

K. A. Baird

DR. ED'S LAST SLEIGH RIDE

DR. E. D. MACPHERSON was better known throughout the Orangeville district as "Dr. Ed". Settling back in the pung he called back, "Goodnight, Dick. Take good care of Jennifer and your grandson. Dr. Williams will be over to check up in a couple of days if they get the roads plowed! Goodnight!"

"Thanks again, Dr. Ed. Goodnight!" replied Dick Shaw, waving the lantern with his one arm.

Dr. Ed, just retired from medical practice after fifty years, had been told that young Dr. Williams was storm-stayed twenty miles from Orangeville in another direction, and the government snow plow had broken down when the Shaws' married daughter at Hall's Bay was going to have her second child three weeks early. Could he let one of "his girls" down? Of course not. He was soon behind one of the few remaining horses in the farming district, driving across the valley and rolling hills the eighteen miles to Hall's Bay. Now, at eight o'clock in the winter evening, he was starting back. As he travelled he occupied his mind, as he often had on other drives, by thinking about the people past whose homes he drove.

Years before, Dick Shaw had survived a terrible accident when his arm was caught in a mill belt. The girl to whom Dick Shaw had been engaged insisted they should be married as planned, joking that he was the kind of one-armed driver she preferred. They did light farming, made crates and berry-boxes, and "made good". A very excellent example, thought Dr. Ed, of Alexis Carrel's statement that man's adaptive functions "are the indispensable basis of our duration".

In contrast, Eaton Jones over in Jonesville once lost three fingers in a sawmill, and had done nothing useful since. "What is character?" thought the doctor. "Is it inherited, built in, or built up by training?"

Passing Dick Shaw's fields and a quarter mile of cedar swamp, Dr. Ed soon noticed a light and thought, "That's Jack Wilmot's place. Three generations of Wilmots have had asthma. Jack's grandfather, Jack, depended on smoking stramon-

ium leaves for relief. Tom, his son, married Jane Adroyd. Several Adroyds had asthma. I still remember the first time I gave adrenalin to Tom. He just couldn't believe that a few drops under his skin had relieved him in two minutes! Young Jack has had the advantage of modern specialist advice as to treatment and has done pretty well. Once at a political meeting in Orangeville a dry speaker heard Jack coughing and asked, 'Don't you think a few minutes in the open air would help your cold?' Jack called back, 'I ade got a code! Just allergic to baloney!' The meeting almost broke up. Once when he went around some with that girl over in Westbridge, I just happened to mention that her father and two aunts were afflicted with asthma or eczema or both! He lost interest in her, but is happily married to a wife with no known family allergies. I wonder how long the human race can survive breeding without using intelligence as to quantity or quality; and what will be the *fall out* of the 'population explosion'. Of course allergy always makes me think of Bill Burns and Mary,—happy couple as you ever saw. Bill claims they met because Mary had hay fever and he thought she was crying at the Sunday School picnic and went over to comfort her. Mary doesn't deny it!

"Bill Brown's place! Did Bill's sense of humour keep them healthy? His wife claimed she thought it was just another one of his jokes when he proposed to her, so she said yes, and has been laughing about it ever since. That was once when he was serious. They had no children. His stories were always so plausible, or at least possible. I remember the one about 'Uncle Charlie', who came to live with them shortly after they were married. The old man was very irritating. For ten years he nagged, criticized, and found fault,—claimed to be sickly and couldn't do any work, but was first at the table. Finally he died. When driving home from the cemetery Bill had said, 'Darling, I must confess something. I'm glad he's gone. If I hadn't loved you so much I never could have stood your Uncle Charlie.' Mrs. Brown's eyes widened and she turned pale. 'What?' she exclaimed, 'I thought he was *your* Uncle Charlie!' Old timers did recall that an old man had stayed with the Browns soon after they were married. He was seldom seen and never went out anywhere, and then he died!"

