

be East Anglia; and at first glance Mrs Woodhouse's method would seem to have some importance for any inquiry into the methods of the 'whisperers' who have operated in Suffolk within fairly recent times. (It must be emphasised again that the writer has not heard the term 'whisperers' in relation to these experts, but the term is kept merely for convenience of reference). But it is likely that neither the real methods or true antecedents of the Suffolk 'whisperers' lie in the direction indicated above. To discover these it will be necessary to go very much further back into history.

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The Society of Horsemen or Ploughmen

Undoubtedly the whisperers were connected with, or had access to the secrets of, a very ancient order or society of horsemen that was in existence up to the late nineteenth century here in East Anglia. Oral evidence in the Stowmarket area of Suffolk is sufficient to suggest that such a society existed here and that they held regular meetings in Ipswich. But owing to the secrecy surrounding the whole organisation, details are very hard to come by; yet correlation of oral evidence and an examination of some of the practices of the old horsemen in this district show that it must have once existed in a fairly complete form. All this will be discussed later; but to clear the ground it would be as well to outline the form of the old horsemen's society as far as it is known; to define its purpose and to determine, as far as possible, its origins.

The horseman's society appears to have had its most characteristic form and to have lasted until most recent times in the agricultural districts of Scotland. Here it was called *The Horsemen Society* or *Society of the Horseman's Word*. Thomas Davidson, in an informative article¹ in a recent issue of a folklore journal, has given a summary of the Scottish evidence. The Society's main functions were to admit into its fraternity the farm-workers who had acquired the skills of their trade; and, after the initiation ceremony, to share with him the trade's secrets and to pass to him certain closely guarded oaths and passwords. Such craft societies or trade organisations were once common in England, and there is a strong likelihood, as Lewis Spence suggests,² that they had their origin in Romano-British times

¹ *Gazette*, Vol. 2, 1956, Blackwell, Oxford.

² *Myth and Ritual in Dance, Game and Rhyme*, p. 158.

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and stem from the Roman institution of the trade society 'founded on the worship or patronage of some god appropriate to the predilections of the craft which they followed.' Spence says of the Society of Horsemen in north east Scotland:¹ 'Down to the close of the last century the brotherhood held secret initiations in barns at midnight with a good deal of "horse-play", the "altar" being a sack of corn. The initiate who was blind-folded had a "grip o' the auld chief's hand", a stick covered with hairy skin. "The auld chief" is most obviously an euphemism for some debased deity, probably confounded in later times with that ubiquitous form "the devil" who succeeded and absorbed a whole pantheon of ancient divinities. The neophyte was then invested with "the horseman's word" which there is no harm in revealing as "Both in one",² alluding to the harmony which was supposed to exist between man and horse. This word, it was held, could arrest a horse in the road so that no man could make him budge.'

The similarity of this *reist* (or arrest) word to the alleged magic word of the 'whisperer' will already have become apparent. But if it would seem strange that such an ancient craft brotherhood with all its suggestion of magic and mysticism, symbolism and secrecy, should have survived in Britain right into modern times, one can point out its correspondence in at least some of its aspects with the Freemasons and, on a different level, with some of the Friendly Societies. All these appear from the outside to have this leaning towards the esoteric, and even the occult; and in this connection a High Churchman friend of the writer's has stated that he did not know what the word ritual meant until he attended a meeting of one of these semi-secret societies.

In the same article Thomas Davidson has stated that there was a class of horse charmers known in the Ely and Peterborough districts until quite recently. These were known as *Toadmen*. A *Toadman* was accounted a kind of witch—male witches were common at one time—and got his name from the ritual in which a toad or a frog was in-

¹ *Ibid.*

² *sic tibeo*—Thus I command thee—in the Fen districts of Cambridgeshire. *Folklore*, Vol. 69, June 1958. 'Some Folk Beliefs of the Fens,' Enid M. Porter.

THE SOCIETY OF HORSEMEN OR PLOUGHMEN

involved. Evidence of some of these practices have been found in the Stowmarket area of Suffolk. But before discussing these it would be well to ask: what was the ritual of the toad or frog's bone, and what was its purpose? The ritual is a primitive survival that is, or was, practised in countries as far apart as Scotland and India. As described to the writer by an old horseman living in the Stowmarket area, to obtain the power of the frog's bone one had to perform the following ritual: 'You get a frog and take it to a running stream at midnight, but before this you have killed it and pounded it up. You throw it into the water and some of it will flow downstream, but a part of it—a bone—will float upstream. This is the part you have to keep.'

More evidence from a village in the same district has shown that the village wart-charmer is believed to have gained his powers in this way. He followed the ritual of the frog's bone: 'He took a frog to running water at midnight and he sold his soul to the devil, and now he has the power to cure warts'. Many Suffolk villages still have wart-charmers, operating more or less openly, or more frequently only within a small circle of the 'accepted folk' in the village. But only in this one instance has the writer come across the ritual of the frog's bone associated with wart-charming.

Thomas Davidson has recorded instances of identical practices in the Cottingham district of Cambridgeshire and in parts of Cornwall. Possession of the frog's bone was believed to give a horseman absolute power over the most intractable horse that came into his care. 'With the frog's boon,' said one horseman in this district of Suffolk, 'you could do anything you like with a horse; take him upstairs if you wanted to.'

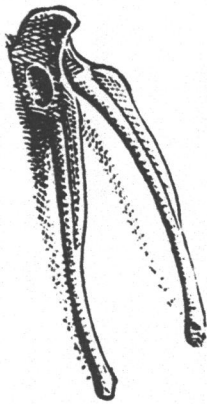
But which bone of the frog was the one preferred? The bone can be identified without much doubt both from descriptions given here: 'It was like a chicken's wish-bone in shape: my father used to keep it in his trousers pocket' (an old Suffolk horseman is the narrator), and from a passage in a book describing a piece of Indian folklore.¹ In India the frog was wrapped in a piece of white linen and given astrological benedictions. It was then put on an ant hill at sunset.

