

Hereford Haven: A Dog's Delight

By Judith LeRoy

"Judy!?! There are four *BIG* cows on our porch!"

I stared at my unkempt reflection in the bathroom mirror and considered my husband's words. It was 6 a.m. Mountain Time, and I hadn't even brewed the morning coffee yet. I wiped sleep out of my eyes and pondered an appropriate response. Was this a rude attempt at early morning country humor? Didn't the man know that 6 a.m. was no time for joking?

"Judy!!!"

Another bellow from the living room. Oh, oh ... this didn't sound much like a joke. I left the bathroom fast and hurried through the house, aiming for the front door—or so I hoped. We'd only moved in the day before and my sense of direction was really off. Looking for a snack a little past midnight, I ended up in the laundry room instead of the kitchen, peering at the washing machine rather than the refrigerator.

I turned the corner and nearly ran over my husband. He was standing stock-still, peering disbelievingly out the front window. I looked, blinked, and looked again. He had reason to disbelieve. A bunch of cows were standing on our front deck! Actually, I guess the proper term is "herd" when you had this many.

Holy Moses!!

How on earth did four massive Herefords get on my front porch? The quantitative side of my brain idly wondered how they managed to fit—the wooden, ground-level deck hadn't seemed that big to start with. Those Herefords were wedged shoulder to shoulder, tight as sardines in a can. They mooed gently and jostled as they tried to swing their gigantic heads around to check the source of the problem.

The problem? My eyes opened wider when I saw the dancing, hairy brown body at the foot of the porch. My dog, Dylan. Big D. Dilly-Bop. Dill-pickle, to his friends.

It didn't take Hercule Poirot's little gray cells to deduce that the agent responsible for this calamity was my usually indolent, sheep-scorning brown Beardie show dog. Calamity? Yes, calamity. What else would you call a porch-full of Herefords? Dylan pranced around the assembled cows like a Cheyenne warrior counting coup.

How did he get those damn cows on the porch? Better yet, where the Hell did he find them?

My husband's icy glare threatened to freeze my night-shirted back. He's thinking this was my fault??? I couldn't have orchestrated anything this unlikely had I been paid to do so. And I wouldn't have accepted the deal if offered.

How about a reality check, David? The villain of this piece was clearly the wretched grimy mutt who was leaping, diving, and strutting around the impassive bovines. He was the only creature out there other than the cows, so he must be the guilty party, mustn't he? I

glanced over my shoulder and counted the other hairy brown dog bodies, just to be sure. Mike stood on the dining room table ... nose pressed against the glass of the window that overlooked the deck. He had a startled but interested expression on his face.

Mike, the oldest, was the best herder of the bunch, distinguishing himself at a BCCA Herding Instinct test at the tender age of 16 months by leaping a fence to follow his escaping Barbados test sheep and cornering them in an adjacent field. But that was sheep. Sheepdogs herd sheep. So, what the heck was Dylan doing with these critters? You could see the question smoldering in Mike's eyes.

Huck and Madoc huddled behind David. Not a peep out of them ... not a single sound escaped their throats, but they were probably thinking thoughts like Mike's. They were *sheepdogs*, for God's sake; actually, if we want to be precise, Huck Finn had always confined his herding efforts to ducks. Those gigantic quadrupeds out there weren't related to any sheep *they'd* ever chased, and they sure as Hell had no semblance to ducks.

Mike, Mad, and Huck might have been cowed (forgive the pun) by the goings-on, but it was clear that Dylan's usual lackadaisical herding instinct had ratcheted into super-macho-extreme high gear. I watched as he lifted his cockle-burred muzzle skyward and bayed like a damned Black and Tan Hound treeing Rocky Raccoon. He was obviously proud of what he had accomplished.

When he was a puppy, one of my daughters wanted to name him Conan (after the Barbarian, of course). I rejected the name because I felt it didn't represent his true character. How wrong could I get?

"What are you going to do about this?" my husband demanded, flicking the drapes on Mike's window for a better look. "God, they're big, aren't they?"

I looked hopefully at Dylan. He'd brought them home. Maybe he had a plan?

