

THE HORSE

by

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Olivia put her head in her hands. Another exhausting argument with Charlotte on the subject of the horse had just been completed but, yet again, not resolved. *Why, oh why had they sent her to the expensive grammar school half an hours drive away on the urban fringe, when there was a perfectly good high school on the corner of their street?* It was a rhetorical question, she knew the reason. David, her husband, playing lord of his little kingdom as usual. He had decreed it, so that was that.

All very well, but he hadn't factored in bloody horses, and not just any old horse either. The animal's requirements must include an ability to 'win competitions'. It needed to be as close as possible to the one that bore Charlotte's best friend, Emma, to victory on many a weekend outing.

Now Olivia was no expert on horses, but she had a distinct feeling that they did not just win competitions without human assistance. Emma had been riding since she could walk. Graduating through the ranks of the pony club to the exalted levels of official 'Young Rider' state competitions. Charlotte, on the other hand was now a veteran of approximately fifteen expensive riding lessons and obviously considered that it was time to strut her stuff on her own conveyance. 'Because she couldn't go any further on a school horse.'

Even the cost of riding lessons had been a disagreeable revelation. If that wasn't bad enough, apparently they could not possibly be carried out without a pair of riding pants made in Germany and bought 'on special' for a mere \$300, held in place by a diamante studded leather belt which, luckily, had been made in Australia and was therefore a giveaway at \$130. Then there were the boots, leather chaps, two elegant shirts and gloves. All purchased at exorbitant prices. If only she had wanted to take up skiing!

As a woman experienced in the ways of the world. She had a growing fear that if all these accoutrements must be purchased merely to have lessons, then the actual act of owning a horse would involve an astronomical level of expenditure. In this conjecture, as many a horse owner has found out - could it be described, to their cost - she was completely correct.

Here was David now, entering the house in his usual fashion, banging the front door against the door stop protecting the wall. "Hello girls!"

This was one of his 'family' evenings. Somewhat of a rarity. He ran a successful engineering company which seemed to involve much dining out with clients and many nights away conducting business deals. Charlotte had obviously waylaid him in the hall,

she could hear her voice whining on, and his soothing replies. She knew the battle was lost. She wondered how much money the business was making.

Since Olivia was required, perforce, to transport Charlotte to her lessons and wait on an uncomfortable wooden bench until they were completed, she had been introduced to the instructor, Stuart. He seemed to be a nice young man and there appeared to be nothing shifty or underhand about his demeanour. But, appearances can be deceiving. So, after David had announced that Charlotte must have the horse 'if she really wanted one', she arranged to meet Emma's mother and consult her on the advisability of calling upon Stuart's experience for the purchase of the animal. After all, neither she nor David were competent to perform this function and they would probably end up with a 'spavined nag', a term she was sure that she had heard used in many an Edwardian novel.

Emma's mother, despite being a private school parent, was quite pleasant and down to earth, having once been a secretary to her husband. On a previous occasion she had confided that, he too, seemed to 'dine out' clients on rather too many occasions. However he was a good father, an adequate husband and a generous provider, and she had decided to make no further enquiries on the subject.

On the topic of Stuart she was equally forthcoming. Appearances were not deceptive, he was nice and reasonably honest, to the extent that she was sure that he would not suggest a horse that would send Charlotte on a one way trip to the morgue. On the other hand the finances of a riding instructor were somewhat precarious and he would certainly want to 'make a buck' out of everything that he did for Olivia. Fifteen lessons were not enough incentive for him to give the family any favours.

Forewarned, Olivia approached him after the next lesson, while Charlotte was hosing the horse down, scraping it and putting on a rug. Horse management being for the stable, a convenient and labour reducing adjunct to the lessons.

She was impressed by his apparent honesty when, glancing over his shoulder to check that Charlotte was still occupied, he confided that her riding was not up to the standard to compete in public, let alone win anything. He hoped that she didn't mind him saying that? Well no, she didn't, but nevertheless, under the circumstances, some sort of passible horse must be found.

He knew of an eighteen year old warmblood for sale that had competed in dressage up to Advanced. A level he assured Olivia, that Charlotte would certainly never reach. It had also done a bit of eventing in the past. Olivia had no idea what he was talking about.

