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The Horses of Follyfoot

Written by

Monica Dickens

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The Horses of Follyfoot

MONICA DICKENS

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Chapter 1

The colt, Folly, son of old Specs, was two months old that year when spring came to the farm on the hill, where the old horses lived at peace.

It came late and suddenly, taking everyone by surprise. For weeks it had been raining; steely, penetrating rain that made the older, thinner horses – like Lancelot and Ranger – shiver and cough if Dora or Steve or Callie left them out too long.

Dora and Steve were employed at the farm to look after the twenty horses who had been rescued from cruelty or neglect, or brought here by fond owners to end their days in peace. Callie's mother Anna had married the Colonel, who owned Follyfoot Farm. Callie was unpaid, but she worked just as hard as the others whenever she

was free from the hindrance of school, which interfered with the real purpose of her life: the horses.

Lancelot was twenty-nine – the oldest horse in the world. Callie was determined to keep him alive to see thirty. If it was true that you multiplied a horse's age by seven to compare it with a person, he would then be two hundred and ten years old.

Bringing him in from a short leg-stretcher one wet afternoon, she put hay on his back under a rug and made him a bran mash, spiced with salt and laced with molasses for energy. He stood steaming gently into the rug, with his ugly coffin head in the manger, his rickety legs gone over at the knees and under at the hocks, mumbling at the warm mash with his long yellow teeth.

'Pegging out at last.' Slugger Jones, the old ex-boxer who had worked for the Colonel for years, looked over the door of Lancelot's stable, where Callie was brushing the mud from the elderly horse's legs with a wisp of twisted hay.

'Shut up,' said Callie. 'He's got years yet.'

Slugger made a jeering noise from under the wet sack that covered his balding head from the rain. 'He's older than me, the beggar.'

'Impossible.'

Callie left the stable. Slugger kicked out, but his boot was too caked with mud to lift far enough to catch her.

Everybody's boots were permanently mud-logged at the end of that wet winter. It was not worth hosing them off. The whole farm was a sea of mud. Every gateway was a squelching morass.

Callie's hair was seaweed. Dora's short hair clung in wisps round her blunt brown face. Steve's black hair stuck out in wet spikes. Ron Stryker – who worked at the farm when the fancy took him, and the Colonel could stand him – had long red hair which hung damply in his eyes. When Callie's mother gave him a rubber band to tie it back so that he could see what he was doing, he said, 'What I'm doing is mostly shovelling manure, and I'd rather not see.'

Then suddenly, from one day to the next, the rain was gone. A light fresh wind swept a curtain of last big drops over the farm and away down the hill, with the sun shining it. You could see the rain still grey in the valley, and behind it the broad sunlight painting the fields and hedges and the tops of the greening elm trees. Mist rose from the ponds and the river.

One of Callie's jobs was to look after the colt Folly and his mother. Old Specs had had her baby very late in life, and had almost died doing it. Callie had been keeping them in during the bad weather. When she turned them

out into the first sunshine, the little bay colt went frisking and bucketing away on his silly long legs. Specs went after him in a series of feeble bucks and squeals, stopped in the middle of the field with her head up and her nostrils spread to catch the messages of the spring breeze, then collapsed to roll and wallow in her favourite substance – sticky mud.

Anna's daffodils were rioting under the trees on the lawn. The Colonel put away the dreadful old jacket he wore in the winter, with the leather patches on the elbows and cuffs. Ron Stryker bought a fancy pair of boots, which were too good to work in, but too tight to take off – solution obvious: don't work.

Dora washed her jeans. It was worth it now. Steve's hair lay down again. Slugger took the sack off his head and put on his woollen cap. The grey stable cat decided to have her kittens early, in the bottom of an empty bran sack. The Colonel's mongrel dog had six big yellow puppies on Steve's bed above the tack room.

Cobbler's Dream, the half-blind show-jumping pony, hopped through a weak spot in the hedge and went mad in Mr Beckett's clover. The vet and the blacksmith sent in their bills at the same time. Ron fell in love with the new girl at the Silver Stud Café on the London Road. Dora and Steve and Callie decided to hold a horse show to celebrate this glorious late spring.

Chapter 2

As soon as school closed for the Easter holidays Dora and Callie rode round the neighbouring village to announce the show among the local horse and pony population.

The kind of people who came to Follyfoot shows didn't go to proper shows, because they didn't have the proper kind of ponies, or because they didn't like shows. They just liked to ride.

