

Dark Horse

Chapter 1

Patience McElwee



Chapter One

The three Hardcastle children realised that it was very kind of their grandmother to give them a show pony of their very own, just as it was kind of her to give them, orphans as they were, a home. They agreed obediently with all the people who told them, practically every day of their lives, what a lovely home it was that they were being given, and when they saw the pony they knew they ought to be feeling enthusiastic about that too. She came nimbling down the ramp of the horse-box, the lightest possible golden chestnut, plaited and shining, her browband a fanciful emerald green, and she reminded them all, at once, of the blonde, spoilt children they met at the parties they were now forced to attend in ever-increasing numbers.

For a few moments they could find nothing sufficiently enthusiastic to say. They were used to making the best of

whatever place they found themselves in, because ever since they were very small they had had to go where they were sent, to whatever relation would put up with four children whose ages never seemed to be just right. But up till now they had chosen their own ponies, and they had got used to thinking of ponies as their own personal responsibility. Swedish Rhapsody, the show pony, had been wished on them.

Casey, the groom, who was Irish and only kept because he would condescend to have an eye to the pigs that formed part of a model farm that was as neat, like the rest of the premises, as a toy in a cardboard box, took the straw from his mouth and spoke, before any of the children could manage to open their mouths. "You wouldn't get far on that one, if hounds were running."

Their grandmother answered him coldly. "This is a show pony, not a hunter, you know." Then she turned to the children, expecting a show of gratitude equal to the fact that the pony had cost every penny of four hundred guineas. "Well, chicks? Isn't she a picture?"

Susannah went forward to pat the pony, hoping to conceal the fact that she had not fallen instantly in love with it, and found it exactly like touching the tightly upholstered yellow satin sofa in the drawing-room, that not even Wong, the Peke, was allowed to sit on, and certainly not children, with their sticky fingers and muddy shoes. She thought of her own pony, Cosy, now banished to a far-distant, thistly, dock-

infested field, together with Matthew's hideous, kind-hearted skewbald cob and Priscilla's outgrown Shetland. Even in the summer Cosy's skin had felt like velvety fur and she had eyes that swam with love and enthusiasm. The show pony showed the whites of her eyes when she was approached, and took a nip at Susannah's sleeve.

"Gently, dear. You can't pull this pony about, you know. She's thoroughbred. You must remember that—all of you. Be very careful, always."

It sounded as if they had all been in the habit of knocking their ponies about, like the rich, spoilt, ignorant children in pony books, who did not reform until the very last chapter.

"There's no need for you to be frightened of her, Priscilla. She won't hurt you if you're gentle with her. She's young, you see. Not like ... " She did stop then, having once before referred to the Shetland as a dusty old hearth-rug, and been quite surprised that Priscilla had not been amused.

Priscilla, who was eight and much younger than the others, was standing with her hands deep in the pockets of her jeans, chewing a grass stalk in as close imitation as she could get of Casey, the groom, in spite of often-repeated warnings that children who sucked grass got things wrong with them too disgusting to mention. She was frightened of nothing in the world, on four legs or on two. She was not even frightened of her grandmother, as the others were, or of her grandmother's maid, Stringer, who was known to Casey and the daily women as the Copper's Nark, and who made it

her business to report every instance of untidiness, every light left burning, every time the bath had a high-water mark.

“Darling, how often have I told you not to suck grass? You’ll get ... well, never mind. What Wong had, that time we had to have the vet. And you’ll spoil the shape of your mouth, thrusting out your lower lip like that. Little girls ought not to pout—they ought to be as happy as the day is long.”

Mrs Aston-Pringle was not in the least like other people’s grandmothers. She hadn’t got untidy grey hair done in a bun and a face like a nice wrinkled apple, nor did she wear lace, smell of lavender, or walk about leaning on a stick. She was slim and extremely smart, with bright red finger-nails and her hair done up in tight curls of mauvish blue. Once a fortnight regularly she went up to London and came back again looking even younger and smarter and carrying a stack of shiny magazines all about Gracious Living.

