PIPPA'S PONY TALES

Rusty the Trustworthy Pony



PIPPA FUNNELL

OLYMPIC MEDALLIST

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One

It was late summer and the sun was shining, as Tilly and Mia rode their horses along the bridle path through the forest.

'I love this time of year,' said Tilly.

'Me too,' said Mia.

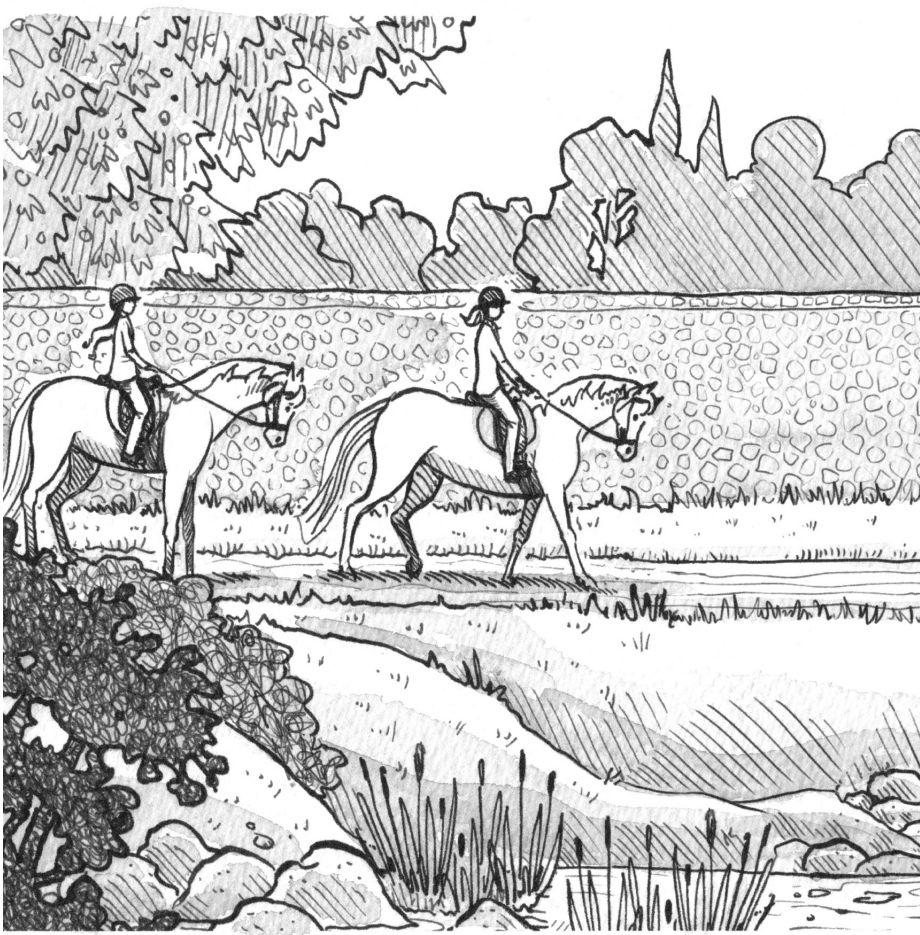
She leaned forward and patted her chestnut horse.

'And in a few months we'll be looking forward to autumn, which suits you perfectly.'

Mia's horse was called Autumn Glory. He was the colour of red-gold leaves.

