

The novel traces the life and adventures of Black Beauty, a horse in 19th-century England. It opens with Beauty's descriptions of his life as a colt (young horse) in the home of a kind master named Farmer Grey. He runs and plays in the meadow and receives lectures from his mother, Duchess, about the importance of being kind and gentle and never biting or kicking - basically the horse equivalent of an English gentleman.

When he is two years old, Beauty witnesses a hunting party going after a hare and the tragic death of one of the riders in a fall from his horse. The horse, also injured, is put down. The experience frightens him.

When Beauty turns four, Farmer Grey trains him to carry riders on his back and pull carriages. After being sent to a neighbor's pasture near the train station to get used to the sounds of the road, Beauty is sold to Squire Gordon at Birtwick Hall. This is where he gets his name; other than a white star on his forehead and a white hoof, his coat is shiny black.

At Birtwick, Beauty meets and befriends the other horses in the stable: Merrylegs, Ginger and Sir Oliver. Squire Gordon and his coachman, John, are kind men who believe in treating horses well, and Beauty's work with them is humane and happy until the Gordons must move to a warmer climate for Mrs. Gordon's health.

Beauty is sold to a number of different homes, from Earls Hall Park, a fashionable home where his mistress, Lady Anne, works her horses hard, to a stable that rents out carriages and finally to a London cab driver named Jerry Barker, the first really kind master Beauty has after leaving Birtwick. His other masters and stable managers overwork him, neglect his care and hygiene and even steal from his oats.

After Jerry becomes sick and needs to leave the cab business, Beauty gets sold to a corn dealer and then to another cab driver who is lazy and treats his horses unkindly. When Beauty collapses from overwork, he's sold at auction to a kind farmer who nurses him back to health before selling him to the Blomefields, who were neighbors of the Gordons. Under the care of their groom, who had once been a stable lad at Birtwick, Beauty lives out the remainder of his days in a kind and loving home.