The ants ate the flesh and left the bones, and two bones were then

¹ Sudhin N. Ghose, *The Flame of the Forest*, Michael Joseph, p. 151.

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kept. One of these was to hook the object desired—the lover in this case; the other to reject him. This latter bone was called the shovel, and is probably the supra-scapula of the frog. The *hook* or wish-bone—the bone kept by the horsemen here—is without much doubt the ilium, the chief bone in the frog's pelvic girdle. Another horseman from this area of Suffolk has given the pith of the matter in an observation: 'The frog's boon was the same shape as the frog in a horse's hoof'; and if there were any doubt about the identity of the particular bone used by the old horsemen, this similarity would appear to dispel it. For the ilium of a frog is, in fact, identical in shape to the V-shaped horny, elastic substance in the middle of the sole of a horse's hoof; and moreover the identity of name points strongly to the principle of



magic under which the frog's bone was supposed to operate. Frazer's first principle of homeopathic or imitative magic is operating here in at least two of its aspects: like has control over like; an object of particular shape once possessed by a man gives him the power of control over a similarly shaped object he desires very much to influence. The horseman has the frog's bone, therefore he can control the frog on the hoof; in other words, he can stop or release the horse at will. The second aspect of magic involved is this: by the possession of the bones of a dead animal, one can render another animal as immobile as death, until you wish to release him.

The ilium, it may be stated, is also roughly the shape of a boomerang; and one wonders whether this peculiar shape caused it to behave differently from the other bones when they were thrown into the stream. Is it too fantastic to suppose that its shape would carry it into an eddy, out of the mainstream, where it would revolve while

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the other bones were carried downstream? Only actual experiment would throw light on this; and this the present writer has not attempted.

By this time, the reader is no doubt saying: 'Where is all this farrago of superstitious nonsense taking us?' or he may be ready to make the ultimate gesture of criticism—to close the book at this particular point with an unanswerable and inexorable snap. If he has this impulse he is asked, most politely, to hold his fire and impatience; for there is in this belief of the frog's bone, as there is in most primitive beliefs, very much more underneath than appears manifest on the surface: an iceberg-like proportion of the belief, in fact its real substance, is well out of sight. This, the kernel of the belief, was the justification for all the secrecy of the old horsemen's societies—the *arcana* that it was vital for them to preserve intact and to pass on only to the initiated and the well-affected.

But before going on to discuss these secrets and how they were applied by horsemen here in Suffolk, and before proceeding to uncover the results of the present efforts to make sense of these primitive and seemingly fantastic practices, one observation should be made concerning the frog's bone. Even if it were used merely as a *charm*, its cherishing by the old horsemen would seem to be justified on this ground alone. Many times during the last war, to give an example, pilots of operational aircraft went on flights with the most curious charms one could imagine. Occasionally a member of the ground-crew had to return a child's teddy-bear or a toy dog to a pilot who had inadvertently left it in the cockpit after coming back from an operation. No comment was made at the strangeness of the mascot: the practice was accepted. For it was held, even though it was seldom openly stated, that where a man's fate hung on chance he would be flying in the face of chance if he made no effort to propitiate it. In the same way, a horseman who had to deal with a killer stallion was better able to gain control if he had the fertile suggestion in his pocket, in the shape of the frog's bone, that he could not but succeed in his task. For it has been said that no animal can sense better than a horse any nervous tension in a person who is approaching him. Nervous tension is rightly interpreted as fear by the horse; and fear begets fear and

trouble is bound to follow. (Is the breathing-down-the-nose device a recognition of this? It is impossible to have full muscular tension while breathing thus.) The use of the charm is in one sense a recognition of what psychologists agree is a fact: that there is a large area of the mind that is not directly and easily accessible to reason: this is particularly true when, as in the primitive mind, reasoning is often faulty. Therefore a charm such as the horseman carried had to a certain extent a pragmatic sanction: it was used because it appeared to work—not perhaps as it was supposed to: directly on the object; but through giving confidence to the wearer and suggesting to him that he was full master of the situation in which he was about to engage. But there was very much more to the frog's bone than this—at least as it was used by horsemen, certain horsemen, here in Suffolk. In the following chapter the active principle that underlay its use will be shown, and in addition the true substance of the supposedly magical power of 'the word' or 'the whisper'.

The Search for the Horseman's Word

In his search for the principle behind the nexus of beliefs known variously as the *whisper* or the *power of the horseman's word* the writer stumbled by accident across a seemingly irrelevant fact which proved to be the first step in a direction that ultimately led to what is claimed to be the real centre, the holy-of-holies, of the old horsemen's practices. The incident was this: in a small Suffolk village a woman mentioned to another in the sort of conversation women have in an environment where new topics of interest are rare: 'That's the dirtiest (dirtiest) house in the village! The horseman at X Farm can't get his hosses past it. Every time he goes that way he very nigh has to drag them past the door.' This incident lay dormant at the back of the mind for some time and then a somewhat similar observation brought it forward again: 'The owd hoss were all right when they mucked out the cows with him; but you should ha' seen him when they tried to get him to muck out the pigs! He wouldn't play at all. He kicked and he snorted, very near tipped the cart up, and he *runned* (ran after) the hossman, cart an' all, right across the yard. As soon as we took him away from the pigs he were as quiet as his usual self.' The next link came when a farm-worker mentioned that he dare not hang a dead rabbit on the tumbrel when it was drawn by one or two of his horses. With some it was all right; but an occasional horse would shy and refuse to draw the cart until the dead rabbit had been taken away.

