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TO BE A FARMER'S BOY

by

TOM HARRISON

Synopsis

Imagine a time not that long ago, when life was hard, but people cared for each other and looked after one another. Imagine growing up on a farm and being up at the crack of dawn to feed the cows and deliver the milk before going to school and then having to help out around the farm well into the evening. These are the things that helped shape the life of the author.

Tom Harrison lived that idyllic, but harsh life and the events that happened during his childhood, made him appreciate not just his extremely hard working parents and those around him, but also the farm animals with whom he shared a precious existence and whose intelligence truly surprised him.

This delightful account of those childhood days in the 1930's and 40's are a real insight into much harder times. His stories are recalled with true feeling and warmth and will make you yearn for the past.

A truly inspiring read.

Chapter One

My first memories of life begin at about three and a half to four years of age. Dad was a farm bailiff for a gentleman farmer, that's a farmer with loads of money who doesn't do much work himself. The farm was in a very beautiful village called Hale, located between Widnes and Liverpool. We lived in a cottage at the end of the driveway leading to the farm. It was a lovely peaceful place. There was a wall along the side and across the backyard, and in the corner of the yard was an outside toilet. We did not have flush toilets in those days. The toilet was a large bucket with a wooden seat over the top. The dustbin men emptied it when they came to empty the dustbins. If it got too full before they came, Dad and I had to carry it down to the manure heap and tip it out on there. Not a very

nice task I can assure you. The stink from that thing was quite disgusting, even to a five year old child.

Beyond the yard wall Dad had quite a large garden, as most farm cottages did those days. Dad had some sheds on there where he bred pigs to supplement his meagre income of thirty two shillings and sixpence a week. He also grew vegetables and flowers. He sold flowers to local people and the veg was to help feed us. Bear in mind that he did all this after working a twelve or fourteen hour day. I remember being told, in later years, that if Mam and Dad had sixpence left after paying the bills they would celebrate by taking me into Widnes on Saturday night as a treat for us all. The shops were open late on Saturday and all I remember of the trips was window shopping. I do however remember one instance, like it was yesterday, which must have been quite close to Christmas. I saw this beautiful red truck with milk churns on the back in a shop window. I just stood there staring at it, fascinated at the sight of such a wonderful toy. How Mam and Dad did it I don't know, but on Christmas morning there was my red truck by my bed. The joy I felt cannot be described, but I played with that truck for years. The following year I got a pedal car for Christmas. I had never seen one before and that just overwhelmed me. I'm sure that's when I learned to drive because I have been car crazy ever since.

Les was born at Hale and was probably eighteen months to two years old when we left there, so I suppose we must have lived there for about three years. Memories from such a young age are very limited, but I will recall the few I have.

I remember Mam taking me to school, sat on the carrier of a big sit up and beg bicycle. I loved having my rides on that old bike. The school was a typical old village school, two classrooms in a building that looked a little like a small church, and probably run by the church. Memories of this school were good. The teachers were nice and we didn't get a bottle of cold milk at break time, as in later years, we got a cup of Horlicks and a biscuit.

Another very vivid memory is of a motorcycle and side-car provided by the farmer for Dad to carry churns of milk to the hospitals in Liverpool. Have you ever seen an old motorcycle from the late twenties or early thirties? They were bone shakers alright, but I loved the smell of the old machine. Old motorbikes were smelly things anyway, but the petrol those days had a different odour, a little like racing spirit. Was I a strange kid or what? The smell of an old motorbike being one of my most vivid memories.

Another of Dad's little sidelines was shooting rabbits, which he sold to locals or the butcher for a few pence each. Strange how such a young child should remember this! I remember being so proud of Dad. He had orders for seven rabbits, but only had six cartridges for his gun. He came back with seven rabbits though. He had enough patience to wait until he saw two rabbits sitting together and got the two with one shot. Dad, incidentally was a crack shot. He always claimed he had never ever wasted a cartridge. Once many years later, I had a .22 rifle. Dad asked to try it. He stood a match up between two pieces of wood round a compost heap. He fired at the match from about thirty to forty yards away and struck the match.

