

# WHO KILLED PHAR LAP?

by G. leF. Y.

I SUPPOSE if the late Phar Lap (Night Raid—Entreaty) is anything, he is two things: an object of worship to the 99.9 per cent of Australians and New Zealanders who follow the races, and a recurrent mob slogan whenever we feel like beating up Americans.

"Who killed Phar Lap?" bawl Australians and New Zealanders, banging their glasses on the bar and unlatching their belt buckles for action against hapless American visitors.

I had this early in life. One day in 1932, a group of us were playing racehorses round the school football field. ("I'm Phar Lap. I'm gonna win every race!") To us came the bearer of black news. "Hey!" he cried, "the Yanks have killed Phar Lap. Hey! You hear? The Yanks have killed Phar Lap."

At the time, there probably wasn't a genuine Yank in the whole of Canterbury, my home province, and so there was no massacre, but in our hearts we had all the urges to feud.

The other day, nearly 23 years later, I went to the races at Agua Caliente, a rather secular track near Tijuana, Mexico, where they have racing every Sunday all the year round. Caliente is quite a place. In the best grandstand, you sit at tables spread with checkered blue and yellow cloths. There is a Maitre d', enthroned in a special observation box, directing a corps of waiters, who flow up and down the steep steps carrying champagne and steak, beer and hamburgers, cokes and ice cream.

On the mezzanine, where you go to bet, there are intricately patterned mosaic floors, stretches of expensive, dull red carpet, atrocious cut-glass candelabra clusters, and a bar where you can drink standing up when you get tired of drinking at the tables.

In the old days, they had a night club there, too, with all kinds of gambling, and one of the best floor shows in California. Rita Hayworth did some of her earlier leg and torso work

at Caliente. But repeal, and Presidents Cardenas and Comacho, of Mexico, cramped the lavish style, and today you don't need to put on a tie to get through the grandstand gates. You can go there any week day and bet on horses running at any of the tracks in the States. You can go there at night and bet on the dogs. It's still a good business. The management pays the help in pesos, but the customers pay in dollars. "Buenos dias, amigos. Welcome to Caliente!"

Caliente started in 1930, and the big money race then was, so far as I could find out, the Agua Caliente Handicap. It was won by Phar Lap.

I thought it unlikely that anyone would remember so long. After all, they had no grudge to bear at Caliente. On the second floor of the best stand is the Turf Club, restricted territory for regulars in good credit standing. I asked the doorman how long he'd been with the Club. "Since it started, sir, in 1930," he said. (In Mexico, when you get a job, it's as well to hang on to it.)

"Ever see an Australian horse run here about 1930?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. He was called Phar Lap. He won the first big race we had here. He could run this way or that way (making clockwise and anti-clockwise gestures). He was very much of a horse."

"So I've heard," I said, remembering those races round the school football field.

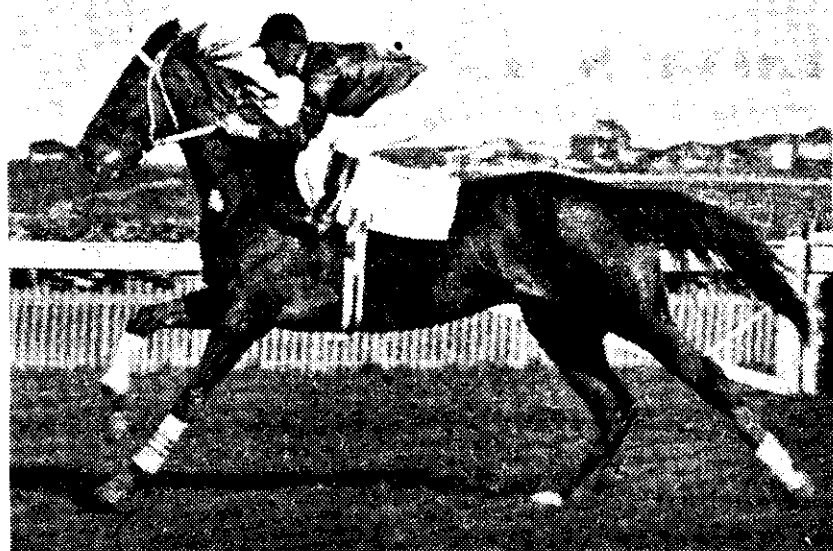
The doorman pulled gently at his ear lobe. "There was a big picture of him here," he said. "A big picture on the wall. I think it's still about somewhere inside. Maybe you see it, sir."

"I'll look round," I said. "Thanks. You say he only won one race here?"

"Yes, He died," the doorman said. "They say he had too much dope."

Heresy, I thought. Who killed Phar Lap?

On my tour of the walls I passed one end of the bar. The nearest barman was in late middle age, a little man with a deeply creased leathery face, like an ex-jockey. "Seen a picture of an Australian horse on these walls?" I asked him.



"He was murder in the stretch"

"What'll you have?" he asked severely, sticking to his trade.

"Beer," I said. "Tecate Cerveza."

He poured the beer expertly. "You mean Phar Lap?" he said. "Yeah, his picture's about somewhere. I see him run here. They said he wouldn't be able to run good on this track. Ha! He was murder in the stretch. The boy kicked him once coming out the turn and nothing else had a chance." He shrugged slightly. "He died two three days later. Water was wrong for him they say."

