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My Friend Flicka

Written by

Mary O' Hara

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MARY O'HARA

MY FRIEND FLICKA

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Chapter One

High up on the long hill they called the Saddle Back, behind the ranch and the county road, the boy sat on his horse, facing east, his eyes dazzled by the rising sun.

It seemed like a great personage come on a visit; appearing all of a sudden over the dark bank of clouds in the east, coming up over the edge of it smiling; bowing right and left; lighting up the whole world so that everything smiled back.

The snug, huddled roofs of the ranch house, way below him, began to be red instead of just dark; and the spidery arms of the windmill in the gorge glinted and twinkled. They were smiling back at the sun.

'Good morning, mister!' shouted Ken, swinging his arm in salute; and the brown mare he rode gave a wild leap.

To keep his seat, riding bareback as he was, he clapped his heels into her sides, and she leaped again, this time with her head down. Stiff-legged and with arched back she landed; and then bucked.

Once, twice, three times; and Ken was off, slung under her nose, hanging on to the reins.

She backed away and pulled to get free, braced like a dog tugging at a man's trouser leg.

'No you don't!' gasped Ken, sitting up to face her and clinging to the reins. 'Not that time you didn't –'

She jerked her head viciously from side to side. Ken's teeth set in anger. 'If you break another bridle –'

This thought made him crafty and his voice fell to a coaxing note. 'Now Cigarette – be a good girl – thatsa baby – good girl –'

Responsive to the change of tone, one of her flattened ears came forward as if to peer at him and see if he spoke in good faith. Reassured, she stopped pulling and moved up a step.

Ken got warily to his feet and went to her head, still talking soothingly but with insulting words.

'Thatsa girl – stupid face – whoa, baby – jughead – no sense at all –' and this last was the worst possible insult on the Goose Bar Ranch where a horse without sense was a horse without a right to existence.

Cigarette was not wholly deceived but stood enjoying the stroking of Ken's hand and awaiting developments.

'D'you think I'd ever ride a ornery old plug like you if I had a horse of my own like Howard's?'

The frown faded from his face and his eyes took on a dreamy look. 'If I had a colt –'

He had been saying that for a long time. Sometimes he said it in his sleep at night. It was the first thing he had thought when he got to the ranch three days ago. He said it or thought it every time he saw his brother riding Highboy. And when he looked at his father, the longing in his eyes was for that – for a colt of his own. 'If I had a colt, I'd make it the most wonderful horse in the world. I'd have it with me all the time, eating and sleeping, the way the Arabs do in the book Dad's got on the kitchen shelf.' He stroked Cigarette's nose with the unconscious gesture of an automaton. 'I'd get a tent and sleep in it myself, and I'd have the colt beside me, and it would have to learn to live just the way I do; and I'd feed it so well it would grow bigger than any other horse on the ranch; and it would be the fastest; and I'd train it so it would follow me wherever I went, like a dog –' At this he paused, struck through and through with bliss at the thought of arousing such devotion in a horse that it would follow him.

There was no warmth yet in the level rays of the sun, and the dawn wind was cold on the mountain side, so that Ken presently began to shiver in his thin, dark blue cotton jersey. He turned to

face the wind, tasting something of freshness and wildness that went to his head and made him want to run and shout – and ride and ride – to go on all day – as fast as he could and never stop –

He was hatless, and the wind made a tousled mop of his soft straight brown hair, and whipped colour into his thin cheeks that had not yet lost the whiteness of winter schooldays. His face was beautiful with the young look of wildness and freedom, and his dark blue dreaming eyes.

He must get on Cigarette again.

The moment this thought passed through his mind, Cigarette knew it and turned her head a little to look at him. Her whole body got ready. Not exactly resistant, but waiting.

First he had an apology to make. In all fairness, he must tell Cigarette that the fault had been his own. He had put his heels into her.

He knew exactly what his father would say if he told him about it.

'Cigarette bucked and tossed me.'

'What did you do? Put your heels into her?'

'Yes, sir.'

He and Howard had to say 'Yes, sir,' and 'No, sir,' to their father because he had been an Army officer before he had the ranch, and believed in respect and discipline.

