

# PHILIPPA GREGORY

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE OTHER BOLEYN GIRL*  
AND *THE BOLEYN INHERITANCE*



# MERIDON



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# *Meridon*

A NOVEL



PHILIPPA GREGORY

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About Philippa Gregory



"I don't belong here," I said to myself, before I even opened my eyes.

It was my morning ritual. To ward off the smell and the dirt and the fights and the noise of the day. To keep me in that bright green place in my mind, which had no proper name; I called it "Wide."

"I don't belong here," I said again. A dirty-faced fifteen-year-old girl frowsy-eyed from sleep, blinking at the hard gray light filtering through the grimy window. I looked up to the arched ceiling of the caravan, the damp sacking near my face as I lay on the top bunk; and then I glanced quickly to my left to the other bunk to see if Dandy was awake.

Dandy: my black-eyed black-haired, equally dirty-faced sister. Dandy, the lazy one, the liar, the thief.

Her eyes, dark as blackberries, twinkled at me.

"I don't belong here," I whispered once more to the dream world of Wide, which faded even as I called to it. Then I said aloud to Dandy:

"Getting up?"

"Did you dream of it—Sarah?" she asked softly, calling me by my magic secret name. The name I knew from my dreams of Wide. The magic name I use in that magic land.

"Yes," I said, and I turned my face away from her to the stained wall and tried not to mind that Wide was just a dream and a pretense. That the real world was here. Here where they knew nothing of Wide, had never even heard of such a place. Where, except for Dandy, they would not call me Sarah as I had once asked. They had laughed at me and gone on calling me by my real name, Meridon.

"What did you dream?" Dandy probed. She was not cruel, but she was too curious to spare me.

"I dreamed I had a father, a great big fair-headed man and he lifted me up. High, high up onto his horse. And I rode before him, down a lane away from our house and past some fields. Then up a path which went higher and higher, and through a wood and out to the very top of the fields, and he pointed his horse to look back down the way we had come, and I saw our house: a lovely square yellow house, small as a toy-house on the green below us."

"Go on," said Dandy.

"Shut up, you two," a muffled voice growled in the half-light of the caravan. "It's still night."

"It ain't," I said, instantly argumentative. My father's dark, tousled head peered around the head of his bunk and scowled at me. "I'll strap you," he warned me. "Go to sleep."

I said not another word. Dandy waited, and in a few moments she said in a whisper so soft that our Da—his head buried beneath the dirty blankets—could not hear: "What then?"

"We rode home," I said, screwing my eyes tight to relive the vision of the little redheaded girl and the fair man and the great horse and the cool green of the arching beech trees over the drive. "And then he let me ride alone."

Dandy nodded, but she was unimpressed. We had both been on and around horses since we were weaned. And I had no words to convey the delight of the great strides of the horse in the dream.

"He was telling me how to ride," I said. My voice went quieter still, and my throat tightened. "He loved me," I said miserably. "He did. I could tell by the way he spoke to me. He was my Da—but he loved me."

"And then?" said Dandy, impatient.

"I woke up," I said. "That was all."

"Didn't you see the house, or your clothes, or the food?" she asked, disappointed.

"No," I said. "Not this time."

"Oh," she said and was silent a moment. "I wish I could dream of it like you do," she said longingly. "T'aint fair."

A warning grunt from the bed made us lower our voices again.

"I wish I could see it," she said.

"You will," I promised. "It is a real place. It is real somewhere. I know that somewhere it is a real place. And we will both be there, someday."

"Wide," she said. "It's a funny name."

"That's not the whole name," I said cautiously. "Not quite Wide. Maybe it's something-Wide. I never hear it clear enough. I listen and I listen but I'm never quite sure of it. But it's a real place. It is real somewhere. And it's where I belong."

I lay on my back and looked at the stains on the sacking roof of the caravan and smelled the stink of four people sleeping close with no windows open, the acid smell of stale urine from last night's pot.

"It's real somewhere," I said to myself. "It has to be."

\* \* \*

There were three good things in my life, that dirty painful life of a gypsy child with a father who cared nothing for her, and a stepmother who cared less. There was Dandy, my twin sister—unlike me as if I were a changeling. There were the horses we trained and sold. And there was the dream of Wide.

If it had not been for Dandy I think I would have run away as soon as I was old enough to leave. I would have upped and gone, run off to one of the sleepy little villages in the New Forest in that hot summer of 1805 when I was fifteen. That was the summer I turned on Da and stood up to him for the first time ever.

We had been breaking a pony to sell as a lady's ride. I said the horse was not ready for a ride. Da swore she was. He was wrong. Anyone but an idiot could have seen that the horse was nervous and half-wild. But Da had put her on the lunge rein two or three times and she had gone well enough. He wanted to put me up on her. He didn't waste his breath asking Dandy to do it. She would have smiled one of her sweet slow smiles and disappeared off for the rest of the day with a hunk of bread and a rind of cheese in her pocket. She'd come back in the evening with a dead chicken tucked in her shawl, so there was never a beating for Dandy.

But he ordered me up on the animal. A half-wild, half-foolish foal too young to be broke, too frightened to be ridden.

"She's not ready," I said, looking at the flaring nostrils and the rolling whites of her eyes and smelling that special acrid smell of fearful sweat.

"She'll do," Da said. "Get up on her."

I looked at Da, not at the horse. His dark eyes were red-rimmed, the stubble on his chin stained

his face blue. The red kerchief at his neck showed bright against his pallor. He had been drinking last night and I guessed he felt ill. He had no patience to stand in the midday sunshine with a skittish pony on a lunge rein.

"I'll lunge her," I offered. "I'll train her for you."

"You'll ride her, you cheeky dog," he said to me harshly. "No whelp tells me how to train a horse."

"What's the hurry?" I asked, backing out of arm's reach. Da had to hold the horse and could not grab me.

"I got a buyer," he said. "A farmer at Beaulieu wants her for his daughter. But he wants her next week for her birthday or summat. So she's got to be ready for then."

"I'll lunge her," I offered again. "I'll work her all day, and tomorrow or the day after I'll get up on her."

"You get up now," he said harshly. Then he raised his voice and yelled: "Zima!" and my stepmother came out into the sunshine from the gloomy caravan. "Hold 'er," he said nodding at the horse and she jumped down from the caravan step, and went past me without a word.