Another one due for burning, I thought. Who killed Phar Lap?

At Caliente you can bet with the books or the mutuel. Still touring, I stopped in front of a bookie's stand to look at the odds. The bookie, a fat, inscrutable man with glasses, looked at me.

"Figure a good bet, hombre?" he said at last.

"If I'd been here 25 years ago I'd have bet Phar Lap," I said.

He automatically held out his hand for the money, then smiled very faintly. "Stralian horse, huh. He dead long time."

"Yeah?" I said. "How come?"

"Couldn't take the feed. Not like back home, I guess."

"I guess not," I said. "I don't think I'll bet this race, hombre. Poco mas dinero. Hasta la vista."

I kept touring, and drew a few blanks, including a rather suspicious cop. There was no sign of the picture. Finally I came on a corridor with offices opening off at either side. I asked a receptionist if the Club records were kept in this vicinity. "Please wait," she said, smiling professionally.

I sat on a bench in the corridor. In Mexico, if they say please wait, you do just that. Nothing happened for a long time. I was about to leave when a well-groomed executive type came out of an office further up the corridor. He smiled and bowed slightly as he walked past me. I fell into step beside him.

"I was looking for a picture of an Australian

horse," I said. "Do you still have it about?"

"Maybe," he said. "Are you an Australian, sir?"

"No," I said.

This seemed to relieve him a little. "The horse would be Phar Lap," he said. "He won here the year the track opened."

"And then died," I said.

"Yes, He took the colic."

"No," I said firmly, my unconscious feuding urges no longer to be denied. "He took the arsenic. Somebody sprayed his pasture."

"He died across the line," the executive said. "They are always using chemicals in the States. Have you had a good day at the track, my friend?"

"Fair," I said. "I have enough left to get home. Do you know anything for the last race?"

"The favourites are running well today," he said.

I thanked him and went downstairs to the mutuel windows in the mezzanine with the awful candelabra clusters. The favourite was backed down to even money. So I took a long shot quiniela, a pool where you have to pick the first two home. My two led round the turn but folded in the stretch. Another long shot won, much longer than mine, and paid 438 dollars on a two-dollar ticket. I walked down the steps, shredding my ticket, and rejoined the party I had deserted earlier in the afternoon.

"Where have you been?" they said. "Did you strike the quiniela?"

"No," I said. "Has anyone ever heard of a horse called Phar Lap?"

"He won here way back when," said the oldest member of the party, "Australian horse. Didn't he break a blood vessel and die soon after? You should know."

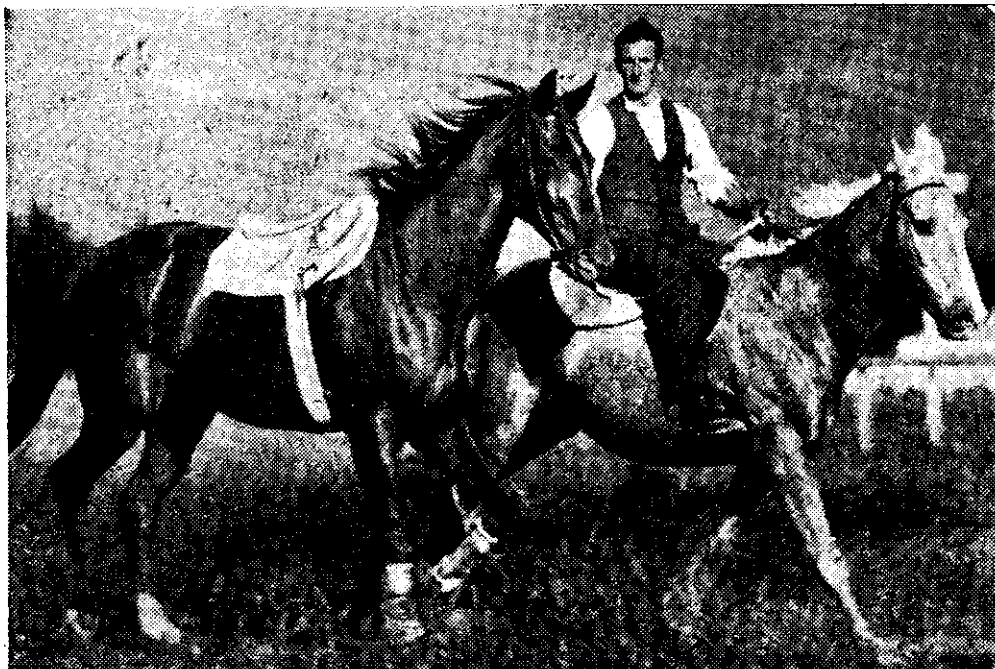
"I don't know a thing," I said. "Except he's dead."

"Yeah," said the oldest member. "He's dead all right. The Aussies took his hide home and stuffed it. He's a public monument now in Sydney or somewhere. Come on folks, let's go home. We can play the races again next Sunday."

"Hasta luego, hasta Domingo," belated the track loud speaker. "Come again to Caliente next Sunday, friends!"

The crowd moved towards the gates, discussing the spending of a secular Sunday evening.

Poor stuffed champion, I thought, my hands in my empty pockets. He had it coming to him all right. No horse from a puritan country should race on a Sunday.



THE BIG BAY on an early morning canter over the training track at Trentham