But Dylan was too busy to converse. His chest stuck out so far he couldn't see the ground—of course, he wouldn't have seen it anyway, because sometime during the cattle drive he'd lost my daughter's pink barrette—the only one I could find at 5:15 a.m. that morning. His hair fell rakishly over one eye, and—rather like the stereotype blonde Valley Girl flipping her mane at the local mall—Dylan kept tossing his head. Only his effort wasn't for vanity's sake—he just wanted to get the damn hair out of his eyes so he could keep the cows in focus.

A few details may help you appreciate my situation. Let me tell you how we got into this pickle.

We had migrated to Taos, New Mexico for a few cool months while our hometown Tucson broiled in the summer heat. Our temporary relocation happened because we heard about a great four-acre fenced property owned by a Taos writer who was taking his wife, his four computers, and four dogs north to Montana to escape the heat of the Taos summer—I know, I know—it's all relative. During their absence, he was willing to rent his Taos compound to some other fools who had four dogs and four computers.

After one look at the property, and especially the fence, we jumped at the opportunity. The eight-foot tall wooden fence that native New Mexicans called "lattia" was made from pine saplings, undressed, nailed one by one to two-by-six fence slats. The fence posts were eight-

foot logs of telephone-pole pine and, under the fence so his dogs couldn't dig out, the writer had expensive concrete footings. Impenetrable. Nothing could get into or out of this fence once the gate was closed—an important fact in view of my current situation.

Within the fenced area were aspen, pinon pine, peach, pear, and apple trees—and even some sage and an occasional blue spruce. Also, surprisingly, a formal English flower bed, modeled after one the writer's wife had seen in Bath, UK. (Obviously, he wasn't the starving artist kind of writer, was he?) Once inside this compound you might not see a dog for hours, but you know he can't, he *won't*, get out.

Unless the 10-foot span of wooden gate is not properly latched, and the wind is blowing from the south.

The way I figure it, Dylan, on his 5:15 a.m. sunrise exploration of the perimeter, discovered the open gate. The other dogs, being more intent on breakfast, came back inside, while Dylan succumbed to wanderlust and went on a tour of the neighborhood. And he found some new friends who were now standing on my front porch, bawling gently. Waiting for breakfast also, perhaps?

I looked out the window and waited for inspiration.

"Do they bite?" asked David, not really much of a livestock man.

I refused to dignify the stupid question with an answer. I strode manfully through the living room back to the bedroom.

"Where are you going?" David yelled. "Aren't you going to do something?"

"I'm going to get my boots and saddle," I hissed at him. A six-shooter would have been handy, too, but I wouldn't know whether to aim it at the cows, Dylan, or my husband.

Actually, I just went to get my old green Wellies and bathrobe. If I got trampled, I wanted to look somewhat presentable when I arrived at the Emergency Room. Or the morgue. A faded and holey knee-length nightshirt isn't exactly reputable cow-punching gear.

With my bathrobe flapping and green boots flopping on otherwise bare feet, I stomped back to the living room, trying to look like I had a plan in mind. Where's John Wayne or Clint Eastwood when you really need him? I looked, with some disgust, at the other dogs. Now they were all standing on the dining room table for a better view. I was surprised my husband wasn't sitting in their midst.

I opened the door and surveyed the scene.

"Wow, they have big horns!" David murmured from behind me. Actually, the horns were miniscule. Thank God Dylan hadn't found some Brahmins or Longhorns. That would have really upped the ante.

The dogs on the dining table were still silent. Perhaps they were worried about antagonizing these giants—a fear Dylan presumably didn't share. But where was Dylan anyway? My eyes swept the gravel driveway, looking for his familiar brown shape.

Dear God, no! He was bringing TWO MORE!!

But these two cows weren't as mellow as their sisters on my porch. Maybe that's why Dylan left them for last? The monster on the right sent a hoof flying out behind her. Dylan leaped backward, waited for the hoof to return to earth before he nipped that hock smartly. She turned to face her persecutor. She glared at him, wicked little horns lowered and gleaming in the early morning sunlight.

"Oh my God, that beast will kill my dog!" I whispered.

"It'll save us the trouble," my husband muttered.

