

# Black Beauty

## Chapter 17 Reuben Smith

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When York went away on business, a man named Reuben Smith was left in charge of the stables. He was a gentle and clever man, and he knew how to care for horses. But Reuben Smith had one problem—he drank too much. He did not drink all the time. He could be steady for weeks or months, but then he would break loose and get very drunk. At these times he was a disgrace to himself, a terror to his wife, and a nuisance to everyone around him. York knew about Reuben's problem, but they had talked it over and Reuben promised that he would not touch another drop of alcohol as long as he worked at the stable. York trusted him, and so he thought Reuben could be trusted to fill his place while he was away.

It was now early April and the family was expected home some time in May. I was chosen to pull the carriage to town to run some errands. Reuben drove the carriage at a steady pace. When we reached the town, I was sent to a stable to be fed and rested. A nail in one of my front shoes had come loose, but the stable groom did not notice it. After a few hours, Reuben returned. He said we would not be going home for another hour, since he had met some old friends and wanted to spend some time with them. By this time, the groom had noticed the loose nail in my shoe and asked Reuben if he should do something about it.

“No,” said Reuben, “that will be all right until we get home.”

He spoke in a very loud, offhand way, and I thought it was unlike him not to see about the shoe, since he was usually so careful and concerned about these things. He also seemed to be in a bad mood and had a sour expression on his face.

He finally returned about nine o'clock in the evening. It was obvious that he had been drinking. We started out on the journey home while it was still very dark. Before we were out of the town, Reuben began to lead me in a fast gallop. The roads were very stony, and at this fast pace, my shoe became so loose that it fell off. If Reuben had not been drunk, he would have noticed this right away. But instead, he urged me to go faster and faster until my foot began to ache terribly. The hoof broke and split down to the quick, and the inside was badly cut from the sharp stones.

I could not go on. The pain was just too much to bear. I stumbled and fell with great force on both my knees. Reuben fell off my back, and since we were

going so fast he fell with a loud thud, for I thought I could hear his body hit the ground. I soon recovered my balance and limped to the side of the road. The moon had just risen, and I could see Reuben lying a few yards away. He did not move, but I could hear him groaning. I stood there by the road in great pain. It was a calm April Night, and it made me think of the summer nights long ago, when I used to lie beside my mother in the green, pleasant meadow.

as the pain grew worse, I listened for the sound of footsteps, or horses or wheels. I hoped someone would come soon to help us.

## **Chapter 18** How It Ended

It must have been almost midnight when I finally heard the sound of horses' feet. As the sound came nearer and nearer I was sure I could hear Ginger's step. As soon as I was positive it was her, I neighed loudly. The carriage came slowly over the stones and stopped at the dark, motionless figure that lay upon the ground.

One of the men jumped down and held up Reuben's limp arm.

"He's dead," he said. "Feel how cold his hands are."

They lifted him up, but there was no life. His hair was soaked with blood. when they laid him down again, they looked at me. They noticed my cut knees and my bad foot. The two men soon figured out what had happened. They realized that Reuben had caused his own death by drinking too much.

After they talked for a while, we began the slow, sad journey home. I limped and hobbled with great pain. At last I reached the stable, and my knees were wrapped in wet cloths and my foot was tied up with medication. I managed to lie down in the soft straw and sleep in spite of the great pain.

The next day the horse doctor came and examined my legs. He said that he hoped I would not be spoiled by the fall, but even so, I would never lose the scars on my knees. They did their best to cure me, but it took a long time and was very painful. Scar tissue came up in my knees, and it was burned out with an ointment. When at last it was healed, they put a blistering fluid on the front of both knees to take all the hair off. They had some reason for this, and I suppose they knew what they were doing.

Since Reuben's death was so sudden and there were not witnesses, an inquest was held. The innkeeper testified that Reuben had been very drunk when he left town that night and was riding at a fast gallop. My shoe was picked up among the stones, so the cause of death was quite clear and I was cleared of all blame.

## **Chapter 19** Ruined and Going Downhill

As soon as my knees healed, I was turned out to a small meadow for a month or two. No other animals were there, and although I enjoyed the freedom and the sweet grass, I was very lonely. Ginger and I had become good friends, and now I missed her a great deal. I often neighed when I heard horses passing on the road, but I rarely got an answer. Then one morning the gate was opened, and Ginger trotted towards me. I whinnied joyfully and ran to meet her. But I soon found that she had not been sent to the meadow just to keep me company. Her story would be too long to tell, but it ended with her being ruined by hard riding. Now she had been sent here to see what rest and some freedom would do for her.

Ginger looked at me sadly and said, "Here we are, ruined in the prime of our youth and strength. Life is very hard for us."

We both felt that we were not what we had been. However, that did not spoil the pleasure we had in each other's company. We did not gallop about as we one did, but we fed on the sweet grass and stood under one of the shady lime trees with our heads close to each other.

One day we saw our master come into the meadow. He had just returned from a long trip. York was with him, and they examined us carefully. Our master was very upset.

"These horses were given to me by my friend, who thought they would find a good home with me. Now they have been ruined. Ginger should stay here for a few months and then we'll see what she'll be like. But the black one must be sold. It is too bad, but I cannot have knees like that in my stable."

York urged our master to sell me to a man he knew who would treat me well and would not mind my appearance.

So I was sent by train to another town. When I reached the end of my journey, I found myself in a comfortable stable, but it was not airy or large. My new owner kept many horses and carriages with he rented out by the day.

Sometimes his own men drove, and other times the horse and carriage were rented to ladies and gentlemen who drove themselves.

Before this time, I always had been driven by people who at least knew how to drive. But in this place I was driven by all sorts of people. One time, I was rented by a man and his family. He flopped the reins as we started and of course gave me several cuts with the whip, even though I was keeping up a good pace. There were a great many loose stones in the road, and I got a stone stuck in my front hoof. A good driver would have noticed that something was wrong after I had gone two or three paces. This man was so busy laughing and talking that he noticed nothing. After we went over half a mile, he finally became aware that I was lame. A friendly farmer stopped us on the road and removed the stone from my aching hoof. Experiences such as this were common to me while I was hired out as a job horse.

After a few months of this rough treatment, I was rented to a gentleman who clearly knew how to drive a horse. He seemed pleased with me, and I arched my neck and set off at my best pace. It seemed like old times again, and it made me feel quite happy.

This gentleman took a great liking to me, and after trying me several times with a saddle he asked my master to sell me to a friend of his who wanted a safe, good-natured horse for riding. And so it came to pass that I was sold to Mr. Barry that summer.