"I want summat inside the wagon," he said under his breath and I stood aside like a fool to let him go past me. But as soon as he was near he grabbed me with one hard grimy hand and twisted my arm behind my back so hard that I could hear the bone creak and I squeaked between clenched teeth for the pain.

"Get up on 'er," he said softly in my ear, his breath foul. "Or I'll beat you till you can't ride 'er, not any other for a week."

I jerked away from him: sullen, ineffective. And I scowled at my stepmother, who stood picking her teeth with her free hand and watching this scene. She had never stood between me and him in my life. She had seen him beat me until I went down on my knees and cried and cried for him to stop. The most she had ever done for me was to tell him to stop because the noise of my sobbing was disturbing her own baby. I felt that I was utterly unloved, utterly uncared for; and that was not a foolish girl's fear. That was the bitter truth.

"Get up," Da said again, and came to the horse's head.

I looked at him with a gaze as flinty as his own. "I'll get up and she'll throw me," I said. "You know that, so do I. And then I'll get on her again and again and again. We'll never train her like that. If you had as much brains inside you as you have beer, you'd let me train her. Then at least we'd have a sweet-natured animal to show this farmer. The way you want to do it we'll show him a whipped idiot."

I had never spoken to him like that before. My voice was steady but my belly quivered with fright at my daring.

He looked at me for a long hard moment.

"Get up," he said. Nothing had changed.

I waited for one moment, in case I had a chance, or even half a chance, to win my way in this. His face was flinty-hard, and I was only a young girl. I met his gaze for a moment. He could see the fight go out of me.

I checked he was holding the horse tight at the head and then I turned and gripped hold of the saddle and sprang up.

As soon as she felt the weight of me on her back she leaped like a mountain goat, stiff-legged sideways, and stood there trembling like a leaf with the shock. Then, as if she had only waited to see that it was not some terrible nightmare, she reared bolt upright to her full height, dragging the reins

from Da's hands. Da, like a fool, let go—as I had known all along he would—and there was nothing then to control the animal except the halter around her neck. I clung on like a limpet, gripping the pommel of the saddle while she went like a sprinting bullock—alternately head down and hooves up bucking, and then standing high on her hind legs and clawing the air with her front hooves in an effort to be rid of me. There was nothing in the world to do but to cling on like grim death and hope that Da would be quick enough to catch the trailing reins and get the animal under control before she came off. I saw him coming toward the animal and he was quite close. But the brute wheeled with an awkward sideways shy which nearly unseated me. I was off-balance and grabbing for the pommel of the saddle to get myself into the middle of her back again when she did one of her mighty rears and I went rolling backward to the hard ground below.

I bunched up as I fell, in an instinctive crouch, fearing the flailing hooves. I felt the air whistle as she kicked out over my head, but she missed by an inch and galloped away to the other side of the field. Da, cursing aloud, went after her, running past me without even a glance in my direction to see how I fared.

I sat up. My stepmother, Zima, looked at me without interest.

I got wearily to my feet. I was shaken but not hurt except for the bruises on my back where I had hit the ground. Da had hold of the reins and was whipping the poor animal around the head which she reared and screamed in protest. I watched stony-faced. You'd never catch me wasting sympathy on a horse which had thrown me. Or on anything else.

"Get up," he said without looking around for me.

I walked up behind him and looked at the horse. She was a pretty enough animal, half New Forest, half some bigger breed. Dainty, with a bright bay-colored coat which glowed in the sunlight. Her mane and tail were black, coarse and knotted now, but I would wash her before the buyer came. I saw that Dad had whipped her near the eye and a piece of the delicate eyelid was bleeding slightly.

"You fool," I said in cold disgust. "Now you've hurt her, and it'll show when the buyer comes."

"Don't you call me a fool, my girl," he said rounding on me, the whip still in his hands. "Another word out of you and you get a beating you won't forget. I've had enough from you for one day. Now get up on that horse and stay on this time."

I looked at him with the blank insolence which I knew drove him into mindless temper with me. I pushed the tangled mass of my copper-colored hair away from my face and I stared at him with my green eyes as inscrutable as a cat. I saw his hand tighten on the whip and I smiled at him, delighting in my power, even if it lasted for no more than this one morning.

"And who'd ride her then?" I taunted. "I don't see you getting up on an unbroke horse. And Zima couldn't get on a donkey with a ladder against its side. There's no one who can ride her but me. And I don't choose to this morning. I'll do it this afternoon."

With that, I turned on my heel and walked away from him, swaying my hips in as close an imitation of my stepmother's languorous slink as I could manage. Done by a skinny fifteen-year-old in a skirt which barely covered her calves, it was far from sensual. But it spoke volumes of defiance to my Da, who let out a great bellow of rage and dropped the horse's reins to come after me.

He spun me around and shook me until my hair fell over my eyes and I could hardly see his red angry face.

"You'll do as I order or I'll throw you out!" he said in utter rage. "You'll do as I order or I'll beat you as soon as the horse is sold. You'd better remember that I am as ready to beat you tomorrow night as I am today. I have a long memory for you."

I shook my head to get the hair out of my eyes, and to clear my mind. I was only fifteen and could not hold onto courage against Da when he started bullying me. My shoulders slumped and my face lost its arrogance. I knew he would remember this defiance if I did not surrender now. I knew that he would beat me—not only when the horse was sold, but again every time he remembered it.

“All right,” I said sullenly. “All right. I’ll ride her.”

Together we cornered her in the edge of the field and this time he held tighter on to the reins when I was on her back. I stayed on a little longer but again and again she threw me. By the time Dandy was home with a vague secretive smile and a rabbit stolen from someone else’s snare dangling from her hand, I was in my bunk covered with bruises, my head thudding with the pain of falling over and over again.

She brought me a plate of rabbit stew where I lay.

“Come on out,” she invited. “He’s all right, he’s drinking. And he’s got some beer for Zima too, so she’s all right. Come on out and we can go down to the river and swim later. That’ll help you with the bruising.”

“No,” I said sullenly. “I’m going to sleep. I don’t want to come out and I don’t care whether he’s fair or foul. I hate him. I wish he was dead. And stupid Zima too. I’m staying here, and I’m going to sleep.”

Dandy stretched up so that she could reach me in the top bunk and nuzzled her face against my cheek. “Hurt bad?” she asked softly.

“Bad on the outside and bad inside,” I said, my voice low. “I wish he was dead. I’ll kill him myself when I’m bigger.”