Dad had three dogs. I remember one was a black and white collie, which dad had bought off a young boy in Wales, who trained his own working dogs. When Dad had to take cows into Liverpool, I assume to the cattle market, he used to drive the cows onto the road, with the dogs, and then catch the bus to the outskirts of Liverpool and wait for the dogs to bring them through. One

dog used to go in front to stop the cows turning off down side roads and the other two kept them together and drove them ahead. That I saw as my first insight to the amazing intelligence and capabilities of creatures the uninitiated describe as dumb animals. Other tales I have to tell about animal behaviour may convince you that animals are anything but dumb.

These lovely memories of life at Hale were about to come to an unexpected and sudden end. Life was never going to be the same again. The memory of the moment I was told by Mam that we had to leave still brings a feeling of sadness to my mind. Although I was only five I still recall how I loved my life at that time. Believe it or not, until I married my wife Kath at the age of forty eight, there always felt to be something missing. I had my good times. I had my successes in life, but that something missing feeling was always there. It wasn't until I took Kath back to see where I'd lived, many years later, that I realised that was my missing bit. Strangely enough, after I had revisited the place, the love for that house and that place came flooding back, but I was then able to put it to rest, and the missing something feeling left me.

I have just had to have fifteen minutes break from my writing. I cannot believe it. I am seventy two years of age, and telling you about this episode has brought back the memory and made me cry a little about something that happened when I was five. I hope this doesn't happen again or there will be little pleasure in telling my story.

Mam woke Les and me very early on the fateful morning of our move. We came downstairs and men were carrying our furniture out. I couldn't see then that it was being loaded onto Mr Jones truck. He was the local haulage contractor. I can't recall how Dad's pigs were moved to their new home.

Mam dressed us and sat me at the table. She gave me a bowl with a round thing about the size of a saucer in it. These things were called tea biscuits, and you literally poured tea over them and that was my breakfast. Les was sat on Mam's knee and too young to understand what was going on. Whilst I was eating my breakfast Mam explained to me that we had to go to live at Granddad's farm to help him with the work. So I had to hurry up with my breakfast because we had a long way to go and Granddad was waiting for us. I remember crying and saying I didn't want to go. I didn't like Granddad, I said you go, but I want to stay here. Very shortly after, we were gone from Hale. I don't remember the journey, probably because I no doubt cried all the way.

Now the tough times begin!

We arrived at Granddad's farm about lunch time. Mam said 'come on and see where we are going to live,' as though it was some great adventure.

The main farm buildings were in one block. There was the Cottage, then the main farm house and ext to the house was the dairy. Next to that the stables, followed by the barn and on the bottom end was a cowshed or shippon as they were known. Directly opposite across the farmyard was the toilet, attached to another shippon. Just to the right of these was a wooden garage and behind the shippon was a large wooden shed, that was pig sties. The place was a dump.

Mam, carrying Les and leading me by the hand led us to the cottage. I could not believe that I had to live here. It was one room and a kitchen downstairs and one bedroom upstairs. After Hale that was as big a dump as the farmyard. However Granddad said we could have the bedroom over the farmhouse living room, so Dad cut a hole through the wall like a doorway to give us access into there from the cottage. We had to jump down about 18inches, because the two houses were on

