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National Velvet

Written by

Enid Bagnold

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NATIONAL Velvet

ENID BAGNOLD

Illustrated by Laurian Jones

EGMONT

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We bring stories to life

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TO

RODERICK AND LAURIAN



Author's Note

WITH reference to Chapter Thirteen the race in this book is run prior to the Clause which made it necessary for a horse to have distinguished itself

> 'by being placed first, second, or third (by the Judge) in a steeplechase of three miles and upwards value 200 sovs. to the winner' –

and for all I can find in the Rules a zebra could have entered, provided he was the proper age.

. . . . .

As regards the objection which was lodged after The Piebald passed the post, I don't think this objection would eventually have been sustained on the ground of 'dismounting before reaching the unsaddling enclosure' alone. The fact of the rider's sex of course disqualified her. But the contention that the objection would immediately have been lodged is based upon Rule 144 of the National Hunt Rules.

> 144. 'If a rider do not present himself to be weighed in, or dismount before reaching the place appointed for that purpose, or touch (except accidentally) any person or thing other than his own equipments before weighing in, his horse is disqualified, unless he can satisfy the Stewards that he was justified by extraordinary circumstances.'

. . . . .

The drawings throughout have been done by my daughter Laurian, who is thirteen years old.

Chapter I

UNEARTHLY humps of land curved into the darkening sky like the backs of browsing pigs, like the rumps of elephants. At night when the stars rose over them they looked like a starlit herd of divine pigs. The villagers called them Hullocks.

The valleys were full of soft and windblown vegetation. The sea rolled at the foot of all as though God had brought his herd down to water.

The Hullocks were blackening as Velvet cantered down the chalk road to the village. She ran on her own slender legs, making horse-noises and chirrups and occasionally striking her thigh with a switch, holding at the same time something very small before her as she ran. The light on the chalk road was the last thing to gleam and die. The flints slipped and flashed under her feet. Her cotton dress and her cottony hair blew out, and her lips were parted for breath in a sweet metallic smile. She had the look of a sapling-Dante as she ran through the darkness downhill.

At the entrance to the village the sea was pounding up the sewer with a spring gale behind it. She passed to the third cottage, stopped at the door, opened it, let a gush of light on to the pavement, closed it and carried her tender object inside.

Edwina, Malvolia, and Meredith sat in their father's Mr Brown's sitting-room just before supper time. It was dark outside and hot inside, and outside in the darkness the Hullocks went up in great hoops above the village. There was an oil stove in the corner of the sitting-room and lesson books on the table. The ceiling was low and

sagged. An Albert lamp with a green glass shade lit the table. There was no electric light. Donald, the boy of four, was asleep upstairs.

Edwina, Malvolia and Meredith were all exactly alike, like golden greyhounds. Their golden hair was sleek, their fine faces like antelopes, their shoulders still and steady like Zulu women carrying water, and their bodies beneath the shoulders rippled when they moved. They were seventeen, sixteen, and fifteen. Velvet was fourteen. Velvet had short pale hair, large, protruding teeth, a sweet smile and a mouthful of metal.

Mr Brown was swilling down the slaughter-house, as Mi Taylor was away for the day. The sound of the hose swished at the wooden partition which separated the slaughter-house from the sitting-room.

'He went beautifully!' said Velvet, and laying down a tiny paper horse on the table she wrenched at the gold band that bound her teeth back and laid it beside the horse.

'Father'll be in in a minute,' said Edwina warningly.

'It's going in again directly I hear a sound,' said Velvet and sitting down she swept the plate into her lap.

'Look at him,' she said lovingly, taking up the paper horse. 'I must unsaddle him and rub him down.' The heads were bent on the lesson books again and Velvet took a tiny bridle of cotton threads from the horse. Then going to a shell-box on the sideboard she brought it to the table.

'It's just supper,' said Mally. 'You'll have to clear.'

Velvet opened the box and took out a stable rubber two inches square, a portion of her handkerchief, hemmed round. Laying the little horse flat on the table she rubbed him with delicacy in circular motions, after having taken a paper saddle from his back.