The pung slipped past a patch of hardwoods into open country. "Well, well, there's the Henry Williams house! Poor Henry died of a severe case of psycho-neurotic wife! He took her ailments seriously and worried so that he finally developed high blood pressure. His death certificate read 'cerebral thrombosis', but I should have stated, 'chronic wifitis,—with acute episodes!' Instead of having a bit of temperature, she was 'boiling'! Her sore throat was 'seared by flame'! An abdominal pain was a 'terrible cutting pain' as though *ten* knives were severing her

insides! No one-knife pain for her,—it was a ten-knifer! Her daughter Ann married weak good natured Tom Ashton,—still living in spite of both of them. Quite typically, old Mrs. Williams has survived her husband these twenty years, and every once in a while she still gets terrible symptoms. I must remember to warn young Dr. Williams about his namesake! And young Bill Ashton,—how did he ever happen along? Only one child in that family! Of course Ann nearly died when he was born,—according to her and her mother! Actually, I have seldom attended a more normal case,—nearly didn't arrive in time to give the lad a proper reception. He is quite a nice young man now—I take some credit for that!"

The horse plodded on. The road was mostly uphill with some large drifts. Opposite Ed Williamson's back field someone had opened the snake fence, driven the length of the field through shallow snow, and re-entered the road through the gate. The doctor followed. Reaching the ridge top he stopped to let the animal rest. Off to the right below was a great expanse of farm lands lying clear and still in moonlight. The river, invisible under ice and snow, flowed past his destination several miles beyond. Tonight not only did the lights and the dark groups of buildings represent people he knew and loved, but suddenly they seemed to stand out in time as well as in space. He thought, "These places have more than length, breadth, and thickness,—they have duration. And what events have happened, are happening, will happen in them. It is not just a peaceful valley of farms, where nothing ever occurs. Births and deaths have been in most of those houses,—but what births and what deaths in some! Insanity, suicide, attempted murder, runaway marriages, and abductions have been in that valley. I remember when Billy Weston, aged twenty-two, persuaded Betty Ryder, aged fifteen, that she was in love with him, and took her away from the Chase place in Orangeville, where she was the hired girl, over to his mother in Hall's Bay so he could marry her. The agent of the Children's Aid Society got her father and drove over to the Bay in a rain storm and brought her back. When the agent told young Weston the penalty for abduction of a girl under age of consent, he turned pale. I recall Mr. Ryder's admiring description of the event. 'That agent didn't use many words, doctor. But oh, mister, them words was mighty!'

"Good things have occurred in the valley too, like the collections for those who lost buildings through fire, and the one to send little Ivy Simpson to Montreal for a special eye operation. That was the year of the drought, too! Then there are the kind deeds,—like the way Mrs. Wheaton would always help old Captain Johnston when he wanted to stop drinking and would come, hat in hand, to request ever so politely, 'A little music to soothe an old man's nerves, if you could find the time.

Mrs. Wheaton.' Her playing was more therapeutic for the lonely Captain than anything my profession could do. A lot of events have occurred in the valley's houses in the last half-century and I have shared in many. Perhaps I have lived as much and had as many interesting and challenging experiences as those of my classmates who worked in the big towns and cities. Many of them have been gone these many years. I've had a few triumphs too, and a little publicity; like the time Amos Purcell and I drove over to Hall's Bay in a blinding blizzard to look after the Clark child sick with pneumonia. That was quite an experience, with Amos driving and I watching his nose. When it would start to turn white I would give it the Eskimo treatment by warming it with my bare hand until it became red again. By that time my hand was almost frozen, so I was glad to put it back inside my glove and coat. Then every once in a while Amos' old harness would break and we had to get out and fix it! Quite an experience! It was described in the *Weekly Clarion* and published in a number of big city dailies. I got some fan mail too, especially the card from my classmate, Elias Dixon in South Carolina, who said he had read the item, and wondered why I didn't 'wise up' and come South!

"Well, boy, you've got your wind and I've had a few reminiscences about the valley and its people—let's go home! Get up *lightning!*" And chuckling aloud to himself the old doctor pulled on the reins and the farm horse started off again.

"Come to think of it" ruminated Dr. Ed, "I've tried never to lie to help a patient and never to give one a false certificate. Heaven knows I've been asked to do both often enough. Of course I sometimes had to help people with their little deceits. Percy McNeil and his bride might have done something foolish in their panic if I hadn't helped them. But I put down a date about five weeks later than I really expected to be called. And when the expectant grandmother (of prominent family, too!) called me one night to say her daughter was having pains I said, 'Wait a moment,' audibly rattled some paper and exclaimed the question, 'Didn't we expect that on—naming the date in my book?' She agreed, and I agreed at once to go. Of course everyone knew the baby was about a month premature. How else in so prominent a lineage?"