Gathering up the rein, slipping it over Cigarette's head, Ken was humming, 'Yes, sir – No, sir – Yes, sir – No, sir –' and this seemed to have a soothing effect on Cigarette.

When his father had mounted Cigarette, to show him how, she stood like a statue; never started or jumped; and then had moved off slowly and comfortably like a well-behaved horse in a park. But when *he* mounted her, like as not she would toss him four or five times running, all because he couldn't help trying to grab on with his heels the moment he straddled her. That she wouldn't stand; and that he couldn't help doing.

He turned her so that, on her left side, he was up the hill from her. She was not a tall horse, but even so, the jump from the ground for a boy was a long one, and sometimes his arms didn't

pull strongly enough. Last summer he hadn't been able to do it at all, but when he had no saddle must always mount by a fence or from a rock. So far, this summer, he had missed it only a few times.

He took hold of her withers and back, jumped and pulled, landed well up against her, held stiffly there by his arms, then carefully swung his blue-trousered leg over; and slowly, just like his father, settled to her back, legs hanging straight down.

Cigarette was calm. He tightened his rein, squeezed the calves of his legs a little, and she moved off.

One of the exciting things about coming up from school in Laramie to the summer vacation at the ranch, was the weather. Always something doing. Winds and rainbows and calm sunny days, then an electric storm; or frosts or even blizzards. People said it was because of the eight thousand foot altitude.

Now, all the clouds in the sky had caught the sunrise colours, and there was a mingling of pink and red and gold and a keen blue, like electricity, and a wind that was boisterous, like someone scuffling with you, and it played and rippled over the greengrass and made it look like watered silk –

'Greengrass – greengrass –' he chanted, cantering along, thinking how different the greengrass of the range was from the green grass in the little square lawns before the houses down in Laramie, because, on the range, it stretched as far as you could see, and there were jack rabbits hiding in it that sprang up and sailed away over it, riding on the wind with great leaps, as big as small deer. And on the range you called it greengrass, all in one word; and it was important. They read out of the newspaper, 'Greengrass in Federal County already,' early in the spring. Everyone said, 'Have you got greengrass yet? We have.'

It was in the spring that it was important, after the last big snow storm in May when all the horses and cattle were so thin and weak from the long winter that it seemed if the greengrass didn't come soon, no one could stand it any longer; and it came first like just a tinge of pale green on the southern and eastern slopes; and the cattle picked and mouthed at it; and soon it was like green velvet; and then, at last, in late June, like this. A sea of rippling grass.

Ken topped the hill and stood staring. From here he looked west over a hundred miles of the greengrass; and south across the great stretch of undulating plateau land that ran down to Twin Peaks, and beyond that across broken crags and interminable rough terrain, mysterious with hidden valleys and gorges and rocky headlands, all the way to the wide farm valleys of Colorado. Beyond them the Neversummer Range stood wrapped in snow, winter and summer.

He put his head back and sucked in the smell of the cleanness and the greenness and the snow and the windiness – all so sharp and heavenly.

This was what he had been waiting for. All through the last unbearable months of school, the endless classes, the examinations –

At this an uncomfortable feeling gripped him. His and Howard's reports had arrived in yesterday's mail with a letter from the Principal of the school addressed to their father, Captain McLaughlin. And McLaughlin had slung them on the desk with some papers and bills to open later. By the time Ken got back to breakfast surely his father would have opened them. There was that examination – Ken knew he hadn't done very well –

He wondered what time it was now. He looked down at the ranch.

From his high point of vantage the ground fell away to the north in broken undulations and steppes. Just before it reached the low level of the stream and the meadows a mile away, there was a little gorge in the low hills, bounded by a cliff on the eastern side, and, on the west, a steep hill, both of them covered with thick black pine. In the gorge were cottonwood and young aspen. A stream bed with a thread of water and a road wound through, leading from the stables and horse corrals on the near side, out into a V-shaped clearing beyond the gorge. This, grass-covered and studded with young cottonwood trees, his mother called the Green.

Right in the gorge, stretching silver arms up above the trees, and set to catch every stray current of air that sucked through the gully even on windless days, stood the windmill.