The horse was a racer cut from the Bystander. He stood three inches high and had a raking neck and a keen, veined face. By dint of much rubbing the paper had given off a

kind of coat, and now as Velvet rubbed there came a suède-like sheen on the horse's paper body. He was dark, most carefully cut out, and pasted upon cardboard. The bridle was made by the fingers of a fairy, noseband, chin-strap and all, in black cotton.

'He has a high action,' said Velvet. 'A lovely show canter, but a difficult trot. I didn't jump him today as he needs to settle down.'

In the shell-box other horses lay.

'There's a marvellous picture of mares on the back of *The Times* today, but you can't cut a single one clear. They're all mixed up with the foals.'

'I saw it,' said Velvet. 'I called at the Post Office. But it was no good.'

'I called in too,' said Mally. 'They said in the Post Office that one of us looking at *The Times* was enough. We'd better take turns.'

'Yes,' said Velvet. 'You can't think how lovely it was galloping up there. It was nearly dark. He never put a foot wrong. Somehow you can trust a horse like that.'

'It's blood that counts,' said Mally darkly.

'I haven't got the racing saddle cut right,' went on Velvet. 'I wish I could find a picture of one. I ride short when I ride this horse and with this saddle the knees come right off on to his shoulder.'

'You need kneeflaps,' said Edwina.

'I suppose there's not time,' said Velvet, 'to take the chestnut down for a stand in the pond? His hocks are still puffy.'

'It's not you to lay tonight,' said Mally. 'You've got ten minutes. Don't let father see. . . . Mind your plate! It's fallen!'

Velvet dived under the table, picked it up, and examined it anxiously. Opening her mouth she worked it painfully in with both hands.

'S'bent a bit,' she gasped. 'It's a hell plate . . .'

'It's no good. Don't go on! Get on down to the pond.'

Velvet packed the racer in the shell-box and carefully abstracted a smaller horse, a coloured picture of a polo pony cut from *The Tatler*. Putting the box away she slipped through the door with the chestnut and was gone.

A door at the other end of the sitting-room opened and Mrs Brown came in. She stood and looked at the daughters for a moment – an enormous woman who had once swum the Channel. Now she had become muscle-bound.

Towering over the Albert lamp she threw her shadow across the books and up the wall.

She said: 'Lay supper.' And went out.

'Meredith,' said Edwina mechanically without looking up. Meredith got up and began to collect the books. When all the books were gone the two sisters sat tilting their chairs back so that Meredith could get the white cloth over the edge of the table past their knees. When this was done all their chairs came forward again. Kneeling by the Victorian sideboard Meredith pulled out plates, bread-knife, platter, sugar, knives and forks and salts and peppers.

The street door opened and Velvet stood on the mat. She had her shoes in her hand and her bare ankles were green with slime. Mrs Brown who had come in glanced at her and took a duster from the sideboard. 'Wipe them up,' she said and threw the duster on to the mat. Velvet mopped her slimy ankles, whispering to Mally, pointing with her finger towards the door – 'Stars like Christmas trees. Terrible stuff in the pond. Spawn. I stood five minutes.'

'We ought to get some,' said Mally. 'I'll get a bottle after supper.'

'Any spawn,' said Mrs Brown without looking up, 'goes on a tin tray.'

'Yes, mother.'

'Larder,' said Mrs Brown.

Velvet put her shoes in the corner and the horse in the shell-box and disappeared. The others sat in silence till she came back with the tray.

Cold ham, jam, butter were placed on the table, and a dish of radishes.

Mr Brown came in by the slaughter-house door, gum-boots drawn to his thighs, his sleeves rolled up, his hands wet from the hose. He passed through the room on his way to wash for supper. Velvet and the three golden greyhounds sat on in brooding silence. A smell of liver and bacon stole in from the kitchen.

The two doors, that on the street and that on the kitchen, opened suddenly together. Out of the black hole of the street came Mi Taylor, brushed up for supper. Mrs Brown came in from the kitchen carrying the liver and bacon.

The room filled with smells. Mr Brown came in putting on his coat. Everyone sat down, Mi last of all, pulling up his chair gingerly.

'Well . . .' said Mr Brown, and helped the liver round.

Meredith went out and fetched in the jugs of coffee and milk.

'Bin over to Worthing?' said Mr Brown.

'I have,' said Mi.

