

CUT-AWAY PASS

Boot wondered if other horses hated mud as much as he did. The slippery, slimy stuff was squishing between his hoof and his shoe, sticking to the feathers on the back of his legs and causing each foot to make this awful sucking sound when he tugged it from the charcoal ooze. The mud was bad enough. The rain was worse. It dripped down his neck, to finally soak through the thickness of his saddle pad.

He twitched his black ear and turned his head as he tried to glimpse the canvas-draped burden tied to his packsaddle. He supposed he should be proud. They had chosen him to carry it. He just wasn't sure. He'd never been a packhorse before. Always Abby's saddle horse from the time he'd been five and come to live at the ranch. He'd heard them talking earlier in the summer. Abby had a new horse she wanted to work in the wilderness. And of course there was the question of *his* age. He had turned twelve in the spring; but he felt as strong as ever. He loved Abby, would never do a thing to hurt her. He had to admit, he'd been hurt by their choice. But Pete needed a packhorse so here he was; hooked by a long halter rope to the horn of Pete's saddle. As if he needed that. He'd never leave. He watched Pete's back, fascinated by the little cascades of water dripping from his hat. If Pete turned his head just right, they landed on his shoulder and ran down the back of his yellow slicker.

Boot thought about that. The more he thought, the more he decided he hated yellow slickers. What was wrong with brown...or black? And made from some other kind of fabric, not so crinkly and noisy. He remembered how Abby had goosed him the last time she'd tried to put hers on while she was riding him. He'd jumped. She had fallen off. He's been sorry but Pete got mad and Abby scolded him. Maybe that's why he was packing this burden.

He listened. Somehow, they all acted different. Nobody was laughing. He thought it was more than the drenching rain. He thought it had something to do with his load. He'd heard them talking. He hadn't been there when they'd mantied it, but he thought it was a man. That was strange. The only men he'd ever seen were riding in a saddle, with boots and spurs. And the smell. He could have done without that, but they were all so upset; the girls crying, the men silent and frowning, actually sad. He wasn't going to make it worse by refusing to pack it. They had called him a special horse. That was nice. He'd try his best to live up to the compliment.

They had talked to him. "Easy boy, Good Boot." That made him sound like an imbecile. They held the rope tightly. Were they afraid he'd bolt? Abby patted him on the neck and crooned to him. That was nice. Four of them, with tears in their eyes, slowly raised the strange shaped manti to his back, lashed it to his pack saddle. He hated being short, but maybe this time it was for the best. They seemed to appreciate it. "Good thing he's no taller. And he's quiet, too. Almost as if he knows." Of course I know. I'll just whinny softly to tell them. Abby murmured. "See you told them." They were all silent for a moment. Then he heard a girls voice. The young one who always had a pellet for him at the end of the day. "I guess it doesn't really make any difference, but I'd like his last ride to be as pleasant as possible."

So here they all were, sloshing down the trail; in the rain...and the mud. Under dripping trees, crossing swollen streams. His feet were wet and his nose was running. He was tired. He was hungry. He shook his head in misery. Would it never end?