Dandy stroked my forehead with her cool dirty hand. “And I’ll help you,” she said with a ripple of laughter in her voice. “The Ferenz family are nearby; they’re going down to the river to swim. Come too, Meridon!”

I sighed. “Not me,” I said. “I’m too sore, and angry. Stay with me, Dandy.”

She brushed the bruise on my forehead with her lips. “Nay,” she said sweetly. “I’m away with the Ferenz boys. I’ll be back at nightfall.”

I nodded. There was no keeping Dandy if she wanted to be out.

“Will you have to ride tomorrow?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “And the next day. The farmer’s coming for the horse on Sunday. She’s got to be rideable by then. But I pity his daughter!”

In the half-light of the caravan I saw Dandy’s white teeth gleam.

“Is it a bad horse?” she asked, a careless ripple of amusement in her voice.

“It’s a pig,” I said plainly. “I’ll be able to stay on it, but the little Miss Birthday Girl will like to break her neck the first time she tries to ride.”

We chuckled spitefully.

“Don’t quarrel with him tomorrow,” Dandy urged me. “It only makes him worse. And you’ll never win.”

“I know,” I said dully. “I know I’ll never win. But I can’t keep quiet like you. But as soon as I can see somewhere to go, I’m going. As soon as I can see somewhere to go, I’m going.”

“And I’ll come too,” Dandy said, repeating a long-ago promise. “But don’t make him angry tomorrow. He said he’d beat you if you do.”

“I’ll try not,” I said with little hope, and handed my empty plate to her. Then I turned my face away from her, from the shady caravan and the twilit doorway. I turned my face to the curved wall at the side of my bunk and gathered the smelly pillow under my face. I shut my eyes tight and

wished myself far away. Far away from the aches in my body and from the dread and fear in my mind. From my disgust at my father and my hatred of Zima. From my helpless impotent love for Dandy and my misery at my own hopeless, dirty, poverty-stricken existence.

I shut my eyes tight and thought of myself as the copper-headed daughter of the squire who owned Wide. I thought of the trees reflected in the waters of the trout river. I thought of the house and the roses growing so creamy and sweet in the gardens outside the house. As I drifted into sleep I willed myself to see the dining room with the fire flickering in the hearth and the pointy flames, the candles reflected in the great mahogany table, and the servants in livery bringing in dish after dish of food. My eternally hungry body ached at the thought of all those rich, creamy dishes. But when I fell asleep, I was smiling.

\* \* \*

The next day he was not bad from the drink so he was quicker to the horse's head, and held her tighter. I stayed on for longer, and for at least two falls I landed on my feet, sliding off her to first one side and then the other and avoiding that horrid nerve-jolting slump onto hard ground.

He nodded at me when we stopped for our dinner—the remains of the rabbit stew watered down as soup, and a hunk of old bread.

“Will you be able to stay on her for long enough tomorrow?”

“Yes,” I said confidently. “Will we be moving off the next day?”

“That same night!” Da said carelessly. “I know that horse will never make a lady's ride. She's vicious.”

I held my peace. I knew well enough that she had been a good horse when we first had her. If she had been carefully and lovingly trained, Da would have made a good sale to a Quality home. But he was only ever chasing a quick profit. He had seen a man who wanted a quiet ride for his little girl's birthday, and next thing he was breaking from scratch a two-year-old wild pony. It was coarse stupidity; and it was that doltish chasing after tiny profits which angered me the most.

“She's not trained to sidesaddle,” was all I said.

“No,” said Da. “But if you wash your face and get Zima to plait your hair you can go astride and still look like a novice girl. If he sees you on her—and you mind not to come off!—he'll buy her.”

I nodded, and pulled a handful of grass to wipe out my bowl. I had sucked and spat out a scrap of gristle, and I tossed it to the scrawny lurcher tied under the wagon. He snapped at it and took it with him back into the shadow. The hot midday sun made red rings when I closed my eyelids and lay back on the mown grass to feel the heat.

“Where d'we go next?” I asked idly.

“Salisbury,” Da said without hesitation. “Lot of money to be made there. I'll buy a couple of ponies on the way. There's a fair in early September as well—that idle Zima and Dandy can do some work for once in their lives.”

“No one poaches as well as Dandy,” I said instantly.

“She'll get herself hanged,” he said without gratitude and without concern. “She thinks all she has to do is to roll her black eyes at the keeper and he'll take her home and give her sweetmeats. She won't always get away with that as she gets older. He'll have her, and if she refuses he'll take her to the justices.”

I sat up, instantly alert. “They'd send her to prison?” I demanded.

Da laughed harshly. “They'd send us all to prison; aye, and to Australey if they could catch us

The gentry is against you, my girl. Every one of them, however fair-spoken, however kind-seeming. I've been the wrong side of the park walls all my life. I've seen them come and seen them go — and never a fair chance for travelers."

I nodded. It was an old theme for Da. He was most pitiful when he was in his cups on this topic. He was a tinker: a no-good pedlarcum-thief when he had met my Ma. She had been pure Roman traveling with her family. But her man was dead, and she had us twin babies to provide for. She believed him when he boasted of a grand future and married him, against the advice of her own family and without their blessing. He could have joined the family and traveled with them. But Da had big ideas. He was going to be a great horse dealer. He was going to buy an inn. He was going to run a livery stable, to train as a master brewer. One feckless scheme after another until they were travelers in the poorest wagon she had ever called home. And then she was pregnant with another child.

I remember her dimly, pale and fat, and too weary to play with us. She sickened; she had a long and lonely labor. Then she died, crying to Da to bury her in the way of her people, the Rom way, with her goods burned the night of her death. He did not know how; he did not care. He burned a few token scraps of clothing and sold the rest. He gave Dandy a comb of hers, and he gave me an old dirty piece of string with a gold clasp at each end. He told me it had once held rose-colored pearls.

Where she got them Da had never known. She had brought them to him as her dowry and he had sold each one until there was nothing left but the string. One gold latch was engraved with the word I had been told was *John*. I could not read myself. The other was inscribed *Celia*. He would have sold the gold clasps if he had dared. Instead he gave them to me with an odd little grimace.

"You have the right," he said. "She always said it was for you, and not for Dandy. I'll sell the gold clasps for you, and you can keep the string."

I remember my dirty hand had closed tight over it.

"I want it," I had said.

"I'll split the money with you," he had said winningly. "Sixty:forty?"

"No," I said.

"That's enough to buy a sugar bun," he said as if to clinch the deal. My stomach rumbled but I held firm.