'Got that freezing-machine catalogue for me?'

'Shops shut again.'

'Good God!' said Mr Brown exasperated, 'Don't you ever learn the shut-shop day in Worthing? Whadyer do then?'

'Had three teeth out. Dentist was all there was open.'

'Oh Mi, where?' said Velvet.

Mi opened his jaw and pointed to a bloody wound.

'Oughter eat pap for it,' said Mr Brown. 'It's pulpy.'

'S'got to learn to harden,' said Mi.

'Donald asleep?' said Mally.

'This hour gone,' said Mrs Brown.

They ate, sleek girls' heads bent under the lamp, Mr Brown and Mrs Brown square and full and steady, Mi silent and dexterous with his red hair boiling up in curls on his skull.

Jacob went grinning round the table, from sister to sister.

'Nobody feeds him,' ordered Mi under his breath.

His red hair boiled up on his skull fiercer than ever at Jacob's presumption.

The yard spaniels remained in the street on the door-step through meals. They lay and leant against the front door, grouped on the step, so that the door creaked and groaned under their pressed bodies. When the door was opened from the inside they fell in. When this happened Mi sent them out again with a roar.

Jacob had been allowed in all his life. His fox-terrier body, growing stout in middle age, still vibrated to a look. His lips curled and he grinned at the blink of a human eyelash. His tail ached with wagging, and even his hips waggled as he moved. But under cover of these virtues he was watchful for his benefit, watchful for human weakness, affected, a ready liar, disobedient, boastful, a sucker-up, and had a lifelong battle with Mi. Mi adored him and seldom said a kind word to him. Jacob adored Mi, and there was no one whom he would not sooner deceive. At meals Jacob wriggled and grinned from sister to sister, making a circle round Mi, whose leg was scooping for him.

Just outside the slaughter-house was a black barking dog on the end of a string. This dog had a name but no character. It barked without ceasing day and night. Nobody heard it. The Browns slept and lived and ate beside its barking. The spaniels never opened their mouths. They pressed against doors and knee and

furniture. They lived for love and never got it. They were herded indiscriminately together and none knew their characteristics but Mi. The sisters felt for them what they felt for the fowls in the fowlyard. Mi fed them.

But Jacob's weaknesses and affectations and dubious sincerities were thrust upon everyone's notice. When Velvet came in at the front door, and pressing back the leaning spaniels, closed it, Jacob would rise, wriggle his hips at her, bow and grin.

'How exquisite, how condescending, how flattering!' said he, bowing lower and lower, with his front legs slid out on the floor and his back legs stiff. But if asked to go for a walk not a step would he come outside unless he had business of his own with the ashbin, or wanted to taunt the chained and raging dog with the spine of a herring dragged in the dust.

The chained dog chiefly barked. But sometimes he stopped rending the unheeding air and lay silent. Then he would whirl out on his chain like a fury and fall flat, half choked. And Jacob would stand without flinching, banking on the strength of the chain, and think, 'You poor one-thoughted fool . . .'

The Browns loved Jacob as they loved each other, deeply, from the back of the soul, with intolerance in daily life.

As the girls ate, a private dream floated in Velvet's mind. . . . It was a little horse, slender and perfect, rising divinely at a jump, fore-feet tucked up neatly, intelligence and delight in its eager eye, and on its back, glued lightly and easily to the saddle . . . she, Velvet . . . Gymkhana Velvet. As she took the visionary jump her living hand stole to her mouth. She pulled out the torturing plate and hid it in her lap. Mi's eyes were on her in a flash, he who never missed anything.

'Be windy for the Fair Thursday,' said Mrs Brown.

'It's coming in wild from the South West,' said Mr Brown.

'Always does when it comes in at all,' said Mrs Brown. 'Three-day gale.'

All the trees in the dark village outside attested this. They were blown like fans set on one side. The rooks shuffled and slept in them, waving up and down among the breaking twigs. The village street was white with rook-droppings.

'Put that in again, Velvet,' commanded Mrs Brown.

'She got it out again?' asked Mr Brown looking up sharply.

'It aches me an' aches when I eat,' said Velvet.

