

## *Ralphie at the Races*

SAM SELVON

RALPHIE lost his image standing in front of the narrow mirror on the bathroom door of his apartment. No matter how much he twisted his head and hunched his shoulders to try and get a glimpse of the skin at the back of his neck, as he leaned sideways the upper part of his body just vanished off the mirror as if it had never existed. Eventually, persevering in the contortions, he was rewarded with his head at an awkward angle, but he froze in the position and gingerly brushed his fingertips on the area.

There was no doubt about it. He, a landed immigrant from tropical Trinidad only eleven degrees off the Equator, was sunburnt. The thin outer pigment of black was peeled away to reveal pink and even white patches.

What made matters worse as he stood there examining the rest of his body was the discovery of bumps on his arms from mosquito bites. In spite of himself Ralphie had to laugh. Sunburnt, *and* mosquito-bitten. Here he was in Calgary, in the "frozen north," just beginning to get accustomed to the weather, and if he wrote a letter home to tell them it was so hot that he was sunburnt for the first time in his life, and itching with mosquito bites, they would never believe him.

It was Friday morning, and in a way the hot summer was responsible for an unusual chain of circumstances which had started for Ralphie at the beginning of the week. On Monday, listening to the weather forecast predict an indefinite run of fine weather, he got to thinking that he was falling into a rut. He felt he should make some effort to get up and about, as there was so much he hadn't done or seen since he settled down in Calgary. He didn't want to be like so many other immigrants who get

into a routine the day they find a job and a place to live and lose their original interest in the new environment and exploring the things about them. A good example was his best friend Angus, a fellow Trinidadian, who had been living in Calgary for seven years and was now a Canadian citizen, and he hadn't even been up to the top of the Calgary Tower.

When Ralphie explained his feelings, Angus merely shrugged.

"I see the tower every day, man," he said, "what I want to go up there for, to catch birds?"

"You don't feel funny that you living here so long and up to now you haven't been?" Ralphie asked him.

"Why I should feel funny? I bet a lot of other people who born here haven't been either. Besides boy, the weather too hot these days to do anything."

"Too hot?" Ralphie scoffed. "A Trinidadian like you complaining that it's too hot?"

"Weather like this, the best place to be is the racetrack," Angus said. "Let the horses and the jockeys provide the action while you sit back, and at the same time you could come away with a few bucks in your pocket."

"You could also lose the shirt off your back," Ralphie reminded him, knowing that Angus spent all his spare time at the races.

"Not a bad idea in this kind of weather," Angus laughed.

"That's the trouble with you guys," Ralphie said, "you make a joke of everything. But I bet by the time the summer is over, I will know more about Calgary than you do."

"Good luck," Angus said, still laughing, "maybe you will be able to take me on a conducted tour of the city to see the sights and places of historic interest!"

"Laugh all you want," Ralphie retorted, "but I intend to take advantage of this good weather we're having."

But he almost had to give up the idea when he was driving to work on the Wednesday and his car broke down. Ironically enough, the damage was caused by his engine getting overheated with the temperature soaring into the upper twenties. And it was more trouble than he thought when he found it couldn't start. He had to be towed away, and the people at the garage told him

it would take a couple of days and cost a hundred and fifty bucks.

It had not taken Ralphie long to realize that in this country without transport one might as well be stranded on a desert island. The only walking anyone did was to and from a parking lot, or shopping in the malls. But where would he find that sort of money with payday not until the following week? And what about his plans to get about and see the local sights? He had been thinking of driving to the mountains over the weekend — he'd heard about the cool mountain lakes, and felt sure that he would have no trouble tempting Angus to go along with him to get away from the hot and humid city for a while.

As he thought of Angus it occurred to him that friends were there to help a guy get out of a jam, and he phoned him and explained the situation. Angus said he didn't have the money right away, but he was sure he would have it by Friday and would lend it to him, no sweat.

Ralphie was so relieved that he did not mind having to leave the car. One of his workmates gave him a drop home that evening, but when he got up on Thursday he had to get to work by bus. It was only when he was using his own two feet to get to the bus stop that he realized how hot it really was. He was perspiring and out of breath. I must be out of shape, he thought, I ought to be doing some exercise.

That was why, during the lunch hour, instead of sitting in the cafeteria around the corner as he usually did, he bought a sandwich and took a stroll in the neighbourhood. It turned out to be more of an exploration, for he saw shops and business places that he never knew existed, and suddenly, at the end of a street, he came across a greenbelt area. It excited him — this was exactly the sort of thing he was telling Angus about, calling yourself a Calgarian, but ignorant of what the city was like just a couple of blocks or so from the place where you worked!

