THE USE AND ABUSE OF THE CHECK-REIN

BY FRANCIS M. WARE

While most parts of any harness, as manufactured at the present time, have their important and evident uses, there is one item which is responsible for much acute suffering to its unfortunate wearers; which is in very general use, and almost as general abuse; which is applied without thought or reason in most cases; which is, handled with discretion, a most valuable invention; with callous indifference, an instrument of ingenious torture—and this implement is the check-rein, whether for heavy or light harness work, whether in the ordinary form of side-check or of the over-draw type. Not one man in ten can give a good sensible reason for checking, and not one horse in one hundred needs—really needs—any such appliance. True the colt in training is the better mouthed and the more quickly maneuvered if the check is worn, and drawn up to a point where he must steady his balance, carry himself well, and through it learn to bend himself, and to deport himself generally as a harness horse should; but even here a naturally well-balanced animal will “make himself” to satisfaction without the use of any such contrivance.

Most youngsters are not thus well-poised by nature, and the check has, in early training, its valuable points, but once maturity is attained the more liberty the head and neck have for moving and curving the better the horse endures and the longer he lasts—so that there is a cash equivalent to be considered, aside from the matter of mere humanity to animals which apparently has nowadays so little practical interest for the average citizen. With sentimental interest we are nauseated. Any wayfarer upon our city streets, or along park drives or speedways, will see hundreds of cases of the most outrageous abuse of the check-rein, every day and all day, passing unrebuked by complacent owner, indifferent spectator, or purblind official paid for and delegated (presumably) to the purpose of preventing it. We are daily indorsing and ourselves possibly ignorantly perpetrating one of the most ingenious cruelties known to man by cramping the muscles; and hampering the breathing powers of defenseless animals day after day, year after year—and this not for a few moments at a time, but for hours and hours—and in the months when insects swarm and the sun glares down, as when winds blow and the sharp sleet drives. You know the sensation of one fly crawling on the hand for an instant; of biting wind and rasping hail and snow. Fancy what it is to afford, on head, neck, and shoulders a pasture to countless insects for hours in the one period, meanwhile glaring helplessly up at the blazing sun; and in the other months to face the stinging and rasping of the elements upon your defenseless body, while your head and neck, in the grip of a tight check and sharp bit [reinforced by the whip when needful (\)] is immovably pointing straight up and into the tempest which harasses you. Or, in the case of the light-harness horse—the road-horse—to find that the tension of the check which, when that fast record was made, was tightened only for the brief period of fast work, now continues throughout a long afternoon’s drive of two to three hours, because the owner is too thoughtless or too ignorant to permit any change from what has been found necessary in speeding, or from what some one told him was the proper elevation of the head for the animal in question—information usually as worthless as it was carelessly given.

The private owners are the most deliberate and outrageous offenders in this respect, and that they leave these matters to their coachmen and grooms so generally in no way excuses them for such sins of omission. John and James know that they are expected to maintain the proud appearance of the bays or browns which Mr. Croesus purchased at such a long price, and Mr. Dealer also knew that upon his present six or play—must be to such luckless quadrupeds; the dreadful stress for hours upon the tired muscles. Movement will somewhat relieve the strain, and during it, the horse naturally carries a more elevated front, but the flat-footed wait—notice how the men upon the box, though sitting quite at ease, shift and squirm about on their seats, and judge therefore in some feeble degree of the agony of the motionless horses.” Remem-
ber, for instance, that you ordered the carriage at say 7.30 P.M. to go to the theater. It arrives five or ten minutes ahead of time. After leaving you at the playhouse the horses return to the stable, and by thus checked up on any horse, too far behind the body, both at rest and in becoming more pronounced. Now if we many minutes—we shall find him to assume a second-thigh, and narrowness of the thigh of what should be the crest, and over what is most uncomfortable, and frequently acutely painful to thin-skinned horses. In addition the bridoon bit is \( \text{in heavy harness drawn very tightly up into the mouth-angles, forcing the cheeks against the teeth, and often severely wounding them.} \)