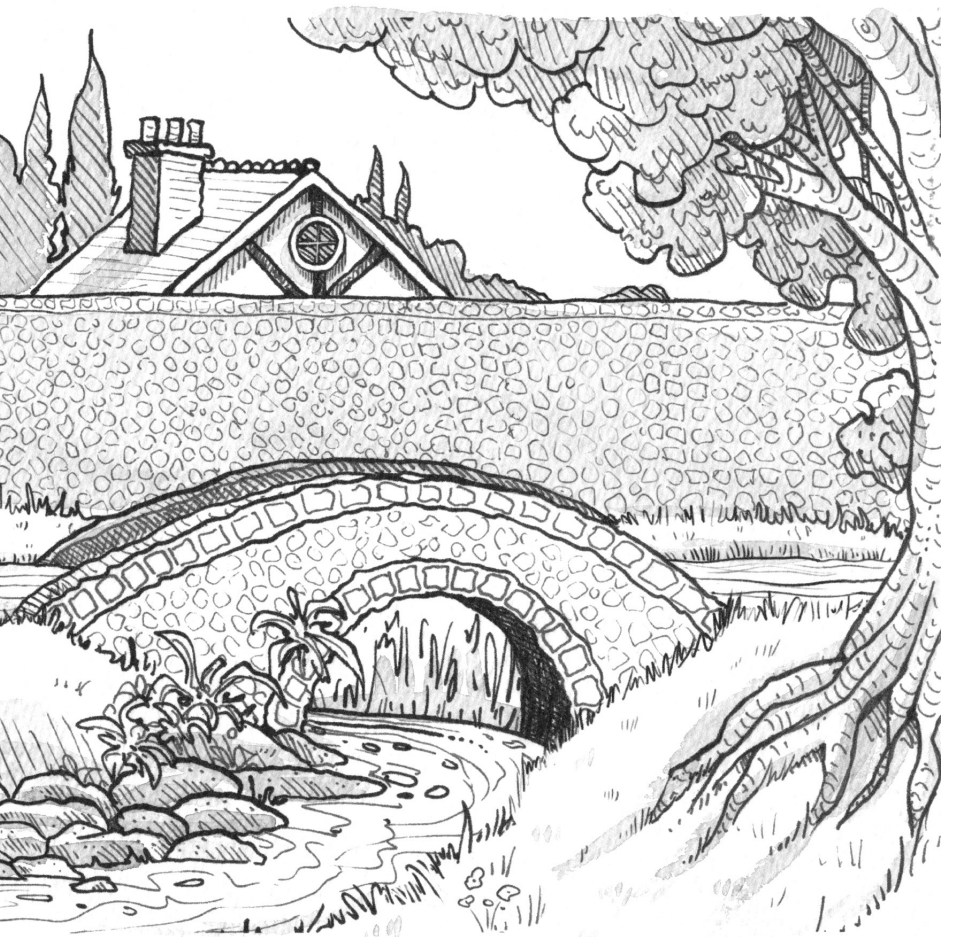


Tilly's horse, Magic Spirit, was a grey, and his coat shone beautifully in the sunlight. They looked great together, walking side by side, while the girls chatted about next year's Pony Club camp.



'Let's take the long route, around the back of the village,' suggested Tilly.

It was one of their favourite off-road tracks – a lane that ran along the edge of North Cosford, with its big gardens and leafy trees.



Soon, they were out of the forest and on their way.

At the end of the track, a little humpback bridge crossed a stream. The horses could sometimes be nervous about the bridge, so Tilly and Mia urged them forward. Autumn Glory crossed the bridge with no fuss, but Magic seemed reluctant.

'Come on, boy,' said Tilly. 'It's only a little stream. You've been over it a hundred times. We won't get home if you don't.'

She nudged with her leg, but he wouldn't move. Magic could be stubborn with other people, but to refuse an instruction from Tilly was unusual.

'Is there something on the other side of the bridge, something that might be bothering him?' Tilly called to Mia.

Mia looked around.

'I can't see anything. It's just the same as always.'

Mia could sense Autumn growing impatient to move on. She patted his neck soothingly.

Tilly nudged Magic again, but he remained where he was. Then she heard a whinny.

Tilly nudged Magic with her leg one more time and finally he walked on. As they approached the bridge, she heard the whinny again.

She moved Magic closer to the cobbled wall that backed onto the big gardens. She tried to peer over, but couldn't see any sign of a horse.

'It's Mrs Pollinger's garden,' said Tilly. 'That couldn't have been Rusty, could it?'