The obvious, and in itself quite undramatic, inference from these incidents is that a horse has a very keen sense of smell.¹ But the possibilities of this hyper-developed sense in a horse and its importance

¹ cf. *Job*, xxxix, 25; 'he (the horse) smelleth the barrie afar off'.

for our inquiry were not fully realised until a meeting with an old horseman in the Halesworth area of Suffolk—Walter Lovett (born 1878) of Bramfield. It was plain that he had never been in the inner circle of horsemen in the district: he did not have the *know*, or the *Word* as it was called in Scotland; but, when asked about some of the seemingly magical powers claimed by the older teamsters when he was a young man at the end of the last century, he related what proved to be a germinal incident in the search:

'I heard tell that two carters once called at The Wherry Inn in Halesworth for the usual snack and drink and bait for the horses. They put up the horses in the stable and then went into the pub. After they'd had a couple of drinks, one said to the other:

'"Shall we have another?"

'"No, I reckon we'd better see to the horses."

But when they went to the stables they couldn't budge the horses from their stalls. They pulled and they cursed and they swore, but the horses wouldn't move an inch. After they tried for a quarter of an hour or so, an old man who happened to be in the yard said to 'em: "'What's the matter on 'em? Won't they come out?—I can fix that.'" He may have been the one who done it—mind you, I don't know. But he went inside the pub, and in a minute or two he came out with a jug of milk. He got this jug and put it above the lintel of the stable door and after a minute or two he say: "'It's all right: you cin take 'em out now.'" And sure enough they led the horses out of the door without any trouble at all.' No explanation was given: no explanation was asked for at this stage; for it had become obvious that the horses' acute sense of smell was involved here without question: because milk has the property of absorbing any obnoxious or strong smell arising anywhere near it.

From this point onwards the search, instead of being a rather futile and frustrated groping about in the half-light of primitive fantasy and magic, became a consciously determined drive to get at the centre of the whole tangled system of horse-beliefs. The man who had willfully caused the horses to refuse to come out of their stalls had used a substance that was so aggressive to their sense of smell that it was impossible to get them to cross the threshold of the stable. Such was

the hypothesis at this stage. But what was the substance and where had the trickster placed it? These questions were not answered until later; but now, having an hypothesis, it was possible to work systematically towards its confirmation—or its rebuttal; to the stage where all the questions would answer or cancel themselves.

But at this point came support for the theory that the horse's sense of smell is more highly developed than is ordinarily realised. A brief inquiry into the steps in the evolution of the horse shows that at one stage of its evolution the development of a keen sense of smell was very important to its survival. When the horse was in the wild state, chiefly a plains dweller relying for his food on grass and plants near the ground, he had no protection against his enemies except his speed and his ability to apprehend danger as soon as it was in the vicinity. The horses with the best eye-sight and the keenest sense of smell, those best equipped for seeing and scenting the approach of an enemy, were most likely to survive. Therefore through the first stages of its development the head of the horse tended to lengthen: the eyes were then further off the ground, making better instruments of detection while the horse was grazing, and the nostrils had also lengthened giving him the optimum sense of smell. For this depends on the thousands of small nerves that line the nasal passages: and to increase the surface of the nostrils meant to improve the power to smell. It is part of our thesis that this hyper-acute sense of smell has survived the horse's domestication.

The next step was a discussion of the old horseman's practices with a farmer of the old school. He had never been a horseman himself, yet he had been a keen observer of their activities all his life; and he had his own theory about the way they got their seemingly magical results. The *reist* word, 'the whisper between the collar and the hames' to stop a horse and keep him on a spot until the horseman—and no other—wished to move him, was given a new meaning by conversation with this old farmer. But it is likely that this information would not have been given had he not realised that the questioner was already at the threshold of the truth before he talked with him. His first illustration showed that the hypothesis formed above was not far wrong:

'These owd horsemen, you couldn't tell 'em anything; and they'd

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never tell you! I seen one of 'em put a stick up in a field in front of his pair of horses, and they wouldn't budge from where they were for anybody. The horseman could go off to Ipswich and they'd still be there when he come back.'

After this the writer related to him the story told him by a horseman from a different part of the county. This was the story: 'They had about a hundred horses at Hall the time I'm telling you about. A man who was working up there got wrong with 'em over something or other—I don't know what happened. Anyhow he got the sack. But that night he went up and did something to the horses. Next day not one on 'em would go near the harness. No one could do anything with 'em. In the end they had to fetch that man back for him to put it right. No one ever knew how he did it. He went in and locked the stable doors. But not long afterwards they harnessed the horses and they came out as if nothing had happened.'

The old farmer's comment was direct and to the point:

'I reckon the fellow who got the sack didn't do anything to the horses. He put something on the harness, you ma' depend. They wouldn't go near the harness because of it. When they had him back he wiped it off or put something else on it to take the smell away. But he'd make sure they wouldn't see him a-doing of it. I reckon it's the same sort of thing as when a horse won't come out of a stable. The horsemen put something on the doorpost—something that a horse couldn't bear the smell of, and wouldn't shift to go near it.'

To illustrate his theory he told another story which fitted in with the writer's, formed not long after he had heard the original story of the old man and the jug of milk:

'A horseman brought three fine horses into a Suffolk town on market day and stabled them and baited them at an inn. The stableman happened to say to him: "You got three fine horses there, bor." "Yes," he say, "and I know right well how to handle 'em." Now the stableman wanted to finish early that afternoon, and to do this he needed to move these three horses to a stable in another part of the yard. So after a while they decided to change the horses' stalls. But when they tried, the horses wouldn't move an inch. Then one man who was more in the know than the rest said:

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'I know the way to shift 'em!'