Dr. Ed noticed how little attempt had been made by local residents to open the snow-blocked road, and he thought, "Quite different from thirty years ago! Then the news, spread on party lines, that I was on the way to or from Hall's Bay on a 'baby case' would have caused every man from Orangeville to the Bay to come out to break roads with teams and shovels. Now, most pay taxes and wait for government action. Usually more efficient, it isn't so tonight. I wonder if the politicians and 'do-gooders' have too much undermined the sense of self reliance and personal

responsibility of the populace, not only in this matter but in every human relationship from the care and feeding of children to care and housing of senior citizens!"

The traveller had reined the horse sharply to the left, to go, rather unwillingly, into an unbroken road which entered a dark evergreen forest. After plunging through one or two drifts the animal was suddenly breaking road through only ten inches of undrifted snow, and down hill along the valley of a little brook. Here and there the water broke out of its icy covering to interrupt the silence of the winter night. These musical intervals, the little bells on the shafts, and the very slight sound of horse and pung in the snow were all the doctor heard for the next mile. There was no wind in the tops of the dark trees. The valley road was not exactly a short cut, but avoided the drifts of the more open country through which the main highway ran across the hill tops. A little over a mile would bring him out to a more thickly settled community where he would find his road marked by car tracks, see one or two cars abandoned, and meet a few cars, trucks, and even horse-drawn sleds.

He had always enjoyed this Valley Road in winter. There was something very satisfying and soul-restoring about the peaceful silence and the dark trees, with sometimes as now a little more light because of the moon, and sometimes a glimpse of stars through an opening in the forest. For a time Dr. Ed did not think of his former patients but just enjoyed the experience of the moment. Then as there was an added sound when the horse's feet went over the little bridge where the brook crossed the road, his reverie was interrupted, and memories again came to mind. "I'll soon be passing Charlie Legere's barn, the only Frenchman for miles around, and one of the few Catholics in this predominantly Protestant community. And a smart, hardworking Frenchman he is too! How well I remember the day his wife brought their daughter to my office and said. 'Marie isn't exactly sick, doctor. But she thinks she has lost her faith.' I don't know why she consulted me instead of her priest, but I did my best to restore her faith in things spiritual, which had been disturbed by learning a bit of science at the convent school in the city, and apparently I succeeded. Now, twenty years later, Marie is a rather prominent matron in the city."

As the pung slid past the big Legere barn and out on to the larger highway, and the doctor noted the change of night scenery from dark woods to extensive snow-covered fields with spots of light here and there, he continued his memories. "It was around the same time as Marie Legere's trouble that I had to help a *Protestant* with *her* faith. Mrs. Fenwick from Sutton Corners decided she would 'have to pay up' for the last ten years of wonderful health by a period of sickness, so developed the

most garbled group of symptoms I ever heard. It was all due to attending evangelistic services at Westbridge, so I had to preach a little sermon myself. I remember asking her if she thought God was her Heavenly Father. She said 'yes', so I asked, 'Is he a worse father than I am?' She thought not. 'In that case, why are you insulting your Father by suggesting He will charge you a high price for His gift of good health? You don't need medicine, you need to stay home from those meetings and look after your husband and children. Don't you think I am talking good sense and good theology?' She smiled and said, 'Perhaps you are right, doctor, I guess I've been carried away by the excitement of those meetings. I really feel better already. Thank you for your help, even if it hasn't come in a bottle!'

"The mind and emotions do strange things to some people. There was old Mrs. Wilson, also of Sutton Corners, who thought she had broken off a needle in her ear canal. Doctors couldn't find it. Finally I removed it for her,—by showing her a bit of rusty needle which I had put between the forcep blades in the back office, before I went probing. To remove the psychic needle from her psychic ear it was necessary to demonstrate a physical needle apparently coming from her physical ear!

"Well, well! The young Wymans are up looking after the new baby—or maybe just up! Years ago there were not many lights in the houses after nine o'clock, unless someone was sick. Now electric lights, radio and television, and shorter work days have changed all that. Of course his Uncle Sam Wyman often showed lights till all hours. They called him the most successful bootlegger in three counties! He wouldn't sell to minors and often turned away would-be customers whose family needed the money. When he died some people declared Sam Wyman would go 'straight to H'. Their word had only four letters. Perhaps they should have used six. I'm glad I haven't had to decide to which H folks should be sent, but only to try to keep them out of both for a time! Sam Wyman was a kind man, and sometimes asked me to look after a sick child at his expense. And the child's father was sometimes one of the would-be customers he had turned down, who had later spent his money at 'Dirty Dan' Donaldson's over at Cedarville. He took good care of his old mother, too—called me for any sickness or discomfort she had, and always paid me spot cash. But his illegal activities were against the rules of society, as spelled out by men who represented the majority of those who voted. Yet apparently a considerable minority wanted and needed his—shall I say 'services'? Although Sam Wyman didn't attend church many times a year, he did build a nice house in Orangeville, and turned it over to the Baptists for a parsonage! I'll

bet the present occupant doesn't know he is living in a house that was built by a bootlegger!