In spite of the heat Ralphie lingered in the area. There were other people about, some of them stretched out on the grass in the open baking in the sun . . . why should *he* grumble?

When he got home that evening he headed straight for the fridge, dying for an ice-cold beer, only to discover he had run

short. If he had the car he could easily drive down to the liquor store. The thought was irritating — and so was his body, sore and itchy from his unaccustomed walk in the sun. Anyway, tomorrow was Friday, he'd get the money from Angus to pay for the car, thank God for that.

He reminded himself of this in the morning when he discovered the results of his lunchtime walk, and gave thanks again that the car was equipped with air conditioning. He was almost consoled when the phone rang and he answered.

It was Angus.

"You're early," Ralphie said.

"Yeah, I wanted to catch you before you went to work."

Something in Angus' tone alarmed Ralphie and he asked abruptly: "You got the money?"

"That's what I called about. I went to the races last night . . ." *and here it comes, Ralphie thought . . .* "and I lost. A streak of bad luck, boy . . ."

"Go on," Ralphie said, as Angus' voice trailed away.

"What d'you mean 'go on?'" That's it, all I got left is about fifty bucks."

"You call yourself a friend?" Ralphie said bitterly, scratching his arm. "I got sunburn and mosquito bite walking about in the heat, and now you let me down. I was planning to go to the Rockies tomorrow, too."

"Look Ralphie, I'm sure I'll have it for you tonight, I can't be so bad-luck-ed twice in a row."

"You mean you're going back?"

"Sure. I can't miss the Wild Rose Stakes meeting, the stands will be packed. Why don't you give it a whirl?"

"I never been to a racetrack in my life, and I don't intend to start now."

"You could dump that old Chevy and buy a new car."

"Yeah, I could lose the little money I got, too."

"At least think about it. With an expert like me you can't go wrong. If you change your mind give me a call and I'll pick you up after work."

All morning, as he went about his job in a downtown repository, Ralphie thought of Angus with mixed feelings. He was

disappointed in his friend, but he could not help a grudging admiration for his carefree style and having the nerve to gamble on horses. Perhaps he himself was being too cautious, and should take a chance for once — how else could he pay for the car short of a miracle? If he tightened his belt, he could afford to risk about twenty-five dollars. Would that be enough? He hadn't the faintest clue. Maybe he'd have to dress for it — Canadians seemed to have special clothing for every damn thing, curling, golfing, baseball, fishing, ice-skating . . . why not horse-racing? As his resistance weakened, he began to think of it as just another way to get out of the routine and do something different, which was just what he was planning all along.

Late in the afternoon he phoned Angus. "Look, about this evening . . ."

Angus didn't wait for him to finish. "That's great, boy, maybe you'll have beginner's luck."

"I haven't even been near to a horse all my life, Angus. I don't even know where the racetrack is."

"Stampede Park — I said I'd pick you up."

"Have I got to wear a jockey cap or something?"

Angus laughed so loudly Ralphie had to shift the phone off his ear. "Come on Ralphie, you're not as dumb as all that. Look, just get a paper and study the form, if you like. I'll pick you up after work, okay?"

Before Ralphie could raise any more objections or questions Angus hung up on him.

When they got to Stampede Park that evening, Ralphie had made up his mind about two things. The first was he wasn't going to make himself appear a complete fool to Angus even if he had to bluff and bluster. The second was that he was going to be careful and hold on tight to his money. No bets in the first race, or the second, or even the third and fourth. He would case the joint, as it were, and feel his way into this new experience before he invested any part of his twenty-five bucks — well, twenty-three, he corrected himself, deducting the two-dollar entrance fee which he felt Angus should have paid, and thinking uneasily that he was down two bucks already and he hadn't even seen a horse or heard one neigh.

Angus was anxious to get doing. He wore a cap which he assured Ralphie had nothing to do with the attire of race-goers ("it always bring me good luck if I wear it") and a pair of binoculars dangled on his chest from a leather strap around his neck ("I will lend it to you now and then if you want to get a close-up of the race; I bought it with my first winnings.")

As they went through the turnstiles and walked towards the pavilion, Angus said, "We mustn't miss the daily double."

"Yeah," Ralphie muttered, feeling ill-at-ease and gazing around at the crowds of people moving about in complete familiarity with their surroundings. He also suspected that Angus was trying to impress him, putting on airs as if he was the Chief Steward of the meeting or something: as they were passing some stairs he gestured and said, "When I'm in the money I go up there to the clubhouse, but seeing as this is your first visit I'll stick around with you — or rather, you stick around with me."

