

## CADDIE AND THE SADDLE

With the increase in herd size – now numbering over forty horses – it became increasingly challenging to provide day-to-day guidance to this diverse group. With Murphy gone and Tucker, the unquestioned herd leader, the effort needed to keep track of every horse and every situation took its toll on the Warmblood. It was evident that he was losing weight and the need for assistance was clear. While The Man and I were great pals, his preferred riding horse was always Tucker. But the increase in responsibilities, the amount of land needed to be covered by horseback, and the distances traveled during cattle roundups, were wearing the big horse down.

It was just a typical summer storm, but the strong wind along the ridgeline had blown several trees over. These were now blocking the lane leading down from the barn to the north gate. But the John Deere had been loaned out to the neighbors for more urgent damage repair. I wasn't quite sure what they needed the tractor for, but I had overheard a conversation between The Man and Mrs. Man about some electrical pole being down.

Tucker and I were in the pasture when The Man came through the gate, halter in hand. He whistled for Tucker, and, although tired from being up and alert all night during the storm; the big horse traveled over to have the halter put on and do the job as best he could. When The Man saw the tiredness of Tucker and knew the day ahead would be a long and tough one, he gave the big guy a scratch, a treat from his pocket, and, with a pat on the shoulder, sent him back to the pasture. Tugging his hat down tighter against the still breezy wind, The Man headed over to where I was standing. I met him halfway and bent down as he slipped the halter over my head.

I was going to work!

We headed back to the barn, Tucker nickering a friendly 'so long.' I was excited to help out with clearing the fallen trees, so I was maybe a bit rude in pushing ahead, but The Man didn't seem to mind. He knew how much I loved using my size and strength, and I kind of think he enjoyed having me along as his partner in these efforts.

We usually enter the barn through the sliding door on the west side, but this time, my human approached the overhead door and lifted it high enough for us to go through. As we entered the dim interior, he let the shank rope drape over my neck, and I walked to my usual spot near the end of the aisle. I heard the rattle of chain behind me and turned to see him releasing the raised door, dropping it to about half the height it was when we entered. The breeze coming under the lip of the door felt good.

I always enjoy the time I get to spend with The Man, and I think he appreciates the quiet times as well. This occasion was even better as he was in no rush and took extra time to brush me down and use the hoof pick to remove the dirt and pebbles from my feet.

He placed the saddle pad on my back, smoothed it out then set the saddle. I always appreciated him for making sure there were no lumps or bumps and that there wasn't any dirt or clumps of mud under the pad. Before I came to the ranch, I had an owner who always rushed things, and

there were times when he put the saddle pad on that he left bulges and ridges unsmoothed or some bits of hay or straw. After a while, they dug into me and drove me crazy. But not anymore – I can't remember the last time I was uncomfortable under saddle.

I liked being loose in the barn and, most times, The Man didn't tie me up when he put the saddle on. I was seldom even put in a stall. And this time was no different.

He moved around the barn, putting things in a saddlebag – extra gloves, a water bottle, a small emergency kit, and the like. He usually didn't make the bag too heavy, and he always balanced it, so the bags stayed steady behind the cantle. He set the leather bags down and headed into the tack room. I wandered around, just enjoying the freedom of the barn.

Where did he go? I couldn't hear him anymore, so I guessed that he had gone outside for something. Maybe he left me behind? I headed for the door.

Now, looking back, I should have known he wouldn't have gone without me – after all, I had the saddle on, and he had left the saddlebags sitting on the floor just waiting to tie them on the back of the saddle. But I wasn't thinking. I was reacting.

Did I mention The Man had left the overhead door about halfway down?

When I first came to the ranch, I had tossed The Man off into a thistle patch. He didn't seem to take it personally, but the incident did have consequences. For months he didn't ride me, and I was left alone in the pasture. I remember complaining to Tucker and asking him *why does everything happen to me?* I had just about lost my life in the flood, was injured by a charging bull, and had a bad reputation I had to live down. It seemed that bad things always happened to me!