Gracious Living was, unfortunately, her motto, which meant there was not one room in the house where what she called litter might be left about, paints or cutting-out things or what she referred to unfavourably as story-books. The house itself, years ago, had been a proper farm, but now it looked no more like a farm than its owner looked like a grandmother. The warm little rooms had been thrown together to make two long chilly ones, and artificial logs, electrically heated, glowed half heartedly in winter in place of red-hot heaps of smouldering ash that could be blown into

roaring life with a pair of bellows, where you could roast chestnuts or potatoes or see fairy castles according to your mood. The diamond-paned windows had all been ripped out and replaced with high, wide, clear glass through which could be seen horrid gaps where the gnarled old fruit trees had been cut down to expose the view. Some neat cypresses had been planted to replace them, because they reminded Mrs Aston-Pringle of dear sunny Italy, where she could not now go because she had the children to think of. The cypresses reminded Susannah, who was gloomier than the others, of a new churchyard.

The original farmyard had been turned into a hard tennis court, and the farm itself was well away from the house, because of sounds and smells. The pigs and chickens no longer wandered at will, snuffling and pecking at the windfalls. The pigs were housed in model sties and the hens captive in batteries.

The place used to be called Puddephats and was now known as The Lawns. Priscilla had once said it might just as well be called The Gravel or The Concrete.

The children had lived there now for four months, ever since their grandmother had decided that the clergyman uncle with whom they had been perfectly happy was neither able nor even willing to Do Anything, as she expressed it, about their sister Charlotte.

Standing gazing at Swedish Rhapsody, who had cost four hundred guineas, a fact they were not going to be allowed to

forget, it came into Susannah's head that their elder sister was being made to lead a life comparable to that of a show pony, animals for whom they had always felt sympathy. Groomed and plaited and only allowed out for the day once a week, they were not allowed to hunt, or gallop round wide fields in company with other ponies. That was partly why they had never wished to own one. They were not companionable, and if they were not happy in their lot there was nothing their child owners could do to relieve it. Charlotte too might become sour and unfriendly and too grand for ordinary life, after a bit more of what their grandmother called Social Life in capital letters. She had gone to a tennis party this afternoon, after her grandmother had weighed the advantages of her meeting some Really Nice People against the danger of her getting freckles from the sun. Susannah had freckles, but it wouldn't begin to matter until she was older.

Matthew spoke then. He was the favourite, because he was the only boy, and he dared to ask the question to which Susannah longed to know the answer.

“Which of us is going to ride her?”

Mrs Aston-Pringle spoke decidedly. “You can both school her—under supervision, of course—but Susannah will show her. She's only fourteen, so she'll be able to do it for two years. Remind me to get you some hair-nets, Susannah, when I go up for my rinse.”

Hair-nets. Susannah made a face to herself. She had a lot of rebellious hair, much more nearly the colour of a real chestnut than any so-called chestnut pony, and she knew she looked quite unlike what they called Show Pony Misses, with their black coats, leather gloves, agonisingly tight jodhpurs, and bowler hats that made a cruel rim round their foreheads.

“And you can’t show in a velvet cap, of course. I shall have to get you a bowler.”

“What about me?” Priscilla asked boldly. “What am I going to ride?”

“The donkey, darling,” her grandmother said. “You’ll look sweet on him. We must think of a fancy dress for you. A little Italian peasant girl, perhaps—then you’ll remind me of happy times ... ”

Matthew kicked his youngest sister on the ankle as she opened her mouth to protest. By now he and Susannah, and Charlotte as well, had learnt that protests did as little good as grumbling about the weather. All they could do to relieve their feelings was to foregather in the potting-shed, whenever they could manage to get away unobserved, and plot ways and means of escape from what was distasteful to them in their present life and express their hopes that a time might come when they would no longer be sent from one relation to another like so many parcels without any reference to their own wishes.

Mrs Aston-Pringle turned briskly to Casey, as if she would like to accuse him of idling. “Now—the end loose box—have you put straw right up the sides, as I told you? And seen the light is in working order?”

Casey did not bother to answer. He always did as he was told on matters where his employer could check up at once, so that he could Get Away with it, as Stringer called it, on things unseen and to him unimportant. He gave the pony a not very gentle tug and muttered: “Donkey, is it ... ” Priscilla was his favourite.

Mrs Aston-Pringle watched the pony being led away to its luxurious prison and then turned to the children. “Now, Susannah—Matthew—Priscilla—are you listening? Don’t kick up the gravel, Priscilla—it wears out your shoes. I know you’ll want to make a pet of the pony, and of course you may make friends with her—only Priscilla had better not go into the box with her yet awhile. And you others, be very careful never to raise your hand suddenly—make any sudden movement, or she may take fright and hurt herself—and one scar would spoil her for show. But no titbits, do you understand? Ponies have been known to choke on a piece of apple or a carrot—and bread is bad for them. And of course no handfuls of oats whenever you go near her. She will have a good feed twice a day, and it will upset her digestion ... That reminds me—I must tell Casey he must use the measure, not just guess at it ... Do you all understand?”