'Ache or no, argue or no, that plate cost me four pound ten and it's solid gold an' it goes in,' said Mr Brown. 'I'm not going to have a child like a rabbit if I can help it. You girls have got your faces for your fortunes and none other. I've told you often enough.'

The three golden greyhounds sat up straighter than ever and Velvet fumbled with her teeth.

'It's got hooked up.'

'Unhook it, then,' said Mr Brown. He sat back, satisfied, commanding and comfortable, and pulled the radishes towards him. Then he passed the dish round.

'Take a radish, Velvet.'

'Couldn't bite a *radish*!'

'Go without then,' said Mr Brown happily, and leant back to light his pipe.

All the Browns tilted their chairs. Nobody ever told them it would hurt the carpet. They ate, ruminated, and tilted. Only Mrs Brown sat solid and silent. She did not talk much, but managed the till down at the shop in the street. She knew all about courage and endurance, to the last ounce of strength, from the first swallow of overcome timidity. She valued and appraised each

daughter, she knew what each daughter could do. She was glad too that her daughters were not boys because she could not understand the courage of men, but only the courage of women. Mr Brown was with dignity the head of the family. But Mrs Brown was the standard of the family. When Velvet had fallen off the pier at the age of six her mother went in thirty feet after her, sixteen stone, royal-blue afternoon dress. A straight dive, like the dive of an ageing mammoth. The reporter from the *West Worthing News* came to make a story of it and said to Edwina, 'Your mother swum the Channel, didn't she?' Edwina nodded towards her mother. 'Better ask *her*.' 'What's past's past, young man,' said Mrs Brown heavily and shut her mouth and her door.

Mi Taylor's father had trained Mrs Brown for her swim, trained her when she had been a great girl of nineteen, neckless, clumsy, and incredibly enduring. Mi himself had been a flyweight boxer, killed his man, because the wretched creature was in status lymphaticus, got exonerated and yet somehow disqualified, tramped the country, held horses, cleaned stables and drifted nearer and nearer to the racing world, till he knew all about it except the feel of a horse's back. Arriving somehow in the ebb of Lewes races he had been taken on by Mr Brown for the slaughter-house, for running errands, and lately even for negotiating for stock.

Mrs Brown stared at him when he came with a look of strange pleasure in her hooded eyes. Mi Taylor, the son of Father Taylor! He knew all about her, Taylor did. The only one who ever did. He knew what she was made of. He'd had the last ounce out of her. He and the doctor at her five confinements, those men knew. Nobody else, ever. Mi was his son. Mi was welcome. He could stay. Henceforth he ate with the family and lodged in the extra loose-box. And Araminty Brown, embedded in fat, her keen,

hooded eyes hardly lifting the rolls above them, cooked admirably, ran the accounts, watched the shop, looked after the till, spoke seldom, interfered hardly ever, sighed sometimes (because it would have taken a war on her home soil, the birth of a colony, or a great cataclysm to have dug from her what she was born for), moved about the house, brought up her four taut daughters under her heavy eye, and thought of death occasionally with a kind of sardonic shrug. Nobody could have said exactly whether she had a dull brain or no. Ed and Mally and Meredith behaved themselves at the wink of one of her heavy eyes. Velvet would have laid down her stringy life for her.

'Yer ma,' said Mi, ''sworth a bellyful. Pity she weighs what she does.'

'Why?' said Mally.

'Binds her up,' said Mi. And it was not constipation he was thinking of.

'Mi,' said Mally to her mother, 'thinks you ought to be riding in Lewes races.'

Mrs Brown made a noise in her nose.

'What?' said Mally.

'That's all right,' said Mrs Brown.

'You can never tell what mother's thinking,' said Mally to Velvet.

'She doesn't think where we do,' said Velvet. 'She thinks at the back.'

In the sitting-room at the close of supper Mrs Brown stretched out an arm and turned the Albert lamp lower.

'Box,' said Mr Brown indicating the sideboard. Edwina rose and brought him his small cigar.

The shadows whirled.

'Monday,' said Mrs Brown.

'Driving night,' said Velvet.

'What I was thinking,' said Mrs Brown. 'Get on off!'

'First?' said Velvet.

'First,' said Mrs Brown.

Velvet hunched her shoulder-blades and sniffed. Was driving worth it? She never could make up her mind. Out of bed it didn't seem so, but in bed it was worth while.