Dylan feigned a lunge to the left, and when the cow turned to meet the challenge, he darted right and grabbed her nose. Beardies aren't even supposed to pull wool when herding, and he had this cow by her nostrils! I would have gotten indignant, but it was clear that the cow understood this mode of communication. All fight gone, she jogged to join the sisterhood on my front deck. The other cow followed meekly, casting a worried glance over her shoulder at the puffed-up brown Beadie who seemed to be enjoying this more than he did any of his victories in show rings across North America.

"Oh NO!" yelled David, a step behind. "MORE COWS!"

Well, I couldn't let another cow get on the porch. I imagined it was already in danger of collapsing under the current tonnage. So, from the doorway, I started shouting,

"Back! BACK, you cows!!!"

They peered at me in complete befuddlement. Dylan frowned at me from around the last two cows' haunches. Clearly, he thought I'd lost my marbles—yelling at cows?

Since verbal communication wasn't effective, I tried physical force. I put my hands on the nearest brown hulk and shoved. All I got was a pathetic, sorrowful bawl.

"Moo ... ooo ... oooooo ... uh."

Obviously, she had reason to bawl. She really couldn't go anywhere. She was anchored in place by the cows packed around and behind her. She had nowhere to go even if she had a mind to.

I'd have to get the rear ones off the porch first. I pushed and shoved my way through the pungent crowd. I never realized cows smelled so earthy, close up. Actually, like manure. Oops! One of them had deposited a large pile on the porch and one of my Wellies was parked in it.

The cows turned their dull eyes in my direction as I squelched through their midst. I had a sudden epiphany: Cows aren't real smart. I suspected this fact could either help me or hurt me. While the cows stared at me, dumbly, three sets of really clever eyes in hairy brown bodies parked on the dining room table were also fixed upon me.

David asked the question that was hovering in all their minds. "Judy? What are you going to do *now*?"

I pondered the cows' backsides, picked a victim most likely to release the log jam, or, rather, cow jam ... grabbed her tail and pulled.

Nothing happened. I pulled harder. Harder! The damn bovine didn't even know I was there. Just my luck that the cow that was the bottleneck—the one I had to move before the others could trundle down the steps—was catatonic.

I squeezed between two cows, mimicking the strategy my Grandfather used with his comparatively petite and gentle Guernsey dairy cows in northern Wisconsin many years ago. (At the time, I had thought he was crazy to risk life and limb amongst those potential foot-crushers. Ha!)

I started shoving, crooning ridiculous barnyard things heard in my childhood, obviously buried deep in my unconscious.

"Ho, Boss, move Bossy, Good girl, let's go, Boss"

To this day, I have no earthly idea why my grandfather called all his cows Bossy, but it seemed to work for him. And, by God, it seemed to be working for me!

Dylan watched in dismay as the bottleneck cow turned her head. Her stuporous eyes widened when she saw the two late-comer cows walking up the driveway toward the porch. One of them had lost interest in the porch proceedings and had lowered her head to munch the yellow daisies that lined the driveway. Obviously, my bottleneck cow liked daisies, too—because she extricated herself from her buddies on the porch, trundled down the step, and ambled toward the daisies.

The other cows on the porch, seeing her move, turned and did likewise. Wow! This wasn't so hard. The theory of "herd behavior" had a very practical advantage.

"Good work, Jude!" came the voice from within. David was still spectating.

He spoke too soon, however. Dylan, watching his penned cattle come unglued, was outraged. He danced, howled, nipped, and barked. He gathered, he drove, he wore ... he was absolutely unrelenting. The cattle stumbled back from whence they came—back toward the porch.

I had no choice. To avoid being trampled, I trotted in front of them ... up the porch step, through the doorway ... the herd hot on my heels! I slammed the door, then leaned on it, lest one of those behemoths put her weight against it and burst through into the living room.

After a minute, I got a grip. The cows really didn't have an invasion plan. But they were, once again, wedged on the deck, bawling gently, packed a little tighter now that their two late-coming friends had joined them.

"I think Dylan's the problem," David speculated.

For cripe's sake, a savvy three-year-old could tell you that! I controlled my temper, remained levelheaded, cucumber cool, and I began my response quite tactfully, I thought.