They nodded in an obedient chorus. It sounded to them as if the pony's life was going to be exactly like poor Charlotte's. No sweets, because of her complexion, and no bread or cake because of her figure. But perhaps the pony liked it that way, as Charlotte's so-called friend Primrose Pinkney did. Primrose was destined to make a Really Good Marriage, because she was content to live entirely off salad and orange juice.

When Charlotte herself was married, then of course they would all three go and live with her. Priscilla had discovered an empty cottage, where, if you could see the sky from one of the bedrooms, there were three others that were more or less weatherproof. It was conveniently near the field where their ponies were living in exile, and on the occasions when they were allowed to go for a picnic on their own, when their grandmother went up to London, they always chose to go there rather than to some breezy upland with a gorgeous view that would have been their grandmother's choice for them. When they were helping Priscilla allot rooms in the cottage, and planning how it should be furnished, they could not bring themselves to remind her that when Charlotte married, it would be, unless she managed to stand up for herself a bit more, to someone of their grandmother's choice, someone rich and sleek and smart, who went up to London every day to get even richer. He would already have a house of his own, or if not would soon acquire one that would lend itself to

Gracious Living more readily than a tumble-down Tudor cottage whose last inhabitant had been a game-keeper.

“I’m going to fetch Charlotte in the car, and one of you may come with me. Whose turn is it?”

“Mine,” Priscilla said untruthfully. She was the only one of them who did not feel sick in the back of the new car with its spongy springs and smell of hot leather.

“Run and change, then, darling. Your blue smock and the straw bonnet. Clean white socks. And gloves, please. There will be a lot of people there.”

It was to Priscilla’s disadvantage that she was very pretty, and whenever she was taken into public her grandmother contrived to make her look exactly like the doll on the Christmas Tree.

Mrs Aston-Pringle backed the car competently out of the garage, and while she sat waiting for Priscilla, who was clearly having a job to find a clean pair of socks and gloves that matched, remembered to add sugar lumps to the list of things the pony might not have, and reminded them that whatever happened no other child was ever to be allowed on her back. “Not even Celandine Pinkney.”

They blinked at that. Celandine Pinkney was always being held up to them as a model rider, just as her elder sister Primrose was supposed to set an example to their elder sister Charlotte of how a sensible, dutiful girl behaved when she Came Out.

“And tell Casey, when he comes back from his tea, that the pony must have chilled water—from the kitchen, tell him—not the stable tap.”

Casey knew far more about horses than their grandmother did, and the children knew he hated being given orders like that, as if he were deliberately planning to give a four-hundred-guinea pony colic.

After the car had driven away and before they went to the stables they turned out their pockets to see if they could muster sixpence between them, as a reward for Priscilla. She did not need to be bribed before she would sacrifice herself for others, but though she did not mind the car she hated having to dress herself up, and she was trying to collect a fund to provide her Shetland with a few oats for when the winter wind and sleet tore across the miserable, shelterless field where, unless a miracle happened, poor Miss Muffet would still be in exile.

They did not go to the stables with the intention of telling Casey about the water, because if the pony had broken out into a sweat from the nervous excitement to which she was obviously prone, he would have taken away the bucket as a matter of course. They wanted to have another look at the pony to see if she would improve on acquaintance.

Casey had taken out her plaits and she looked more than ever like a child at a party, with her mane in a froth of fair curls. She stood backed against the far wall and made no attempt to come and greet them.

“She’s just like Jonquil Pinkney,” Susannah said, and she and Matthew agreed, for the hundredth time, how absurd it was for all the Pinkney girls to be called after spring flowers when they looked like not very attractive ferrets.

Matthew took a rather melted piece of chocolate from his pocket and held it out to the pony, reminding Susannah that nothing had been said about chocolate, that the ban only applied to the things people normally gave to ponies when they wished to get on the right side of them.

“She couldn’t choke on chocolate, anyhow, and we can wipe her face—” he giggled—“as we wipe Priscilla’s after a secret orgy of choc-ices.”

