

The Hack

David Edmundson

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Once, between ambitions, I learned the blacksmith's trade, or rather the farrier's. And while I learned to make useful items with hammer and forge, to shape, weld, and temper iron with a modest skill, I never made plowshares or pruning hooks out of swords or anything else. My goal was to learn to shoe horses. And I did. I learned to cut and shape the bar with hardie and anvil, punch and pritchel the nail holes, shape the hooves with nippers and rasp, make toe clips and heel caulks, drive the nails, break, clinch, and set them, and dress the newly shod hoof to a neat and finished condition.

All this I did on hooves taken from the freezer and held in a bench vise. Our teacher had gone to the slaughter house and procured the limbs of broken-down nags whose future was a can of Alpo. I was one of a dozen neophyte farriers at a school in Xenia, Ohio, run by a cantankerous old stable fly named Pat Snider.

When we had demonstrated to the Master's satisfaction that we could shoe a frozen hoof, he passed the word around the Greene County fairgrounds that anyone who would risk his horse to a student could have it shod for free. Just bring your animal to the Midwest Farrier School on Monday morning and it will be assigned to a novice shoer.

We arrived on Monday and saw a variety of horses in the school lot, not the finest horse-flesh in the county, but living breathing animals all the same. Mine was a young hackney gelding with bad manners that seemed to feel all humans should pay for the offense of the veterinarian who had changed his status. He looked like he was standing on electric fence and his owner was having a hard time holding on to the halter. At least, I thought, he is small. He won't be that hard to shoe.

Removing the old shoes and dressing the hooves wasn't all that hard, except for the flamenco the little gray was dancing. Every time I picked up a foot, he tried to tap out some obscure horse code with the other three, which meant that he reared or kicked mule-style every twenty or thirty seconds. An experienced farrier could have gotten enough done between dance numbers to move on to the forge fairly quickly. But this was, after all, my first live rehearsal, and by the time he was ready I was sweating profusely, my confidence in a shaky condition.

For those of you who don't recall the various equine classifications, a hackney is a pony, that is, shorter than 14 hands at the withers. A hand is four inches and the withers is that place at the base of the neck where the mane stops. Unlike the Shetland, which seems all body and head with short legs, hackneys are proportioned much like riding horses but at about 3/4 scale. Also equines are classed by blood. Cold-bloods are the draught horses, large heavy-footed, slow and calm – think of Budweiser Clydesdales. Hot-bloods are the Arabs and their descendants, most notably the thoroughbreds. When you have watched the handlers load, or try to load, the last derby horse in the starting gate on the first Saturday in May, you have seen an exhibition of hot-bloodedness. You have also

seen a demonstration of why there are warm-bloods. These are a mixture of size and strength with spirit – think of Lipizzaners or any of the dressage horses.

Hackneys were bred for cab and carriage, for show as much as for use, and show in those days meant spirit, hence the anomaly, a hot-blood draught. Mine was hot indeed and, like all horses, could tell when he was getting the upper hand.

There is a device known to horse people as the twitch. Its function is to control a horse by causing it pain. It consists of a loop of chain or cable through a hole on one end of a handle. The horse's upper lip is pulled through the loop, the handle twisted until the loop binds, and the pressure varied according to how much pain is needed. Most horses you just show them the twitch and they'll stand still, especially if they have had it used on them before. Imagine somebody looping a garrote around your most sensitive parts and twisting until you give in and you'll have a pretty good idea of why it works. I had been raised to believe that this particular form of cruelty to animals was only to be used as a last resort. So when the owner asked if I wanted the twitch, filled with the idealism of youth and inexperience, I said no.

The pony seemed to get the idea though and calmed enough that I was able to nail, clinch and set the back shoes without too much resistance. You may not know that the rear hoof is brought over the farrier's leg, cradled in the lap, supported by the knees while the necessary work is done. Mouthful of nails, the shoer holds the shoe in place, places the first nail in a hole in the shoe, lines it up and strikes it through the bottom of the hoof as close to the living hoof as he can, driving the beveled nail so that it emerges curving outward through the hoof wall. Once driven

the claw of the hammer bends the nail downwards and breaks it, leaving a quarter inch or so of jagged metal to be clinched. This process is repeated for each nail, six per foot for a small-hoofed animal like a hackney. The nails are then clinched with a special set of pliers peculiar to the farrier's craft, pushing the jagged end into the hoof wall, holding the shoe firmly (the farrier hopes) in place.

The hackney, built a little closer to the ground, requires a commensurate deeper crouch by the shoer. By the time the back shoes were done, my back hurt enough I began to feel like a real farrier. And the front leg goes between the farrier's legs while he does his work. Facing to the rear, I grabbed the tuft of hair just above the hoof, and when the pony shifted his weight, I pulled the hoof between my legs, grabbed the shoe from my bench and started nailing it in place. As quickly as my limited skill allowed, I drove six nails and broke them off. That left six jagged hooked nails to clinch, and it was at this moment that the hack, remembering perhaps the veterinarian, took his foot back. Head up, ears back, he reached for the rafters, taking his foot and with it a fair piece of my brand-new leather apron and some of the crotch of my jeans.

Maybe it was frustration. Maybe it was embarrassment at being so suddenly exposed. Maybe it was just unwillingness to let the hack have his victory, but abandoning ideals I turned to the owner and said, "Get the twitch." He did and using it in the afore-mentioned fashion, the pony was made to hold still and I finished my first live shoeing job.

That was an informative moment in my shoeing career. There were several factors that led me away from the farrier's life. In addition to my recognition that a

three-month course, however intense, was not enough preparation, there was the sight of the veteran horse-shoers with broken hands and feet unable to stand fully erect. There was in them a certain look, a recognition of the futility of struggling against forces more powerful than they, not unlike the look of some married men I have known. And yet they have, for reasons I can only dimly grasp, stuck with the trade when I did not. They are men who have been tempered by hard dangerous work and rewarded by their stubborn victories. My choice to abandon smithing was made easier by a timely opportunity to pursue the musician's life, a life beset perhaps with its own occupational hazards, but certainly my first love.

I can't say, or I won't admit, that I enjoyed seeing that pony twitched down to trembling, sweating immobility. Nor can I say I was all that sorry. I realized that in order to work safely around other people's mis-trained equines I was going to have to resort to cruelty bordering on sadism. And the image of those jeans, shredded in a most alarming area, has kept me ever since from any deep regrets.