Dora didn't even have a proper horse. Hero was lame, a legacy of his bad days with an evil-tempered lady in the circus. Callie rode Cobby, and Steve was off in the other direction on the chestnut Miss America.

Dora rode Willy the mule in the hard military saddle that made you understand why they had to mechanise the Army. His trot was like a truck with one flat tyre. His

canter loosened your teeth. To turn him away from home, you had to lean forward, grab the rein near his mouth and pull it out sideways. If that didn't work, you had to go home.

Dora dreamed of a horse of her own, finely bred and schooled, a joy to ride or watch. Meanwhile, because she lived at Follyfoot, she made do with Willy, or stiff-legged Hero, or Stroller – sitting sideways, because his back was as broad as the beer barrels he used to pull in his old days at the brewery.

Callie and Dora stopped at the Three Horseshoes to tell Toby to bring his Welsh pony. They went to the forge to tell the blacksmith's daughter to come with Pogo; and through the wood to the pony farm, whose owner was infested with swarms of horsey girls, some his, some not.

On the way home they passed a house where a spindly roan horse was tied up in the yard, having ribbons plaited into its mane by two fat girls. The creepy Crowleys. They were famous at Callie's school for being the stupidest family ever seen in those parts.

'Don't ask them to come.' Callie jerked her head to where the girls were waving hopefully.

'They couldn't. That horse is lame.' Dora knew everything about every horse for miles round.

'That wouldn't stop them.'

***

The small field behind the Dutch barn had dried out enough for the show. The races would be in the middle and the jumps round the outside. Jumps at Follyfoot were not post and rail with white painted wings, or neatly clipped brush, or red block walls – the kind that Cobbler's Dream had cleared so nobly in the days when he was County champion. Follyfoot jumps were made of anything available: fallen trees, oil drums, broken wheelbarrows, bits of old fencing. One class was called 'Back-Alley Jumping' and it did indeed involve dustbins and broken chairs, a couple of old bicycle wheels, which you could set spinning on the wings of a jump to test a pony's nerve, one of Anna's aprons flapping from a bar, a torn blue horse rug laid on the ground to simulate water, bales of hay and an old door. Ron dragged home some car tyres, bouncing along the road at the back of his motorbike.

'Where did you get those?' Dora and Steve walked through the yard with the mattress off the spare bed for the Refusal Race.

'Down the road.'

'At the garage?'

'If you say so.' Ron never looked directly at you when he spoke.

'Didn't they want them?'

'I dunno. Didn't ask them, did I?'

***

The morning of the show, Anna came out to see where her washtub had gone.

'Apple bobbing.'

'Oh well.' Then Anna saw the mattress. 'Oh no, you've gone too far.'

Callie tried to turn her round and push her back towards the house. 'It's for the Refusal Race. Don't fuss.'

Callie's narrow face was pale and fussed between the pigtails. Organising things exhausted her, and she would throw up from excitement before the show. Everyone knew that. They would not start the show until she had.

The Colonel came out to see where all the pencils had gone from his office.

'Letter Race. You gallop to the end of the field, get off and sign your name, race back and post it in the bird feeder on that tree.'

'Sounds pretty dull.'

'Not when you do it bareback, on someone else's horse,' Dora said. 'You're doing it on Willy.'

The Colonel groaned.

'Oh, please, you must. It gives people something to laugh at.'

'I don't think Earl Blankenheimer does laugh.'

'Who's he?'

'Friend of mine from America. He's coming to see the farm.'

'Who is?' Anna asked.

'Old Blank. You know. He was with me in the hospital last year.'

The Colonel's old war wound played him up sometimes. He would cough painfully for weeks, until Anna got desperate, and Slugger, who had once saved the Colonel from being burned alive in a tank, bullied him into getting some treatment.

'He was in the bed next to me, remember?' the Colonel said. 'Nice enough chap. He was over here looking at 'chasers. Went to the Newbury meeting. It rained for three days. He got pneumonia, more fool him to come to England in February, and ended up in hospital. He's over here now, looking at a stallion he might buy.'

'Racehorse breeder?' Ron pricked up his ears. A racing stable was more his line than a home of rest for old horses.

'In a small way. Got a bit of money, I believe, though I don't think he knows much.'

'He don't know nothing till 'e's seen the great Follyfoot horse show.' Ron swept an arm round the field with its collection of washtubs, laundry lines and bizarre back-alley jumps.