'Hush!' she said suddenly and held up her hand. 'Cough...' she said, and went to the slaughter-house door.

'Gone to rub Miss Ada's chest,' said Mi grinning.

In the sitting-room the books for homework came out again.

'Gotta see a boy,' murmured Mi as he went out into the street.

Velvet lit the hurricane lamp standing in the corner of the empty slaughter-house and passed through to the shed where the old pony lived.

Miss Ada was an old pink roan gone grey with age, her ears permanently back, a look of irritation about her creased nostrils, backbone sagging, horny growths on her legs.

'Hullo,' said Velvet and opened the door. Miss Ada moved definitely round and turned her backside on Velvet.

Velvet put her hand on the quarters and the skin twitched irritably.

'You never do anything about being decent!' said Velvet. 'Have you got a cough?'

Miss Ada bent her head suddenly and rubbed the itch off her right nostril on to her leg, and as she did it she flashed a robust, contemptuous look at Velvet. 'Is there sugar?' said the look, 'or no sugar? I want no subtleties, no sentimentalities. I don't care about your state of heart, your wretched conscience-prickings, your ambitious desires. Is there sugar or no sugar? State your reasons for coming to see me and leave me to brood.'

Velvet produced a piece of sugar and the pony bent her head round with a look of insolence, as though she still suspected the sugar to be an imitation lump. She took it

with her lips, but she pressed her old teeth for a minute on the child's palm, and at this trick, as old as Velvet's childhood, Velvet thrust her arms over the sagging backbone and buried her face among the knobbles of the spine. The pony munched her lump stolidly, flirting her head up and down as though she were fishing for extra grains high up among her teeth.

'If we had another pony,' said Velvet, 'nobody would love you less. But we can't go on like this, it's awful. The gymkhanas all coming and nothing to ride. And you hate all that. It puts you in your worst mood.'

The door opened and Mally came in.

'Has she got a cough?'

'She hasn't coughed since I've been here,' said Velvet.

'Get over, you awful old thing!' said Mally, 'and let me pass.'

'Don't, Mally . . .'

'The only way is to be as horrid to her as she is to us.'

'I've left the lamp down there. Hang it up somewhere. I can't reach the hook.'

Mally hung the lamp carefully out of way of the straw. The two sat up on the manger together. The pony, utterly disgusted, drew her ears back almost flat with her head, hung out her twitching underlip and faced round at an angle from them, her tail tucked sourly in.

'Look at her!' said Mally. 'My God, what a mount!'

Velvet took out her plate and wrapped it in her handkerchief.

'Don't you leave it here,' said Mally. 'It won't help us any. It was your plate-fiddling that went wrong at supper.'

Mally got up on to the manger's rim, reached to a ledge of wood below the window and took down two sticks of dark gold paper.

'Crunchie?' said Velvet her face lighting.

'I got them this morning.'

'On tick still?'

'Yes. She was cross but I swore we'd pay by Saturday.'

In the gold paper was a chocolate stick. Beneath the chocolate was a sort of honeycomb, crisp and friable, something between biscuit and burnt sugar. Fry's chocolate crunchie. Not one of the sisters ate any other kind of sweet that year. It was their year's choice. The year before it had been Carmel Crispies.

'We must pay her. She's a wispy woman. She's pappy.'

'Aren't you queer about people? Always cutting 'em down to the bone.'

'I don't like people,' said Velvet, 'except us and mother and Mi. I like only horses.'

'Pity you weren't a boy.'

'I should a bin a poor thin boy. With muscles just on one arm. From meat chopping.'

'As it is,' said Mally, 'we're all going into tills. Into cages. To count out money.'

'I'm not,' said Velvet, examining her crunchie. 'Do you like the end best or the middle?'

'I like the ones that don't seem cooked. Sticky in the middle.'

'I wish I had a proper coat with checks,' said Velvet.

'You? Why Edwina's never had one.'

'Edwina isn't me. I'm not going to be a jersey-jumping child in a gymkhana any more.'

'I don't know how we're going to do anything in the gymkhanas at all. Miss Ada's turning sourer and sourer on us. She'll end by refusing to go into the ring.'