"No," I said. "Who are John and Celia?"

He had shrugged, shiftily. "I don't know," he had said. "Maybe folks your Ma knew. You have the right to the necklace. She always told me to be sure to give it to you. Now I've done that. A promise made to the dead has to be kept. She told me to give it to you and to bid you keep it safe, and to show it when anyone came seeking you. When anyone asked who you were."

"Who am I?" I had demanded instantly.

"A damned nuisance," he said, his good temper gone with his chance to trick the gold clasp from me. "One of a pair of brats that I'm saddled with till I can be rid of you both."

It would not be long now, I thought, sucking on a grass stem for the sweet green taste of it. It would not be long now until he would be able to be rid of us. That conversation had happened a long time ago, but Da had never changed his mind about us. He never acknowledged how much meat Dandy provided for the pot. He never realized that his horses would have been half-wild if he had not had the knack of riding them. Not he. The selfishness which made it easy for him to take a woman with two small babies at the breast and no way to keep her save a cartload of foolish dreams now made it easy for him to plan to sell us to the highest bidder. Whatever the terms.

I knew Dandy would end up whoring. Her black brazen eyes twinkled too readily. If we had been with a gypsy family, traveling with kin, there would have been an early betrothal and early childbirth for Dandy, and a man to keep her steady. But here there was no one. There was only Da who cared nothing for what she might do. And Zima, who laughed lazily and said that Dandy would be street-walking by the time she was sixteen. Only I heard that feckless prophecy with a shudder. And only I swore that it should not happen. I would keep Dandy safe from it.

Not that she feared it. Dandy was vain and affectionate. She thought it would mean fine clothes and dancing and attention from men. She could not wait to be fully grown, and she used to insist on inspecting the conical shapes of her breasts every time we swam or changed our clothes and tell her if they were not growing exceedingly lovely. Dandy looked at life with lazy laughing eyes and could not believe that things would not go well for her. But I had seen the whores at Southampton, and at Portsmouth. And I had seen the sores on their mouths and the blank looks in their eyes. I would rather Dandy had been a pickpocket all her days—as she was now—than a whore. I would rather Dandy be anything than a whore.

“It’s just because you hate being touched,” she said idly to me when the wagon was on the road toward Salisbury for the fair. She was lying on her side in the bunk combing her hair, which tumbled like a black shiny waterfall over the side of the bunk. “You’re as nervy as one of your wild ponies. I’m the only one you ever let near you, and you won’t even let me plait your hair.”

“I don’t like it,” I said inadequately. “I can’t stand Da pulling me on to his knee when he’s drunk. Or the way Zima’s baby sucks at my neck or at my face. It gives me the shivers. I just like having space around me. I hate being crowded.”

She nodded. “I’m like a cat,” she said idly. “I love being stroked. I don’t even mind Da when he’s gentle. He gave me a halfpenny last night.”

I gave a little muffled grunt of irritation. “He never gave me a thing,” I complained. “And he never has. He never have sold that horse on his own. The farmer only bought it because he saw me ride it. And if it hadn’t been for me Da would never have trained it.”

“Better hope the farmer’s daughter is a good rider,” Dandy said with a chuckle in her voice. “Would she throw her?”

“Bound to,” I said indifferently. “If the man hadn’t been an idiot he’d have seen that I was only keeping her steady by luck, and the fact that she was bone-weary.”

“Well, it’s put him in good humor,” Dandy said. We could hear Da muttering the names of cards to himself over and over, practicing palming cards and dealing cards as the caravan jolted on the muddy road. Zima was sitting up front beside him. She had left her baby asleep on Dandy’s bunk, anchored by Dandy’s foot pressing lightly on his fat belly.

“Maybe he’ll give us a penny for fairings,” I said without much hope.

Dandy gleamed. “I’ll get you a penny,” she promised. “I’ll get us sixpence and we’ll run off at night and buy sweetmeats and see the booths.”

I smiled at the prospect and then rolled over to face the rocking caravan wall. I was still bruised from my falls and as weary as a drunken trooper from the day and night training of the pony. And I had that strange, detached feeling which I often felt when I was going to dream of Wide. We would be a day and a half on the road, and unless Da made me drive the horse there was nothing I had to do. There were hours of journeying, and nothing to do. Dandy might as well comb her hair over and over. And I might as well sleep and doze and daydream of Wide. The caravan would go rocking, rocking, rocking down the muddy lanes and byways and then on the harder high road to Salisbury. And there was nothing to do except look out of the back window at the road narrowing away behind.

us. Or lie on the bunk and chat to Dandy. Between dinner and nightfall Da would not stop, the jolting creaking caravan would roll onward. There was nothing for me to do except to wish I was Wide; and to wonder how I would ever get myself, and Dandy, safely away from Da.



It was a long wearisome drive, all the way down the lanes to Salisbury, up the Avon valley with the damp lush fields on either side, where brown-backed cows stood knee-high in wet grasses, through Fordingbridge, where the little children were out from dame-school and ran after us and hooted and threw stones.

"Come 'ere," Da said, shuffling a pack of greasy cards as he sat on the driving bench. "Come 'ere and watch this." And he hitched the ambling horse's reins over the worn post at the front of the wagon and shuffled the cards before me, cut them, shuffled them again. "Did yer see it?" he would demand. "Could yer tell?"

Sometimes I saw the quick secretive movement of his fingers, hidden by the broad palm of his hand, scanning the pack for telltale markings. Sometimes not.

He was not a very good cheat. It's a difficult art, best done with clean hands and dry cards. Da's sticky little pack did not shuffle well. Often as we ambled down the rutted road I said, "That's a false shuffle," or "I can see the crimped card, Da."

He scowled at that and said: "You've got eyes like a damn buzzard, Merry. Do it yourself if you're so clever," and flicked the pack over to me with an irritable riffle of the cards.

I gathered them up and pulled the high cards and the picture cards into my right hand. With a little "tssk" I brushed an imaginary insect off the driver's bench with the picture cards in a fan in my hand to put a bend in them, "a bridge," so that when I reassembled the pack I could feel the arc even when the cards were all together. I vaguely looked out over the passing fields while I shuffled the deck, pulling the picture cards and the high cards into my left hand, and stacking them on top alternately with stock cards so I could deal a picture card to myself and a low card to Da.

"Saw it!" Da said with mean satisfaction. "Saw you make a bridge, brushing the bench."

