

A Night Among The Horses

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Toward dusk, in the summer of the year, a man dressed in a frock coat and top hat, and carrying a cane, crept through the underbrush bordering the corral of the Buckler farm.

As he moved small twigs snapped, fell and were silent. His knees were green from wounded shrubbery and grass, and his outspread hands tore unheeded plants. His wrists hurt him and he rested from time to time, always caring for his hat and knotted yellow cane, blowing through his moustache.

Dew had been falling covering the twilight leaves like myriad faces, damp with the perspiration of the struggle for existence, and half a mile away, standing out against the darkness of the night, a grove of white birches shimmered, like teeth in a skull.

He heard the creaking of a gate, and the splashing of late rain into the depths of a dark cistern. His heart ached with the nearness of the earth, the faint murmur of it moving upon itself, like a sleeper who turns to throw an arm about a beloved.

A frog began moaning among the skunk cabbages, and John thrust his hand deep into his bosom.

Something somnolent seemed to be here, and he wondered. It was like a deep, heavy, yet soft prison where, without sin, one may suffer intolerable punishment.

Presently he went on, feeling his way. He reached a high plank fence and sensing it with his fingers, he lay down, resting his head against the ground.

He was tired, he wanted to sleep, but he searched for his hat and cane and straightened out his coat beneath him before he turned his eyes to the stars.

And now he could not sleep, and wondered why he had thought of it; something quick was moving the earth, it seemed to live, to shake with sudden immensity.

He heard a dog barking, and the dim light from a farm window kept winking as the trees swung against its square of light. The odor of daisies came to him, and the assuring, powerful smell of the stables; he opened his mouth and drew in his moustache.

A faint tumult had begun. A tremor ran under the length of his body and trembled off into the earth like a shudder of joy,--died down and repeated itself. And presently he began to tremble, answering, throwing out his hands, curling them up weakly, as if the earth were withholding something precious, necessary.

His hat fell off, striking a log with a dull hollow sound, and he pressed his red moustache against the grass weeping.

Again he heard it, felt it; a hundred hoofs beat upon the earth and he knew the horses had gone wild in the corral on the other side of the fence, for animals greet the summer, striking the earth, as friends strike the back of friends. He knew, he understood; a hail to summer, to life, to death.

He drew himself against the bars, pressing his eyes under them, peering, waiting.

He heard them coming up across the heavy turf, rounding the curve in the Willow Road. He opened his eyes and closed them again. The soft menacing sound deepened, as heat deepens, strikes through the skin into the very flesh. Head on, with long legs rising, falling, rising again, striking the ground insanely, like needles taking terrible, impossible and purposeless stitches.

He saw their bellies, fawn colored, pitching from side to side, flashing by, straining the fence, and he rose up on his feet and silently, swiftly, fled on beside them.

Something delirious, hysterical, came over him and he fell. Blood trickled into his eyes down from his forehead. It had a fine feeling for a moment, like a mane, like that roan mare's mane that had passed him--red and long and splendid.

He lifted his hand, and closed his eyes once more, but the soft pounding did not cease, though now, in his sitting position, it only jogged him imperceptibly, as a child on a knee.

It seemed to him that he was smothering, and he felt along the side of his face as he had done in youth when they had put a cap on him that was too large. Twining green things, moist with earth-blood, crept over his fingers, the hot, impatient leaves pressed in, and the green of the matted grass was deathly thick. He had heard about the freeness of nature, thought it was so, and it was not so.

A trailing ground pine had torn up small blades in its journey across the hill, and a vine, wrist-thick, twisted about a pale oak, hideously, gloriously, killing it, dragging it into dust.

A wax Patrick Pipe leaned against his neck, staring with black eyes, and John opened his mouth, running his tongue across his lips snapping it off, sighing.

Move as he would, the grass was always under him, and the crackling of last autumn's leaves and last summer's twigs--minute dead of the infinite greatness--troubled him. Something portentous seemed connected with the patient noises about him. An acorn dropped, striking a thin fine powder out of a frail oak pod. He took it up, tossing it. He had never liked to see things fall.

He sat up, with the dim thunder of the horses far off, but quickening his heart.

He went over the scene he had with Freda Buckler, back there in the house, the long quivering spears of pot-grass standing by the window as she walked up and down, pulling at them, talking to him.