"Yes, dear. I think you're right. So, I'm going to go out the back door and grab Dylan," I said in a calm, reasonable voice. Then, pressed, I guess, by the mounting stress, I sort of lost it. My voice rose to a frightening pitch. The dogs on the dining room table watched my disintegration with wide-eyed admiration. They loved theatrics.

"Then I'll lock the damn dog in the bathroom. And after I get rid of these wretched cows, I'll probably drown him in the flipping bathtub!!!"

David looked a bit concerned—he really liked Dyl and, unlike the Beardies on the dining room table, he didn't savor theatrics or violence. I didn't really intend to drown Dyl and I think my momentary loss of control should have been overlooked, given the unusual circumstance.

The fact of the matter was that I loved the dog dearly. I loved almost everything about him. The irony: The only thing about Dylan that disappointed me was his apathetic attitude about sheep. He herded them without enthusiasm when pressed to do it, but he did it almost in disgust. His parents liked sheep; his siblings liked sheep. He had an ROMI title from the BCCA, thanks to his children's sheep herding ability. But sheep never excited Dylan. Apparently, he had no appetite for mutton. That day in Taos brought perspective, if nothing else. Dylan preferred beef. He had spent his herding lifetime waiting for someone to bring on the cattle!

And now that he'd found a bunch of them, he wasn't going to surrender them without a fight.

I sneaked out the back door and crept behind Dylan—a feat possible only because his attention was focused elsewhere. I nabbed him by the collar and dragged him through the back door of the house and into the bathroom while he whined and yelped, protesting the unfairness of life. At last glimpse, he was standing, all four filthy feet on the counter next to the sink, probably wondering if he could shove his brown body through the narrow bathroom window to return to his roundup.

I ran out the back door and hustled back to the front of the house.

"Judy, the cows are off the porch!" David yelled.

CNN couldn't have provided better commentary than David that morning. After his perceptive observation, my beloved opened the door and stepped out onto the porch that the cows had vacated. He wrinkled his nose.

"Smelly creatures, aren't they?"

The odor must have wafted past him, through the open door to the living room, and into the dining room. I noticed, through the window, there weren't any dog bodies on the table anymore. Where were they?

A brown head appeared in the doorway behind David. Mike. He cocked his head to one side and looked at the forlorn bunch of cows. They were about 20 feet away in the driveway, standing in a tight circle, wondering what to do now that their driving force was locked in the bathroom.

Mike cocked his head to the other side, listening to voices deep inside his Scottish sheepherder brain. One eyebrow rose. Then the other. His ears followed suit.

"Oh, oh!" mumbled David.

He was right. Without warning Mike catapulted through the doorway. Two bounds and he was off the porch and racing toward the cows. When he herded sheep, he did so silently, but the cattle obviously brought out his latent huntaway herding style and he was in fine, melodic voice as he circled the herd.

The cattle looked questioningly at Mike and looked at each other. They looked at me.

I started shouting at Mike. Madoc and Huck, realizing there must be trouble afoot, came barreling through the door to check it out.

Mad, always the careless one, ran smack into David—who tumbled down the single step and sprawled awkwardly on the ground at the base of the porch. Huck, in a fine imitation of an Olympic broad jumper, tried to sail over David as he got to his knees. David, off-balance, bit the dust again as Huck ricocheted off his back. As he groveled in the dirt, David yelled something about everyone and everything in this house being "absolutely, totally crazy!" Who in their right mind would challenge that?

Anyway, Madoc also launched himself into the fray. Huck Finn had second thoughts. He paused well before reaching the cows and glanced back at David, still sitting on the ground. He contemplated the situation while I chased Mike and Maddawg as they circled the cows.

It wasn't a hard decision for Huck. As I said before, when Huck herded, he preferred geese and ducks—the smaller the better. And maybe that was a wise decision on his part—he was a small Beardie, a touch below the male height standard. And let's face it. A smallish-Beardie who's intimidated by sheep isn't the best candidate for herding Herefords, is he? So, Huck, adhering to Shakespeare's dictum about discretion and valor, turned around and loped past David into the house. I saw, through the window, that he had returned to the dining room table and was settling in for some serious spectator sport. It was a wonder he hadn't brought beer and popcorn.