"Doesn't count," I said, argumentatively. "If you were a pigeon for plucking you'd not know the trick. It's only if you see me stack the deck that it counts. Did you see me stack it? And the false shuffle?"

"No," he said, an unwilling concession. "But that's still a penny you owe me for spotting the bridge. Gimme the cards back."

I handed them over and he slid them through and through his callused hands. "No point teaching a girl anyway," he grumbled. "Girls never earn money standing up. Only way to make money out of a girl is to get her on her back for her living. Girls are a damned waste."

I left him to his complaints and went back inside the lumbering wagon, where Dandy lay on her bunk combing her black hair, and Zima dozed on her bed, the baby sucking and snortling at her breast. I looked away. I went to my own bunk and stretched out, my head toward the little window at the back, and watched the ribbon of the road spinning away behind us as we followed the twists and turns of the river all the way northward to Salisbury.

Da knew Salisbury well. This was the city where his alehouse business had failed and he had bought the wagon and gone back on the road again. He drove steadily through the crowded streets and Dandy and I stuck our heads out of the back window and pulled faces at errand boys and looked at the bustle and noise of the city. The fair was on the outside of town and Da guided the

horse to a field where the wagons were spaced apart as strangers would put them. There were some good horses cropping the short grass. I looked them over as I led our horse, Jess, from the shafts.

“Good animals,” I said to Da. His glance around was sharp.

“Aye,” he said. “And a good price we should get for ours.”

I said nothing. Tied on the back of the wagon was a hunter so old and broken-winded that you could hear its roaring breaths from the driving seat, and another of Da’s young ponies, too small to be ridden by anyone heavier than me, and too wild to be managed by any normal child.

“The hunter will go to a flash young fool,” he predicted confidently. “And that young ’un should go as a young lady’s ride.”

“He’s a bit wild,” I said carefully.

“He’ll sell on his color,” Da said certainly, and I could not disagree. He was a wonderful pinto gray, a gray almost silver with a sheen like satin on his coat. I had washed him this morning, and he had been thoroughly wetted and kicked for my pains, but he looked as bright as a unicorn.

“He’s pretty,” I conceded. “Da, if he sells—can Dandy and me go to the fair and buy her some ribbons, and some stockings?”

Da grunted, but he was not angry. The prospect of the fair and big profits had made him as sweet as he could be—which, God knew, was sour enough.

“Maybe,” he said. “Maybe I’ll give you some pennies for fairings.” He slid the tack off Jess’s back and tossed it carelessly up on the step of the caravan. Jess jumped at the noise and stepped quickly sideways, her heavy hoof scraping my bare leg. I swore and rubbed the graze. Da paid no attention to either of us.

“Only if these horses sell,” he said. “So you’d better start working the young one right away. You can lunge him before your dinner, and then work him all the day. I want you on his back by nightfall. If you can stay on, you can gad off to the fair. Not otherwise.”

The look I gave him was black enough. But I dared do nothing more. I pulled Jess’s halter off and staked her out where she would graze near the caravan, and went surly to the new gray pony tied on the back of the wagon. “I hate you,” I said under my breath. The caravan tipped as Da went inside. “You are mean and a bully and a lazy fool. I hate you and I wish you were dead.”

I took the long whip and the long reins and got behind the gray pony and gently, patiently, tried to teach it two months’ training in one day so that Dandy and me could go to the fair with a penny in our pockets.

I was so deep in the sullens that I did not notice a man watching me from one of the other caravans. He was seated on the front step of his wagon, a pipe in his hand, tobacco smoke curling upward in the still hot air above his head. I was only dimly aware that he was watching; I was concentrating on getting the gray pony to go in a circle around me. I stood in the center, keeping the whip low, and sometimes touching him to keep him going on, mostly calling to him to keep his speed going steady. Sometimes he went well, round and around me, and then suddenly he would kick or rear, and try to make a bolt for it, dragging me for shuddering strides across the grass until I dug my heels in and pulled him to a standstill and started the whole long process of making him walk in a steady circle again.

I was vaguely aware of being watched. But my attention was all on the little pony—as pretty as a picture and keen-witted. And as unwilling to work in the hot morning sunshine as I was. As angry and resentful as me.

Only when Da had got down from the caravan, pulled on his hat and headed off in the direction of the fair did I stop the pony and let him dip his head down and graze. I slumped down then myself.

for a break and laid aside the whip and spoke gently to him while he was eating. His ears—which had been back on his head in ill humor ever since we had started—flickered forward at the sound of my voice, and I knew the worst of it was over until I had to give him the shock of my weight on his back.

I stretched out and shut my eyes. Dandy was away to the fair to see what work she and Zima might do. Da was touting for a customer for his old hunter. Zima was clattering pots in the caravan and her baby was crying with little hope of being attended. I was as solitary as I was ever able to be. I sighed and listened to a lark singing up in the sky above me, and the cropping sound of the ponies grazing close to my head.

“Hey! Littl’ un!” It was a low call from the man on the step of the caravan. I sat up cautiously and shaded my eyes to see him. It was a fine wagon, much bigger than ours and brightly painted. Down the side in swirly red and gold letters it said words I could not read. There was a great swirly picture which I guessed signified horses, for there was a wonderful painted horse rearing up before a lady finely dressed twirling a whip under its hooves.

The man’s shirt was white; nearly clean. His face was shaved and plump. He was smiling at me so friendly.

I was instantly suspicious.

“That’s thirsty work,” he said kindly. “Would you like a mug of small beer?”

“What for?” I asked.

“You’re working well, I enjoyed watching you,” he said. He got to his feet and went inside his wagon, his fair head brushing the top of the doorway. He came out with two small pewter mugs of ale and stepped down carefully from the step, his eyes on the mugs. He came toward me with one outstretched. I got to my feet and eyed him, but I did not put out my hand for the drink though I was parched and longing for the taste of the cool beer on my tongue and throat.

“What d’you want?” I asked, my eyes on the mug.

“Maybe I want to buy the horse,” he said. “Go on, take it. I won’t bite.”

That brought my eyes to his face. “I’m not afraid of you,” I said defiantly. I looked down longingly at the drink again. “I’ve no money to buy it,” I said.

“It’s for free!” he said impatiently. “Take it, you silly wench.”

“Thank you,” I said gruffly and took it from his hand. The liquid was malty on my tongue and went down my throat in a delicious cool stream. I gulped three times and then paused, to make it last the longer.

“Are you in the horse business?” he asked.

“You’d best ask my Da,” I said.