The horse was being retired from active competition due to minor arthritic changes in one hock rendering it unsuitable for its former demanding schedule. It wasn't lame, and he was certain that it would be a more than adequate mount. It was stabled, fat and shiny and Charlotte would be impressed. His fee would be five hundred dollars to Olivia and one thousand to the owners, who would be spared the cost and frustration of advertising a

horse that would certainly not pass a vet check. Only one problem, the horse was located in a rural city four hours drive away.

This seemed a small inconvenience to Olivia. After all, who else could she turn to? Eight hours driving and a one night hotel bill wasn't going to prevent her displaying this paragon of equine virtue to Charlotte.

Lucre Park Maximillian III, or Max for short, was indeed a very attractive animal, even Olivia could see that. He leaned his large noble head over the door of his box and accepted gifts of carrots with good manners and dignity. He was led around in circles, his feet picked up as a demonstration of his co-operation in all things, and then was tied up and saddled.

The owners had been forewarned by Stuart of what to expect, and had come up with a plan that they thought would benefit everyone, Max included. But first they had to convince Olivia and Charlotte to buy him. Max was taken to the indoor arena, its solid walls precluding any possibility of equine escape. Robert, the owner, got on and put Max through his paces, as indeed, he had done for an hour earlier that morning until Max had been dripping sweat and quite subdued. Max bent his neck and stretched down, trotted sideways, went from a walk to a canter and back again and even performed something mysterious known as flying changes.

Charlotte mounted and didn't put on a bad display, all things considered. Maybe the reins were a little long, a few corners were cut and Max did seem a little confused occasionally, but nothing too serious. Charlotte dismounted of her own volition and proceeded to hug and kiss Max. Olivia could see that the deal was, effectively, done.

Much to Olivia's surprise two non-eventful months past as she forked out enormous amounts of money on extra lessons, shoeing, rugs, a saddle, bridle, and, of course, agistment at the school, at a discount rate for pupils of \$200 a week.

Charlotte did seem to spend most of her lessons on the end of a long rope to 'develop her seat' and she was still too afraid to canter on the enormous Max, but it could have been worse. In fact Max seemed to be adapting quite well and appeared to be resigned to the rather confusing situation in which he found himself. After all he did still get well fed and the accommodation was to his liking and that is all that really matters to a horse.

But it is the way of life that such desirable situations cannot last. Eventually the dreaded day dawned when Charlotte was to go to her first competition. Emma was competing 'officially' but there was also two arenas at this particular event dedicated to riders of a lower standard. Quite a bit lower it seemed, as Charlotte was entered in two Preparatory tests where, fortunately, even cantering was not required. Emma's mother was towing the horse float and providing free transport. Olivia nearly kissed her hand at the mention of the word 'free'.

Unfortunately Emma had to 'warm up' for her first test at the same time that Charlotte was required to mount, thus leaving Charlotte to the somewhat amateur ministrations of the two mums. Emma was considerably concerned about her friend, after all she had seen Charlotte ride, so she made sure Max was saddled correctly before she left and instructed Charlotte to lunge him first before getting on.

Charlotte managed to get the bridle on after two attempts and then attach the lunge line and lead Max to a relatively open space. Unfortunately, due to some oversight, this part of her equine education seemed to have been missed. She was always on Max when he was lunged and it seemed so easy with Stuart on the other end of the line. This time things didn't seem to go so well.

Max marched off as expected and completed about half a circle, but on receiving no further instructions, put down his head to rub his nose meditatively on his leg and then began to munch the grass. Charlotte was armed with a long lunging whip, which she flicked in his general direction as she had seen Stuart do. Unfortunately the end made rather painful contact with Max's rump and he leapt forward and then spun round to face Charlotte staring accusingly.

Charlotte dropped the whip and ran up to kiss and stroke him until he appeared placated. One further equally ineffective attempt was made at the lunging, and then Charlotte decided that she really didn't need to do it anyway, and she may as well get on. With one mum holding his head and the other the stirrup, this was accomplished without difficulty and a slow but stately procession proceeded in the direction of the warm up arena.