Mrs Pollinger was old now, but she still kept a pony called Rusty. She'd once been a rider, but years ago she'd had an accident and had to give it up. She'd never lost her love of horses and ponies though, and she often stopped by Silver Shoe Farm to say hello. She kept Rusty in a paddock at the bottom of her garden. Sometimes the girls would stop to lean over the wall and watch him.

They hadn't taken this route for a while and Tilly noticed the garden – usually immaculate – was messy and wild with weeds.

'That doesn't look good,' she said.

Magic gave another snort. Mia and Autumn Glory came back over the bridge to see what was going on.

'What's up?'

'Take a look.'

Mia peered over the wall too.

'What am I supposed to be looking at? An overgrown hedge?'

Then the whinnying noise came again.

Autumn Glory and Magic pricked their ears.

'Where did that come from?' said Mia. 'It sounds as if it's right beside us.'

'I can't see Rusty in his field,' said Tilly, craning her neck to look over the wall.

They looked back along the path to see if any other riders were coming. It was empty.

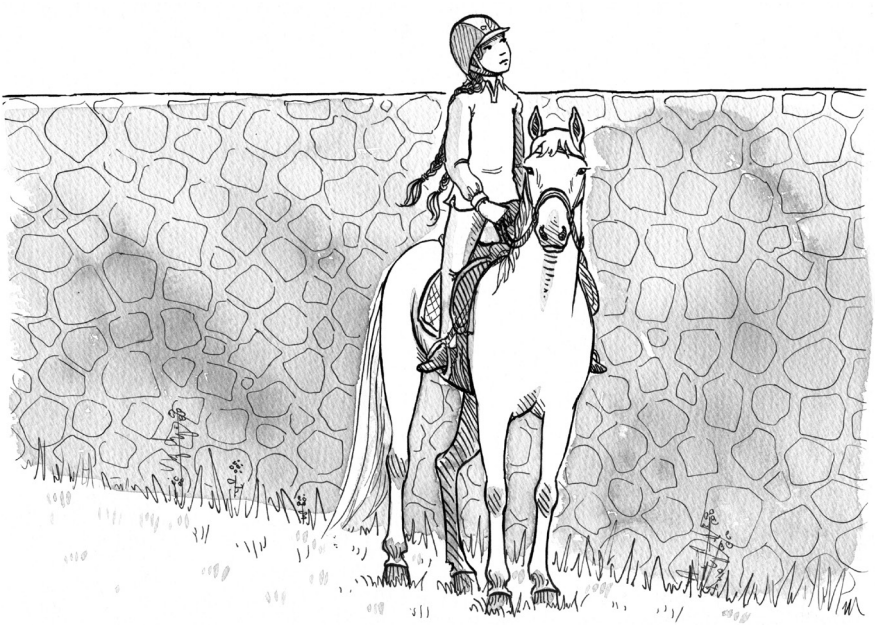
'Maybe it was a ghost horse?' said Mia,

pulling a silly face.

'Hang on a minute,' said Tilly.

She leaned up and forward in her saddle, hoping Magic would stay still long enough for her to balance. She wanted to get enough height to see over the wall properly. Luckily, Magic obliged, and sure enough, directly below, on the other side, Tilly caught a glimpse of a dun-coloured pony.

She sat back and stared at Mia.







'It *is* Rusty. He's on the other side of the wall.'

Rusty let out another whinny. Magic whickered, as though he was trying to let Rusty know they were close by.

'Do you think he's okay?' said Mia.

'I don't know,' said Tilly.

'What's he doing in the garden?' said Mia. 'He must have got out of his paddock.'

'But did you see? The garden is a mess. I know it's been a while since we've been here, but something doesn't feel right.'

'What should we do?'

'Let's go to the front and see if Mrs Pollinger is in. She might not realise what's happened.'

Mia nodded. 'Sounds like a plan.'

'Come on then.'

This time Magic walked straight over the bridge with no trouble. Tilly leaned forward and gave him a pat.

'Thank you, boy. That's much more helpful.'