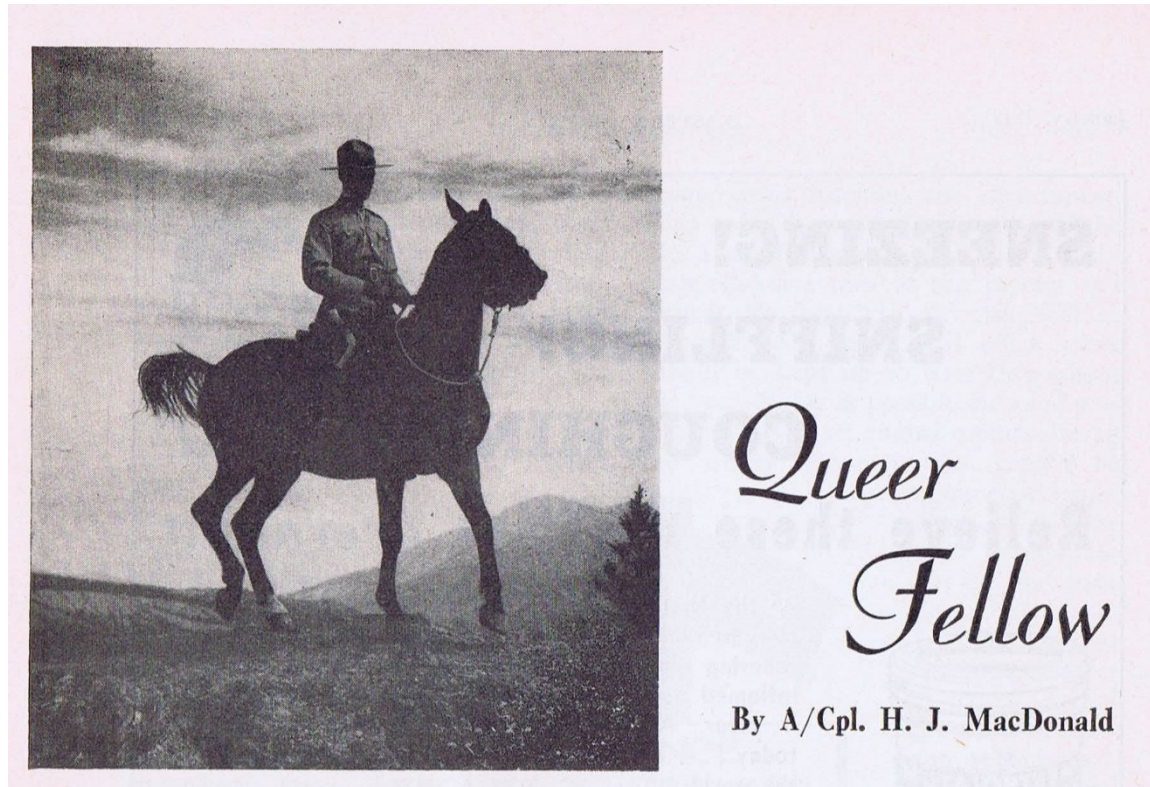


Queer Fellow

R.C.M.P. Quarterly Jan. 1949 p.132 - 135



An old timer tells a young member of the Force about an incident in the early days when patrol on horseback were the usual thing.

“Funny you should mention the name Johnson, son,” the old-timer said to me. “Used t’know a man by that name. We didn’t like him at all. Rode the dickens out him too. But we were mighty sorry for that, one day. Yessir, mighty sorry.” He slowly shook his gray head. “Poor old Johnson. ... Y’know, son. I learned one thing from him, though.” He pointed the stem of his pipe at me. “You can never really judge a man from his face or actions until the chips are down. Yessir, Johnson taught me that. Poor old Johnson. I wonder where he is now?”

From his seat in the swivel chair behind the big desk, the old-timer paused and stared reflectively at the closed door of the detachment. Beneath his white, bushy moustache, his lips were curled into a faint reminiscent smile. Striking a match he lit his pipe.

Tonight, I told myself, the old-timer has a story. Not wanting to interrupt him when he got started, I quickly and quietly took the chair by the typewriter, loosened my tunic, leaned back against the wall and waited. The graveyard shift can be long sometimes; especially when duties are few. And being fresh out of Depot, I hadn’t quite got used to it yet, although I was trying hard. And I think the old-timer sensed this. He came into the office two or three nights a

week. Sometimes we played crib, sometimes we just talked. That is, he talked, I listened. Like tonight.

