

THE HORSE LAUGHED

And The Rider Learnt

The Proper Level

Of Mankind Is Ground

A Tale of Misery

By

ANNE HOPE

NEW ZEALAND country towns are not what they used to be. In fact, most of them nowadays are literally one-horse places where the horny-handed farmers go about in streamlined limousines that make my poor husband's city vehicle look like an amoeba for shapelessness.

In some districts horses are so rare (they tell me) that the only people who remember riding them are the Hill Billies on the radio.

All this is very discouraging—particularly if you are a woman like me, who has longed to ride a horse ever since I started reading "Buffalo Bill" 'way back in the 'eighties. Not even Lady Godiva was more eager than I to imitate a Centaur.

I remember how often Tony used to coax me out tramping with him on the pretext he would hire a horse from a farmhouse on the way. There was one particularly promising place with a paddock and five horses in front and Alsatian dogs round the verandah steps. Tony reached the gate at the same time as the Alsatis, and he panted back to explain to me that "it wasn't any use asking about horses there, they weren't the sort of people who would hire them out."

So that all I got from my tramps to find horses were two large calves—never a horse.

I used to read horse books for consolation, went to Wild West pictures, and patted the heads of city council Clydesdales in the streets. Occasionally I dreamt I won jumping contests at show meetings, and woke sobbing and clutching at the rug fringes under the impression it was a mane.

BUT these frustrated longings are now of the past. A few weeks ago I learnt, very forcibly, that the proper level of mankind is ground.

This was the way of it:—

I fell ill of an over-tonsillated throat, and peeked so and pined during my convalescence that Tony decided to export me into the country to recover. I went to stay with my cousin Mamie, who has a "metal axis" in Taranaki.

The first thing I said to her was: "Mamie, I'd like to get a horse."

Mamie stared. "A horse?" she gaped. "Why?"

"To ride."

"Oh," said Mamie, and looked relieved—almost as though she had expected me to eat it. "Oh, well, there's



I gripped the top of the saddle and put a toe in the stirrups. Weed swung his head. I saw the white of his eye flash.

Weed. He's in the bush paddock. He's very old and not used much, but he's quiet and he'll do to learn on."

I was too polite to show disappointment. But I had hoped for a more lively animal. "Why do you call him Weed?" I asked.

Mamie just smiled mysteriously.

NEXT day the farm boy brought Weed into the yard. He stood with his head hanging and

one leg bent, as if he was slowly and steadily concertinaing to the ground. He was a woolly creature, very dull of spirit.

From the yard railing I looked down with disfavour. "Do you think it'll be too much for him to canter?" I asked Mamie.

Mamie gave her jolly laugh. "Not Weed! Come on, I'll give you a leg."

"Good heavens," I answered sharply. "I can climb him myself easily." I hitched up the riding trousers I had borrowed from Mamie's husband and sauntered across the yard. I said: "Good old Weed," in a hearty voice, and patted his neck.

Then, for the first time, I felt a qualm. At a distance, Weed was just a broken-down, despicable old moke. From two feet away he was imposing, and his feet were enormous. When I crowded near his head to be out of range of his hind legs it occurred to me immediately that he could just as easily paw me down with his front ones.

Confidence began to trickle slowly away.

"I'll get on now," I told the farm boy, who was watching with his mouth open. And added firmly: "I'll just have to steer him, I suppose?"

At that I gripped the top of the saddle and put a toe in the stirrup. I heaved a little. (Contd. on page 38.)

IN this article, the "Record's" woman contributor, Anne Hope, is back on the job. She has been convalescing in the country, and tells how she was taken for a ride by a horse with a mysterious name.