different floor levels, but at least we now had two bedrooms. To give you some idea of how basic this place was, the stairs were in between the kitchen and living room. There was a door with a thumb latch at the bottom, for some unknown reason, as there was no other form of privacy and the stairs led straight up into the bedroom. This also meant that we had to go through that bedroom to get to the loaned room. In the kitchen there was a brown stone sink with a cold water tap over a wooden draining board with shelves underneath with a tatty old curtain round to hide the shelves. What did you say? What about the hot water tap? No such luxury. In the corner of the room was a set boiler. That is a large cast iron bowl that held about fifteen gallons of water, (about sixty eight litres), set in bricks. There was a chimney at the back and a place to build a fire underneath. It had to be filled with water, light a fire under of anything that would burn, and this was the only source of hot water. Mam used to put all the clothes in there with soda and boil it up to get our clothes clean. The clothes were then taken out of the boiler put into a dolly tub and pounded with a dolly, which was three legs set into a round base. Off the base came a handle similar to a spade handle. Out of there they went into the sink for rinsing and then had to be put through a hand operated wringer. I, more often than not had to turn the wringer handle whilst Mam fed the clothes through. That was arm and backbreaking work. What about baths? I hear you say. Well there was an experience. The bath was hung up outside the back door. It was Tin. Bath night, which was once a week, involved Mam boiling up the water in the set boiler, bringing in the tin bath to the living room, carrying the water in a bucket from the boiler, adding cold water to get the temperature right and there was your bath. Sunday night was bath night, perhaps something to do with it being the Lord's Day, and we had to take it in turn. The youngest first, up the scale, Dad being last, and as I remember, all in the same water. Poor Dad must have bathed in near mud. The rest of the week we stood at the sink and had hands, face and legs washed. The rest of you waited for bath night. I suppose the idea was that your body was covered up most of the time so didn't get dirty. When Dad was stripped to the waist having his wash I used to watch the muscles ripple up and down his back as he washed his face and pray that one day I would have a physique like his.

Another disgusting item was the sanitary arrangements. Because the toilet was up the garden, we had chamber pots under the bed. If one wanted to do anything in the night, wee, sick or poo, one pulled the pot from under the bed and did it in there, and then it was tipped in the toilet next morning. That was basic life in the cottage.

Before I continue my story of life on the farm from here on, let me go a little further back in history to give you some idea of how we came to be in this situation, or at least what I suspect happened. Granddad's family were Quakers I believe, and Quakers, from the stories I've heard, are strange people to say the least. For example, Dad told me of a day in mid winter when he had occasion to visit his grandfather with Granddad Harrison. Apparently the snow was about a foot thick on the ground and a bitter cold wind blowing. His granddad came out and said, 'would you like a cup of tea to warm you up child'. My Dad replied 'I wouldn't mind please', and his granddad's reply was 'neither do I', and he walked off and left Dad standing in the cold. Your reply has to be either 'Yes please' or 'No, thank you' or similar positive response to a question.

Reading between the lines of snippets of information I gathered as life progressed, I think Granddad had caused a bit of a scandal as far as the Quakers were concerned by marrying Grandma outside of the Quaker clan. That was not the done thing in Quaker life. You were supposed to marry another Quaker. This must have been the case because when the old patriarch died, all his wealth, which was considerable by the standards of the day, was left to Granddad's two spinster

sisters, Aunt Mary-Anne and Aunt Cissy. No wonder they were spinsters. The pair of them still dressed in old black Victorian clothes, even down to the black buckled shoes. Granddad also had a brother, who apparently took five cows to Chester market one day and they never saw sight nor sound of him again. He skipped off to Australia with the money and finished up owning the largest sheep farm somewhere in southern Australia and president of the sheep breeders association. Good for him I say. Aunt Mary Anne died not long after we arrived at the farm. Who did her money go to? Aunt Cissy of course. Granddad remained penniless and had to borrow the money off Cissy to buy the farm. And they made him pay it back. In fact when Granddad died at the early age of fifty nine. Dad, by some means, paid the remainder of the debt off. After that Cissy got a position as a Matron at Eton College. Dad took over the farm, after all he had paid for it and Grandma moved in with her mother at Runcorn in Cheshire, Runcorn being the family's home town.

Great joy, we moved into the farmhouse, much bigger and better, still no bathroom though. Aunt Cissy, when she retired from Eton, moved into a flat in Runcorn. The people next door had a room that was above Cissy's living room. They kept about twenty cats in there. Cissy could not stand cats and eventually moved. She didn't die until I think in the sixties. You are not going to believe this, but she didn't leave her money to Dad, who did she leave it to? The cat's home, would you believe. It is difficult to imagine that such evil bitterness could be maintained for so many years.