His reply has stayed in my mind ever since. He said, "Caddie – things don't happen *to* you; they happen *for* you." The comment was a turning point in my life. Everything that happens is an opportunity for my growth and learning. And now, with the door half-open, I was about to learn more lessons.

I dropped my head under the lower edge of the door, lifted it, and began my exit. The first half of my departure was easy and without incident. But then something stopped my forward motion. I pushed harder. I felt a slight give and, dropping my head, drove forward with even more energy. There was a lot of noise – people yelling, the sound of twisting metal, and even the voice of The Man shouting for me to stop. But I was committed. I was becoming quite proud of myself! I was showing him how much I wanted to be with him!

I headed to the hitching rail that stood alongside the corral to wait for The Man to come alongside, mount up and get on our way. As I stopped, I turned and saw a big commotion over at the barn. The overhead door was hanging off its track, and the lower portion bent into a fascinating shape!

It didn't take me more than a second or two to notice something else twisted and torn. I turned my head and looked at the saddle on my back. I saw the horn had been ripped off, and the

leather covering on the pommel was shredded. So that was what caught on the lower edge of the door! Oh boy, I was in trouble now. That saddle was The Man's favorite. He had owned it for many years, and it was his baby. And, to make things worse, he needed both me and the saddle to drag the downed trees off the roadway.

I hung my head in embarrassment and shame. I was so looking forward to working with The Man this day, using my power and skill to help him clear the deadfall, and now, I had not only ruined his special saddle, I had caused significant damage to the barn, and he would have to repair it. It would make extra work for him, and he was so busy already. I was dreading his reaction.

I nervously watched as he walked swiftly across the yard to where I was standing. He quickly undid both front and back cinches, unclipped the breast collar, and pushed the saddle off me, letting it land in a heap on the ground.

"Are you okay, Caddie?" he asked, running his hands over my head, shoulders, back, and legs. He never even looked at the mess of leather on the muddy ground! He was more concerned about me than he was about that special saddle of his.

"I can get it fixed," he added. "As long as you're not hurt."

I had been holding my breath, waiting for him to yell at me, but he didn't—he just grinned. "You're something," he muttered, "I never know what to expect."

He threw the saddle and pad over his shoulder and headed back to the barn. I stood where I was, not sure what to do. He paused about halfway to the damaged door and looked back at me.

"Are you coming?" he asked. "You wanted to be with me, so stick with me, and we'll get this door fixed and be on our way."

As we approached the barn, we met several people who had been watching the situation unfold.

Shocked, one of the men inquired. "Are you going just to let him get away with it?"

The Man took a breath before he replied. "And what should I do? Whip him? Take away his food? Tie him up for the rest of the day?"

"And if I did any of those things, what would it accomplish? Would it fix the door or repair my saddle? I don't think so."

"I have to look at his motivation," he continued. "Why did he do it? Was it his intention to bust the door and damage the saddle? Or was his goal only to be with me? If I concluded that the damage was intentional, I would impose discipline to correct that behavior. But it wasn't. His purpose was to find me. Maybe not the best decision he's made in his life, but I will not punish him for honorable intention."

I've never forgotten his words. And it reminded me so much of the comment made by Tucker so many years ago that "things don't happen *to* you, they happen *for* you." What could have been

an incident that destroyed our relationship became an event that, if even possible, cemented my loyalty to him more.

With the door temporarily repaired, The Man took another saddle and settled it on my back. It wasn't as good a fit, but I certainly wasn't going to complain! Not after what I did to his Eamor!

The rest of the day was uneventful as we pulled logs and branches off the roadway—even the power pole!

It was late afternoon when we had completed our work and returned to the barn. The Man let me loose in the barn again—he knew I had learned from the experience—and he placed a pan of oats in the manger.

When I had finished, he returned and led me through the side door—the overhead one not working very well due to the damage. “It’s been an interesting day,” he said, patting me on the shoulder, “now go enjoy the herd”. And with those parting words, one of the most impactful days of my life drew to a close.

