that other supposedly intelligent domesticate, the pig.

A few small anecdotes, almost in passing, tell of how a dog can think, i.e., to **ratiocinate** or **cogitate,** in a way that even would do credit to a human. The first dates back to my childhood, when, while on holiday on a farm, I happened to observe a young dog making off with a large stick, for a purpose that only he would know, and I could only speculate about. He approached a small gate, the stick, obviously too large to through fit crosswise, held square in his mouth as he busily approached. Of course, he was bought up short by the gate, and then he retreated a couple of paces to concentrate on the problem thus so abruptly bought to his attention. After a moment of consideration, he turned his head slightly, enough for the stick to clear the sides of the obstacle, trotted through, and then went about his business with that stick still held firmly in his mouth. As part of childhood memories, as well as astonishing me as to the capacity of the dog to solve this problem, the incident is ever-clear in my mind, 50 years later, and probably taught me to appreciate dog brain-power at an early age, and to be on the watch for similar feats of canine intelligence.

Another incident, years later, also happened almost in passing, so that I could have missed it if I was not carrying the memory of that first incident in my subconscious. At the time, I was making a delivery of fertilizer in an area of small farms, narrow hedge-lined roads, and poorly defined main gates. I had stopped to ask directions at a house, half-hidden behind a giant hawthorn hedge, and guarded by a large dog, whose kennel and well-defined run showed that he had a permanent home at the base of the complex and twisted mass of the high hedge that also marked the road boundary. He leapt and barked, and moved rapidly about, and almost as an afterthought, I realised that he did not seem to get tangled, chain and all, among the trunks and roots of the hedge.

Pausing to observe him closely, I saw that during his seeming frenetic dodging in and out amongst the mass of bald, uneven dirt and gnarled woodwork of his run, that he was actually moving back and forth in a careful pattern that saw him seeking different vantage points to observe me, while undertaking a series of careful mirrored movements that ensured that the long stout chain he dragged and tugged on never became tangled. What I saw could only be described as a quite complexly choreographed dance among the obstacles. I was most intrigued at the fancy "paw-work", and could only marvel at his skill. That time, and trial-and-error learning, was part of his skill, did not detract at all from his capacity to learn, especially as these steps are so much a part of the learning curve of humans who are supposedly superior.
Anyhow, how long would it have taken the average human to have learned the freedom of movement thus displayed, along with all the barking and jumping going on at the same time, as he moved so skilfully among the maze of roots and burrowed ground at the base of the boxthorn?

There was also the one about the straying child being followed by the family terrier, who was too small to influence the child physically, but who enlisted the help of another larger dog to restrict the child by tugging on the seat of his rompers, pulling him in the direction of the family home. Thus was the trio discovered by anxious adults who had noted the open gate, which happened to open onto a busy street, and had come looking for the child. What they saw along the footpath was the child in a screaming, wriggling tantrum, the bigger dog tugging purposefully at the seat of his rompers, and the terrier barking instructions

and/or encouragement to both connected parties. The child, of course, had only sensed that a burst for freedom could be made when the gate was left open; the terrier was much wiser in this respect, and obviously felt his family responsibilities very keenly.

Sally and the Last Pup

Another short, but nevertheless special and poignant, dog story. This is about a blue heeler named Sally, who had lived with a poor, and rather irresponsible, family on the outskirts of a small rural town. For a dog, even a faithful blue heeler, it was not much of a life, with haphazard food and care, innumerable heats and pups, no visits to the vet possible or even contemplated, dogs and their survival being very much taken for granted. Perhaps Sally thought, in her doggy way, that at least it was a home of sorts, on the river, away from the highway, and no doubt with a self-appointed duty of protecting the human progeny that also grew up along with surviving pups. Pack or family, for Sally, as for so many dogs, it was all the same to her. Sadly, Sally's sense of duty and example did not rub off on the family she protected, as, with time, they inevitably drifted into delinquency, as well as heats and pregnancies of the human kind. But that is part of another story.

Sally's shortish life continued in the same pattern, and some of her pups survived to run away, or to go to new homes. Others died of neglected puppy illnesses, snake bites, being trapped in holes or rubbish, drowning, and probably even **accidental** drownings. There was also some humour in what could be observed of Sally's love-life, regular and often public as it was, at least from a human point of view. Her main suitor, Fred, was a three-legged heeler who lived at the neighbour's, (no relation, apparently), and who performed quite astute feats of balance and movement with impressive ardour, while being short of the steadying influence of one sturdy front leg. (This limb had been removed by the local vet, due to nerve damage sustained after a misjudged jump from a moving vehicle.) Fred was a good anticipator of Sally's waxing amorous condition, but sometimes she would even surprise him with a visit!

Anyway, a couple of their pups had found a home at Fred's place, one actually replacing him when he finally made one too many leaps to or from the back of his other true love, the farm ute, which unfortunately happened to be at speed when the mishap occurred. What a way to go, Freddie-boy! (Only Sally at those ‘certain times’ could compete with Fred's fascination with four or more wheels. Motorbikes he actually disliked, probably because he never could hitch a ride on one...but that's also another story.)

As time went by at the house by the river, Sally got a bit older and thinner, had less pups, and probably began to succumb to the ubiquitous and inevitable heartworm, endemic in the State, and also in untreated dogs. In the end, even the kids at her home were too old to include Sally as often as before in their activities, as the bright lights of the town beckoned and human hormones provoked those new and more exciting interests. Finally, as her energies waned, and her hard life and indifferent living conditions caught up with her, Sally had one last heat, which produced one last surviving pup. Although by this time, Fred had been chasing "utes" in doggy heaven for a couple of years, Sally still remembered the neighbour next door, and the fact that pups of hers had found a home there in the past.

She took that solitary pup over to the farmer at the time when finally she could no longer feed him, and dropped the tiny black bundle at his feet one evening, when he came out of the house to investigate the barking of one of Sally's other pups, now grown up, and resident guard dog at the house. The farmer, ever a soft touch for Sally and her pups for odd feeds or other, more permanent arrangements, took in the latest and last, and Sally went back to her old home again. For a week or so, Sally came each night to check on the entrusted pup in his new home, and to watch the farmer feed him, although spurning similar offerings for herself. Apparently finally satisfied one particular evening that his well-being was assured, she went back home again for the last time, and died that night.