Small, with cunning fiery eyes and a pink and pointed chin. A daughter of a mother who had known too many admirers in her youth; a woman with an ample lap on which she held a Persian kitten or a trifle of fruit. Bounty, avarice, desire, intelligence--both of them had always what they wanted.

He blew down his moustache again thinking of Freda in her floating yellow veil that he had called ridiculous. She had not been angry, he was nothing but a stable boy then. It was the way with those small intriguing women whose nostrils were made delicate through the pain of many generations that they might quiver whenever they caught a whiff of the stables.

"As near as they can get to the earth," he had said and was Freda angry? She stroked his arm always softly, looking away, an inner bitterness drawing down her mouth.

She said, walking up and down quickly, looking ridiculously small:

"I am always gentle, John--" frowning, trailing her veil, thrusting out her chin.

He answered: "I liked it better where I was."

"Horses," she said showing sharp teeth, "are nothing for a man with your bile--poy-boy--curry comber, smelling of saddle soap--lovely!" She shrivelled up her nose, touching his arm: "Yes, but better things. I will show you--you shall be a gentleman--fine clothes, you will like them, they feel nice." And laughing she turned on one high heel, sitting down. "I like horses, they make people better; you are amusing, intelligent, you will see--"

"A lackey!" he returned passionately throwing up his arm, "what is there in this for you, what are you trying to do to me? The family--askance--perhaps--I don't know."

He sat down pondering. He was getting used to it, or thought he was, all but his wordy remonstrances. He knew better when thinking of his horses, realizing that when he should have married this small, unpleasant and clever woman, he would know them no more.

It was a game between them, which was the shrewder, which would win out? He? A boy of ill breeding, grown from the gutter, fancied by this woman because he had called her ridiculous, or for some other reason that he would never know. This kind of person never tells the truth, and this, more than most things, troubled him. Was he a thing to be played with, debased into something better than he was, than he knew?

Partly because he was proud of himself in the costume of a groom, partly because he was timid, he desired to get away, to go back to the stables. He walked up to the mirrors as if about to challenge them, peering in. He knew he would look absurd, and then knew, with shame, that he looked splendidly better than most of the gentlemen that Freda Buckler knew. He hated himself. A man who had grown out of the city's streets, a fine common thing!

She saw him looking into the mirrors, one after the other, and drew her mouth down. She got up, walking beside him in the end, between him and them, taking his arm.

"You shall enter the army--you shall rise to General, or Lieutenant at least--and there are horses there, and the sound of stirrups--with that physique you will be happy--authority you know," she said shaking her chin, smiling.

"Very well, but a common soldier--"

"As you like--afterward."

"Afterward?"

"Very well, a common soldier."

He sensed something strange in her voice, a sort of irony and it took the patience out of him:

"I have always been common, I could commit crimes, easily, gladly--I'd like to!"

She looked away. "That's natural," she said faintly, "it's an instinct all strong men have--"

She knew what was troubling him, thwarted instincts, common beautiful instincts that he was being robbed of. He wanted to do something final to prove his lower order; caught himself making faces, idiot faces, and she laughed.

"If only your ears stuck out, chin receded," she said, "you might look degenerate, common, but as it is--"

And he would creep away in hat, coat and cane to peer at his horses, never daring to go in near them. Sometimes when he wanted to weep he would smear one glove with harness grease, but the other one he held behind his back, pretending one was enough to prove his revolt.

She would torment him with vases, books, pictures, making a fool of him gently, persistently, making him doubt by cruel means, the means of objects he was not used to, eternally taking him out of his sphere.

"We have the best collection of miniatures," she would say with one knee on a low ottoman, bringing them out in her small palm.

"Here, look."

He would put his hands behind him.

"She was a great woman--Lucrezia Borgia--do you know history--" She put it back again because he did not answer, letting his mind, a curious one, torment itself.

"You love things very much, don't you?" she would question because she knew that he had a passion for one thing only. She kept placing new ladders beneath his feet, only to saw them off at the next rung, making him nothing more than a nervous irritable experiment. He was uneasy, like one given food to smell and not to taste, and for a while he had not wanted to taste, and then curiosity began, and he wanted to, and he also wanted to escape, and he could do neither.