'And he did. He got a bottle of vinegar, poured some in his hand and smeared the muzzle of each horse with this as he moved him from his stall. The horse couldn't smell nothing else when he did this; and they got 'em all out without any trouble.'

The same man gave another facet of the old horsemen's activities, still observed—it may be noted—from the outside:

'The horsemen would never tell you their secrets. But if you listened and watched, kept your ears and your eyes open, you could put two and two together. I was in a pub in Stowmarket once; and I got to know a bit of their business. There were a couple of men talking about some stuff to give the horses, and a third man who was listening said: "If the stuff cin do that, I'll go out and git some from the chemist's." But when he came back he said he'd been to every chemist in the town and none of 'em had got it. "Give me a pint," said one of the men, "and I'll go out and git it for you." He returned with the stuff within five minutes. You see, the chemist wouldn't give it to anyone, only a man they knew—one of the regular horsemen.'

The old horsemen would not allow anybody to take liberties or impinge on what they considered to be their craft preserves; and they were fond of putting the uninitiated in their place. The following incident is typical of a number related to the writer: 'The stockman on a farm said to one of the horsemen: "I'm going to take one of your horses into Stowmarket early tomorrow: I'll take him afore you git back from breakfast, so you don't want to bother." The next morning the horseman fed the horses at his usual time and went home for breakfast. When he returned the horse was still there.

'What's the matter with him?' the stockman asked in despair; "he won't come out!"

'Won't come out,' said the horseman, "course he will!" And with a word he led the horse out of the stable.'

One thing was very soon established: only a very small proportion of horsemen during the last half-century were in possession of *the know*, as one old farm-worker referred to the secrets of his craft. The

horsemen who had it, guarded *the know* jealously and would pass it on to no one: least of all to those who were working on the same farm. One horseman revealed this at a very early stage in the search, and at the same time confirmed that some 'stuff' or substance was in fact used when, at this point, only a very tentative theory had been formed about the real nature of the 'magical practices'. On being asked about the horseman's strange power to control horses at a distance, when the horseman was not actually present himself he said:

'Some used it, but I never used a piece of the stuff in my life. I always managed my business without any of it. Someone tried it on me once, but I knew enough to get out of that! And to the further question: 'What did you use?' he replied with a twinkle in his eye: 'Only a drop of water—just cold water.' The incident could be reconstructed when later more was known about such happenings. Probably a fellow-horseman had placed some of the 'stuff' on the doorpost of the stable thus preventing him bringing out his horses. But although he was not in possession of the full secrets, he knew enough to wash down the woodwork before attempting to force his horses out of the stable.

One horseman in the Stonham Aspal district told of a similar incident: A horse-dealer or jobber had sold two of his geldings. The head groom told one of the men in the stables: 'These two horses are going away tomorrow, and I'm not a-taking them. But the man who is, will have to wait till I get here afore he takes 'em out.' But the man who took the horses the next morning did not wait. He harnessed them up and brought them out of the stable; and he passed the horse-man as he was coming out of his cottage. 'Mornin', Bill,' he shouted. But the horseman kept a sullen silence, put down by the other man's knowing quite as much as he did.

One further example will add emphasis to what has already been written about the jealous guarding of precedence among farm horsemen. The incident happened on a farm in the Ipswich area about fifty years ago: 'There were a big chap working on this farm. I believe he were the second horseman, or maybe he were the second's mate; a big, cross-grained fellow. He were one of the Brethren—with God on Sunday and with the devil the rest of the week. He started taking

his team out in the morning as soon as he were ready, right out of his turn. No one said nothing at first. Then one morning, one of the baiters said kinda quiet like: "He's not allus a-going to do that, is he?" The next morning the big fellow had some trouble with his horses. He couldn't get them out of the stalls. He cursed and swore because he couldn't get them harnessed up; and there were the horses, getting into the other horses' stalls as he were laying into 'em. There was a regular rumpus. But all the rest of the men turned out as usual and just left him to manage it as best he could. He niver gave any more trouble after that.'

The horseman did not go into details about the way the lesson was taught, but from what has already been stated the reader can infer the actual procedure.

These incidents illustrate some aspects of the old farm life that are worth dwelling on briefly. They confirm the impression, already discussed, that only a handful of horsemen, at least within the last fifty years or so, were within the inner brotherhood of the craft; and these possessed the secrets that were held, one supposes, by members of the craft society when it functioned regularly. Confirmation of this came from two particular horsemen who later revealed information that demonstrated that they were outstanding, and held secrets very few horsemen in the district knew of. One of these gave some details about the horsemen's society that used to meet in the town: 'My grandfather used to go to it and the horsemen from Bush Hall, Akenham Hall and Thurlleston Hall used to go with him. Both my father and grandfather told me this. There was some sort of ceremony to join, I believe; but it was all before my time (He was born in 1886). They met to have a chin-wag amongst themselves.'

Bits and pieces of evidence collected about this society suggest that many of the secrets—probably the traditional medicines and cures, chiefly—were actually written down. The book was available, so it is reported, for certain horsemen at a cost of £5—a mint of money in the days when the average farm-worker's wages were twelve or fourteen shillings a week. Basil Brown, the Suffolk archaeologist, who once farmed in north Suffolk, has also heard of the existence of this book; but he was unable to secure access to the particular copy he

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knew of. Recently, too, the writer has been informed¹ that the secret of 'The Horseman's Word' has been offered for sale by a man—a ploughman—in Scotland; and this seems to suggest that the Society has broken up even there where it flourished more strongly than in other parts of Britain.

