To the angels on horseback

There's a great deal about horses I don't like—the goofy teeth; the sentimentality they inspire in daughters; and their glee at pooling in public. I have mounted in earnest only twice.

The first was quite a small, mar­malade-coloured horse. The advance party of trekking girls who had reported the emergency argued if Tiger was the mount of choice, "He's fast", "But he doesn't like..." pigtails objected (later I found out it was "men"). Fast—that was the ticket. I'd driven like the wind to meet the riders at a viewpoint on the mountain. "You can ride, doctor?" Well, I'd seen western films. I was hoisted into the saddle, medical bag wedged where the rescued heroine should be. Pigtails, on a grey, set a cracking pace. So did Tiger in pursuit, once I recalled that the accelerator is shaking giddyups.

In the distance where a cairn defaced the lumbar declivity of our recumbent mountain (Carn ingle—the mountain of angels—peaks to her raised head, neolithic fortifications her hairdo), pig­tails dismounted to herald the emer­gency service's arrival. Tiger was in full flight. Where was the brake? Ah, yes, you pull in the reins and "whoohay"!

Tiger, stopped; I catapulted over the horse's neck. The emergency service was bruised but intact; the emergency equipment was swim­ming in broken eggs, a reward from a farm visit. Tiger was nuzzling and scooping an omelette of otoscope, dress­ings, blood bottles, swabs, and my favourite stethoscope.

A while later, the discrete borough within which I practised elected me Mayor. Always discover the unwritten ordi­nances of any public-service under­taking. I did not. On a day in August, the Mayor leads the Corporation in beating its bounds, "Always on horse­back?" "It's tradition". Fruitless to argue with tradition. I ordered a docile charger from the Castle and took instruction. "Your knees" pigtails screeched in desperation, "grip them".

After three eventful outings, I was con­sidering a diplomatic attack of hayfever, but my funk was overcome by anticipa­tion of the afternoon's highlight—at the mountain viewpoint, against a venera­ble boundary stone, some boys were to be beaten by the mayor, so that they would remember their limits.

Knees gripped, I led the parade in regalia—a scarlet robe trimmed with rabbit, lace ruff, gilt chain, kid gloves, and a rather fetching cocked hat. We paraded along the estuary and round the lime kilns. When it came to winding uphill, it became apparent that the horse was not happy with its mount. I gripped on until in sight of the expec­tant crowd at the viewpoint, when the beast rid itself of me with a convulsive squirm, rear, and whinney.

I took a stick to two boys with rather more vim than the ritual required (they had laughed, you see). Honour was sat­isfied. The beast reckoned so too, and was shamelessly obedient for the rest of the tour. At the square pigtails exclaimed her crush, fretfully examining it for any damage. Exaggerations of my tumbles (not, needless to say, of my pluck) amused carousers in the public house.

But both exploits were foolhardy. In my time in the borough, two people I knew were seriously injured when thrown from horseback. One was irre­trievably brain-damaged, and the other died. Trust nothing, children, with four legs even less than with two—unless, or course, you are between the ages of nine and fifteen and have pigtails. And then, please, always wear a safety helmet.

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