But the pony clearly had something in common with Primrose Pinkney, as well as looking like her younger sister Jonquil. She was capable of self-control because of her looks.

She mouthed disdainfully at the hay in her net and then yawned, showing teeth white and square and neat, not like the yellow fangs of the beloved, aged three in the far-distant field.

Her brother always knew what Susannah was thinking. “It’s too far to go and see the ponies this evening, even if we are alone. We’d be late for supper.” In their uncle’s house supper had been a movable feast, because clergymen were like doctors, always at someone’s beck and call, and so his housekeeper never threatened to give notice if she couldn’t get in front of the television by half-past eight sharp.

Susannah spoke unhappily. “Last time we went I’m sure I saw some ragwort growing—only then we had to tear back to lunch. Supposing they get so short of keep that they eat it? It’s poisonous. And it’s been so dry, there can’t be much grass. And we can’t go tomorrow, as it’s Sunday ...”

Swedish Rhapsody stamped her near hind languidly, as if to indicate she didn’t think much of her new quarters, or that she couldn’t imagine how she was going to live through the time before the next show, like Primrose Pinkney waiting for the next debutante dance.

“And we shall probably have to school her—” Susannah jerked her head in the direction of the loose box— “for a short time morning and afternoon, so that she won’t get tired or bored or stale, and that means we’ll never have a long enough time to go and look after our own. We couldn’t even save time by riding her there, as of course we’d never be allowed to take her on the road ...”

Matthew knew that Clown, his uncouth old friend, had thriven for years on a diet of all the poisonous weeds and shrubs that grew. He was an expert escaper, and had often browsed happily for hours before being discovered, on the privet, laurel and box that abound in all vicarage gardens. He had even spent a night in the churchyard and survived the yew and a wreath of chrysanthemums off the grave of a newly buried and much-lamented parishioner. He was not worried about that. He said: “Do you realise we never said thank you, really, to Gr—Flora?”

It was part of her unsuitability as a grandmother that Mrs Aston-Pringle insisted on the children calling her by her Christian name.

“Oh, dear ... Perhaps she thought we were struck dumb with excitement.”

Priscilla’s never dumb,” he reminded her. “And she’s quite capable of telling Flora, at this very minute, that we none of us really want a show pony—that we’d rather have our own back, even if they do look like hearth-rugs or something out of a travelling circus. She’ll point out that for what it costs to keep a show pony we could have all three of ours here and that Casey wouldn’t have to lift a finger. It would give us something to do, to look after our own ponies.” He sighed. Time hung very heavy on his hands at The Lawns, where there were no carpentering jobs to be done as it was all in such excellent repair, the wood chopping was all done by electricity, there was not a weed in sight, and if he tried to help Casey he was told that Casey only had enough to Keep Him Up To The Mark.

“It wouldn’t do any good, whatever she said. It would be like when Charlotte said she’d rather be a girl groom than a debutante. She pointed out that she would be earning money instead of spending it. Grand—Flora simply said she owed it to our parents’ memory to do the best for us all. And having such a noble sort of thing said to her—the sort of thing wonderful relations in books say—naturally Charlotte couldn’t tell her the truth about herself.”

“The truth?” Matthew asked.

“Charlotte thinks she’s pleased at having collected a family of the same number, sex and ages as Lady Pinkney, and that she is looking forward to wiping Lady Pinkney’s eye all along the line, even though Lady P is her greatest friend. It is the truth, Matthew, you know. Charlotte is to make a smarter marriage than Primrose, I’m to ride more successfully than Celandine, Priscilla is to look sweeter—on the donkey—than Jonquil, and you’re to get into the Eleven.”

Matthew thought about the Pinkney boy, his contemporary and schoolfellow. He said spitefully: “They ought to have called him just Bulb, instead of Merlin—not that Merlin isn’t a pretty awful name ...”

“I believe it’s the main reason why she’s got us a show pony—because she’s jealous of hearing about all the rosettes Celandine gets and because there was a photograph of her in *Horse and Hound*.”

“Maybe you’re right. I don’t envy you, Susannah, when you get into the ring ...”

Susannah went back to what was at the moment a greater weight on her mind. “It’s not so bad for you—Clown can eat anything. Uncle Mark once said he had an incinerator instead of a stomach— but don’t you remember how Cosy nearly died of eating rushes? And I believe ragwort poisoning is a terribly painful, lingering death.”

