

Early Days

Leo Tolstoy

Contents

CHAPTER I. THE OLD HORSE	3
CHAPTER II. HOW I WAS TAUGHT TO RIDE HORSEBACK	4

CHAPTER I. THE OLD HORSE

WE had an old, old man, Pimen Timofeitch. He was ninety years of age. He lived at his grandson's house, but did no work. His back was bent ; he walked with a stick, and found it hard to drag one leg after the other. All of his teeth were gone ; his face was wrinkled ; his lower lip trembled. When he walked and when he talked, he had no control over his lips, so that it was impossible to make out what he was saying.

There were four brothers of us, and we all liked to ride horseback ; but we had no gentle horses fit for us to ride. We were permitted to ride only on one old horse whose name was Voronok.¹

One time mother gave us permission to have a ride, and we all ran with our tutor to the stables. The coach- man saddled Voronok for us, and the first to ride was our eldest brother.

He took a long ride ; he rode over to the threshing- floor and around the park, and when he came back, we shouted :

“ Now start him up ! ”

Our eldest brother began to kick Voronok, and to strike him with his whip, and Voronok galloped past us.

After our eldest brother had ridden, the next oldest took his turn. He also had a long ride, and whipped Voronok till he galloped down the hill. He wanted to ride even longer, but the third brother begged him to give him a chance as soon as possible.

The third brother also rode over to the threshing-floor and around the park, and then along through the village, and then he came galloping down the hill toward the stable.

When he rode up to us, Voronok was winded, and his neck and flanks were black with sweat.

When my turn came, I wanted to surprise my brothers, and show them how well I could ride, and I began to spur him on to his utmost speed ; but Voronok would not stir from the stable.

In spite of my redoubled blows he would not gallop, but only shied and backed. I grew angry with the horse, and pounded him with all my might with my whip and legs. I tried lashing him in the places where he was tenderest ; I broke the whip, and with the broken handle I began to pound him on the head. But still Voronok would not budge.

Then I turned around, rode up to our tutor, and asked him for a heavier whip. But the tutor said to me :

“ You have ridden him enough, sir ; come down. Why torture the horse ? ”

I was vexed, and said :

“ Why ? I have not ridden him at all ! Look how I will make him gallop ! Please give me a stronger whip ! I will warm him up ! ”

Then the tutor shook his head, and said :

“ Ah, sir ! you have no mercy. Why warm him up ? Just think ! He is twenty years old. The horse is tired out ; he is all winded ; yes, and he is so old ! Just think how old he is ! It is just as if it were Pimen Timofe'ftch. If you should mount on Timofeitch, and should whip him with all your might, say, now, would not that be a pity ? ”

I knew well about Pimen, and I obeyed the tutor. I dismounted from the horse, and when I saw how he was laboring with his sweaty sides, and was puffing with his nostrils, and was switching his thin tail, then I realized how cruel we had been to the horse. But till that time I had supposed that the horse enjoyed it as much as I did.

¹ Blackie.

I became so sorry for Voronok that I began to caress his sweaty neck, and to ask his forgiveness for the beating that I had given him.

Since that time I have grown older, and I still always pity horses, and I always remember Voronok and Pimen Timofeitch when I see any one abusing a horse.

CHAPTER II. HOW I WAS TAUGHT TO RIDE HORSEBACK

WHEN I was a little boy, we four brothers had our lessons every day except Sundays and holidays, when we were free and could play together.

One time father said :

“You older children must learn to ride horseback; you must be sent to riding-school.”

I was the youngest, and I asked :

“ Can't I learn, too ? ”

My father said :

“ You would tumble off.”

I began to tease him to let me learn, too, and I almost cried.

My father said :

“Very well, then, you shall take lessons, too. Only see here : don't you cry if you fall. One who never falls from a horse will never learn to ride.”

When Wednesday came, three of us were taken to the riding-school. We went up a great staircase, and from the great staircase we went up a narrow staircase. And the narrow staircase opened into a very large room. In this room there was sand instead of a floor; and gentlemen and ladies, as well as lads like ourselves, were riding on horseback.

This was the riding-school.

It was rather dark, and there was an odor of horses, and we could hear people cracking whips, and shouting to horses, and the pounding of horses' hoofs against the wooden partitions. At first I was afraid and could not make anything out distinctly. But afterward our tutor called the riding-master, and said :

“Give these lads here some horses; they want to learn to ride.”

“ Very well,” replied the riding-master.

Then he looked at me, and said :

“ This one is very small.”

But our tutor said :

“ He has promised not to cry if he falls off.”

The riding-master laughed and went away.

Then three saddled horses were brought ; we took off our cloaks and descended the staircase into the riding- room. The riding-master held the horse by the thong,² and my brothers rode around him. At first they walked ; then they trotted.

At last a little pony was brought out. He was a chestnut, and his tail had been cropped. His name was Chervonchik. The riding-master laughed, and said to me :

“ Well, cavalier, mount ! ”

² Kord, a rope for making the horse go in a circle. AUTHOR'S NOTE.

I was both glad and sad, but I tried to hide it so that no one would notice it. I made several attempts to set my foot into the stirrup, but it was in vain, for I was too small. Then the riding-master lifted me in his arms and set me on, saying :

“ The barin is not heavy ; he can't weigh more than a couple of pounds.”

At first he held me by the arm ; but when I saw that they did not hold my brothers, I asked him to let go of me. He asked me :

“ Are n't you afraid, then ? ”

I was very much afraid, but I said that I was not.

I was all the more afraid because Chervonchik kept pricking back his ears, and I made up my mind that he was angry with me. The riding-master said^:

“ Well, only mind that you don't fall off !

And he let go of me.

At first Chervonchik walked around, and I sat up straight. But the saddle was slippery, and I was afraid that I should slide off.

“Well, now,” asked my riding-master, “are you on firm ? ”

“Yes,” said I.

“ Well, then, now trot ! “ and the riding-master clucked with his tongue. Chervonchik started off in a gentle trot, and I began to slip. But still I said nothing, and tried not to tip over sidewise. The riding-master praised me, “Ai” da, cavalier! Splendid!” and this made me very glad.

At this moment my riding-master was joined by one of his associates, and began to talk with him, and his attention was distracted from me.

Then suddenly I became conscious that I was slipping a little toward one side of the saddle. I tried to regain my seat, but all in vain. I wanted to cry to the riding-master to stop the horse, but I felt that it would be shameful to do that, and I kept quiet.

The riding-master was not looking at me. Chervonchik kept on the trot all the time, and I kept slipping and slipping to one side.

I looked at the riding-master and thought that he would help me ; but he was busily talking with his associate, and, without looking at me, said something about his “ brave young cavalier ! “ By this time I was far over on one side and very much frightened. I felt certain that I was going to tumble. But still I was ashamed to cry out.

Chervonchik gave me one more little shake, and down I went to the ground. Then Chervonchik stopped of his own accord; the riding-master looked around, and saw that I was no longer on Chervonchik's back. Saying, “Hullo there! my cavalier has fallen off,” he hastened to me.

When I told him that I was not hurt, he laughed, and said :

“ A child's body is like a cushion ! ”

But I felt like crying.

I asked him to seat me again, and he did so. And this time I did not fall again.

In this way we went to the riding-school twice a week, and I soon learned to ride well, and was afraid of nothing.

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