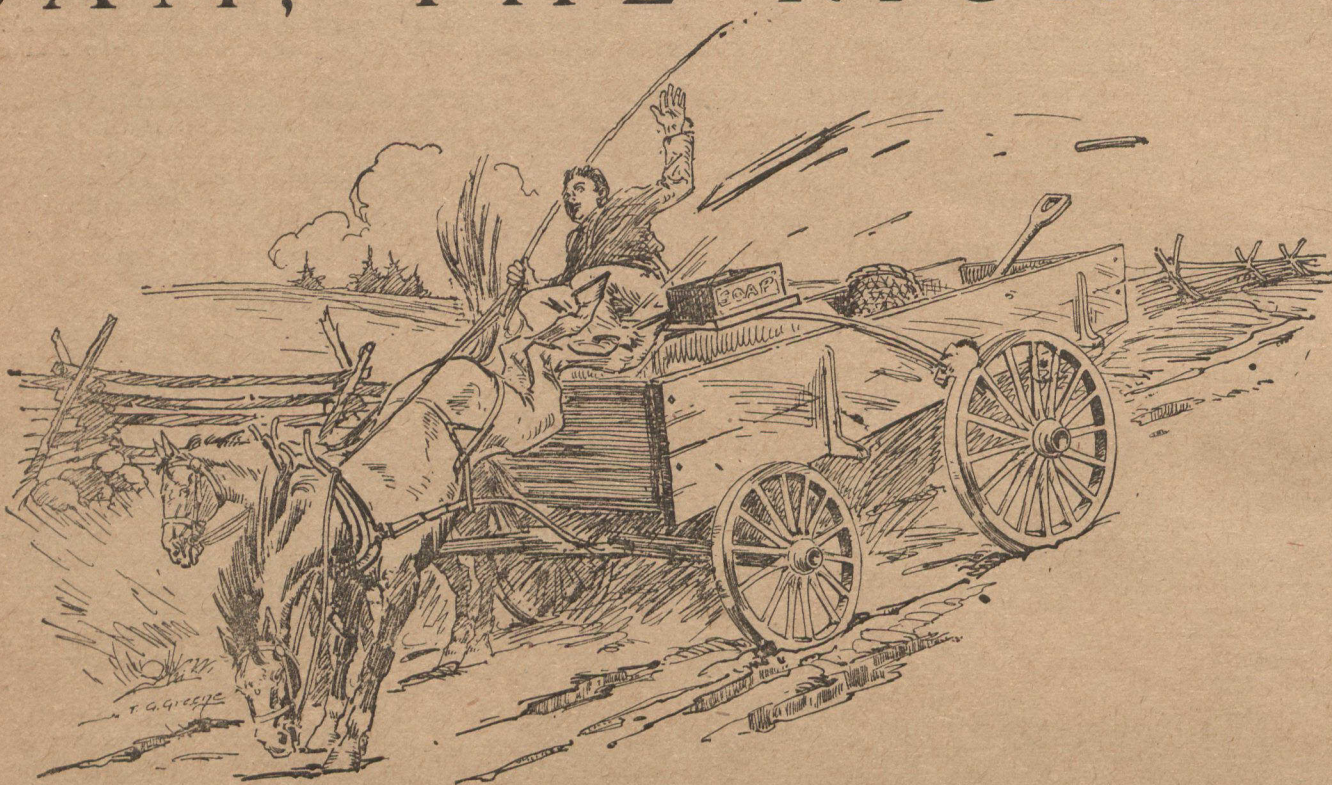


SAM, THE KICKER

— By —
JACOB HOLDFAST

*A Homely Epic of Older
Ontario in the Potash Days*

Illustrated by T. G. Greene

I got down and gathered up the fragments.

"Feel like goin' again?" I said, feebly.

I was no sooner up on the seat than Sam started up. He went along quite nicely. He now seemed the soul of good humour—for him. Apparently he had shot his bolt. Having got that one master kick out of his system, perhaps he would settle down to be a good horse for the rest of the day. Anyway, though I should have powerfully lam-

basted him with the bluebeech I withheld my hand, thinking it better to act as though a little episode like that never could cause me to lose my temper. So I started to sing and whistle, feeling now that I had a long, successful day ahead of me.

True to relate, all the way out the side road to the Middle Road, and on up to Smith's Mills, Sam behaved like a gentleman. When we turned in at the mill I had quite forgotten the early morning kick. On either side of the sawdust trail from the road to the screaming, throbbing stave mill great piles of swamp-elm logs blinked grey in the sun. Men and teams went here and there shouting among the timbers. Logs went snouting up the gangway into the hungry maw of the stave mill. Heaps of elm bolts came shooting out of a hole in the side. Boys hauled the bolts away to the steam boxes. Men at the stave cutters stood in the hissing steam and pared off the staves like cheese. Other men bundled them together, and hauled them away to the long streets of piled-up staves seasoning for the haul-out in the summer. The place resounded with great and inspiring energy. It smelled powerfully like the beginning of the world.

As I backed the waggon up alongside a fat heap of white mill ashes thatched with elm bark I felt that I was a merchant prince. None of the men in that mill gang had a finer job than I had. Nobody was more successful. Every bushel in that heap was mine for the asking—and the soap.

When the whistle blew for noon and the mill hands came trolloping out, there was a general inspection of my rigout.