Meanwhile, Mike and Madoc had changed direction and were re-circling the herd, howling like banshees. That was it. The cows could stand no more. They broke through the Beardie perimeter and charged off in six different directions. Mike quickly selected his quarry and went after her. Being a smart dog, Mike picked the smallest heifer. Madoc, with more bravado than sense, chose the biggest. On the other hand, being the biggest, all Madoc's jumbo could manage was a slow shuffle, while Mike's fleet-footed heifer launched like a Concord jet. Maybe Maddawg wasn't so stupid after all?

I watched the rapidly disappearing rumps and wondered what was next.

By this time, David had picked himself up out of the dirt and was hobbling up the steps to the house.

"Where are you going?" It was my turn to be irate.

"Since you seem to have things under control, I thought I'd go work in my study for a while." His backside disappeared through the doorway and around the corner into the house.

Under control? Under control?! I studied the scene before me. Had I misperceived?

I jogged down the gravel path toward the lower reaches of the four acres, but after about 100 feet, I came to halt. There, right before me, were four members of the cow sextuplet—obviously, the members not being chased by Mike or Maddawg. They were standing smack-dab in the middle of the formal English Garden. Our landlords, the writer and his wife, had told us in great detail about the horticultural vicissitudes of the past seven years—fighting insects and weather as they lovingly cultivated beds of flora they had imported from rain-drenched London, Manchester, Birmingham, and Dover to semi-arid New Mexico. They had identified each bit of vegetation by Latin, then common name. They even had pet names for some of them.

They had spoken with pride about the poppy-orange, obviously savory flower that the cow with the curling horns currently munched. The red-brown cow with a single horn had moved on to a delicate white lily-looking plant. Her friend with the white spot on her rear nosed a sky-blue delphinium. Uh-oh, a rare pink aster just disappeared into another gaping maw. If I didn't do something soon, there wouldn't be a blossom left! The third cow from the right shifted a foot and crushed two small imported azalea bushes.

I charged into the middle of the herd. I had lost all fear of death. I tried the "Hey, Bossy" routine, but the munching Bossies ignored me. Apparently, that trick only works once per day. I put my hands on the broad side of the closest cow and shoved mightily. Sort of like nudging the Statue of Liberty off Ellis Island.

If ... I ... could ... just ..., another mighty shove and she plodded, on her own steam, for a couple of steps. I reached out and pushed again. At this rate, I might be able to move the herd six feet in a couple of days—give or take a few hours.

But what was this? When she moved, so did the cow on her right. And the one on her left. A moment of hope ... a bolt of insight! Maybe she was the leader of the pack. Do cow packs have leaders?? I kept shoving and four cows started trudging up the path.

Then, a whirlwind behind me! Two cows, bawling madly, eyes rolling, came hurtling toward us with Madoc and Mike racing behind them. Oh, my God, a stampede!

I leaped off the path into the nearest sage brush. The four cows I had finally gotten lumbering forward quickened their pace—they obviously felt a growing sense of urgency as the two driven cows pounded close upon their heels.

Two brown canine torpedoes stretched low to the ground, ears flying, tongues hanging almost to their knees as they roared behind the now smartly moving herd. The look in those canine eyes was positively frightening. They were having one whale of a good time!

I crawled out of the sage and watched the dust cloud as it disappeared down the path. Then I hurried after it.

As I jogged along, somewhat handicapped by my loose, flopping Wellies, I realized that the path we followed led, God bless it, to the wooden gate. I speeded up as the herd and the dogs reached the wide-open portal.

Mike was a dog that liked to wander, and I knew that once his feet hit the open road, he'd probably keep right on going. There was no predicting where the several tons of galloping

sirloins might end up. I gasped for breath and speeded up, running through the gate just as an old, beat-up pick-up truck rumbled at breakneck speed down our one-lane dirt road toward us.

Dear God! Could six stampeding Herefords demolish a pick-up? And would I be sued if they trampled the driver? I ran even faster, expecting, any moment, to hear the sound of a massive collision.