I must tell you about the farmhouse. If anything, although it had more rooms, it was a worse dump than the cottage. There was no such luxury as central heating, it was damp and extremely cold. On occasions, when we tried to decorate, the wallpaper began peeling off within two weeks, because the walls were so wet. Can you imagine such a cold wet house and Mam used white linen sheets on the beds, which were cold to get between even in the summer. In the winter one shook with cold for an hour until one's own body heat beat the cold. The most unpleasant aspect of the place was that it was over run with cockroaches. Those horrible creatures would even get into our clothing. It wasn't unusual to find a couple in your jacket pocket. They have their own claim to fame however, because apparently they date back to before the Dinosaurs and apparently can grow new limbs when they get injured and can survive eating absolutely anything. They used to live and breed mainly underneath the hearth of the fireplace where it was warm and dry. We did not get rid of them until the fireplace was changed many years later, which brings me on to another sore point. The original fireplace was a big ugly black range with a large fire in the centre, an oven to the right and to the left a couple of swivelling pan or kettle plates to enable one to swing pans over the fire for cooking. As children it was our job, once a week, to clean this monstrosity with a shoe brush and some liquid called black lead. Behind the fire was a back boiler which was supposed to provide hot water and built into the left side of the fire was a tank with a tap on the front to enable one to draw the water off. Some form of central heating could have been run off this system but was never installed I suspect due to the expense. The only advantage we had from this facility was when we got the privilege of a bath installed, when I was about fourteen, and that meant we could all bathe in clean water. Bliss!

Due to the poverty of the times even rugs on the floor were a luxury therefore we had to make our own, a job I quite enjoyed. Dad used to cut old bran sacks open. The sacks were large, so ideal for the job, and they formed the backing for the rugs. Mam then used to beg and borrow all the old clothing and any other material she could lay her hands on. We used to sit for hours in the evening, cutting the material into strips, about as near as I can remember, three or four inches long and an inch wide. We then had a tool called a rug peg. The material went into a slot in the peg and it was

pushed through the sacking and back again and you were left with two pieces of material sticking out of the sacking. This was repeated with each piece of material very close to the next until you had a completed, hard wearing, very strong and heavy rug, which it was almost impossible to wear out. To clean these rugs we had to hang them over the washing line outside and beat them with a large stick or, if you were lucky a proper beater, another job children were often expected to take part in. No, we had not got vacuum cleaners, they were only for the privileged few. If the rugs had not been cleaned other than with a sweeping brush, there was clouds of dust everywhere, including all over the beater. Not exactly the healthiest activity one can imagine.

Whether Granddad still had the Quaker in him or whether he was just a very bitter man I do not know, but he was a bad tempered cruel old sod. One day, not long after arriving at the farm, he was cutting Kale in the field next to the farmyard. Kale is similar to sugar cane in taste and appearance, grows to about six feet high and was used to feed the cattle. I went down to the field. I did not really know what he was like then. I said I wanted to lead the horse. Granddad would not have anything but large Shires. He said no because it could tread on me as I was too small. Being a child, I said 'he won't' and reached up and took hold of the rein hanging from the horses bridle. I lead him on and the first step he took, this massive hoof came down on my foot. I cried out, it hurt badly. The hoof of a Shire horse on a six year old's foot hurts pretty bad. Most Granddads I have known would have picked the child up to make sure they were alright. Not my Granddad, he got me by the scruff of my neck, belted me round the ear and said 'perhaps that will teach you to do as you're told, now get back home to your mother'. When he came out of the field there was a terrible shouting match between him and Mam, to no avail of course. Another display of his cruelty was when we got a horse that horse people describe as a jibber. That's a horse that is perfectly normal until you put some weight behind, like a loaded cart, then they just refuse to budge an inch. Granddad loaded a cart with bales of straw, and that old horse just refused to move. Cruel Granddad got hold of a piece of chain and laid it across that poor horse's back until it bled. I stood in the shippon doorway crying my eyes out and shouting for him to stop. Even after such a thrashing that horse refused to move. Granddad's next act of cruelty was to take some more bales of straw off the stack, break them up and spread it round the horse's feet. Then he set fire to it and screamed at the horse 'now move you', followed by expletives 'or burn'. When the hair on his legs started to burn the horse moved and never jibbed again, but what sort of man could do that. Another time a cow kicked him while he was milking it. He could not move out of the way quickly due I think to injuries he received in the First World War in India. He was a horse breaker there for the army, so what those poor animals went through is anybody's guess. He beat that cow unmercifully, then got his arms round its' front legs and threw it over on its' side, tied its' legs together, then kicked it until it struggled to it' feet, then sat down again and finished milking it. He also beat my dad badly at the drop of a hat when he was a little boy, once knocking him unconscious with a stone. I did not feel a thing when that man died, and we could at least live without fear.