One other aspect is this: the secret of 'the horseman's word' gave certain horsemen a positive economic advantage, and they were very careful not to jeopardise this advantage by giving their secrets away. The more they knew, the more skilled they were, the better they could do their job and the more likely they were to hold it; and in the agricultural depression of the end of the last century and the pre-war years of this, possession of *the know* was a very real advantage indeed. The set-up on some of the farms during these years, as related by the old horsemen, was anything but idyllic; and the description they gave of the rivalry, back-biting and sometimes open malice that existed, even among the men themselves, should be taken into account when there is any impulse to depict the countryside under the old order as a haven of peace and rural contentment. The scene was not as it looked to visitors from the town—the Corydon and Amaryllis seekers—who even now are convinced that the Golden Age is immediately behind us.

But what was the relation of the farmers themselves to the practices of the horsemen? In most cases they appear to have known nothing of them. Like the shepherd the head horseman had a very responsible job. He was usually given a free-hand by the farmer who did not interfere with the actual technique of looking after the horses. As long as he was assured they were treated well and were kept in good condition, he knew that it was best to interfere as little as possible. Certainly, few farmers would belong to the horsemen's society even if they knew of its existence. Some, however, were aware of unorthodox practices and gave out that anyone caught using 'stuff' would immediately be given the sack. But on the whole the farmers were forced to err on the side of trust rather than suspicion; for once a farmer's suspicion became overt the smooth running of his farm would

¹ Personal communication from Mrs Leslie More of Newbridge, Midlothian.

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greatly be hindered. The horseman had the 'whip-hand', in more senses than one. The following incident will illustrate this:

'A farmer had a horseman who couldn't pass a pub. So he told the policeman at B . . . to look out for him: if he ever saw the horses standing outside a pub, to get the horseman out of it and send him home. One day the policeman saw this farmer's horses standing outside The Fox. He went inside and said to the horseman:

' "You better get back to the farm."

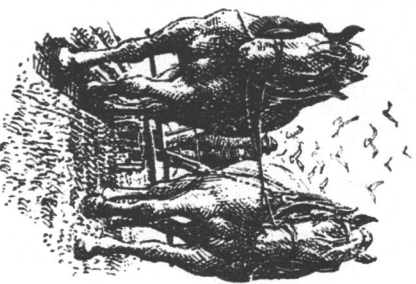
' "Yes, I will: when I'm ready."

' "If you don't get going now I'll take the wagon and the horses back myself."

' "Right. In that case I'll be here till stop-tap!"

'The policeman went out and tried to lead the horses back to the farm. But he couldn't get them to move an inch. He returned to the pub and told the horseman: "I can't shift 'em."

' "No more you will. They'll go when I'm ready," and he quietly finished his drink and took the horses home without further trouble.



The Frog's Bone

During the search the writer talked with dozens of horsemen up and down the county of Suffolk; and he soon learned to distinguish the ones who were likely to have secrets of the inner-circle of the craft. That this circle was still in existence—if not in formal operation—was apparent to him on one of the first occasions when he talked to a horseman who, he was sure, was more likely to have *the know* than anyone he had so far met. Wishing to indicate that the horsemen's secrets were not entirely unknown to him, and that the revealing of information would not, therefore, be entirely a breach of the craft's secrecy he gave a rather gratuitous explanation of an incident—similar to those already given—where a horse was *reisted*¹ or stopped by apparently magical means. He was immediately met with the sharp challenge: 'Who told you that?'

But in the weeks that followed when the old horseman came to recognise that the questioner's motive was no more sinister than to record the past farm-economy in all its aspects, he became less cautious; and he grew sensible to the argument that while at one time giving his secrets away would have been equivalent to letting someone 'take the bread from his mouth', as one horseman put it, at present, when a full 'horse economy' had gone from the farms, the secrets could be of little material advantage to anybody. Moreover, as there was now no working horseman to pass his secrets to, unless he told them now they would soon go into oblivion.

For at this stage the inquirer was still puzzled by one apparently unassimilable fact. The *reist* phenomenon, the control at a distance, had been explained at least to his own satisfaction; and, judging from

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the old horseman's reaction when he heard it, his theory was the right one. But how did the frog's bone fit into the picture? When the old horseman was first asked if he had ever come across the frog's bone, he shook his head and said bluntly: 'Never heard of it.' Here was a lesson the questioner should have learned long before this: it is almost useless for a folklorist to ask the direct question—at least in a cold and purely 'informative' atmosphere. The real information comes of its own accord, is nourished by a kind of involuntary flow between the questioner and the questioned; and when the time is ripe it comes unannounced, with all the freshness of a discovery and with the same conviction of rightness that accompanies the poet's inspiration.

So it was with the old horseman. After a number of talks extending over a few months, one winter's evening the true secret of the frog's bone was revealed. But first of all, the searcher had to sit humbly under a mildly astringent and admonitory lecture. The horseman rolled himself a cigarette; trimmed the shreds of tobacco from its ends and threw them into the fire: 'Now look, you've been hearing things! Someone round here has been telling you things about the horseman's business—about stuff and chemicals, the frog's boon and all that. Well, you don't want to believe half on it. It's someone who's heard a bit of it and is making the rest of it up. Now I'll tell you about the frog's boon. . . .'

At this point the horseman paused to take another shred of tobacco from the end of his cigarette, and the effect was both dramatic and painful. Painful, because the inquirer sensed that here he was about to learn a vital fact that would quicken most of the others; and yet at the same time he knew that in the long seconds that were passing before the old horseman would start to speak again, there was plenty of time for him to change his mind, to gloss over or to retain the information he first intended to impart. But with all the solidity of his kind he kept to his first intention:

'I'll tell you about the frog's boon. First of all not one in ten thousand knows what kind of frog it comes from, or would be able to recognise the boon if they saw it—not one in ten thousand. I knew only one man in this district who had one. The frog you were after

¹ A Scottish dialect word.

wasn't easy to come by: it were a rare kind. It were a black frog with a star on its back; and you'd be most likely to find one in a wood where they'd been a-felling trees. You'd get one, maybe, under an owd felled log or something like that. After you'd caught it you had to kill it and hang it up on a blackthorn tree to dry. Then you took it down and treated it till it were all broke up and dismembered. Or you could clean it by putting it in an ant hill: the ants would pick all its flesh off the boons. You then took it to a running stream and placed it in the water. Part of it would float upstream; and that's the part you had to keep.'