"I'll be okay, don't worry about me," Ralphie said.

They went out to the open stands and Angus led Ralphie to his usual place in the back row of the yellow section. Once seated he immediately became engrossed in studying form, checking the list of horses and jockeys, what time they made at previous meetings, and what tips he could get from the newspapers: he even looked up at the sky as if seeking a sign from the few puffy clouds that drifted above the park. All of which had Ralphie baffled, he could not make head or tail of it as Angus frowned and concentrated like he was trying to work out Einstein's theory of relativity. Ralphie looked across the central stage or platform at the tote board flashing figures and letters on and off giving information which was totally useless to him, how could anyone make sense of it?

Suddenly a woman came out on the platform, dressed up like English people when they are going to chase the foxes with the hounds. She had a bugle under her arm and she marched up like a soldier to a microphone and she played a little tune, army revellie or something it sounded like to Ralphie.

"Where's the rest of the band?" Ralphie asked, hopeful for some music to divert his thoughts.

"Ten minutes to go," Angus muttered, "you putting anything on the daily double?"

"I will hold my horses for a while," Ralphie said, unconsciously making the pun.

The riders began to come out on the track to warm up and get in position for the start.

"Number five look good," Ralphie volunteered, for no other reason than the feeling that he had to say something.

"You think so?" Angus frowned like a man tortured by indecisions, and consulted the program. "Two point eleven . . . two point ten . . . that's the worse time in the lot."

"All the same, if I was you I would put my money on number five," Ralphie persisted.

"I am taking number three, and number six for the second race," Angus said. "Take it from me, that's the best bet."

"Six is an unlucky number," Ralphie was beginning to enjoy his deception. "I would chose seven if I was you."

Angus chuckled. "Boy, I could understand why you keep away from the racetrack, and leave it to the experts like me!" And he went off to place his bet.

Needless to say, number five came in first, and in the second race, number seven finished a whole length in front of the others.

"And they're paying three hundred bucks for the double," Angus said mournfully.

"What!" Ralphie sat up. He couldn't believe it, although Angus pointed it out on the tote board, and said that if he had only had a little guts to bet a mere two dollars, he would have had three hundred in his pocket now.

"Three hundred and twenty-three, including my capital," Ralphie choked.

Angus was too much the regular gambler to let it upset him, but Ralphie did a hop and a dance in dismay.

"I lost my chance, I lost my chance!" He wailed.

"It got other races," Angus said. "And besides, look at all the other losers."

"I don't see any! Everybody win excepting me!"

"Cool it. Can't you see all those bits of paper scattered around," Angus waved a hand about the stands, already the

ground was strewn with discarded tickets. "Forget what's gone, man, that's spilt milk, water under the bridge. See what you could do in the next race."

"That's easy for a hardened gambler like you to say," Ralphie could not recover from the blow. He got up and wandered about the stands with his hands in his pockets, kicking disgustedly at any tickets he saw on the ground. Lady Luck had smiled at him and he had spurned her advances. He went out on the grounds and leaned against the rails, and as the horses came around the last bend he imagined they were running the first two races again and this time he had bet every cent he had.

He was so bitter and disappointed he was tempted to get out of Stampede Park and go home, but he came across the Rodeo Bar as he strayed about. Perhaps a double scotch chased with a beer might console him.

As he sipped the drink he did feel better, and he thought, what the hell, I might as well have another, at least I'm enjoying this instead of trusting my money on jockeys and horses that I know nothing about — and I'm not the only one, if you ask me the bar doing more business than the races!

"I had the daily double," he said conversationally to a stranger standing next to him.

"Yeah?" the man replied, "you caught them, eh?"

"Yeah." Ralphie drained his glass. "But I didn't bet."

"Tough luck." He gave Ralphie a curious glance and turned back to his own friends.

Ralphie wasn't sure how long he'd been away, but when he got back Angus asked him if he'd won anything.

"I wasn't betting," he replied. "Just moseying around."

"Well, a quinella is coming up now."

"Quin-ella? Where?"

"Pick two horse, it doesn't matter which comes in first or second."

"Oh yeah, quinella . . . how've you been doing, you make a big kill yet?"

"Not too good, Ralphie. You better start betting if you want that car for the weekend. You didn't pick up any tips on your wanderings?"



Ralphie took a random peep at the program. "Sure, I heard two Chinese guys arguing about *Ruby Morning* and *Victor Brave Boy* for that quinella thing."