Bad as may be the effects and severe as is the punishment of the usual heavy-harness bridoon side-check, the almost universal "overdraw" variety used on our light-harness horses is assuming the proportions of a national calamity, and so far as conformation and carriage goes, is apparently working lasting injury to our light-harness horse, and to his heavy-harness compeer who graduates from the light-harness bridoon bit. If, in addition, the unfortu-
in the numbnness of the lower jaw a sur-

crase to his misery by learning to pull, and

thus to develop a "dead" and probably

uneven mouth. Notice the congestion of the

tongue and lower jaw of such a poor 

brute, and figure what sensation can pos-
sibly remain, after an hour or more in its

empurpled, bruised, and benumbed mem-

branes. It is doubtful if any puller was

ever born—they are all "made" by the deat

mismangement of man—aided by the

infernal ingenuity of the check-rein; yet

in the same breath it must be said that no

horse in the world possesses the even, deli-
cate, responsive mouth of the animal

educated by the American trotting-horse

developer, who uses and does not abuse

the check; who suits the driving bit to the

mouth and tongue and the animal's fancy;

who allows, or compels, the animal to keep

his mouth always closed, and that organ

and the lip-angles consequently moist—

without which no horse can either "make"

or maintain that most valuable attribute—

a "good mouth." How ever could be as readily attained without

any check at all, few handlers strive to

discover, the pupils who escape being the

few determined youngsters who will not

submit to it, and are allowed to develop

without it—in most cases to the perfect

satisfaction of both parties. The high

side-check—the loops sewn upon the

crown-piece—was at one time in much

favor, and would be so-to-day were it more

generally in use in light harness. For a

fast horse which takes a hard hold at speed

such checks would probably not answer

well, as the overdrew usually prevents

such an animal from choking however hard

he pulls, but, at all events for road work,

hard pullers nowadays are not driven, and

in fact so generally good are the mouths of

latter-day fast horses that most of them

take merely a pleasant grip of the bit at

and partly through them most may be

coaxed to drive more and more lightly in

hand until finally an almost slack rein will

answer. Light-mouthed horses will al-

ways, after they have become a little used to

the change from the familiar overdrew,

go most pleasantly in the high side-check,

and, with it, precaution should always be

taken to use a nose-band to keep the mouth

closed. Had the side-check no other ad-

vantage, the fact that the horse's attitude

is, with it, far more natural and graceful

than when awkwardly straining in the

overdrew, should make the former far

more acceptable before any gentleman's

equipage. Moreover proper shoeing and

balancing will do much to offset the need

of any check, or at least a tight one, and

many a luckless race- or road-horse is being

checked up until his vertebrae creak, and

his eyes roll in his head because of an

unsteadiness which proper balancing of his

four corners with shoes, toe-weights, pro-
tecting boots and other contrivances would

both quickly and permanently correct.

Checks are needed in any kind of double

harness, and no pair of horses is safely "put
to" without them. There can be no worse

runaway than that where an animal has

lost his bridle, and especially in warm

weather, horses are prone to rub their

heads against anything to allay the irrita-

tion caused by heat and swarming insects.

Thus any bridle may be pulled off, or the

rein, or some other part, caught in a most
dangerous manner, if the heads of the an-
imals are not kept from going too low by

checks. They also serve to steady a pair in

a way, not as holding them in a vise, but

as defining limits of relaxation beyond

which they may not go—and these limits

may be very generous. The very straight-

shouldered draught horse also needs, if,
as usual, he is very low-headed, a moderate

check lest he, by his posture, bring the
draft so low upon the points of his

shoulders as to badly chafe them. A

slight elevation of the head prevents this

and keeps the collar up in a better place.

No one at all familiar with horses and

their vagaries could object to the use of the

check-rein—but all must deprecate the

abuse of it which is continually increas-
ing. An occasional spasmodic effort to

regulate matters is made by the Society

which has charged itself with such matters,

but as with the much-discussed "burrs" on

bridle-bits, practically nothing whatever is
done. Horses need all the freedom they
can get in order to navigate the city streets

at all, now that asphalt is so general, and

motor grease is making its footing even

more precarious. Tight checks, large and

close blinkers, tight pole-pieces, and wet,
greasy asphalt make a desperate combina-
tion for the hapless creatures, and in a few

months we shall again be holding our

breaths and gritting our teeth as we watch
them floundering and falling on the icy

pavements—and, as usual, do nothing to

stop it! If every horse working to-day

could be allowed, no matter how loosely his

check lies, from four to six holes more, he

would last longer, wear better, do more

work more cheerfully, and prove in each

instance that the merciless man had not

wholly forgotten the patient beast which

had no one else in all the world to look to

for care and consideration, but had real-

ized and fulfilled his obligations actually

—and at such a trifling personal cost! This

is one evil we can all correct—why not
do it?