So far the account was no different from the conventional account of the frog's bone ritual, already given by two other horsemen in the area. But what followed was the crux:

'When you got the boon you next cured it. You got umpteen different things and you cured the boon in this mixture. After you had cured it and dried it again, it was ready. You kept it in your pocket until you wanted to use it. There were no charm about it. This is how it were used. A farmer would tell a horseman just before "knocking-off" time:

' "There's a load of oil-cake to get from the railway station: will you take the tumbiril down and get it?"

' "But my horse is tired: he's been working hard all day."

' "It's not the horse is tired!—But all right: I'll get someone else to do it."

'But when the farmer told another horseman to harness the horse and put him in the tumbiril, the horseman found that he wouldn't come out of the stable. What you did was to rub the frog's boon on the horse's shoulder. Then whoever came to fetch him would straightway be in a muddle. The horse would go through the motions of moving but wouldn't shift an inch. To make that horse go you just had to take the frog's boon and rub it lightly on his rump.'

It will be immediately recognised that the potent principle in this, as the old horseman indicated, is not the exotic type of frog, the ritual at the stream, or even the bone itself. All these were incidental. It was the herbs or chemicals in which the bone was cured or steeped and the resulting odour with which it became impregnated that had

the seemingly magical effect. So, as in the use of 'stuff' on stable-doors, lintels and harness, the deciding factor in the use of the frog's bone was the hyper-sensitive smelling power of the horse. The frog's bone was steeped in substances not detectable by human smell; but they were so aggressive to the sense of smell of the horse that he was as though paralysed when the odour was anywhere near his nostrils. When the bone was rubbed on the horse's rump, the odour coming from somewhere behind he was impelled to move away from it. The frog's bone, it may be mentioned, was used in the incident where the policeman tried to get a horseman out of the inn.

The principle behind the use of the frog's bone is analogous to the one that operated in that other secret charm of the old horsemen—the *colt-milt*.¹ The *colt-milt* or *melt* is a small, oval-shaped lump of fibrous matter like the spleen (*milt* is in fact another, older word for spleen). It lies at the back of the colt's tongue when it is in the mare's womb. The old horseman described what happened at a colt's birth: 'When a mare was about to foal, one of the horsemen had to set up with her. She usually foaled at night. In the morning the farmer came in to have a look:

' "Well, I see you got a colt. Where you with her when it was born?"

' "Yes, I was here."

' "Where's the milt?"

'Then you took out the milt for him to see. The milt would show you were actually on the spot and not asleep when the colt were born. Because to get the milt you had to put your two fingers into the colt's mouth and prise it out just as it were a-coming out of the bag. Do you leave it until a moment later, the colt would swallow it.'

Like the frog's bone the milt was a good *charmer*. The old horseman said he had a dozen milts at one time. But they were no use unless they were properly cured. Like the frog's bone, to be effective the milt had to be cured in a mixture of 'umpteen different things', before it could be used.

'I used to laugh sometimes—I'd hear a chap say: "Well, I got the milt. Now I got a good charm. I can get the horse to follow me any-

¹ cf. Christina Hole, *English Folklore*, Barsford, p. 82.

where." But o' course the milt were useless unless it were put in the right mixture first. I've heard them boast, too, about the frog's boon that had never been properly cured. They didn't know nothing about it. They didn't have the secret. But I said nothing. It wouldn't do to say anything.'

It was from such occasions as these that the Suffolk proverb, *Quietness is best*, was born.

The reader will have noticed that there is an important difference between the uses of the frog's bone and the milt as outlined above. The action of the frog's bone may be described as inhibitory: the horse is *reisted* by the aggressive, inhibiting odour in which it is steeped. But the action of the milt is to attract the horse, to get a horse to follow it owing to the special way it had been scented. The realisation that there were two types of substance—opposite in their action—involves in the secret practices of the horsemen was another key-point in the search.

The search now moved to a chemist who was able to confirm this part of the theory. For although in the old days it is likely that the horsemen prepared their own mixtures and got most of their medicines from herbs and trees, as the gypsies do to this day, within the last few generations many have come to use the chemist's shop where many of the substances they needed were to be bought. A chemist who came into an agricultural district of Suffolk during the hey-day of the farm-horse about forty years ago described how the old horsemen came into his shop for their mixtures:

'They would sometimes have their recipes written down on an old slip of paper, in a half-literate hand. But we could usually puzzle them out. The remedies and so on were traditional, handed down for generations; and some of them had cures the vets had never heard of. They also had their *drawing oils* as they called them: aromatic oils for *drawing* or attracting horses to them. These oils were like candy to a child. A drop on a horse's tongue, and it would follow you about all day; or even the scent of it on a horseman's coat. If a horseman came in to ask for one of his chemicals, he first of all took a good look around the shop to make sure that no one else would hear what he was asking for. When I started in the chemist business as a young man forty

years ago they used to come in and order their favourite powders—a stone or so at a time if they were going away for a period, to a show or something like that. The last of the old horseman who used to come to me regularly died a few years back.'