Well, after he had married her, what then? Satisfy her whim and where would he be? He would be nothing, neither what he had been nor what other people were. This seemed to him, at times, her wish--a sort of place between lying down and standing up, a cramped position, a slow death. A curious woman.

This same evening he had looked at her attentively for the first time. Her hair was rather pretty, though too mousy, yet just in the nape of the neck, where it met the lawn of the collar it was very attractive. She walked well for a little woman too.

Sometimes she would pretend to be lively, would run a little, catch herself at it, as if she had not intended to do it, and calm down once more, or creeping up to him, stroking his arm, talking to him, she would walk beside him softly, slowly, that he might not step out, that he would have to crawl across the carpet.

Once he had thought of trying her with honesty, with the truth of the situation. Perhaps she would give him an honest answer, and he had tried.

"Now Miss Freda--just a word--what are you trying to do. What is it you want? What is there in me that can interest you? I want you to tell me--I want to know--I have got to ask someone, and I haven't anyone to ask but you."

And for a moment she almost relented, only to discover that she could not if she had wished. She did not know always what she meant herself.

"I'll tell you," she said, hoping that this, somehow, might lead her into the truth, for herself, if not for him, but it did not. "You are a little nervous, you will get used to it--you will even grow to like it. Be patient. You will learn soon enough that there is nothing in the world so agreeable as climbing, changing."

"Well," he said trying to read her, "And then?"

"That's all, you will regret the stables in the end--that's all." Her nostrils quivered. A light came into her eyes, a desire to defy, to be defied.

And then on this last night he had done something terrible, he had made a blunder. There had been a party. The guests, a lot of them, were mostly drunk, or touched with drink. And he too had too much. He remembered having thrown his arms about a tall woman, gowned in black with loose shoulder straps, dragging her through a dance. He had even sung a bit of a song, madly, wildly, horribly. And suddenly he had been brought up sharp by the fact that no one thought his behavior strange, that no one thought him presumptuous. Freda's mother had not even moved or dropped the kitten from her lap where it sat, its loud resolute purr shaking the satin of her gown.

And he felt that Freda had got him where she wanted him, between two rungs. Going directly up to her he said:

"You are ridiculous!" and twirled his moustache, spitting into the garden.

And he knew nothing about what happened until he found himself in the shrubbery crawling toward the corral, through the dusk and the dampness of the leaves, carrying his cane, making sure of his hat, looking up at the stars.

And now he knew why he had come. He was with his horses again. His eyes, pressed against the bars, stared in. The black stallion in the lead had been his special pet, a rough animal, but kindly, knowing. And here they were once more, tearing up the grass, galloping about in the night like a ball-room full of real people, people who wanted to do things, who did what they wanted to do.

He began to crawl through the bars, slowly, deftly, and when half way through he paused, thinking.

Presently he went on again, and drawing himself into the corral, his hat and cane thrown in before him, he lay there mouth to the grass.

They were still running, but less madly, one of them had gone up the Willow Road leading into a farther pasture, in a flare of dust, through which it looked immense and faint.

On the top of the hill three or four of the horses were standing, testing the weather. He would mount one, he would ride away, he would escape. And his horses, the things he knew, would be his escape.

Bareback, he thought, would be like the days when he had taken what he could from the rush of the streets, joy, exhilaration, life, and he was not afraid. He wanted to stand up, to cry aloud.

And he saw ten or twelve of them rounding the curve, and he did stand up.

They did not seem to know him, did not seem to know what to make of him, and he stared at them wondering. He did not think of his white shirt front, his sudden arising, the darkness, their excitement. Surely they would know, in a moment more.

Wheeling, flaring their wet nostrils, throwing up their manes, striking the earth in a quandary, they came on, whinnied faintly, and he knew what it was to be afraid.

He had never been afraid and he went down on his knees. With a new horror in his heart he damned them. He turned his eyes up, but he could not open them. He thought rapidly, calling on Freda in his heart, speaking tenderly, promising.

A flare of heat passed his throat, and descended into his bosom.

"I want to live. I can do it--damn it--I can do it. I can forge ahead, make my mark."

He forgot where he was for a moment and found new pleasure in this spoken admission, this new rebellion. He moved with the faint shaking of the earth like a child on a woman's lap.

The upraised hoofs of the first horse missed him, but the second did not.

And presently the horses drew apart, nibbling here and there, switching their tails, avoiding a patch of tall grass.