

## Golden Belgian, Golden Autumn

Jack and Eileen brought Terry, a beautiful, golden, two-year old Belgian work horse, to Whitney Valley in the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon, looking for a place to cut firewood. Jack said, "He's about a hundred pounds short of weighing a ton. He'd put that much on in muscle if we could work him regular." Terry weighed twice as much as a good-sized riding horse. He stood tall and massive with muscles.

I showed Jack and Eileen beetle-killed lodgepole in National Forest next to the ranch my wife and daughters and I took care of. Jack hooked Terry to logs and led him out of the timber.

Jim, tall and lean, 19 years old, worked with me that year, cutting and selling firewood from beetle-killed lodgepole pine along the ranch's west boundary. Jim fell in love with Terry as soon as he saw the beautiful, golden horse. Jim's worked with horses all his life. He says they had to run him into a blind chute and peel him off a horse's back to change his diaper.

He says when he was still too small to hang onto a horse, his mother and father used to leave him sleeping in the camper on the back of the pickup. They tied a mare to the pickup bumper and worked cattle in the corral. When he woke up and cried, the mare raised a fuss, so his mother and father knew it was time to come and take care of him.

The second story, about the mare tied to the bumper, I believe, because animals are like that. Any mother is a mother and reacts to a baby in need.

I'm not saying I don't believe the first story, but I'm not as sure about that one.

Jim made a deal with Jack to take care of Terry, fall and winter, and train him some. Jack brought up hay and left a harness and a singletree. Jack and Eileen went to Arizona, courting sunshine and warm days through autumn and winter. The rest of us stayed in the mountains and looked forward to a dramatic shift in weather as the seasons changed.

Jim and I had finished cutting the wild meadow hay two weeks before. Contractors baled 800 tons of hay and hauled it down the river road to the owner's home ranch. Stubble bleached golden in autumn sunshine.

Morning smells of cut grasses, sawdust, animals, and late

wild flowers hung above the meadow in light mist before sunrise. Jim walked behind Terry and guided him with long reins to the edge of the timber, below where the ridge rose abruptly and offered ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine, western larch and Douglas fir to the morning's blue sky. They stopped, and Jim said, "Boy, he does good. Let's pull a log."

"Do you think he's ready to pull a log?"

"Sure. He's pulled logs."

The sun rose, cast warmth into the edge of the timber, and steamed the night's dew off the meadow stubble.

Jim brought Terry into the timber, to where we cleared dead trees from the fence line and from the big ditch that brings irrigation water down through the edge of timber to the meadows west of the Burnt River. Big, powerful golden horse walked gracefully in the lead, and lean man walked close behind, signaling their path with leather reins. They wove their way around stumps, logs, and piles of limbs. Jim backed Terry into position. I wrapped a choker around a log and hooked the choker to the singletree. I cleared to the side.

Jim said "Hup," and snapped the reins. Terry stepped forward, took the slack out of the chains and the choker, and took the weight of the log. The log started into motion, and Terry bolted into a gallop.

Jim raised the reins high, so they wouldn't tangle in down wood, and ran beside the skidding, bouncing log. He talked to Terry as he ran. "Whoa now you idiot horse. Slow it down. You listen to me, you pigheaded horse." They avoided tangling with stumps or down wood and galloped out of the timber onto the open meadow. Jim leaned back on the reins.

Terry didn't slow down, but he curved left the way Jim signaled with the reins. After about half a big circle, horse galloping in sunshine, log sliding on mowed meadow grass, and Jim running a smaller circle, inside Terry's circle, Terry slowed, but he saw the log skidding along behind him and to his left, and he bolted into a full gallop again. He circled left, the way Jim signaled with tension on the long left rein.

Terry galloped. The log slid toward Jim. Jim jumped the log, ran forward, and jumped the rapidly sliding log again to get into a better position. He pulled Terry into a tighter circle on smooth, mowed ground. He jumped the log every time it slid to him inside the large circle Terry galloped on meadow grass stubble.