"I guess I've been so deep in thought about Sam Wyman that I didn't notice whether anyone was up in the Travis house or not. What a time I had to get old Joe to fill in his typhoid well. He and his father before him didn't get sick from it for sixty years, so why should he stop using it now? He ignored the fact that his wife's sister and his daughter had recently developed typhoid, that the well was downhill from the privy, that the laboratory found lots of *E coli* in water from that well, and that the spring above the house was a better water supply. Then he himself developed some enteritis with colic, and while he was good and scared I got his permission to have the hired man fill in the well. As it turned out, he didn't have typhoid. I found out only on the third day that he had spilled a bottle of patent medicine, and in order to save it had spooned it off the table into a cup and drank it—several ounces of Dr. Somebody's Kidney Tonic, which just happened to contain a considerable amount of laxative in each recommended dessertspoonful dose!

"That old wooden skeleton was once the tenant house on the Stanton farm. Shiftless Bill Wasson worked for John Stanton. The Stantons called to say the Wasson woman was 'expecting' and in pain. In spite of our attempts to educate women about the importance of pre-natal care we often had such calls. Knowing the Wasson's financial state I paused to get authorization from the overseer of the poor to make the call at municipal expense, and drove out here. The little house was in darkness. Knocking at the door I heard, 'Is that you doctor? Come in doctor. My husband has gone up to Mr. Stanton's for some oil. The lamp went out and we have no oil. I wish he'd hurry back. The pain is awful.' " Dr. Macpherson chuckled to himself as he remembered. "I re-assured the patient and rushed out to turn the car around so the lights shone on the window of the room where the poor expectant mother lay. In the kitchen I was reassured by the sight of plenty of hot water in kettle and pot. 'How far apart are the pains, Mrs. Wasson?' 'Oh, doctor, it isn't *that*. It's my toothache. It's about killing me!' Rapidly recovering my stability I packed the cavity with some cotton soaked in oil of cloves and gave her a couple of aspirin tablets. The husband returned with oil. Apparently there were such people in the Near East about two thousand years ago, who were unprepared for emergencies. No, you can't be mad at them,—just sorry for them. Two weeks later I earned my \$15.00 by attending a normal delivery with plenty of light in the daytime!"

As he passed the Sanford house the doctor chirped to the horse and the sound was a half chuckle as he recalled the time he was called there at ten o'clock one night.

"Old Al himself met me at the door and invited me in. I could see he and several neighbours were having a small party, but the drinks hadn't been small enough!

"Doc, we need you to settle an argument. Does the scales of scarlet fever spread the disease? Bill Fairbrother bet Alec Carter they does, and each of them has put up five dollars. Alec says it ain't true. We've all agreed you should decide. Don't worry, doc, we've took up a collection and the rest of us will pay you your regular fee for this call. Just you settle the argument for us!"

"I remember I hadn't taken off my hat or coat, and didn't. I just said, 'The scales don't spread the disease, but germs from the throat do. That will cost you eight dollars Al, with the mileage!' 'That's all right, doc, we took up ten. It's all yours. Here it is! You've won the bet, Alec.' Some cheered for Alec and some groaned for Bill, and I went home. How very, very important some small matters become when men put themselves somewhat under the anaesthetic ethyl hydroxide!

"There's the John Darrah place, small house but neat and tidy. I guess John learned to be a good housekeeper those years he went to sea, and when he came back to the farm he just kept on. I remember how they used to call him the most eligible young bachelor on the Hall's Bay road, but he really wasn't eligible at all. Met the girls at church and parties, and was as polite as he could be to them, but I think it just never occurred to him that he needed one of them to keep him company or to keep house for him. I used to wonder if he had read, and believed, that saying of Clarence Darrow's that a smart man is one who hasn't let a woman pin anything on him since he was a baby! Anyway, there he still lives, prosperous and generous, a giver to good causes, a helper of neighbours, an *old* bachelor, but still not eligible,—just one of the all kinds of people it takes to make up the world.