"Yeah?" Angus was too experienced a punter to take any tip lightly, no matter from what source. Many times he'd stood behind some Chinese guy in the payout line and seen him strain to pick up the load of notes he'd won. But when he looked up the card selections he read "continues to disappoint" for one, and "needs mini-miracle" for the other. He shook his head and went back to his own convictions and calculations.

The girl in the fox-hunting garb came out and blew her bugle and the horses came out for a preliminary canter. Ralphie was too miserable to care. He had ten dollars left and was just impatient to get home and forget the whole thing.

"Jesus!" Angus exclaimed as the race ended, tossing away his tickets like so many other. "Victor Brave Boy and Ruby Morning! Man, this is *twice* you make a correct forecast and you didn't bet!"

"Because I am a moron, the most stupid man in Calgary!" This time Ralphie was on the verge of tears.

"The most stupid man here today, that's for sure. I don't know how you do it, boy, but whatever it is, it works. And you better stop depending on me to take the car out, I just lost again."

"Let's go home." Ralphie was dejected. "I never coming back to a racetrack again. This must be a sign that I should never gamble."

"The last race is coming up," Angus said. "Cowards die many times before their deaths is one saying, but they have another, which is 'third time lucky.' In fact, I will go against my better judgement and back your tip. Look at this list of eight horses and pick the winner."

But Ralphie had nothing to say. He hung his head in utter despair, and his eyes couldn't even focus properly on the clusters of unlucky tickets lying at his feet and around him. If he had had the courage to buy one, *just one*, his worries would have been over.

Suddenly he stood up and without a word to Angus he strode off determinedly to the nearest betting window. For a moment he paused, wondering what to say. Then he pulled the ten dollars out and put the money down and shut his eyes and said, "All that on the last race."

The girl looked at him. "What bet?"

"Oh. Ah. To win."

"What horse . . . what number?"

"Er . . . number ten."

She smiled a little. "There's no number ten running in this race."

"Oh. What's the next number, nine?" he asked.

"You want ten dollars on number nine to win?"

"Yeah, yeah. That's it."

He rejoined Angus silently and sat down.

Angus left him alone, except for a quick glance of sympathy. Like a true punter, he appreciated what agonies a man suffered when he did not take advantage of an inspired forecast and watched the horse come in a winner. Ralphie had a lot to learn, though, he should not give up, he should take his blows like a man and come out fighting in the next rounds.

Throughout the race Ralphie kept his head down and forced himself to think of anything but horses. Already he was regretting his rashness, he would be leaving the racetrack without a cent in his pocket, couldn't even afford to buy some lotion from the drugstore for his sunburn, though it didn't bother him much unless he touched the tender skin . . . as for driving to the mountains over the weekend, well, it was just too bad, he would have to wait until next payday . . .

He tried not to listen to the commentator's excited voice as the race progressed, but Angus's yelling was too close to shut out.

"Number eight! Come on eight! That's it baby, come on! It's eight! Eight in the lead!"

And that's the end of that, he told himself, let it be a lesson to you, better to spend your money on women and drink . . .

Then he heard Angus swearing. "Oh hell . . . it's a photo-finish, there's an inquiry . . ."

Photo-finish? Inquiry? Was that the name of a horse or something? Perhaps they would have to run the race again, and this time . . . this time . . .

After what seemed ages he heard Angus swearing again. "Blast it! Eight come in second . . . nine is the winner!"

Ralphie looked up and gaped at Angus. "Nine? Win?"

"Yeah. You bet on nine?"

He couldn't speak. He was trembling with excitement and could barely lift his hand to show Angus the ticket.

"Jesus, nine was a rank outsider, Ralphie! You must have hit it rich, boy!"

As they moved to go inside Angus was so elated for his bewildered friend that he clapped him heartily on the shoulders and was about to voice congratulations again when Ralphie let out a mighty yell of pain.

"Oh Christ, Angus, my sunburn!" He hunched and staggered a little and the ticket slipped from his nervous fingers, but he grabbed wildly on the ground for it, elbowing in the jostling crowd.

"Sorry, Ralphie . . . I forgot all about that in the excitement . . . I'll just check the full results on the telly, you better join the payline before it get too big."

Ralphie was among the first lucky winners, so excited that he was breathing in short gasps and trying hard to control his body from shaking.

When he put his ticket down the cashier looked at it closely then frowned at him.

"You've made a mistake."

"Yeah." He was grinning all over his face and the words did not register until she spoke again.

"This is for the ninth race, and it isn't a winning number. Move aside and check it, please."

Looking for Ralphie, Angus found him down on all fours near the spot where he had dropped the ticket, scrambling about hopelessly in the litter of betting tokens and muttering to himself like a madman.