The stable clock above them struck seven, reminding them they would soon have to go in and change for the meal

of salad and fruit designed to keep their elder sister as lean as a racehorse.

“I tell you what,” Matthew said, “we’ll ask Tim O’Brien to go and see—to root up any ragwort he can find. They will have finished with their horses by now.”

“Oh, yes. He could go on a bicycle—or Shamus could take him in the van. They’d help, I know, if it was a question of ponies ... ”

Mrs Aston-Pringle disapproved of the O’Brien brothers from the bottom of her heart, and it was not really admitted that the two families even knew each other. The Irish, she allowed, made quite good grooms if you Kept An Eye on them, and they were trustworthy with pigs because, in the Bog where they came from, it was well known that pigs abounded in every cabin. But as friends of her grandchildren they were not acceptable. They wore disgraceful old clothes and did not seem ashamed of them, and if old enough to do so smoked filthy pipes and drank whiskey, and one and all had extremely catching accents. And why wasn’t Tim O’Brien, at the age of fifteen, at school, like Matthew and the Pinkney boy? Mrs Aston-Pringle would ask that question, whenever the O’Briens were mentioned, and then supply the answer herself. The O’Briens were nothing more or less than horse-copers.

So a telephone call to the O’Briens had to be put through from the call box in the road just outside the gate. It was too risky to lift the crinoline doll from the white telephone in the

hall, to hiss any sort of message or request down the hygienic glass mouthpiece that was supposed to be wiped before and after every call.

The car, being expensive, was noiseless, and in the summer the front door stood open, and in the summer, too, their grandmother wore, instead of the neat black shoes or elastic-sided boots that might have been expected, gay Espadrilles that made no sound approaching over the parquet floor.

Matthew and Susannah decided regretfully, but necessity knows no law, that Priscilla would have to be content with twopence to add to her fund, and while Susannah, who was the one most concerned about the ponies, dialled the number, Matthew kept watch outside the call box, ready to bang on the door if danger could be seen or heard in the distance. It was just after seven, so the O'Briens might be expected to be still in the house, lingering over the ruins of the high tea of which Mrs Aston-Pringle so much disapproved and which provided her with an added argument for never allowing the children to ask them inside her house.

The O'Briens, both of them, hated and feared the telephone, because they would have preferred to live in any other century but the twentieth, and only had it at all in order to get a vet if they needed one in a hurry, and they could never remember to loose off a flood of bad language and grumbles before rather than after they lifted the receiver to answer a call. It was Tim who answered now, and Susannah

could hear him assuring his brother in the background that as it was after seven it couldn't be the forage merchant ringing up again about his bill.

When she had his attention she poured out her sudden, dreadful fear about the ragwort, telling him, to add emphasis, about the time Cosy nearly died of eating rushes, and he promised he would nip down with what he called a slasher and deal with it. She asked him, while he was there, to look the ponies over for cuts, warbles, and burrs in their manes. He suggested she might come too, possibly thinking she had set him too much of a task to perform single-handed, and she told him about getting tidy for supper. He snorted at that, because he himself was never required to get tidy for anything, and only washed his hands if he had been gutting a rabbit or dressing a horse or dog for a contagious skin disease. He said sarcastically that they might as well be living in London, which seemed to him the worst fate that could befall anyone. She then begged him to look at Cosy's feet, and he told her the keep was too poor in that field to give any pony laminitis.

Susannah hadn't thought about Cosy getting laminitis.

She had merely been worried lest the ponies' feet needed cutting back. That was another terror added to the sum of her anxieties.

Then she remembered what had been over-laid in her mind by her preoccupation with her own pony: the presence in the stable of the unloving, pampered show pony, Swedish

Rhapsody, and the uncomfortable responsibility about to be laid on her shoulders, the importance of beating Celandine Pinkney's grey.

There was silence at the other end instead of the sympathetic condolences she had expected from a kindred spirit like Tim O'Brien.

"Don't you think it's miserable for us?" she asked. "I mean, we don't know anything about showing. We just like to ride ponies for fun in the summer, and hunting in the winter. It can't be fun if it matters so much whether you win or not."

Matthew banged on the glass door and mouthed at her, and she realised he must have heard, away on the main road, the unmistakable, musical horn of their grandmother's car.

"Tim ... " she said urgently, "are you listening?"

"I heard," he said slowly. "The thing is, we've just bought a show pony ourselves ..."

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