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Breakfast Off The Mantelpiece

or

The First Ride of Summer

LABOUR DAY week-end in Auckland and riding planned. "You're mad," everyone said, "it always rains for Labour Day week-end." But "I'll call for you at 10 o'clock," the Major said. Four months since I had a ride.

If you live in a city and are horse-mad, you find you get to your horse one way or another. I used to ride my bicycle six miles; I have gone in buses; I've walked; but I've never driven luxuriously in a car, saddles, bridles, brushes, cloths and halters piled in the back. But that's what I did at Labour Day week-end, and I have to agree with the Major that it's got something on the other ways.

* * *

"FIRST catch your hare," the meticulous Mrs. Beaton advises in a recipe for jugged hare; and the same goes for horses and recipes for pleasant days in the country. . . .

A pretty picture they made in that big paddock with its aged pear tree and its more aged apple tree in full blossom, the chestnut (Frankie), and the bay (Johnnie). They eyed us kindly as we murmured our way towards them, halters discreetly behind our backs; our feet and ankles weren't so very wet by the time we reached those gentle creatures sheltering under the old apple tree; but we were wet to the knees by the time we had followed, puffing over the rough ground, their tail-flying, snorting gallop to the far, far corner. "They're fit," the Major said, good-humouredly. And four or five journeys, just for the exercise, up and down the long length of that paddock didn't make us so very much wetter; but "I'll fix the cows," said the Major with less good humour and more bamboo stick, at which Frankie and Johnnie became meek as cows and suffered our approach according to their characters—Frankie with a petulant underlip drooping, Johnnie with a round and shining eye, a questioning ear, and a nostril quivering to detect the merest smell from heaven or earth. ("Oh," said the Major, "so you'd rather ride Johnnie!")

* * *

WE bridled and saddled, and then the rain became rain instead of a soft drizzle. But what did that matter? From the capacious back seat of that remarkable car the Major brought forth his elaborate but effective English waterproof; the same for me, enormously enveloping me. I sat on it, I tucked it under my knees, my left hand disappeared with the reins up the sleeve, my right hand was warmly hidden away up about the elbow of the other sleeve. I struggled for air and free hands for the reins to the delicate mouth of this dancing creature I found myself on. Off! I mean still on, but away! Dance to the left, dance to the right, pirouette, arabesque, and saraband . . . one-two-and-three, one-two-and-three. I was back in the beginning of 1939, Russian Ballet, and a marvel called Jasinsky dancing



to the music of Handel. Jasinsky. Looking at those curving, pointed ears, the tucked-in head set so narrowly, so Arab-like on that parabola neck, the flying fine mane and forelock, seeing now the left, now the right bright round eye, the cupped nostril, feeling those shoulders moving under my hands, sitting on a thistle-down that I knew to be a couple of hundredweight of HORSE, I had to re-christen Johnnie.

* * *

"WALK the first four and the last four miles of your day's journey," say the world's best-trained horsemen, the Royal North-West Mounted Police. A good rule, proportionately, for a day that is not 30 or 40 but maybe only 15 or 20 miles. So Jasinsky danced on his india-rubber shoes for a mile before we came to a grassy road cutting away and away through hedges of white may and burning yellow gorse to rise sharply to join the main road again a mile and-a-half ahead. And when I had persuaded Jasinsky that there was no purse in it, that life, death, and the great hereafter did not depend on his catching Frankie and thoroughly trouncing him, that he would be much more comfortable, I too, hurrying slowly along that pleasant grassy track, he came down from the heavens, ceased beating *entrechats-trois* in the misty air and stretched himself into a loping canter that I had read of, dreamed of, hoped for, but not encountered since the death of my father's Arab-blooded bay in 1936. "You could sit on a three-penny bit and you'd never lose it," said the Major.

* * *

A COUPLE of miles from home, the chestnut cast a shoe. So when we met the son of an amateur blacksmith, a man who trained a couple of horses himself, the Major arranged for a slipper to be tacked on next day.

"H'm," said the boy, peering at my Jasinsky's clean legs. "A bowed tendon, eh? Trotter, eh?" I don't think so, I said, and no, I said, somewhat coldly.

"H'm," said the boy, "a bit over at the knees, eh? Well, so long, I'll tell Dad!" Silently we continued our way.

"These horsey men make my neck sore," said the Major. "If I brought Kindergarten along they'd tell me he was a bit long in the back, a bit shallow in the rib, or some other twaddle of jargon. Bowed tendon; over at the knees! And look at the moke he was riding himself!"

Frankie hung his head for shame. Jasinsky danced silently behind.

It had been a good ride. And that cup of tea off the mantelpiece tasted as good as any I can remember.

—J.