He smiled at my caution and sat down on the grass at my feet. After a little hesitation, I sat too.

“That’s my wagon,” he said pointing to the caravan. “See that on the side? Robert Gower? That’s me. Robert Gower’s Amazing Equestrian Show! That’s me and my business. All sorts I do. Dancing ponies, Fortune-telling ponies, Acrobatic horses, Trick-riding, Cavalry charges, And the story of Richard the Lionheart and Saladin, In Costume, And with Two Stallions.”

I gaped at him. “How many horses have you got?” I asked.

“Five,” he said. “And the stallion.”

“I thought you said two stallions,” I queried.

“It looks like two,” he said, unabashed. “Richard the Lionheart rides the gray stallion. Then we black him up and he is Saladin’s mighty ebony steed. I black up too, to be Saladin. So what?”

“Nothing!” I said hastily. “Are these your horses?”

"Aye," he said gesturing at the ponies I had noticed earlier. "These four ponies, and the skewbald which pulls the wagon and works as a rosinback. My boy's riding the stallion around the town crying-up the show. We're giving a show in the next-door field. Two performances at three and seven. Today and Every Day. By Public Demand. For the Duration."

I said nothing. Many of the words I did not understand. But I recognized the ring of the showground barker.

"You like horses," he said.

"Yes," I said. "My Da buys them, or trades them. We both train them. We often sell children's ponies. So I trains them."

"When will this one be ready?" Robert Gower nodded to the gray pony.

"Da wants to sell him this week," I said. "He'll be half-broke by then."

He pursed his lips and whistled soundlessly. "That's fast work," he said. "You must take a lot of tumbles. Or is it your Da who rides them?"

"It's me!" I said indignantly. "I'll lunge him all today and I'll get on him tonight."

He nodded and said nothing. I finished the ale and looked at the bottom of the mug. It had gone too quick and I had been distracted from savoring it by talk. I was sorry now.

"I'd like to see your Da," he said getting to his feet. "Be back for his dinner, will he?"

"Yes," I said. I scrambled to my feet and picked up the whip. "I'll tell him you want to see him. Shall he come over to your wagon?"

"Yes," he said. "And when you've finished your work you can see my horse show. Admittance Only One Penny. But you may come Complimentary."

"I don't have a penny," I said, understanding only that.

"You can come free," he said. "Either show."

"Thank you," I said awkwardly. "Sir."

He nodded, as gracious as a lord and went back to his bright wagon. I looked again at the picture on the side. The lady with the whip was dressed as fine as a queen. I wondered who she was and she was perhaps his wife. It would be a fine life to dress as a lady and train horses in a ring before people who paid all that money just to see you. It would be as good as being born Quality. It would be nearly as good as Wide.

"Hey, you!" he called again, his head stuck out of his caravan door. "D'you know how to crack that whip, as well as flick it?"

"Yes," I said. I ought to be able to. I had practiced ever since I was able to stand. My Da could crack a whip so loud it could scare the birds out of the trees. When I had asked him to teach me he had thrown an old rag down on the ground at my bare feet.

"Hit that," he had said; and that was as much help as he was ready to give. Days I had stood flicking the whip toward the target until I had gradually strengthened my little-girl wrists to aim the whip accurately at the cloth. Now I could crack it high in the air or crack it low. Dandy had once taken a stalk in her mouth and I had taken the seed head off it for a dare. Only once. The next time we tried it I had missed and flicked her in the eye. I would never do it after that. She had screamed with the pain and her eye had swollen up and been black with a bruise for a week. I had been terrified that I had blinded her. Dandy forgot it as soon as her eye healed and wanted me to crack the whip and knock feathers off her hat and straws out of her mouth for pennies on street corners; but she would not.

"Crack it, then," said Robert Gower.

"No," I said. "It would scare the pony and he's done nothing wrong. I'll crack it for you when I've

turned him out.”

~~He nodded at that and a little puff of surprised smoke came from his pipe like a cottage chimney.~~

“Good lass,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“Meridon,” I said.

“Gypsy blood?” he asked.

“My mother was Rom,” I said defensively.

He nodded again and gave me a wink from one of his blue eyes. Then his round fair head ducked back in under the doorway and the caravan door slammed and I was left with the young pony who had to be schooled enough for me to ride him that evening if Dandy and I wanted to go to the fair with a penny each.

\* \* \*

I made it by the skin of my teeth. Da’s rule was that I had to get on the horse’s back without him kicking out or running off. Apart from a quiver of fright the gray stood still enough. And then I had to get off again without mishap. By working him all day until we were both weary I had him so accustomed by my nearness that he only threw me once while I was training him to stand as mounted. He didn’t run off far, which I thought a very good sign. I did not work at all at teaching him to walk forward or stop. They were not the conditions Da had set for a visit to the fair, so I cared nothing for them. All he could do by the end of the day was stand still for the twenty seconds while I mounted, smiled with assumed confidence at Da, and dismounted.

Da grudgingly felt in his pocket and gave a penny to Dandy and a penny to me.

“I’ve been talking business with that man Gower,” he said grandly. “As a favor to me he says you can both go to his show. I’m going into town to see a man about buying a horse. Be in the wagon when I come back or there’ll be trouble.”

Dandy shot me a warning look to bid me hold my tongue, and said sweetly: “Yes, Da.” We both knew that when he came back he would be so blind drunk that he would not be able to tell if we were there or no. Nor remember in the morning.

Then we fled to the corner of the field where the gate was held half-open by Robert Gower, resplendent in a red jacket and white breeches with black riding boots. A steady stream of people had been going by us all afternoon, paying their pennies to Robert Gower and taking their ease on the grassy slopes waiting for the show to start. Dandy and I were the last to arrive.

“He’s Quality!” Dandy gasped, as we dashed across the field. “Look at his boots.”

“And he got dressed in that caravan!” I said amazed, having never seen anything come out of our caravan brighter than the slatternly glitter of Zima’s best dress over a soiled petticoat gray with inadequate washing.

“Ah!” said Robert Gower. “Meridon and . . . ?”

“My sister, Dandy,” I said.

Robert Gower nodded grandly at us both. “Please take a seat,” he said, opening the gate a little wider to allow us inside. “Anywhere on the grass but not in front of the benches, which is reserved for the Quality and for the Churchmen. By Special Request,” he added.

Dandy gave him her sweetest smile, spread her ragged skirt out and swept him a curtsy. “Thank you, sir,” she said and sailed past him with her head in the air and her glossy black hair in thick sausage ringlets all down her back.