Emma had forgotten to remind Charlotte that for her lowly tests she was required to warm up in a different area behind the horse floats. But in any case fate was about to decree that Charlotte was to be spared the wrath of more competent riders practicing their flying changes. Not far from their destination a woman with a pusher and a small dog appeared suddenly from between two floats. Max, who was essentially flying solo, took the decision to make a quick sideways step to the left to avoid a collision. Charlotte lost her balance, slipped sideways and clung desperately to Max's mane. Unfortunately she also brought up her right leg bedecked with a brand new gold spur and gave him a painful, and to Max, entirely undeserved, dig in the ribs.

Max did what any reasonable horse would do at this insult, he jumped sideways. Charlotte, still attempting to clutch frantically at any part of his anatomy that she could reach, slid slowly but irrevocably towards earth. There was a tiny cracking noise and she sat up grabbing her wrist and howled.

Olivia ran to Charlotte, Emma's mum ran to catch Max, which wasn't a very difficult task. The St John ambulance man ran towards all of them. The lady with the pusher discretely vanished.

Charlotte's wrist had to be set under sedation so she spent the night in hospital being visited by Emma and her mum and one of their other friends, Sophie. Sophie played tennis and had just won a silver trophy. She showed them all the photos.

The next day, in the car on the way home, Charlotte declared that she might take up tennis instead of riding as her preferred school sport. Olivia breathed a sigh of relief. Charlotte also declared that she loved Max so much that she might be too upset to be present to see him being taken away. Olivia, at this juncture, could have pointed out that horses didn't normally just get 'taken away' unless it was to the knackers, but maternal affection made her forbear.

In reality, there was no problem at all in disposing of Max. His owners had agreed to buy him back for three thousand dollars less than the price paid, provided he was returned in good condition within six months. Max was a nice horse, a good, kind horse, and they had calculated that the sum of money would keep him in retirement for much of the rest of his life and they could foot the bill for the rest. A suitable generous paddock with a largely enclosed walk-in shed, should the weather be inclement, had been set aside for the purpose on their property. They felt that they had arranged things very satisfactorily.

So it was that at 10am five days later, Olivia found herself alone with Max in the school equestrian complex, waiting for the horse transport that was to bear him back to his old home. Stuart - how she had come to love that man - was genuinely not available to help her, but had given advice on how to hold Max and where to stand to avoid any accidents. Of her own volition she had purchased a one kilogram bag of carrots from the supermarket specifically for the purpose of placating him should he become difficult. The truck was running half an hour late, but this was not a problem as he continued to crop the grass contentedly accepting with grace the intermittently proffered carrots.

It was rather enjoyable standing in the pleasantly warm morning sun with nothing to do, nothing but think. She employed the time in making rough mental calculations of how much this diversion into equestrian pursuits had cost their household. With the lessons, extra lessons, agistment and all the accoutrements required, not to mention the cost of Max, now largely refunded, she felt that they had got away quite lightly just under \$15,000. David knew about the refund on the horse, so it was to be paid to him, but he had forked out money for everything else with barely a thought, and now obviously considered it 'written off'.

Stuart - how she had come to love that man - had agreed to sell everything for her and only take ten percent as his fee. He assured her that the saddle alone should return at least \$3000, being hardly used. Since David had not bothered to acquaint himself with the fact that such a thing as a saddle even existed, she felt it quite legitimate that all monies resulting from the sale, and indeed all the sales, should be deposited in her own private bank account which she had opened for that purpose.

She made another resolution there and then. David had dragged them into this mess, then washed his hands of it and left everything to her as usual. He was weak, quite pathetic, she now thought, and fallible. He was lucky to have her as a wife. In future, she

would make more enquiries about these client dinners. There was no reason at all why she could not call in caterers and host them herself in their own palatial home. What he would think of this arrangement and what ripples it may make in the smooth lake of their marriage, who could say? She found she could face whatever the future might hold in that department with equanimity. In fact, standing here in the sunshine with Max, she felt greater resolve, greater contentment than she could remember for many years.

Ah, here it was at last, the huge truck negotiating the turn into the grounds. Max looked up. Perhaps he sensed liberation? She pulled out the last carrot and held it out to him. While he ate it she kissed his soft velvet nose as she had seen Charlotte doing. 'Max', she said, 'you're a good boy.'