

Lucky Breaks

I loved watching Mr Sainsbury at his work. Sleek, pampered hunters and great draught horses loomed over him, docile as lambs, while he pushed and coaxed them into better positions. Then lifted their hooves one after the other onto his leather-aproned thigh for inspection, to remove worn shoes or for trimming with the rasp or drawing knife.

No matter how often I saw it done, it never failed to chill me to see hard hoof peel away like soft cheese and I would curl my own, bitten nails into small, clenched fists watching the terrifying curve of that thin blade at work. He would stir the selected shoe in its baptismal font of incandescent coals, give the bellows a pump or two, and make a judgement.

Then the clamped shoe would emerge, glowing sullenly, until it was applied briefly to the prepared surface in a cloud of acrid smoke, to be removed and the scorched hoof surface studied. Invisible to me, high spots were trimmed and smoothed, or very occasionally, the shoe itself re-shaped with a few deft strokes on the anvil and the fitting process resumed until he grunted his satisfaction.

It seemed only slightly less invasive when he drove up to eight square nails through the serried holes, the hoof bouncing on the tensed muscles of his thigh with each hollow-sounding stroke, until the points emerged through the outer wall of the hoof and could be cut off and the ends clenched over. Filed smooth, the finished effect was as neat as the new shoes that signalled the start of every school year.

One of the most remarkable features of the blacksmith's work was his disposal of the discarded shoes. He took each in his two work-thickened hands, settling his gnarled fingers around the uprights of the 'U' and, very slowly, with the veins writhing like adders in his forearms and standing out across his forehead, he bent them in opposite directions.

Sometimes, depending on the wear in the front of the shoe, they broke, but others simply lost all resemblance to a curved horseshoe. Amongst his equipment was an old billy-can, and into this, he tossed the deformed and ruined shoes and took them away when he left. I never asked what he did with them.

Our own draught horses were Percherons, Jenny and Bob, massive, slow-moving, dappled sources of unimaginable brute power in a time when machinery was in its infancy, crude, noisy and unreliable. Apart from ploughing and drawing the loaded potato wagon, their lives seemed to consist of waiting until their immense strength was called upon, often by neighbours - to extract a stubborn stump, roll an obstructive boulder, or shift some other bothersome heavy object.

The heavy chains would be taken out, massive harnesses checked for defects and, linked together as always, they would plod off solemnly and placidly, with me leading them, my father going on to study the task ahead.

When the top half of the biggest oak on the Sainsbury place snapped off clean and lay across his ruined cottage, the place was declared irreparable. Ancient roof beams were shattered and plaster and lathe walls had crumbled with not a window intact. Old man Sainsbury, long widowed, turned his back on it and said. "Just pull it off, we'll see what we can save afterwards." And someone sent for Jenny and Bob.

I remember arriving at the clearing round the cottage, the horses towering over my ten-year-old head, their heavy, gentle breaths stirring my hair. Neighbours stood about, silent, in twos and threes, occasionally someone patting Sainsbury's shoulder with a few awkward words before turning away, helpless. Sainsbury himself, stood, facing away from the ruin, smoking his pipe, as though something away across his untilled fields was far more interesting.

My father clambered about in the wreckage, seeking a purchase point for the chain amongst the foliage. After a while, he climbed down and went to Mr Sainsbury. "I can pull it out - but it'll bring the whole house down." he murmured.

Sainsbury looked at his pipe for a moment as though considering whether it needed filling and said quietly "Do it"

My father climbed back up and shackled a chain around the biggest of the lower branches. Then he paid it out onto the open ground where Jenny and Bob had been backed up and waited, their enormous hindquarters now turned towards the ruined house.

Eventually, the free end of the chain was hooked onto their heel-chains and my father clucked to them. Each, like a reflection of the other, first took two ponderous steps forward and then another, until the chain tightened and then took one more, so that the stitching in their massive chest harnesses snapped taut and the stout leather itself creaked and crackled as they took up the strain, leaning forward as one.

Again, my father clucked his tongue and slapped Bob's right haunch lightly. Although Bob must have hardly felt it, his muscles rolled and bunched and with Jenny following his lead, he advanced one enormous, feathered hoof and then another. Behind them, the chain was as taut as a bowstring, links now silent under tension, and the neighbours edging back out of range of any mishap.

Jenny and Bob had assessed their task, sensed its measure and what was required of them, great hearts beating as one, slow and rhythmic under the harness, waiting for my father's word. "Hut Bob! Hut Jen! Hut, hut..." he said quietly, and the two horses began a steady and inexorable pull.

At first, there was no forward movement, although the jagged end of the trunk lifted from its resting place and bobbed there, suspended by the chain.

Another quiet “Hut” from my father and their great heads dipped and their shoulders hunched like swimmers on the starting block as they gathered mighty hindquarters beneath them and settled their rear hooves into the earth.

Side by side, shoulder to shoulder, Bob and Jenny increased their pull, until suddenly, with a screech and a rush, the trunk lurched forward, drawing the lesser branches out of the rooms and passages of what had been a home. Leaves spiralled in the up-draught and mortar and dislodged masonry rained down onto smashed glass, crockery and splintered furniture, as the oak was extracted, as smoothly and swiftly as a weed from paving, with Bob and Jenny walking freely now and the trunk ploughing a deep, wide furrow across the turf behind them.

A remaining wall, deprived of any support, collapsed in a cloud of dust and fragments and then there was silence. The stunned watchers were still, when they might have applauded any less dramatic spectacle, the tragedy of Sainsbury’s loss sobering them. My father disentangled the chain from the tree and dragged its heavy length clear. Bob and Jenny stood, tails swishing audibly in the silence - as always, waiting.

Those who had not known Sainsbury for most of their lives began to drift away, others shifted their feet and looked uneasy, not knowing what to do or say. The blacksmith took one last, fragrant draw, rapped his pipe on the heel of his boot, and carefully ground the expelled dottle into the soil until it stopped smouldering.

My father busied himself coiling the chains and securing them to the harnesses so that the horses could carry their enormous, serpentine weight. Sainsbury had entered the remains of his kitchen where one could see him from the waist up, staring around at the destruction. In a moment he emerged, carrying his smithy tools in their stout leather satchel, dropped them on the doorstep with his long apron, and returned to scramble up the collapsed and creaking staircase. With outer walls and roof gone, one could see him stooping and searching until at last, he stood up.

In one hand, he held what seemed to be a small framed picture and in the other that familiar billy-can. Then he seemed to find a few clothes and with some other small items, descended to ground level again.

Squatting on the flagstones outside, he made a clumsy bundle of the clothing in his leather apron, slung his tools over a shoulder and stood up. Without a backward glance at the house, he came over to my father. They didn't shake hands or speak. It was before the time when men seemed to think that it was necessary at every occasion. But he nodded to my father and turned to me, the billy-can extended, its wire handle over one calloused finger.

"Keep this, lad. A reminder that there's no such thing as luck. I buried the others. Always b'lieved the only way was hard work. Seems I was right after all." Then he turned away and left, and I watched until after he was lost from sight.

I looked into the billy-can. One single horse-shoe remained, the wearer doubtless long dead, its 'U' shape, in Sainsbury fashion, distorted beyond repair, quite incapable of bringing anyone luck.