

A SECRET FOR TWO

by Quentin Reynolds

Montreal is a very large city. Like all large cities, it has small streets. Streets, for example, like Prince Edward Street—only four blocks long. No one knew Prince Edward Street as well as Pierre Dupin. He had delivered milk to the families on the street for thirty years.

For the past fifteen years, a large white horse pulled his milk wagon. In Montreal, especially in the French part of the city, animals and children are often given the names of saints. Pierre's horse had no name when it first came to the milk company. Pierre was told he could use the horse. He moved his hand gently and lovingly across the horse's neck and sides. He looked into the animal's eyes.

"This is a gentle horse," Pierre said. "I can see a beautiful spirit shining out of its eyes. I will name him after Saint Joseph, who also was a gentle and beautiful spirit."

After about a year, the horse, Joseph, got to know every house that received milk, and every house that did not.

Every morning at five, Pierre arrived at the milk company's stables to find his wagon already filled with bottles of milk and Joseph waiting for him. Pierre would call, "Bonjour, my old friend," as he climbed into his seat, while Joseph turned his head toward the driver.

The other drivers would smile. They said that the horse smiled at Pierre.

Then Pierre would softly call to Joseph, "Avance, mon ami." And the two would go proudly down the street. Without any order from Pierre, the wagon would roll down three streets. Then it turned right for two streets, before turning left to Saint Catherine Street. The horse finally stopped at the first house on Prince Edward Street. There, Joseph would wait perhaps thirty seconds for Pierre to get down off his seat and put a bottle of milk at the front door. Then the horse walked past the next two houses and stopped at the

third. And without being told, Joseph would turn around and come back along the other side. Ah yes, Joseph was a smart horse.

Pierre would talk about Joseph. "I never touch the reins. He knows just where to stop. Why, a blind man could deliver my milk with Joseph pulling the wagon."

And so it went on for years—always the same. Pierre and Joseph slowly grew old together. Pierre's huge walrus mustache was white now and Joseph didn't lift his knees so high or raise his head quite so much. Jacques, the bossman of the stables, never noticed that they both were getting old until Pierre appeared one morning carrying a heavy walking stick.

"Hey, Pierre," Jacques laughed. "Maybe you got the gout, hey?"

"Mais oui, Jacques," Pierre said. "One grows old. One's legs get tired."

"Well, you should teach that horse to carry the milk to the front door for you," Jacques told him. "He does everything else."

The horse knew every one of the forty families that got milk on Prince Edward Street. The cooks knew that Pierre could not read or write; so, instead of leaving orders in an empty milk bottle, they simply sang out if they needed an extra bottle. "Bring an extra bottle this morning, Pierre," they often sang when they heard Pierre's wagon rumble over the street.

"So you have visitors for dinner tonight," Pierre would happily answer.

Pierre also had a wonderful memory. When he arrived at the stable he always remembered to tell Jacques, "The Pacquins took an extra bottle this morning; the Lemoines bought a pint of cream..."

Most of the drivers had to make out the weekly bills and collect the money, but Jacques, liking Pierre, never asked him to do this. All Pierre had to do was arrive at five in the morning, walk to his wagon, which always was in the same place, and deliver his milk. He returned about two hours later, got down from his seat, called a cheery "Au revoir" to Jacques, then walked slowly down the street.

One day the president of the milk company came to inspect the early morning milk deliveries. Jacques pointed to Pierre and said,

"Watch how he talks to that horse. See how the horse listens and how he turns his head toward Pierre? See the look in that horse's eyes? You know, I think those two share a secret. I have often felt it. It's as though they both sometimes laugh at us as they go off Pierre...Pierre is a good man, Monsieur President, but he is getting old. Maybe he ought to be given a rest, and a small pension."

"Oh but of course," the president laughed. "I know Pierre's work. He has been on this job now for thirty years. All who know him, love him. Tell him it is time he rested. He'll get his pay every week as before."

But Pierre refused to leave his job. He said his life would be nothing if he could not drive Joseph every day. "We are two old men," he said to Jacques. "Let us wear out together. When Joseph is ready to leave, then I too will do so."

There was something about Pierre and his horse that made a man smile tenderly. Each seemed to get some hidden strength from the other. As Pierre sat in his seat, with Joseph tied to the wagon, neither seemed old. But when they finished their work—then Pierre walked lamely down the street, seeming very old indeed, and the horse's head dropped and he walked slowly to his stall.

Then one cold morning Jacques had terrible news for Pierre. It was still dark. The air was like ice. Snow had fallen during the night.

Jacques said, "Pierre, your horse, Joseph, didn't wake up. He was very old, Pierre. He was twenty-five and that is like being seventy-five for a man."

"Yes," Pierre said slowly. "Yes. I am seventy-five. And I cannot see Joseph again."

"Oh, of course you can," Jacques said softly. "He is over in his stall, looking very peaceful. Go over and see him."

Pierre took one step forward, then turned. "No... no ... you don't understand, Jacques."

Jacques patted him on the shoulder. "We'll find another horse just as good as Joseph. Why, in a month you'll teach him to know all the homes as well as Joseph did. We'll...." The look in Pierre's eyes stopped him. For years Pierre had worn a large heavy cap that came

down low over his eyes. It kept out the bitter cold wind. Now, Jacques looked into Pierre's eyes and he saw something that shocked him. He saw a dead, Lifeless look in them.

"Take the day off, Pierre," Jacques said But Pierre was gone limping down the street. Pierre walked to the corner and stepped into the street. There was a warning shout from the driver of a big truck. There was the screech of rubber tires as the truck tried to stop. But Pierre... Pierre heard nothing.

Five minutes later a doctor said, "He's dead... killed instantly." "I couldn't help it," the truck driver said, "He walked in front of my truck. He ... he never saw it, I guess. Why, he walked as though he were blind."

The doctor bent down. "Blind? Of course the man was blind. See those growths? This man has been blind for five years." He turned to Jacques, "You say he worked for you? Didn't you know he was blind?"

"No ... no .. ." Jacques said softly. "None of us knew. Only one... only one knew--a friend of his, named Joseph ... It was... it was a secret, I think, just between those two."