



My Kingdom For A Horse!

“A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!” According to this famous line, uttered by a desperate English king in Shakespeare’s play *Richard III*, a horse is a priceless possession. Who could deny this when we consider what horses have contributed to our civilization? In agriculture, hunting, transportation, and on the field of battle—to mention just a few examples—they have helped us chalk up accomplishments we could never have achieved on our own (some, admittedly, more noble than others). The lifestyles of the Plains Indians, the American cowboy, and the *gaucho rioplatense* would not have been possible without the horse.

Equus caballus has been around for a long time. The horses depicted on the walls of the Chauvet cave in France were painted thirty thousand years ago. Wild horses roamed the Eurasian Steppes for well over a thousand centuries before being domesticated about six thousand years ago on the vast prairies now occupied by Ukraine and Kazakhstan. From there they spread east all the way to the China Sea and west to the Iberian Peninsula. Though probably originally treated like cattle, their owners soon realized they were far more useful pulling a cart or a chariot than providing meat and milk.

Horses were well established in Spain by the close of the fifteenth century and Columbus took some with him on his second voyage to the New World in 1493. They landed in the Virgin Islands and Hernán Cortés then took sixteen of their descendants to Mexico to help with what came to be known as *La Conquista*—The Conquest. Some of the burgeoning herd eventually escaped and drifted north to become a vital part of Native American life and culture. Francisco Pizarro brought horses to Peru when he landed there in 1532. From there they spread to other parts of South America and were soon at home in the Río de la Plata region.

I have never owned a horse but am lucky enough to have had friends who did. The first riding experience I can remember was at a *chacra*—a small farm—not far

from Montevideo. There was a large paddock bordered by eucalyptus trees where horses were assembled for us to ride. I was a little boy at the time and was put on a short, stocky pony that was apparently in a foul mood. As soon as I was in the saddle he took off at a gallop, heading straight for a hitching post standing in the centre of the enclosure. I couldn’t control my steed and quickly saw that he was planning to pass close enough to the post to whack my leg. At the last minute I leapt from the saddle and landed in a heap on the dusty ground. Many years later, in Hawaii, I was riding up a steep hill when my horse slipped on a rock. As he stumbled and his gait faltered, my tail bone slammed into the saddle, and I felt an ominous click at the base of my spine. I spent the rest of the vacation in the passenger seat of our rented convertible with ice packs keeping my lower back numb.

But, of course, not all my rides ended badly. Far from it. And none of the few that did have diminished my love for horses or the pleasure of stroking their necks and fondling their soft muzzles. Not to mention the sheer bliss of feeling their bodies move under me and hearing the rhythmic pounding of their hooves as we fly across open fields. Once, when staying with friends at Punta Ballena on the coast of Uruguay, we took horses to the beach at sunrise. Portezuelo beach is long and flat, and in the gauzy light of dawn we rode along the hard-packed sand at water’s edge. Sometimes veering a few feet into the shallow waves, which our mounts seemed to enjoy as much as we did. A powerful bond can develop between a horse and a rider, and that morning I felt at one with a magnificent chestnut mare as we cantered along the beach, salty sea spray on my face, reliving the wild experience, the heady sense of freedom, that equestrians have enjoyed for thousands of years.