

Of Horses and Men



John Mullinder

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The morning excursions had been far more exciting than he'd expected: sliding down slippery limestone rocks and plunging waterfalls; jumping off a sheer cliff to a sparkling pool, some 30 feet below; zip-lining at breathtaking speed through the forest canopy of the jungle. It had been fun. It was the next part of the tourist package he was concerned about: the horse riding. Even though the tour guide had assured them that everything would be perfectly OK (*tener cojones* or something like that).



Chris had had very little to do with horses. Sure, they had been on his uncles' farms when he was growing up as a kid, and his brother and niece had been active in a pony club. But beyond having his photo taken on a horse once or twice, he'd never really ridden one before. Did plodding along a sandy beach on a placid donkey, or sitting high up on one of those ornate elephant seats, count for anything? Probably not. And this was much more than walking. This would be cantering and galloping for certain.

So he was slightly nervous when the gringo bus pulled into the ranch in a large cloud of rolling dust, and the bunch of mostly white and young *turistas* clambered off: Germans, Dutch, Belgians, Canadians, Americans, Jamaicans. Once they had fastened their helmets (*warning number one!*), the tour guide proceeded to demonstrate how to mount and steer the beasts. When it became obvious that he wouldn't actually be riding with the group (something about having a bad back), Chris should have seen *warning number two*.

By this time, however, he had already been invited to saddle, and was trying to find the stirrup for his right foot. It had happened so quickly that he and the horse hadn't been officially introduced yet. He didn't even know what sex the horse was! And it was a little late now, and too dangerous, to lean over and investigate. A stallion would stick out, wouldn't it? Must be female.

Of Horses and Men

So he gave her a name and introduced himself. Ana meet Chris.

Chris meet Ana. And he stroked and patted her neck to reassure

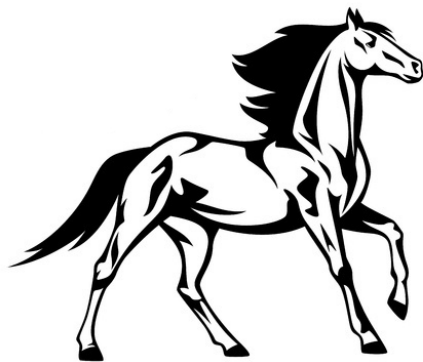
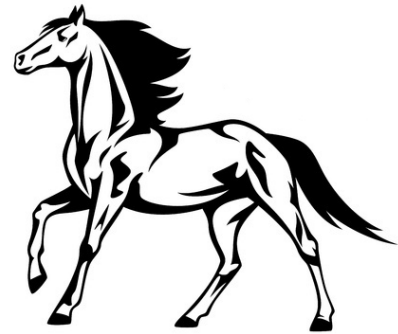
her that he was a good guy, and to please look after him. She

totally ignored him, an outcome he had occasionally suffered at

the hands of other female animals. But then it suddenly dawned

on him how ridiculous it was to try and have a conversation with the back of a horse's head. No wonder

he was getting nowhere.



And yet he *did* want to know more about this particular horse.

He was entrusting his life to her, wasn't he? Was she moody?

Had she been maltreated? Did she bear grudges? Did she hate

gringos? After what he'd read about Christopher Columbus

recently, a big man in these parts some 500 years ago, a grudge

wouldn't have surprised him.

If just half of it were true, the man was a thug. Burning people alive, encouraging slavery, fully aware of

eight and nine-year-old native girls being 'purchased' and not doing anything about it. Quite a different

image from the schoolbooks he'd read years ago, all glowing about the great *conquistador* sailing the

ocean blue.

As he waited patiently for the last of the gringos to mount, Chris hoped that Ana hadn't somehow

inherited a generational memory of those nasty times. Was that even possible? He had no idea. He was

beginning to realise just how little he knew about horses. And what little Ana knew about him.

Of Horses and Men

The ride started gently enough, allowing Chris to become familiar with the steady rise and fall of the horse beneath him. But he soon began to feel the early stirrings of discomfort, *down there*. His junk was moving around just a little too freely, nudging up against the hard leather of the saddle.



Chris had seen men riding before, of course, in movie westerns, at race courses, at equestrian events, and it had all looked pretty smooth going. But as Ana broke into a trot, the family jewels banged against the saddle with increasing rapidity and velocity. This was not even vaguely pleasurable, this was starting to hurt. The jangling of the dangling.

He had worn a protective cup before, when playing baseball and cricket, but Chris had never considered that he might need one for horse riding. And it was not as if he could now just suddenly yell out: “Hang on a minute, folks, stop the horses. I need a cup.”

The ranch probably didn’t have one anyway. And even if they found a *used* one, he didn’t really want to think too much about where it might have been before. No, he would have to tough this one out.

There must be some practical way, some technique, to avoid this pain, he thought, or no men would ride. So he tried to anticipate Ana’s movement, leaning high and forward, hoping that his manly parts would be drawn into a safer, more protected orbit, like a teapot, spout in front. It didn’t work. His tea bags continued to flail out behind, dangerously exposed to the thump-thump-thump of the saddle.

Perhaps Ana sensed his inexperience and pain, and maybe she *did* bear a grudge against gringos, men, whatever. Or maybe she was just being a plain old horse, for she suddenly surged into a mad canter, rapidly pitching him momentarily skyward, before, as sure as God made little apples, he came crashing back down again onto hard leather (*ouch*).

Of Horses and Men

Chris felt the muscular power beneath him, instantly recognising that this horse, about which he knew absolutely nothing, was in total control. Yanking on the reins now would force a metal plate (the bit) to dig into her gums and just incite her, and maybe throw him off, which could be *more* dangerous.

Besides, he had willingly conceded control already, to get the agony over with as soon as possible. *Go, girl, go* he quietly urged Ana on. This was, and never had been, a test of wills between man and horse.

This was a test of *endurance*. And the sooner it was over the better.

At this precise moment of recognition, however, the ranch hand Margarita thundered up, yelling at the horses to move faster, flashing a tree branch in her hand to show them that she meant business. The horses surged forward again, galloping across the uneven ground with the gringos hanging on grimly, Margarita no doubt thinking that she was giving the *turistas* fond memories of what great fun this was.

For Chris, the ride was now sheer agony. He didn't know if it was the shape of the saddle, his loose-fitting underwear that provided no cushioning protection, or just his raw inexperience, probably a combination of all three. He didn't care anymore. This had become the Ride from Hell. Testicles, balls, stones, nads, *cojones*, he didn't care what they were called. He just knew that his *huevos* were being scrambled right now!

It was like being trapped inside a darkened potato sack and thrown onto a slab of concrete every two or three seconds. He anticipated every new, sharp, stabbing, pain. Then finally, through teary eyes, the stables came into view, and Ana slowed to a walk, and stopped. She too, was tired out, thank God.

Chris swung his right leg over Ana's back, glad to be on firm ground again. He was desperate to massage his crotch but social convention got the better of him and he staggered towards the washroom instead.

Ana had ignored his farewell pat and clattered over to the water trough, and to what was left of the meagre hay bale the other mares were already devouring.

Of Horses and Men

She had given him a memorable ride. There was no doubt about that. And he knew a lot more about horses. If revenge had been on her mind, she had certainly exacted it. Chris would never ride again.

But he had been victorious too. He had survived intact. Back on the bus, he discreetly reassured his somewhat bruised little passengers through the thin cotton fabric of his jean pockets. No more trauma would be visited upon them this day. It was over. Chris had come through in the clutch. And that's where they would stay for a while.