Another chemist described how the more careful of the horsemen used to make up the mixtures themselves, coming to him for only one or two of the ingredients and then passing on to another chemist, and perhaps even a third, to get the remainder. One horseman has described how he had code names for chemicals, and these were understood only by the chemist and himself. Therefore, even when the shop was full, he could ask for what he wanted without anyone being any the wiser. '*Dragon's blood* was one of the owd bluff names I used.' And it would have suited his sense of secrecy and tickled his humour immensely if one of his rivals, overhearing his request, had in turn procured the real dragon's blood—the red gum from a palm fruit. This horseman also frequently used an aromatic herb called foenu-greek but when asked for in the dialect as *finnig* it was incomprehensible to anybody but the chemist.

The action of the *drawing oils* is typified by the following illustrations:

'The owd horsemen were very skilled,'—this from Harry Mason, the shepherd—'they didn't have to exert themselves. A horseman would go into a meadow and there'd be no horses about; but as soon as he got himself into the wind, they'd come a-running up to him, neighing and rubbing their noses against him. They'd rub their noses along his legs and his body. He got something sweet-smelling on him, o' course, put on specially.'

'A stallion killed a horse-leader and it was decided to have him put down. But someone suggested that a certain well-known groom should look at the stallion—a valuable one—first, before they finally decided to get rid of him: 'Let Jack Francis see him first,' they said. Now Jack Francis was a little man, a ha'porth of a man, bow-legged and wizened. When he got to the farm where they kept the stallion they told him: 'You'd better hev something to eat first, Jack, afore you see the hoss.'

'No, I'd like to see the hoss first.' So he went into the horse's

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stall and immediately the horse started to nuzzle his head onto Jack's shoulder and very soon he was rubbing his head against him as though they were two old friends. After lunch he went to the horse, put a rope halter on him and led him out as if he were a child's pony.¹ 'The old horsemen often kept a little bottle in their hare-pocket or in their sleeved weskit. If a horseman was going to approach a strange horse he had to deal with for the first time, he'd have some of the stuff from his little bottle sprinkled over his hand. Then he went up to the horse to talk to him. But as he was standing a-talking, his hand with the stuff on it would be gently rubbing the horse's muzzle.'



Thomas Davidson, in the article already cited, quotes the story of a blacksmith from Bourn in Cambridgeshire. This man, George — had the power to *reist* a horse. One day a farmer offended the men in the smithy by hinting that one of them had stolen some money he had lost. 'A little later the farmer drove up to the forge in a pony trap. George turned towards the road, took out his handkerchief, and held it to his nose and replaced it in his pocket. He did no more; but when the farmer was ready to leave, the pony refused to move. In spite of every effort on the farmer's part, the animal remained where it was from nine o'clock in the morning until five o'clock in the afternoon. Then the horse charmer patted its neck, and it went off quite unharmed and unfurried.

'When asked by his co-workers how he did it, George said it was by means of a charm. He then proceeded to give, in detail, a version of the ancient charm of the frog's bone that floats upstream.'¹

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A Suffolk horseman gave the following information which undoubtedly illumines the above: 'I used to use the *drawing oils* some bit. If I had a horse in a loose-box or in a yard and it was being a little troublesome, a little oil of — on a handkerchief and held up would do the trick.' The handkerchief that figures in both these accounts is significant and there is no need to dwell on the correspondences. But why did George the blacksmith give his fellow-workers the rigmarole about the old frog's bone? Undoubtedly it was to put them off the scent. He could safely give away the ritual in all its details and be sure that no one could make any use of it, as long as he kept the ultimate secret to himself. He was only acting in accordance with his kind in letting people know of the ritual, because this was, consciously or unconsciously, part of the smoke-screen to the real practice and also part of the atmosphere. His real secret gave him added social status, some economic advantage and in this particular environment a great deal of power, and in no circumstances would he be ready to give it away. The similarities between the use of the *drawing oils*, outlined above, and the motions of the so-called 'whisperers' are too obvious to need stressing. One horseman actually stated that he pretended to be 'talking quietly' to a horse when all the time he was introducing it to a soothing, aromatic oil.

The farm, it has been said, is the last resort of magic. This is probably true; but we can now see that we must not interpret this word *magic* too uncritically. For it is part of magic's function to conceal its real dynamic under a smoke-screen of fustian and fantasy, precisely because magic is no longer magic if it ceases to be the monopoly of the class or section who practise it. A secret that is shared by the whole community has no realisable value, and brings no kudos—of status or actual economic advantage.

A very appropriate illustration of this principle is given by a former district officer in the British Solomon Islands, D. C. Horton, in an account¹ of primitive Melanesian magic called *The Vele Man*. The Vele men were able, it appears, by the aid of a system of magic to terrorise the populations of certain islands, thus gaining effective control over these islands for themselves. For a long time it was dif-

¹ *The Listener*, 6th January, 1958.

difficult to stamp out the terror because none of the islanders would discuss the Vele for fear of being victimised himself. Finally, however, a determined administrator, Commander Wright, stamped out the terror and the methods of the Vele men were unmasked.

The victim of the Vele men was usually someone who had offended the secret society. He was attacked at dusk, though not before an atmosphere of terror had been carefully built up. The Vele men themselves spread rumours that the Vele were in the district and they drew attention to the simulated cry of an evening bird whose presence always preceded an attack. While the whole village was in a state of hysteria the victim was singled out. 'At the right moment the Vele man would step out of the bush behind his victim, clasp him round the throat and force something into his mouth, at the same time uttering an incantation in a high-pitched shriek.' The victim, if he did not actually die of fright, died from the poison that had been thrust into his throat; for the rest of the villagers were too frightened to help him and left him alone, although it would not have been difficult to save his life by getting him to spit out the poison and giving him an emetic to induce him to vomit up any he had swallowed. But the substance itself appeared not to be directly connected with the death of the victim; and the interesting fact emerged, when the terror was cleared up, that the Vele men themselves believed they had actual magic powers, and did not associate the killing with the poison thrust into the throat of the victim.