Terry and Jim and the log galloped, jumped, and slid smoothly on the meadow. Terry tired, got more used to the log, listened to Jim more, responded to the reins more, slowed down, and finally stopped when Jim told him to stop.

I walked over and unhooked the log. Jim guided Terry farther out onto the meadow, turned him left, then right, then around in a circle just on the reins, and Terry obeyed every command.

They walked back to where I waited by the log. Jim stopped Terry, and Terry stood patiently.

I asked, "Did you know he's never pulled a log except when he was led?"

"No, I sure didn't know that."

"While I was watching that fancy dance out there on the grass, I thought I probably should have told you before you started, but I thought you knew."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't tell me, cause I sure enjoyed how that worked out. That was good training for Terry. He tried to outrun that log, and he found out he couldn't do it on his own."

"It was pretty to watch, but it could busted up a horse or a man or both. If that happened in timber, where you didn't have open ground to wear him down, we'd have a hell of a wreck."

"I know. He needs a lot of work before I'll hook him up to a log again."

We cut wood, and then we went to the barn and built a slip that put a surface of boards three feet wide and twelve feet long on the grass, with a chain hooked to the front of it so we could hook the singletree to the slip. We put two bales of hay across the slip, to sit on.

I ran to the house while Jim circled Terry slowly on the smooth, mowed ground north of the barn. I said, "Come on everybody. We have something really fun going on out by the barn. Hurry. Terry and Jim are waiting for us."

Laura, Juniper, and Amanda ran with me to the meadow, and we rode on the slip until dark.

Slipping across a mowed meadow is a smooth, quiet way to travel. Terry's hooves thud as he trots, but the grass roots and stubble muffle the sound, and the slip makes hardly a sound. We sit on hay bales on the slip, and Terry pulls us to the top of the ranch and back, with stops for rest. Jim says, "It'll take him a while to build his wind up. We can't push him too hard yet."

If he understands what we want him to do, Terry does it happily. Sometimes, something startles him, and he breaks into a gallop. He isn't supposed to gallop unless Jim tells him to, and Jim works to teach him not to, but we love smooth, fast slip rides at a gallop. The meadow is wide, so we have plenty of room to turn Terry and wear him down.

We enjoy the rides, fast or slow. We laugh a lot out on the meadow.

I moved from the rear bale to sit on the forward bale, and

Amanda said something. I said, "Oh, I'm sorry. Did I step on your toe?" and Terry came to an abrupt stop.

Jim said, "Now horse, what are you up to?"

I said, "I asked Amanda if I stepped on her toe. I think Terry thought somebody said whoa."

We slip across the meadow every day after we've cut wood.

Juniper and Amanda go with us. They love our daily adventure. So does Jim. I do. Terry does. Often, we're out on the meadow as dark falls into the valley.

Laura leaves her motherly, taking care of the house and family duties and her spiritual study and goes with us sometimes.

We start putting one of the girls up on Terry while everybody else slips behind. Amanda rides Terry when he breaks into one of his sudden gallops. Amanda slips far to one side of the big, galloping, golden horse. I step to the front corner of the moving slip, ready to jump off to try to knock her out of the way of the slip if she falls, but she grabs hold of the hames, two parts of the harness that stick up above Terry's withers, pulls herself up to a firmer seat, and holds on as Terry gallops and the slip rides behind him.

Jim brings Terry down to a trot, then to a walk, then stops him. I walk up beside the horse and lift Amanda down. "Were you afraid?"

"No. That was really fun. That's even more fun than riding on the slip. Let's do it again. I want to ride some more."

"Well, I was scared when he started galloping and you looked like you were going to fall off."

"I wasn't scared. Now that I know what to hold onto, I'll never fall off."

We could do anything with Terry, lean against the back of his back legs, crouch and walk around under his belly, pull on his tail, lift his feet, as long as we let him know where we were and what we were going to do.

