

Part II

CHAPTER 28

A Job Horse and His Drivers

Hitherto I had always been driven by people who at least knew how to drive; but in this place I was to get my experience of all the different kinds of bad and ignorant driving to which we horses are subjected; for I was a “job horse”, and was let out to all sorts of people who wished to hire me; and as I was good-tempered and gentle, I think I was oftener let out to the ignorant drivers than some of the other horses, because I could be depended upon. It would take a long time to tell of all the different styles in which I was driven, but I will mention a few of them.

First, there were the tight-rein drivers--men who seemed to think that all depended on holding the reins as hard as they could, never relaxing the pull on the horse’s mouth, or giving him the least liberty of movement. They are always talking about “keeping the horse well in hand”, and “holding a horse up”, just as if a horse was not made to hold himself up.

Some poor, broken-down horses, whose mouths have been made hard and insensible by just such drivers as

these, may, perhaps, find some support in it; but for a horse who can depend upon his own legs, and who has a tender mouth and is easily guided, it is not only tormenting, but it is stupid.

Then there are the loose-rein drivers, who let the reins lie easily on our backs, and their own hand rest lazily on their knees. Of course, such gentlemen have no control over a horse, if anything happens suddenly. If a horse shies, or starts, or stumbles, they are nowhere, and cannot help the horse or themselves till the mischief is done. Of course, for myself I had no objection to it, as I was not in the habit either of starting or stumbling, and had only been used to depend on my driver for guidance and encouragement. Still, one likes to feel the rein a little in going downhill, and likes to know that one’s driver is not gone to sleep.

Besides, a slovenly way of driving gets a horse into bad and often lazy habits, and when he changes hands he has to be whipped out of them with more or less pain and trouble. Squire Gordon always kept us to our best paces and our best manners. He said that spoiling a horse and letting him get into bad habits was just as cruel as spoiling a child, and both had to suffer for it afterward.

Besides, these drivers are often careless altogether, and will attend to anything else more than their horses. I went out in the phaeton one day with one of them; he had a lady and two children behind. He flopped the reins about as we started, and of course gave me several unmeaning cuts with the whip, though I was fairly off.

There had been a good deal of road-mending going on, and even where the stones were not freshly laid down there were a great many loose ones about. My driver was laughing and joking with the lady and the children, and talking about the country to the right and the left; but he never thought it worth while to keep an eye on his horse or to drive on the smoothest parts of the road; and so it easily happened that I got a stone in one of my fore feet.

Now, if Mr. Gordon or John, or in fact any good driver, had been there, he would have seen that something was wrong before I had gone three paces. Or even if it had been dark a practiced hand would have felt by the rein that there was something wrong in the step, and they would have got down and picked out the stone. But this man went on laughing and talking, while at every step the stone became more firmly wedged between my shoe and the frog of my foot. The stone was sharp on the inside and round on the outside, which, as every one knows, is the most dangerous kind that a horse can pick up, at the same time cutting his foot and making him most liable to stumble and fall.

Whether the man was partly blind or only very careless I can't say, but he drove me with that stone in my foot for a good half-mile before he saw anything. By that time I was going so lame with the pain that at last he saw it, and called out, "Well, here's a go! Why, they have sent us out with a lame horse! What a shame!"

He then chucked the reins and flipped about with the whip, saying, "Now, then, it's no use playing the old

soldier with me; there's the journey to go, and it's no use turning lame and lazy."

Just at this time a farmer came riding up on a brown cob. He lifted his hat and pulled up.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, "but I think there is something the matter with your horse; he goes very much as if he had a stone in his shoe. If you will allow me I will look at his feet; these loose scattered stones are confounded dangerous things for the horses."

"He's a hired horse," said my driver. "I don't know what's the matter with him, but it is a great shame to send out a lame beast like this."

The farmer dismounted, and slipping his rein over his arm at once took up my near foot.

"Bless me, there's a stone! Lame! I should think so!"

At first he tried to dislodge it with his hand, but as it was now very tightly wedged he drew a stone-pick out of his pocket, and very carefully and with some trouble got it out. Then holding it up he said, "There, that's the stone your horse had picked up. It is a wonder he did not fall down and break his knees into the bargain!"

"Well, to be sure!" said my driver; "that is a queer thing! I never knew that horses picked up stones before."

"Didn't you?" said the farmer rather contemptuously; "but they do, though, and the best of them will do it, and can't help it sometimes on such roads as these. And if you don't want to lame your horse you must look sharp and get them out quickly. This foot is very much bruised," he said, setting it gently down and patting me. "If I might

advise, sir, you had better drive him gently for awhile; the foot is a good deal hurt, and the lameness will not go off directly.”

Then mounting his cob and raising his hat to the lady he trotted off.

When he was gone my driver began to flop the reins about and whip the harness, by which I understood that I was to go on, which of course I did, glad that the stone was gone, but still in a good deal of pain.

This was the sort of experience we job horses often came in for.