

# William

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The gravel roads were just beginning to thaw on that early spring day, and each step we took splashed mud at my boots. Some early robins and some perennial sparrows were doing aerial acrobatics in celebration of the new season. William's eyes, however, were not following the birds' gyrations; nor were mine. While he was staring thoughtfully at the road, I was watching the attitude of his ears—watching because his ears are often indicative of his thoughts. At the time, as though he were mildly tolerant of the situation, they were in a reassuringly lax position, neither upright nor flat, but rather forming two furred slingshot arms with his bay-brown head.

I was more apprehensive of his thoughts than usual because it was spring. Springtime plays strange tricks even on the aged; and William, though advancing in age, has not yet reached complete senility. At any other time of the year and even in his calm spring-time moments, he is the soul of obedience, exhibiting only now and then certain flourishes which are designed to impress me with the remaining vestiges of his waning youth and vigor. On our first spring ride, however, things are different; there is an understanding between us: William is to have his one fling at youth, to rid himself of any excess spring energy or for morale's sake only—provided he can "get by with it." Once the deed is done, I do not punish him for it.

To carry out this grand climax to his spring debut, William would never think of anything so obvious as simply trying to buck me off. Our first spring ride embodies mutual subtlety and artistry. The "fling at youth" is likely to become tempered by the wisdom of age in a credible, if violent, shy at an insignificant object, several hurtling lunges on stiffened legs and a final wild dash preferably down some hitherto unexplored lane. Once this climax has been attempted and at least partially completed (I can do little to avoid the initial stages), William returns to his own level-headed self and so remains for the rest of the summer.

This year's spring ride was continuing without incidence when his left ear twitched, erected itself, and focused on a muddy lane leading away from the road. The very existence of the lane had forewarned me, because William has an inexhaustible curiosity about lanes and loves suddenly to veer into an inviting one. I tugged on the right rein, and the errant ear relapsed into boredom again.

That raised ear had meant that something like this was going on in William's brain:

"Hmmm, this is a good lane; nice mud to splash on her clean boots. Where's something I can shy at? Darn! She caught me. But I can wait. I'll get her when she isn't thinking; that won't be hard. Just wait a while. Ho hum, wonder where that cute sorrel filly is pastured this year . . ."

The fact that I had nipped that plot in its beginning was no indication that William had abandoned hope. The studied nonchalance of his rhythmically bobbing head and drooping ears made me more suspicious than I had been. I sneaked a better hold on the reins, and we jogged on.

My mind wandered. I thought of the numerous children who had clambered atop William and clung happily to his crew-cut mane. I thought of the looks of admiration that they had given him as they twiddled his ears, sid off his tail, and crawled beneath his sagging tummy. And I remembered William himself, who outwardly endured this, balanced on three legs while the fourth relaxed lazily from a diagonal hip, eyes half-closed, lower lip dangling. Inwardly, however, he enjoyed every minute of the loving, if sometimes rough, attentions of his small admirers.

In this thoughtful mood I failed to notice a small scrap of paper which danced end over end across the road. I happened only to send a cursory glance at William's ears and noted that they were standing bolt upright. Then he exploded! His ears flattened to his head, and he bounced sideways across the road. He came down stiff-legged in a ditch, snapping my head forward and bringing the saddle and me into such violent contact that I knew the action had been premeditated. By the time I was again ensconced firmly in the saddle, this having been achieved chiefly through the aid of the saddle horn, we were careening madly down some strange lane. Despite the severe backward push of the headwind that we were creating, William's ears were pointed heavenward in supreme ecstasy. I let him run until I remembered that he might burst a blood vessel. He turned around without my direction, dropped his head and neck several degrees, and started toward home.

I relaxed for the second time of the ride. The first time I had done it with disastrous results, but I was safe now—safe for another year. Again I contemplated William's ears. Now he was thinking:

"Boy, that was fun! Thought she could outsmart me? Hah! Well, that's over for another year. Glad she didn't fall off; I would've had to stop to see if she were all right. Now along about July I'll shy at a dog or something to remind her I'm not quite ready for the glue factory yet.

"Let's see: what was I thinking about before all the excitement? Oh, yes, that sorrel filly. Wonder where she..."