Jim rode Terry bareback the first time by stepping from the top corral rail onto Terry's back. Terry jumped to one side, then figured out what had happened and seemed to decide, okay, sure, you want to sit there and ride, go ahead and do it.

Jim rode Terry out of the corral and down across the meadow, and Terry acted like he'd been ridden all his life and was an old pro at it.

People come to visit, and we take them slipping. Everybody loves it. Everybody always wants more, slipping quietly across the meadow a while before dark, when the day cools down. Juniper and Amanda always go with us when we slip. All their other adventures can wait.

The smell of stubble and the smells of the wild kingdom hang in the air. Ravens go about their business on the meadow, watching us from their shiny black depths, but undisturbed by our activities. The Sandhill cranes, up at the top of the ranch, watch the horse and the people on the slip. We watch the cranes walk tall and stately along the edge of the mowed ground.

Twenty elk trot across the top of the meadow, just our side of the boundary fence, and up into the timber. They're on their rounds, and they aren't afraid of us.

We tried Terry on logs again. He blew up and galloped clear to the river until he had to stop or he'd plummet off the high bank. Jim couldn't stop him or even bring him into a circle.

I said, "We don't really need to move logs. If we clear access to the wood, people will load it right where we cut it, so I can't justify using the time. You can work with him all you want, though. We'll keep track of who cuts what and divide the money by how much we cut."

"Well, I'll work with him some when we're through cutting wood for the day, but I'll stick with you cutting wood."

Late that fall, Scott came down and asked if we knew where he could get thirty straight logs to finish building his house. I said, "I know where we can get some. They're scattered through live timber, though. We'd have to yard them out."

Jim said, "I got a horse can pull those logs out for us." I didn't say anything. It wouldn't be part of our wood-cutting operation. Jim could make his own decision about it, and I'd work with Jim and Scott, however they decided to do it.

I carried my saw into timber and selected straight, dead lodgepoles standing among dead and live trees, dropped them, cut the limbs off, and cut the logs to length.

Jim rode Terry across the meadow, brought him into the timber, and backed him into position.

I hooked the choker to the singletree. Terry took the slack and pulled the log into motion. I had all the logs ready, so I followed them out so I could see how they did. Jim pulled the reins for a little left, and Terry went a little left. Jim said, "Hup. Make a little speed to clear that rise," and Terry humped and made a little speed. Jim said, "Slow down now easy," and put just a little tension on the reins, and Terry slowed down easy.

Terry did exactly what Jim said to do. They snaked their logs around trees, stumps, and slash piles down onto the road along the fence, stopped, unhooked the chokers, left the logs there, and dragged chains and chokers back into the timber. I went along and choked more logs, and they did the whole thing over again, ten times.

That was one of the best shows I ever did see, because I

knew everything that led up to it, and because it was a beautiful process, beautiful horse and beautiful man working very well together.

Scott loaded the logs onto the trailer with the backhoe.

Terry pulled the last logs down onto the road. Jim and I helped Scott load logs, and Scott spun his wheels, eased off on the accelerator, and got the heavily-loaded trailer into motion.

Jim leaned against Terry. We watched Scott's pickup and the trailer rolling toward the ford in the river. Late afternoon sun shone down between lodgepole pine, ponderosa pine, and tall western larch trees. Terry turned his head back along his side and nuzzled Jim, then pushed at him. Jim rubbed Terry's nose, scratched his forehead, and reached high up between his ears. He said, "We got no more logs to pull, horse. We got em all." He said, "This is one smart horse. He wanted to gallop, but he saw the trees and stumps and brush piles, so he figured he'd better depend on me to keep him from getting all tangled up."

"I saw that happen. He thought his way into obedience."

Shadows of the ridge and trees lengthened out across the meadow. We gathered our tools and headed across the meadow toward home, two men, one pickup, and one horse.

The sun slipped down behind Greenhorn mountain. A cool breeze carried rich smells of the wild valley up along the flowing river.