Nothing.

I slowed to a jog when I saw that the cattle had stopped dead in the road. Mike and Madoc halted, quizzically, behind them. In a rare moment of lucidity and luck, I grabbed both their collars before they got the cattle moving again. Hallelujah! First blessed thing all blasted morning that went right!!

A slight, wiry Hispanic man in faded jeans, well-worn boots, and a large Stetson hat made his way around the now placid cows.

"Lady, I don't know how to apologize. I sure hope my cows didn't do any damage to your property. I was coming down the road, looking for them, and I saw them running out your gate. I'm sorry. So sorry," he repeated. By this time, his hat was in hand, and he was nervously twisting the brim.

He looked at my smelly green Wellies and rumpled bathrobe. I suspected that my un-combed hair stuck up in at least 100 directions, but I couldn't let go of the dogs' collars long enough to pat it down. I gaped, wonderingly, at my visitor before my sluggish brain grasped the significance of his words. Did that mean Dylan was off the hook? Had his crime gone undetected?? I felt like a criminal on the dock, with the prosecuting attorney announcing the murder victim wasn't really dead after all. The rancher misread my silence.

"I'll pay for any damages." He obviously believed his cows had wandered off and just ended up inside my fence. He hadn't the faintest clue that Dylan had most likely rustled them.

My conscience spoke to me, but my lips wouldn't oblige. I could at least have equivocated. I could have said that maybe the cows hadn't wandered into my front yard by themselves. I could have suggested that my beloved dog had possibly collected them and brought them home. I cleared my throat, but the words wouldn't come. The rancher kept talking.

"My land is less than a mile down the road," he pointed to the green field in the gentle valley just beneath us. "I don't know how it happened. I was right there fixing the far fence. My cows just disappeared. One minute they were there, the next they weren't. I've been looking for them ever since! I can't figure out how they got way up here!" He scratched his head, obviously bemused.

Then he eyed the two brown dogs whose collars I clutched. "You really got yourself some good herding dogs there." He nodded at Mike and Madoc. "They were pushing those cows right out the gate. I saw them from the road back there and they were doin' just great! I guess I need to get me a herding dog. You got any for sale?"

I thought of Dylan, locked in the bathroom, but resisted temptation and said no, I had no dogs for sale.

I brought my hairy angels back through the pearly gate and locked it tight. We ambled back to the house. David was at work in his study, trauma forgotten.

I opened the door to the bathroom and Dylan lunged out. He raced over to Mike and Madoc, who were alternately drinking from and bathing in the water bowl. He sniffed the two dogs, breathing in the exquisite bovine odor clinging to their filthy coats

Huck Finn looked a little chagrined that he had missed out on all the excitement, but he generously congratulated his colleagues on a job well done. The ensuing canine back-slapping and chortling left me ... well, it left me scared to death. Anything that much fun would probably be repeated. It could become a fixture of canine life.

Dear God.

I padlocked the gate. I put on some very old clothes, scrubbed the manure from the front deck and replanted some of the loose foliage in the English garden. I'd have to spend time and a lot of money, I assumed, on reassembling it before we returned to Tucson. The tabletop that held the spectating Beardies would probably need refinishing, too. I contemplated the effort and resources consumed by this cattle drama, and then I told myself that someday I'd laugh about it. Someday far, far in the future.

I'm pleased to report that we had no reoccurrences—probably because I made sure there were no opportunities. I almost breathed a sigh of relief when autumn came, and the writer moved back to reclaim his acreage in Taos. Let him cope with the joys of country living. I would happily return to Tucson to deal with non-herdable animal life ... Gila monsters ... javelinas ... tarantulas.

My dogs, however, looked at cows differently from that time forward. Whenever we drove past a barnyard, a pasture, a rodeo ring—my dogs lifted their noses, sniffed the air, and got a wistful expression. Then they swaggered a bit, remembering the day that Dylan brought the cows home and they all got to play.

From that day on, my Beardies regarded sheep disdainfully. Even Huck, the former duck-only herder looked down his nose at the wooly creatures. Mere puppy play, after the Hereford day ... mere puppy play.