On beyond that, in a convenient elbow of the hill to the left, was the bunk house, almost invisible and wonderfully sheltered from

winter storms. Farther on down the left side of the V, the long rambling stone ranch house followed the downward slope of the ground by dropping a step from kitchen to dining room, from dining room to living room, and from living room to study.

Its length was marked by the criss-crosses of the peaked red roofs, by the long, grass-covered terrace along its eastern face, and the low stone wall which upheld it.

There was no sign of life about the place. Too early yet, thought Ken. Wait – there's smoke coming out of both chimneys. Gus has made the kitchen fire for mother and now he's getting breakfast in the bunk house.

He fastened his eyes on the cow barn. It was the lower boundary of the Green, a vast structure, sinking into the earth to a depth of four feet or more, the gently sloping peaked roof hooding it so closely it left only a ten or fifteen foot strip of whitewashed wall to be seen.

Yellow Guernsey cows were standing about the gate of the corral in the Calf Pasture, to the east. They were waiting for Tim to come and let them in. After they were milked he would let them out of the gate to the north, where they could wander across the meadow to the stream and stand during the heat of the day under the tall cottonwood trees which had their roots down deep under the stream bed.

Far beyond, across the meadows and the hills that sloped up from them, a long freight train was chugging on the railroad tracks. Two toy locomotives, and a toy train. It seemed hardly to move. It was climbing up from the east, going west, soon would cross the top of the Rocky Mountain Divide, and then it would drop its extra locomotive and start down towards the Pacific, and gather speed – and tear along –

An echoing whistle pierced the silence. The train was approaching the Tie Siding crossing.

The cows were moving into the corral – that little black post was Tim, fastening the gate back.

It wouldn't be long before breakfast. Everybody was awake. Going downstairs, his mother would call, 'Time to get up boys!' His

father was sitting up in bed with his hair rumpled, pyjamas rumpled, hand reaching out for a cigarette.

Gosh – if his father had read the reports! And that wasn't all, there was the saddle blanket too, the lost saddle blanket.

He turned from looking at the ranch house and let his eyes sweep the hillside. Saddle blanket, saddle blanket – every time he asked his father for a colt, McLaughlin said, 'I'll give you one when you deserve one – not before.' It might be caught on a shrub, on a rock – or lying in a gully. Lucky I woke up early. Howard will be sore that I didn't wake him. He always wants to go along. He can never wake up, but I can –

A jack rabbit sprang up almost underfoot. Cigarette jumped, but Ken sat tight, and as the rabbit sailed away, he gave a yell and chased after.

Cigarette loved a good run.

Leaning back as Rob McLaughlin had taught his boys to do, feet forward and out, reins free, Ken rode like a steeple chaser.

Rabbit, pony and boy disappeared over the crest of the Saddle Back.

Chapter Two

Nell McLaughlin pulled the drop-leaf cherry table out from the corner, opened the leaves so that it would comfortably accommodate four people and flung a red-checked cloth over it.

The roomy kitchen was full of bright sunshine from the windows which opened on the front terrace. It made squares of gold on the painted apple-green floor; and in front of sink and stove and baking table there were hooked oval rugs with gay flower patterns. A little brown cat sat by the stove washing her face.

Neither motherhood nor the hard living at the ranch had deprived Nell of her figure or her maidenliness. At thirty-seven she looked not much older than when she had won a silver cup, at Bryn Mawr, for being the best all-round athlete of her class.

Of medium height, with a long slender waist, her curves were held where they belonged by trained muscles, and, as she walked, there was a lightness about her which came partly from natural vigour and partly from the way her narrow head lifted from the shoulders to face whatever was to be faced; a danger, a storm, a loved one, a hope or a fear.

Her skin was tanned to a light fawn colour, not dry and weather beaten, but smooth and with a lustre that came of persistent care; and the thin lips of her rather wide mouth, with clear cut, sensitive curves, were only faintly pink. Her satiny hair, of the same soft fawn colour, fell in a bang over her forehead; the rest was just long enough to be brushed back in shining smoothness and fastened in