

The Animal Lovers Bedtime Reader

A DAY AT THE RACES

It's October. The air is crisp, the foliage a rainbow of colors and the social event of the year in Far Hills, New Jersey is a day at the races. Every one, and I mean every one, goes. Tents are pitched, caterers are brought in and on Sunday morning every tailgate in every station wagon is dropped to produce a picnic fantasy.

The competition is stiff. Ice sculptures, tuxedoed waiters and fountains of champagne. But fancy as they are, we are the show-stoppers. We arrive in horse-drawn carriages.

Our assembly is quite impressive. Four-in-hands, pairs and singles turned out in the finest sporting carriage to celebrate the day. Since we are the "attraction", we are escorted to the infield of the steeplechase course where races will be run later in the day. After the fifth race, we will parade before the crowd before leaving. Until then, we could picnic and chat with the race goers. It really is a lovely way to pass an autumn day.

My husband and I were each driving a pair of Morgan horses, mine being quite green and this being their first public outing. I had two very capable friends riding with me in the carriage, Olivia and her husband Rudy.

Such outings with carriages are very social. Kinda like a moving party. The bigger the carriage, the bigger the party. The horses seem to understand that once we have stopped, there is no need to do much more than cock a leg and take a nap. They have been to these parties before, no rush to leave.

Rudy was standing by the horses' heads, chatting with friends. I was balancing a plate full of gourmet goodies in one hand and the reins in the other. We were just settling into our lunch as the grounds prepared for the first race.

"They're off!"

From our carriages, we could easily see the horses start the course and progress over each jump. Steeple chasing is a very old sport. The horses race a turf course while negotiating hurdles up to three feet in height. It's very exciting to watch, as each hurdle can change the place of the field and it is only the boldest and fastest horse that wins.

At the third hurdle, my near (left) horse, Beau, suddenly developed a keen interest in steeple chasing. My off (right) horse was still napping. As the field blew by, Beau's nervous system blew a circuit and he lit up like a Christmas tree.

He knew, deep down in his heart, that he wanted to be a steeplechase horse too. He did not care that a) he was attached to a carriage, b) another horse was attached to him, and c) he didn't know the first thing about steeple chasing.

By now, the other horse was wondering what was so wrong with Beau and was considering disconnecting herself from him as quickly as possible. To anyone that drives, this is known as a "situation". I had been in situations before and knew that this one could go from bad to worse very easily. Throwing my half-eaten plate of food to the wind, I made the decision to not wait around for the fifth race. It was time for us to make an exit.

Unfortunately, the exit off the infield was in the same direction that the field of horses had last been seen. Convinced that he was truly going to get a crack at joining them, Beau displayed considerable enthusiasm at heading in that direction. His pair mate, still wondering what this was all about, decided to join him in his fervor. I had my hands full.

A wired pair of horses is nothing to take lightly. While I had them under control, I had them just under control. I was pulling against the force of not one, but two powerful horses, and they were pulling against me. It's not brute force that controls horses, rather a series of communicative tugs on the reins, tugs that mean something to the horse. You hope. Sometimes, like this time, they just can't seem to concentrate on what you are saying to them, kind of like controlling a young child on Christmas morning. Good luck.

I was hoping that the quarter mile or so through the parking complex would settle them. Not so. Olivia's husband muttered something about my biceps and trapezoids and not wanted to meet me in a dark alley. I knew he meant that as a compliment, but I was wondering if my arms could be pulled out of their sockets by creatures outweighing me two hundred to one.

I could picture me a year from now, driving with the reins in my toes as people quietly asked what happened to me.

"Oh, she had her arms ripped out one day at the races. Kept the horses in control though, heck of a horsewoman."

The exit way from the parking lot was an under pass which merged to a traffic light on a major highway. It afforded little room for an unsuspecting motorist going sixty miles per hour to react to a horse drawn vehicle going seven miles per hour.

The entranceway, however, offered a clear view of the highway right to the traffic light. If I timed it right, I could scoot across without having to stop. Stopping, so it seemed, was not an option. So, I went for the entranceway, ignoring all of the "wrong way" signs posted along the drive. I was committed to my plan when the police car swung off the highway heading right for us.

Olivia didn't see him at first because she was wondering if my blouse seam was going to split up my back and cause us further embarrassment. The cruiser drove up to us, the cop rolled down his window and he leaned out and said with authority,

"Pull over!"

"Pull over?" It seemed so ridiculous that I repeated what he said.

"Right", the cop demanded. "Pull over!"

The horses weren't at all interested in pulling anything but my arms out. My failure to "pull over" caused the officer considerable distress. He put his car in reverse, matching the speed of the horses, who I had finally reduced to a slow bouncy trot, to make his next demand.

"Just what do you think you are doing?"

I couldn't answer that; I was so focused on keeping us alive. Olivia saved me by outlining our plan.

We were informed that we could not, and would not, be able to continue our route as we were violating countless rules of the road. No doubt we were. The horses remained at their slow, bouncy trot with no intention of going any slower. He leaned out and said with authority,

"Stop!"

I heard Rudy snicker.

"I am very sorry officer," I tried to explain, "but this is the closest I can get to a stop,"

"Then turn around", demanded the officer.

That was not an option either. The curb was too high and the road too narrow to negotiate a turn in a carriage pulled by two bouncing horses. I could see we were really upsetting this guy, his face was getting redder and redder.

"Sorry, again", I replied. We were halfway to the light by now.

Fuming at our blatant disrespect for his badge, his shiny black and white cruiser and his oath to protect civilians, he blustered,

"If you insist on continuing, I am going to give you a ticket!"

Taken aback by his demeanor, Olivia could not restrain herself. "A ticket? What are you going to write on it? 1901 Studebaker, two-horse power with failing brakes going the wrong way out of a parking lot?"

We started to giggle.

Seeing that this was going nowhere, he exercised good judgment for the first time since he opened his mouth; he left.

We hit the light just in time to cross on the green. Under the admiring eyes of motorists on the highway, we looked like the vision of tranquility.

“Oh look dear, there goes one of the Amish buggies out for a Sunday drive!”

Two miles down the road the pair forgot what it was that they were in such a rush about and relaxed into a lovely trot that carried us all the way back to our waiting trailer. My arms remained in their sockets and the day ended on a pleasant note.

We had a great story to relate to our friends when they rejoined us after the races. They all agreed that getting the ticket would have been great fun at traffic court.