It is likely that all the hocus-pocus connected with the ritual of the frog's bone originally impressed not only those who got to know rumours or even some details of the ritual but deceived even the men who practised it into believing that it was the carefully followed formula of the ceremony that was important and not the substances that went into the curing of the frog's bone. This view is strengthened by other discoveries here in connection with it. The frog's bone was used not only in the way already described but it was also ground up and given with other substances to farm-horses either as medicine or a 'drawing powder'. Though for this use the backbone of the frog or the toad was reported to be favoured, in addition—it is assumed—to the ilium.

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The widow of an old horseman, in a village near Stowmarket, turned out his papers after his funeral and gave certain scraps of paper containing some of his old remedies to a young horseman who lived next door, thinking they might interest him: 'There was witchcraft in one of them: all about grinding up a frog's boon and mixing it with some other stuff'. An old farmer also confirmed that some of the horsemen sprinkled a powder containing a ground-up frog's bone in the horses' bait: 'I've seen a horseman with some: he kept it in a tin and he'd give a pinch now and then in the bait. The horse would come after him and always do what he wanted.' Some of the horsemen undoubtedly believed that the frog's bone was the sovereign principle in their composite remedies.

The similarity between aspects of the frog's bone ritual here in Britain and certain aspects of the Indian and South Seas magic already described raises an interesting problem in the diffusion of cultural patterns. At first sight the Gypsies appear to be likely agents in spreading the lore. The Gypsies, according to the most widely accepted theory, had their first home in India, and their interest and skill in horse-lore would provide a likely vehicle for the transmission of the ceremony of the bone. But it is more than probable that it had reached Britain centuries before the Gypsies.

The reading of a remarkably illuminating book¹ by Ronald Rose, who with his wife lived for many years with the natives of Central Australia, leaves one with the conviction that much of the material which is fashionably described as 'folklore' in Britain could be more profitably studied if it were considered as vestiges of a definite stage of social development in the past, when these fragments were part of a system of vital social practices. There are so many correspondences in pattern between 'folklore' in Britain and the actual beliefs and some of the social practices of the Australian aborigines that one is tempted to relate the origin of many of the 'folklore survivals' here to a prehistoric period when the people of these islands were similarly hunters and food-gatherers, before they had learned the use of metals.

One other point regarding the *Horseman's Word* in East Anglia needs to be discussed. Thomas Davidson has stated his belief that the

¹ Ronald Rose, *Living Magic*, Chatto and Windus, 1957.

Word was introduced into East Anglia by the influx of Scottish farmers, already mentioned, in the second half of the last century. Much evidence here in East Anglia discounts this theory altogether. In not one instance has the writer discovered that the practices described here have been associated with a Scottish farmer, or a farm that has been occupied within the last century by a Scottish farmer. Again, the writer's most reliable informant on the *Word* stated with an assurance that is backed by all the other accurate information, checked and counter-checked, given by him: 'We had it here before the Scots came down. My father was born in 1862: he had it (the frog's bone) and my grandfather had it before him.' But the strongest of all arguments for considering the practices indigenous to East Anglia, co-extensive perhaps in time with the Scottish practices and not stemming from them, is the peculiar insular character of this region. Outside influences, outside practices, such as these, do not usually weave themselves into the pattern of a folk in the bare span of a century: in East Anglia they would hardly do so in the space of a millennium.

The expression the *frog's-boon* was also used by the old horseman in another way that is worth recording: it was heard as a kind of metaphor for 'being in control'. If, for example, a horseman was in the field and the ploughing was going on extremely well, his stretches coming out neatly, with dead-straight furrows and a level 'top', his mate sometimes called out in recognition of his prowess:

'I see you got the owd frog's boon with you this morning.'

There are one or two other notes to add as a supplement to what has already been said about the *Word*. For a horseman who had the *know* it was easy for him to release a horse that had been *reisted*. He did not attempt to look for the place where the inhibiting substance had been placed. He took the shorter way, as already indicated in a previous page, and went to the horse himself, temporarily paralysing his sense of smell by introducing another stronger or more pungent substance, vinegar or gin, for instance. 'If you had a drop of gin and just rubbed it in the horse's muzzle he could smell nothing else. Or you could even blow some cigarette smoke up his nostrils. Then you could lead him past anything that had been put down.'

Apart from the necessity of keeping their secrets for their own advantage, the old horsemen probably realised, however dimly, that it was to the society's advantage that their knowledge should remain esoteric. For in irresponsible hands the real secrets of the *Word* were dangerous; and if they had become common knowledge, especially at a time when the horse was literally one of the motive forces of society, the result would have been anarchic. Even at the present time it is considered best not to disclose the names of these actual substances: to do so would not add anything to the folklore aspect of the account; but it would certainly leave it open to be used for purposes other than for those it was intended.

Finally, to balance the above account the following cannot be emphasised too strongly: in ninety nine farms out of a hundred the *Horseman's Word*—to give a comprehensive name to the whole corpus of practices—was never heard of, or even if dimly known was not known well enough to be practised. The majority of farm horsemen cared for and managed their horses by the orthodox methods; and control was by use and patient training. As the old horseman who was possessed of the real *know* has stated: only one or two men in a district would have it; and often where it was openly talked about, discussed and even claimed to be practised, the self-styled practitioner boasted he had the *Word* merely to gain extra status among his kind. In most instances what he had was the husk and not the kernel. Yet, although the practice of the *Word* in the farms of Suffolk was exceptional, it is included here and discussed at length even at the risk of giving it a false emphasis. For at this point of time folklore deals with the exceptional; and what appears to be exceptional in one area or country, when taken in relation to the whole field—that is, the world and all its peoples—reveals itself as the manifestation of an universal type or pattern and, therefore, valuable data for recording.