“Walter Isaiah Johnson was his full name, son,” the old-timer began again. “The laziest man I ever met in my life. He stood six foot seven in his socks. Had a head like a pin with two small black eyes, cold and aloof. How that man hated work.”

He chuckled to himself, blew smoke into the air, then continued: “I often wondered why he ever joined up. It wasn’t for the pay. Not in those days, anyway. Maybe it was because of his legs. He had the strongest pair of legs which ever girt a horse. Bar none. Yep! Wouldn’t at all be surprised if that weren’t the reason. I guess he figured he could take it easy. Sort of wrap those legs of his round the horse and relax. And get paid for it, too.”

“We’d just started training a couple of days when Walt – that’s what I used to call him – arrived. Late, as usual. He told the sergeant-major he’d fallen asleep on the train. Got off at Broadview instead of Regina. Mind you, son he told the truth. But sometimes – Well, y’know what I mean, son, it’s a wise man who uses his baser self on occasions. But that was Walt. And that’s the way he told it. And as you can imagine, the sergeant-major wasn’t pleased.”

The old-timer winked at me, and we both laughed.

After a while, he went on: “Well, the word soon spread round barracks, as it does, and the boys took up the sabre. They ribbed him a plenty. It would’ve stopped soon if it hadn’t been for Walt’s attitude. He didn’t give a smart one back. He didn’t smile. He didn’t laugh. He didn’t get sore. He didn’t do nothing. Just looked at ‘em with contempt written all over him.

“We got pretty sore at old Walt. He acted that way all the time. We began to think he felt he was too good for us. Actually, son, I believe now he just didn’t give a damn for anyone. Not even himself. There’s men in this world like that.”

I nodded to assure him I believed him. He sucked on his pipe, then commenced to shake it, trying to force the juice out of the stem.

“Anyway,” the old-timer went on, “as you would expect, things went from bad to worse for him. He took a terrible ridin’. But it didn’t bother him. Ridin’ him had as much effect as shootin’ peas at that there filing cabinet. They just bounced off him without leavin’ a dent.”

The old-timer got up off the chair and went over to lean against the counter.

“In the gym we’d try to get him to put on the gloves. He’d put ‘em on all right. But at the first punch he’d get a sprained finger or ankle or something’. Always somethin’ he could think of.” He stopped to clear his throat. “Then we got to thinkin’ he was a bit yella. And that was the worst thing of all. The boys stopped talking to him. Ignored him completely. That would’ve bothered the ordinary man. But it didn’t bother Walt. Nosir. That suited Walt fine.”

“But why,” I asked, bewildered, “why didn’t they dis—“

“Discharge him?” the old-timer said, interrupting me. He smiled. “Perhaps, son, the powers that be saw a little more’n we did. Anyway the day came when we were all to change our minds about him. I can remember it just as clear as if it happened right here only five minutes ago. I’ll never forget it.”

He came back and sat down in the chair. He put his pipe aside, crossed his legs and looked at me.

“It was spring and we were ridin’ in the school when the sergeant sent Johnson and me out to exercise our horses. The sergeant used to like to do that so’s we’d get used to ridin’ on our own. I had an old mare by the name of Nora. Johnson was on Stub. They called him Stub because he was the stubbornest piece of horseflesh you ever did see. I’m sure he must’ve been sired by a mule. Mud - how that cussed horse hated mud. Get him out on the prairie and if you let him hit a dry spot, you walked home. It took more’n three men to get him movin’ again and back to the stable.

“Well, this day everyone sorta thought Walt was in for it. We’d had a chinook the last few days and a hot sun. The prairie just looked like thousands of small lakes and rivers. Mud everywhere y’looked. Prairie mud, thick and gooey.

“We clopped along, taking it easy. I didn’t speak to Walt. He probably wouldn’t have answered anyways. Instead, I pulled out my ocarina and began to play. It was real nice, son, though I knew Walt didn’t appreciate my music. But I liked to think I was keeping him awake. Soon we came to the gully on this side of the main line railroad tracks. You know the place I mean?”