When Granddad had his first stroke I was probably about seven years old. Dad said to me 'Now lad, Granddad is very poorly so you will have to help me with the work'. I had already been working for a year in my opinion. We had milk rounds. The first part of the milk delivery was done by Grandma Harrison, to all the customers within walking distance of the farm and at five-thirty in the morning. It was heavy work for her as she had to carry heavy crates. So dear Dad decided to build me a handcart to carry the crates in. It was built from a large wooden box, mounted on a pair of pram wheels and two handles made from rough wood, sandpapered to stop me getting splinters in

my hand. From there on I was out with Grandma at 5.30am, in the pitch dark, delivering milk. Mam was in the dairy bottling milk for the main round, which was started after the milking was finished and before Dad had eaten breakfast. After Granddad's illness, Mam took over the early delivery. By that time I was helping Dad with the work. That involved me in milking eight or ten cows by hand, as there were no milking machines then, and all this in the morning, before going to school. Then a further twelve or fourteen when I came home from school, plus any other jobs Dad thought I was capable of. I didn't know the meaning of the word boredom and used to go to bed very tired.

The following little story may give some idea of how young I was. When you are milking by hand you can hurt the cow by perhaps pinching or squeezing the cow's teet too hard. Some of them would then kick out at you with their back leg. Bear in mind that you are sat on a low three legged stool with your legs under the cow and a bucket between your knees. One day I was milking a cow and must have caused her some pain. She lashed out with her leg, hit me right across the stomach and lifted me about two feet in the air and I landed about six feet away across the shippon floor. Some cows would kick if they were just a little sensitive in the udder area. When you got a kicker, we used leg straps, which were buckled around their legs so that they couldn't kick. Dad put one of these on the cow that had kicked me, and then I had to sit back down and finish milking it. That, I promise you is quite scary. I think the idea behind making me do this was that eventually you learned the hard way not to be scared of anything. It worked.

A couple of years later I was more scared of the bullies at school than I was of a mad bull or runaway horse. When you have to go to school in clogs with irons on the soles and short pants with patches covering the holes in the seat of your pants you get bullied. I will come to that ordeal later.

Our only real help at that time was part time, in the form of one of the loveliest guys you could ever wish to meet, Bob Horsefield. Even when Dad, on rare occasions could afford to employ someone full time, Bob was still in there doing his bit. Bob had a great sense of humour, but on a couple of occasions his humour put me, quite unintentionally I might add, in danger. Have I mentioned, Granddad would only have Shire horses and Dad still had them at this particular time? Shire horses, as you may be aware, are very large animals. One day we had been working down in the fields. When we were finished and heading back home, Bob lifted me onto the back of a shire, then gave it a hard slap on the backside. When a horse is hurt, scared or surprised there is only one thing he does, and that is head for home at a great rate of knots. I will never forget that horse's name. It was Robin. Well Robin took off at full gallop, heading for the farmyard. When he got there, with me still clinging on to his back for grim death, he didn't stop when he arrived in the farmyard. He headed straight for the stable. The stable door was hardly much higher than Robin and I was on his back. I saw the top of the stable door right in line with my head, and thought the worst. I dropped my head down the side of Robin's neck and prayed. As we went through the doorway, the top of the door scraped down my back. Robin shot into his stall, still at the gallop and then came to a sudden halt. I catapulted forward off his back and hit the manger at the front of his stall and then hit the floor in a heap. I was only about eight at the time, but Bob got a few expletives from my mouth when he arrived, much to the shock horror of Dad. He had never heard me swear before and probably thought I didn't know any swear words at that age. How naïve adults can be. There is always some horrible kid at school that will teach you to swear, apart from all the other sources of that sort of knowledge that one can draw on.



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