The field was on a slight slope, leveling off at the bottom, and the audience were seated on the

grass on the slope looking down. In front of them were two small benches, empty except for a man and his wife, who looked like well-to-do farmers, but not proper Quality at all. We had come at the bottom of the hill and had to walk past a large screen painted with strange-looking trees and violet and red sunset and yellow earth. It was hinged with wings on either side so that it presented backdrop to the audience and went some way to hiding the ponies who were tethered behind it. As we walked by, a youth of above seventeen dressed very fine in white breeches and a red silk shirt glanced out from behind the screen and stared at us both. I know I looked furtive, expecting challenge, but he said nothing and looked us over as if free seats made us his especial property. Dandy looked at Dandy. Her eyes had widened and she was looking straight at him; her face was flushed and her smile confident. She looked at him as boldly as if she were his equal.

"Hello," she said.

"Are you Meridon?" he said, surprised.

I was about to say, "No. I am Meridon and this is my sister." But Dandy was ahead of me.

"Oh no," she said. "My name is Dandy. Who are you?"

"Jack," he said. "Jack Gower."

Unnoticed standing behind my beautiful sister, I could stare at him. He was not fair like his father but dark-haired. His eyes were dark too. In his shimmering shirt and his white breeches he looked like a lord in a traveling play—dazzling. The confident smile on his face as he looked down at Dandy, whose pale face was upturned to him like a flower on a slim stem, showed that he knew it. Dandy looked at that smile and thought him the most handsome youth I had ever seen in my whole life. And for some reason, I could not say why, I shuddered as if someone had just dripped cold water on my scalp, and the nape of my neck felt cold.

"I'll see you after the show," he said. The tone of his voice made it sound as if it might be a threat or a promise.

Dandy's eyes gleamed. "You might," she said, as natural a coquette as ever flirted with a handsome youth. "I have other things to do than hang around a wagon."

"Oh?" he asked. "What things?"

"Meridon and I are going to the fair," she said. "And we've money to spend, and all."

For the first time he looked at me. "So you're Meridon," he said carelessly. "My Da says you can train little ponies. Could you manage a horse like this?"

He gestured behind the screen and I peered around it. Tied to a stake on a ground was a beautiful gray stallion, standing quiet and docile, but his dark eye rolled toward me as he saw me.

"Oh yes," I said with longing. "I could look after him all right."

Jack gave me a little smile as warm and understanding as his Da.

"Would you like to ride him after the show?" he invited. "Or do you have better things to do, like your sister?"

Dandy's fingers nipped my arm, but for once I ignored her. "I'd love to ride him," I said hastily. "I'd rather ride him than go to any fair, any day."

He nodded at that. "Da said you were horse-mad," he said. "Wait till after the show and you can go up on him."

He glanced toward the gate and nodded as his father waved.

"Take your seats," Robert Gower called in his loud announcing voice. "Take your seats for the Greatest Show in England and Europe!"

Jack winked at Dandy and ducked behind the screen as his father shut the gate and came to the center of the flat grass. Dandy and I scurried to the hill and sat down in expectant silence.

I sat through the show in a daze. I had never seen horses with such training. They had four small ponies—Welsh mountain or New Forest, I thought—who started the show with a dancing act. There was a barrel organ playing and the boy Jack Gower stood in the middle of the ring with a fine purple coat over his red shirt and a long whip. As he cracked it and moved from the center to the side, the little ponies wheeled and trotted, individually turning on their hind legs, reversing the order, all with their heads up and the plumes on their heads jogging and their bells ringing ringingly like out-of-season sleighbells.

People cheered as he finished with a flourish with all four ponies bending down in a horse curtsy and he swept off his purple tricorne hat and bowed to the crowd. But he exchanged a look with Dandy as if to say that it was all for her, and I felt her swell with pride.

The stallion was next in the ring, with a mane like white sea foam tumbling down over his arched neck. Robert Gower came in with him and made him rear and stamp his hooves to order. He picked out flags of any color—you could call out a color and he would bring you the one you ordered. He danced on the spot and he could count numbers up to ten by pawing the ground. He could add to that quicker than I could. He was a brilliant horse, and so beautiful!

They cheered when he was gone too, and then it was time for the cavalry charge with the barrel organ playing marching music and Robert Gower telling about the glorious battle of Blenheim. The first little pony came thundering into the ring with its harness stuck full of bright colored flags and above them all the red cross of St. George. Robert Gower explained that this symbolized the Duke of Marlborough “and the Flower of the English Cavalry.”

The other three ponies came in flying the French flag, and while the audience sang the old song “The Roast Beef of Old England,” the four ponies charged at each other, their little hooves pounding the earth and churning it up into mud. It was a wonderful show, and at the end the little French ponies lay down and died and the victorious English pony galloped around in a victory circle and then reared in the middle of the ring.

The drink-sellers came around then, and there were pie-men and muffin-sellers too. Dandy and I had only our pennies and we were saving them for later. Besides, we were used to going hungry.

Next was a new horse, a great skewbald with a rolling eye and a broad back. Robert Gower stood in the center of the ring, cracking his whip and making the horse canter round in a great steady rolling stride. Then with a sudden rush and a vault Jack came into the ring stripped down to his red shirt and his white breeches and Dandy’s hand slid into mine and she gripped me tight. As the horse thundered round and around, Jack leaped up onto her back and stood balanced, holding one strap and nothing else, one arm outflung for applause. He somersaulted off and then jumped on again, and while the horse cantered round he swung himself off one side, and then another, and then he fell perilously, clambered all the way around the animal’s neck. He vaulted and faced backward. He spun around and faced forward. Then he finished the act, sweating and panting, with a ride around the ring, standing on the horse’s rump absolutely straight, his hands outstretched for balance, holding nothing to keep him steady; and finally a great jump to land on his feet beside his father.

Dandy and I leaped to our feet to cheer. I had never seen such riding. Dandy’s eyes were shining and we were both hoarse from shouting.

“Isn’t he wonderful?” she asked me.

“And the horse!” I said.

That was the high point of the show for me. But Robert Gower, first as Richard the Lionheart

going off to war with all the little ponies and the stallion, was enough to bring Dandy close to tears. Then there was a tableau of Saladin on a great black horse, which I could not have recognized as the same stallion. Then Richard the Lionheart did a triumphant parade with a wonderful golden rug thrown over the horse's back. Only his black legs showing underneath would have given the game away if you were looking.