Miss Ada, seduced by the smell of the chocolate, turned slowly towards them, approaching by fractions.

'It's all right, Mally, I'll give her a bit of mine,' said Velvet. 'You bought 'em.'

'It doesn't matter who bought 'em,' said Mally. 'We're all owing together. . . . She can have a crumb of mine too.

Don't blow so, you idiot! She's sneezed her crumb off my hand!' Miss Ada stooped her head and began a vain search for one chocolate crumb in two inches of dingy straw.

The stable door opened and Mi put his head in.

'Meredith in here?'

'No . . . Whad'you want'er for?'

'*Canary Breeder's Annual*'s come. Come on last post.'

'Don' know where she is,' said Malvolia. 'She won't be fit to live with for weeks.'

'Mi . . . Mi . . . Mi!' called a voice from the dark.

'In here. He's got your *Canary Breeder*.'

'Mother said so! Oh. . . . I'll come in. Give it to me!'

Meredith took the book from Mi. 'You've taken off the wrapper,' she said disappointedly, 'I like to take it off myself,' and leant back against Miss Ada, unconscious of the pony's body.

' 'Nother time you can fetch your own *Annual*,' said Mi.

'Bet you don't remember next year,' said Mally.

'Listen to this! Listen to this! It's what I always thought!' said Meredith. 'Listen to Mr Lukie. He says (J. Lukie Esquire it's signed) he says "Cod liver oil should be given to mating birds. My own birds did magnificently on Poon's Finchmixture Codliver . . ." ' Miss Ada removed her support sharply and Meredith sat violently on the straw. 'Blast!' she said, without looking round at the pony, opened the *Annual* and searched again for the page.

'Yes but his birds were already mating,' said Mally. 'You keep wanting to give them the cod liver oil to make them mate. It doesn't make them mate. Lukie doesn't say it does!'

'I don't see why . . .' said Meredith, still hunting for the page. 'You've got to be lively to mate. Vital or something. Cod liver oil gives vitality. I read it . . . it's here . . . "gives vitality to the mating bird".'

'Miss Ada'll step on your hand if you leave it there,' said Velvet.

Meredith got slowly up, reading as she rose. 'It doesn't say whether it's the cock bird or the hen. Which do you think it is, Mi?

'Cock before, hen after,' said Mi.

'There you are!' said Meredith. 'I *wish* mother'd let me order it.'

'You got it all over the sofa last time.'

'But I've got a fountain pen filler now. I've trained the cock on drops of water. He's as good as gold. The hen makes a fuss. I could do her in the yard.'

'Bed,' said Edwina from the darkness outside.

They filed out without a word, Meredith reading to the last by the flare of the hurricane lamp. The spring gale had gone. The spring sky was indefinite and still, with a star in it. There was a new moon.

'Are you coming, Velvet?'



'You can't leave Miss Ada with nothing when we've used her stable. I'll be a second.' She opened the corn bin and Miss Ada dropped ten years off her looks. She plunged her nose on the two hands that cupped the corn and ducked her head to sniff out the droppings before they sank too far in the straw. Velvet, alone, saw the new moon. She bowed three times, glanced round to see that no one saw, then standing in the shadow of the stable door she put her hands like thin white arrows together and prayed to the moon – 'Oh God, give me horses, give me horses! Let me be the best rider in England?'

Chapter II

THE next morning Meredith had to take some suet and a shin of beef over to Pendean. School was at nine. It was the last day of term. She rose at six. Mi called her on his way downstairs. He heated the coffee left over from last night and gave her three sardines between two pieces of bread. Then Meredith went out to saddle Miss Ada.

Miss Ada had a crupper to her saddle, partly because the hills were so steep and partly because she had no shoulders. Meredith forgot the crupper and left it dangling. She put the girths on twisted, put the *Canary Breeder* in the basket with the suet, and started off. Miss Ada tapped smartly up the village street on the tarmac. The flints on the church shone like looking-glass. Meredith trotted east into the rising sun. Her toes were warm and the sardines and the bread and coffee digested comfortingly. Over the Hullocks and down into the valleys, sun and shadow, cup and saucer, through the tarred gate, the wired gate, the broken gate, and finally into the Pendean valley and to the house. She