I nodded.

“Well,” he continued, “we went along the gully for a short distance and then had to cross the tracks. I pulled into the lead, Indian fashion, with Walt following. I crossed the tracks. And no sooner had I got over when I heard a train whistle. I stopped playing. I knew it was the No. 10. The local to Saskatoon in my time.”

“Still is,” I said.

The old-timer nodded. “I let the first blast go, and was about to carry on with my tune to the gophers when if that darn whistle didn’t go again. That sorta startled me, son. Most times the No. 10 scooted by without even one toot. Getting curious, I turned in my saddle to have a look.

“Son,” the old-timer said, leaning forward on one knee. “I couldn’t believe my eyes.” He reached over to the desk and pointed to the ink well. “Here, the No. 10 is coming down the track for all she’s worth. Here” – he pointed at the stapler on the far side of the desk – “is Stub with Walt on his back parked plumb in the centre of the track. I almost fell clear off my mount. I knew right away what’d happened. Stub had found a dry spot on the grade.

"I yelled to Walt: 'Get off'm! Get off'm!' Walt climbed off. He yanked, pushed, pulled and cussed at Stub. The whistle of the train became a long shriek. Stub moved a bit – but now that dang horse was facing the train.

"Walt kept on trying to get him off the tracks. I never heard him speak so much, if y'call cussin' speakin'. But I knew he'd never budge that goat. There wasn't time to do anythin'.

"For gosh sake, Walt,' I hollered, "Leave him be. Get off the tracks!"

"Walt looked at me. Then at the train. It couldn't have been any more'n half a mile away. Then, so help me, son, if he didn't jump back into the saddle!

"I froze as I watched him. With all the power in those big legs of his he began giving Stub a terrific pounding. It was unmerciful punishment. The kind only Walt could give to a horse.

"Already I could hear the sickening grind of metal on metal as the brakes of the engine began to take hold. Then the Devil himself took a hand here; Stub lowered his head like a bull and shot forward – straight down the centre of the tracks toward the No. 10 with Walt still on his back. I prayed, son, I prayed, loud and fast.

"They were no more'n fifty feet apart, galloping madly toward each other. Walt's spurs still diggin' when I saw Walt yank the reins viciously - "

The old-timer stopped and mopped his brow. I found myself on the edge of my seat.

I asked breathlessly, "What happened?"

The old-timer spoke in a whisper: "When Walt yanked, Stub swerved and toppled over into the gully. Walt went with him. The train missed 'em by inches."

"Whew!" I exclaimed.

"Yep, son. She was a close call. Walt wasn't even scratched. That man had a horseshoe round his neck the day he was born. He'd been thrown clear. But he was mud from the tip of his Stetson to the sole of his boots. Stub wasn't hurt either.

"Well, son, to cut a long story short, Walt dug himself out of the mud, got Stub on his feet and climbed back on. Just like that. Then he waved to the engineer, showing the train boys he was all right.

"I was still shakin' like a leaf when he rode up to me, scrapin' some of the mud off. And I was sore. "Look, stupid," I said to him – he wasn't the type you could feel sorry for at any time, son – 'since when did you start riskin' your neck for an ornery horse. Y'gone crazy?" My hands were tremblin' as I held the reins. It wasn't a nice thing t'see, son. I imagined myself pickin' up pieces of him here and there all over the prairie. I guess I wasn't in any frame of mind to think things out.

“Walt looked at me a long time before he spoke. I shrivelled under that look, son. Contempt was still written all over him; but there was a sorta patience in his voice, too.

“When I was a kid, Luke,’ Walt said to me, ‘I saw a train hit a cow. The cow had been standing still in the centre of the track. When the smoke cleared, every car, including the engine had been derailed. Ten people died in that wreck. If that cow had been moving, either toward or away from the train, ten to one the engine’s catcher would’ve tossed it clear. None of the cars would’ve been derailed then. Nobody would’ve been killed. Come on, let’s get heading back. I’m wet – ”

At that moment the telephone rang in the office, interrupting the old-timer. I answered it. It was a call from one of the cafes in town. They were having a little trouble with a noisy customer. I left quickly.

And as I drove away from the detachment in the police car, I couldn’t help asking myself what I would have done had I been in Walt’s shoes. What would you have done?