"Wonderful," sighed Dandy at the end.

I nodded. It was actually too much for me to speak.

\* \* \*

We kept our seats. I don't think my knees would have supported me if we had stood. I found myself was staring at the muddy patch at the bottom of the hill and seeing again the flash of thundering legs and hearing in my ears the ringing of the pony bells.

All at once my breaking and training of children's ponies seemed as dull and as dreary as an ordinary woman's housework. I had never known horses could do such things. I had never thought of them as show animals in this way at all. And the money to be made from it! I was canny enough even in my star-struck daze, to know that six hardworking horses would cost dear and that Robert and Jack's shining cleanliness did not come cheap. But as Robert closed the gate behind the last customer he came toward us swinging a money bag which chinked as if it were full of pennies. He carried it as if it were heavy.

"Enjoy yourselves?" he asked.

Dandy gleamed at him. "It was wonderful," she said, without a word of exaggeration. "It was the most wonderful thing I have ever seen."

He nodded and raised an eyebrow at me.

"Can the stallion really count?" I asked. "How did you teach him his numbers? Can he read as well?"

An absorbed look crossed Robert Gower's face. "I never thought of him reading," he said thoughtfully. "You could do a trick with him taking messages perhaps . . ." Then he recollected himself. "You'd like a ride, I hear."

I nodded. For the first time in a thieving, cheating, bawling life, I felt shy. "If he wouldn't mind . . .," I said.

"He's just a horse," Robert Gower said, and put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. The stallion, still dyed black, came out from behind the screen with just a halter on, obedient as a dog.

He walked toward Robert, who gestured to me to stand beside the horse. Then he stepped back and looked at me with a measuring eye.

"How old are you?" he asked abruptly.

"Fifteen, I think," I said. I could feel the horse's gentle nose touching my shoulder, and his lips bumping against my neck.

"Going to grow much?" Robert asked. "Your Ma now, is she tall? Your Pa is fairly short."

"He's not my Da," I said. "Though I call him that. My real Da is dead and my Ma too. I don't know whether they were tall or not. I'm not growing as fast as Dandy, though we're the same age."

Robert Gower hummed to himself and said, "Good," under his breath. I looked to see if Dandy was impatient to go, but she was looking past me at the screen. Looking for Jack.

"Up you get then," he said pleasantly. "Up you go."

I took the rope of the halter and turned toward the stallion. The great wall of his flank went up

and up, well above my head. My head was as high as the start of his great arching neck. He was the biggest horse I had ever seen.

I could vault on Jess, our cart horse, by yelling "Hike!" to her and taking her at a run. But Snow was smaller than this giant, and I did not feel fit to shout an order to him and rush at him.

I turned to Robert Gower. "I don't know how," I said.

"Tell him to bow," he said, not moving forward. He was standing as far back as if he were in the audience. And he was looking at me as if he were seeing something else.

"Bow," I said uncertainly to the horse. "Bow."

The ears flickered forward in reply but he did not move.

"He's called Snow," Robert Gower said. "And he's a horse like any other. Make him do as he's told. Don't be shy with him."

"Snow," I said a little more strongly. "Bow!"

A black eye rolled toward me and I knew, without being able to say why, that he was being naughty like any ordinary horse. Whether he could count better than me or no, he was just being plain awkward. Without thinking twice I slapped him on the shoulder with the tail end of the halter and said in a voice which left no doubt in his mind:

"You heard me! Bow, Snow!"

At once he put one forefoot behind the other and lowered right down. I still had to give a little spring to get up on his back, and then I called "Up!" and he was up on four feet again.

Robert Gower sat on the grass. "Take him around the ring," he said.

One touch of my heels did it, and the great animal moved forward in such a smooth walk that it was as if we were gliding. I sat a little firmer and he took it as an order to trot. The great wide back was a steady seat and I jogged a little but hardly slid. I glanced at Robert Gower. He was tending to his pipe. "Go on," he said. "Canter."

I sat firmer and squeezed—the lightest of touches and the jarring pace of the trot melted into a canter, which blew the hair off my shoulders and brought a delighted smile to my face. Jack came out from behind the screen and smiled at me as I thundered past him. Snow jinked a little at the movement but I stayed on his back as solid as a rock.

"Pull him up!" Robert Gower suddenly yelled, and I hauled on the rope, anxious that I had done something wrong. "Hold tight!" he shouted. "Up, Snow!"

The neck came up and nearly hit me in the face as Snow reared. I could feel myself sliding backward and I clung on to the handfuls of mane for dear life as he pawed the air, and then dropped down again.

"Down you come," Robert Gower ordered and I slid down from the horse's back instantly.

"Give her the whip," he said to Jack, and Jack stepped forward, a smock thrown over his shoulder for showtime glory, with a long whip in his hand.

"Stand in front of the horse, as close as you can, nice loud crack on the ground. Shout him 'Up' and then a crack in the air. Like the painting on my wagon," Robert ordered.

I flicked the whip lightly on the ground to get the feel. Then I looked at Snow and cracked it as loud as I could. "Up!" I yelled. He was as tall as a tower above me. Up and up he went and his great black hooves were way above my head. I cracked the whip above my head, and even that long thorn seemed to come nowhere near him.

"Down!" Robert shouted and the horse dropped down in front of me. I stroked his nose. The black came off on my hand and I saw that my hands and face and my skirt were filthy.

"I should have given you a smock," Robert Gower said by way of apology. "Never mind." H

took a great silver watch from his pocket and flicked it open. "We're getting behind time," he said. "Would you give Jack a hand to get the horses ready for the second show?"

"Oh yes," I said at once.

Robert Gower glanced at Dandy. "D'you like horses?" he asked. "D'you like to work with them?"

Dandy smiled at him. "No," she said. "I do other work. Horses is too dirty."

He nodded at that, and flicked her a penny from his pocket. "You're a deal too pretty to get dirty," he said. "That's your pay for waiting for your sister. You can go and wait by the gate and watch that no one sneaks in before I'm there to take the money."

Dandy caught the penny one-handed with practiced skill. "All right," she said agreeably.

So Dandy sat on the gate while I helped Jack wash Snow and brush and tack up the little ponies in their bells and their plumes, and water and feed them and the skewbald with a little oats. Jack worked steadily but shot a glance now and then at Dandy as she sat on the gate with the evening sun all yellow and gold behind her, singing and plaiting her black hair.

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