"In all my years here I don't remember hearing that Ed Williamson or his wife had any sickness or accident of any kind. I knew them to speak to of course, but never professionally. A few people are just that fortunate—law of averages I suppose one would call it! They did say that Ed's brother went West as a young man and asked Ed to keep an eye on his favourite girl. He did,—and they were married shortly after! The brother heard about it and never came back—is a millionaire in British Columbia, if the gossips are right.

The old farm horse plodded along, and the doctor thought to himself: "I guess he isn't built for speed, but I wish I had my Tom of the old days. Over roads impassable to cars in winter, he hauled me at a fast trot, pulling me by the reins if I didn't let him pull me by the traces. What a character he was—or has a horse character? Tom was nervous and frightened half the time, but kind and intelligent too. Once I was bringing oats down from upstairs and slipped on the narrow stairs.

I knew I would fall right behind him so called out, 'Whoa, boy!' as I was falling. He just danced around a bit and looked at me lying there as though to say, 'What are you doing there, bring my oats please!' Some horses might have kicked my brains out. Not a vicious corpuscle in Tom,—just a high strung animal who had been beaten cruelly by dumb men because he was too fine for them. Tom gave me quite good advertising too when I first came to Orangeville, because all the farmers knew about him; how he had been tried on the track, but was too nervous to be dependable; and how the Devlins over at Cedarville had once beaten him with a fence stake. The fact that the new doctor had tamed the supposedly wild horse went over very well in the community, and probably resulted in more calls than any professional skill in my young head and hands. Well, he had a pretty good horse's life—hauling me all winter and spring and out in Barkhouse's back pasture all summer. Then they improved the roads for cars. Finally Tom grew old and had to be retired, just like me now. Just two more miles to go!"

Suddenly a man appeared with a lantern. "Why there's John North. Whoa, whoa, boy. Goodnight John, anything wrong?"

"Can you come in a minute, Dr. Ed and see mother and advise her once more about her medicines, before you leave?"

The retired physician went in to see his old friend and it wasn't too hard for Mrs. North to persuade him to have a cup of tea, as he had in that house many times in the past. John said he had just given the horse a few oats, and he wouldn't stop a horse in the middle of his meal, would he,—even if people had often interrupted *his* meals all these years! The telephone rang, and John North answered and said something non-committal like, "all ready, eh! OK," and hung up. The horse seemed to have suddenly finished his oats, and soon they were on the road again. Ten minutes later the Norths were on the road, too, in their car with the senior Mrs. North as a passenger and not really concerned about her medicines. For Dr. Ed had been stopped by the Norths in order to give him a rest before certain experiences he was about to have. About a quarter mile from Orangeville village square a great many people appeared in the road ahead. As he approached the group a man, whom he recognized as the horse's owner, stepped to the animal's head and called out, "I guess I'll have to take my horse now, doctor." Two young men proceeded to unhitch the horse from the pung, but before Dr. Ed could remonstrate or get out a young couple he recognized as Bill Sansom and Lily Sarsfield came over to the sleigh and said, "Don't worry, Dr. Ed, we're all *your* babies and we're going to give you a real sleigh ride". Suddenly he realized that the figure coming out of a nearby house was his wife. She got in beside him. About twenty boys and girls

proceeded to haul and push and run alongside the pung, lanterns and torches were suddenly alight, and the doctor and his wife were transported to the High School auditorium. There a ceremony was carried out which had been planned by the community for that very night. Because of the storm the crowd wasn't quite as large as it would have been, but the hall was filled, and some people from quite far away had come in by sleds or broken car roads through the snow. The telephone wires had been busy all the four hours the doctor had been on the way, advising people and changing plans. And of course the program had to be shortened because of the late hour.

Nice things were said about the doctor and his wife; they were presented with a TV set and of course flowers for her. Dr. Ed replied briefly, and compared himself in Orangeville to the fly walking across the very bald head and saying to her granddaughter,—“You know child I remember this field when it was just a narrow path.”

But of course he didn't mention some of the matters he had been remembering during his long ride through the snow. And after they were escorted by Dr. Ed's babies and many of their parents through the village to their home, where things were partly packed already, and after the goodnights, and after the door was shut, the doctor turned to his wife and said with some sadness in his voice but a smile on his face, “I suppose, my dear, that was my last sleigh ride!”