"Holy mackinaw! what fer a sooner d'yeh call that son 'v a seacock?" wanted to know the head sawyer looking at Sam as the team munched hay.

"Him? Oh, that's a cross bewixt a mule and a dromedary," says I, quite flippantly, though not so as to have Sam overhear me, because I felt that somehow that Oriental protestant could read my words, and I wanted to keep on good terms with him for the rest of the day.

As I traipsed up to the head house for dinner I told some of the gang how Sam had kicked so high one morning hitched to a travoy for hauling up firewood that he lost his balance and fell over forwards; had once kicked his right hind shoe across the road into a field; once left his caulk marks high in a basswood tree when hauling out logs from the bush. These were all circumspect gospel truth; also that Sam had persisted in kicking even when all his legs were roped together diagonally under his bellyband—though how he did it nobody ever had a quick enough eye to discover.

As I scoop-shoveled at the ashes after dinner and the sun crawled under a blanket of grey, I began to realize that the biggest part of my contract with Sambo was yet to come. It was about four o'clock when I mounted the seat and drove out the sawdust lanes to the highway. I had a thumping load. Sam took it out with a swagger. We got on to the spongy turnpike and I settled myself to hope that no evil genius would descend upon that horse.

Now that I was away from the mill I felt lonesome. The road was almost empty of teams. The load pulled rather heavily. Sam gave several tail-

A RACETRACK tout would have called him Tornado or Boanerges. We always called him Sam. Our respect for his talents demanded a simple name. Sam was a talented horse. And he looked it. His eyes were about an inch lower than average, and about half an inch closer together than they should have been. This gave him tremendous concentration of purpose. He had none of those benign, apple-eating looks that you see in a common horse. He carried his head at a dromedary angle, scorned the overcheck, had a torso powerful enough for a prehistoric animal, a bushy black tail that spoke several languages, and a pair of heels that were the amazement of the whole community.

Sam and his bewildered mate Liza were Tom Bump's road team. They were the equipage with which he gathered his ashes. Bump usually had very little trouble ashcatting with Sam because he understood him. But to me Sam was an Egyptian riddle. As gentle as a lamb in the stable, he had the ferocity of a jungle beast in harness. He was the dashboard annihilator, the everlasting protestant, the unconventional, unconquerable, unbaffable beast that on a certain April day about thirty-five years ago caused me to comprehend more of the struggles and joys, tragedies and comedies of uncommon life, than all the poems I have ever perused since I left school.

When the world was swaggering with new frogs and fresh buds and first faint flicker of dust on the spongy turnpike of the bush road, Sam and Liza and I started out with the great double box wagon, the hickory spring seat, the big basket and the scoop and the soapbox at my left hand. Hitching him up I purposely treated him with careless disdain, now and then handling him quite peremptorily. Sam scarcely noticed my existence. I knew he was grinning to himself at the farce of my presuming to drive him nine miles or so up to Smith's Mills for a big load of ashes and getting that load home again the same day. But I whistled and acted as though I could drive a foursome like Sam with one hand—when all the while I was wabbling like a jellyfish inside my smock and overalls.

CARELESS as a bird I swung up to the high seat that teetered like a bough.

"Hit the pike!" I shouted, crossing my legs as though I had nothing to do for nine miles now but enjoy the lovely weather and the spring landscape.

With the pride of an eastern potentate Sam whisked the wagon out into the road. I had everything safe aboard. The road was fairly good.

"Mosey along!" I chirped to the team, taunting up the lines and elevating the bluebeech gad with an ominous flourish. I felt as though a show of composure was my only chance. I always understood that horses get electric messages along the lines. If a driver is nervous the horse knows it. But Sam needn't imagine that I was showing off my emotions. No, I proposed to be very secretive and careless with the beast. I didn't expect him to behave like a nice old family mare. I was preparing myself for his worst, and I knew very well it would happen.

Which for a mile at least it did not. Sam jogged along with quite surprising good nature. To be

sure he twitched his tail at the roots a number of times—a sure sign that he intended to kick before long. But I thought if I could keep him jogging he would decide to forego the pleasure.

But suddenly he slowed up—and stopped the other horse. She knew better than to keep on going when Sam wanted to stop. He twisted his head on a pivot and gazed back at me with silent malevolence born of a deep-seated contempt. He peeled his top lip as much as to say:

"You whiffit!"

"Smattera ye, Sam?" I inquired, wishing I could have taken a cool chew of tobacco.

"Bellyband too tight, yeh fool?" I wanted to know.

He yawned.

"Oh!" I pretended to laugh. "I know. It's that dang crupper strap that's a hole too tight on yer tail. Here—I'll let it out a hole."

With pretended nonchalance I let myself down upon the butt end of the wagon tongue, walked up alongside Sam's battering-ram of a rump, and let out the crupper.

"Now y're all hunkadory," I said, slapping him with fine familiarity on the hams. "Gid-ep!"

I swung back on the seat.

At least that was where I supposed I was going. But that was only a circumstance to what really and truly happened. There was a crack like the shot of a rifle. When I got to a fair view of what had taken place I was feebly aware that the top half of the double dashboard was mainly not there. When I looked behind to see if the wagon had been broken into halves I observed that the dashboard was back along the road.

"Hmph!" I said. "That's one way to do it."

