

THE OLD HORSE



The ownership of any animal brings with it an unavoidable responsibility for its upkeep, health and happiness. And, inevitably, if we hold on to our old favourites, there is the ultimate responsibility of making the decision which brings an end to their lives.

Kipling, who knew a lot about the strengths and weaknesses of men and women asked the unanswerable question

*“Why, in heaven, before we are there,
Should we give our hearts to a dog to tear”*

In the cold light of logic and reason it is an unjustifiable and unproductive tearing of the emotions; but then, thanks be to God, the human being is not yet reduced to the insensate efficiency of the computer. And so we give our hearts over and over again, losing a part of them every time we suffer them to be assaulted by the last, feeble wag of a doggy tail, or, for that matter, by the glazing depths beyond the great brown eye of a horse.

At least, that is how it is with me and, I imagine, with many of you, too. The decision to put an old horse down at the end of his days is not made lightly, but, however filled with anguish, it is a duty which must be met – it is the last service we can render to our servant.

Yet I'm afraid there are those that allow sentiment to obscure reality, shrinking from the final step and persuading ourselves that the old horse will be happy to spend the evening of his life at liberty in the paddock. So he may, whilst the sun shines, the grass is lush and there is shelter from the irritation of the flies. But what does he suffer, alone on a bare, bleak acre, when the Winter's wind and the wetting rain penetrate to the core of his aged and aching bones?

Others, even more resolute (or cowardly) commit the old horse to the mercies of "a good home". It may be a good home, of course, where he will in time get over the traumatic severance from the surroundings he has known for most of his life. He may have companions of his own kind and knowledgeable owners who will realise that he will need much extra care and feeding if he is to maintain his condition in his old age; owners who will, also, not shrink from the last service they can perform for him.

There are such people and such homes but there are also the out and out, the do-good sentimentalists, whose sincerity and good-will cannot be doubted but who are woefully deficient in knowledge, experience and, sometimes, the wherewithal to provide adequately for an old animal. Meaning to be kind they are infinitely cruel and their ignorance in no way exonerates them.

Finally there are those who will sell their old horses in the market place when they can no longer serve a useful purpose, denying to their servants, for the pittance of Judas, the quiet end, devoid of fear and panic, to which their labours have entitled them.

Feed your own horse well and wisely in his declining years, when neither his teeth nor his digestion are quite what they were. Provide him with shelter in the Summer and the freedom to browse on good grass whilst the sun brings ease.

Then, my friends, when the green grass has lost its taste; when the joints stiffen incurably; when the eyes are gummed with rheum and the charity of the sun no longer warms; then take your old companion and in his familiar stable, seeing, if only darkly, the face he has known so well and soothed by the voice he has learnt to trust, there help your old horse to take the last step to "the endless prairie where the grasses are always green and sweet, and where only men who have loved horses in this world are allowed to enter"

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We kept him until he died . . . and sat with him during the long last minutes when a horse comes closest to being human.

C J J Mullen