

Patches' Way

By Doreen Tamminga

"Can't we get a horse, Dad? Please?" Sophia begged. Mom had rung the dinner bell, and they were coming in from the small barnyard that lay behind the farmhouse. "What's the use of mending the pasture fence if we don't even have any animals to keep in the pasture?" Sophia continued.

"A horse is a lot of work," Dad said. "It's not like getting a new bike."

Sophia sighed, and Dad added, "I'll talk it over with your mom."

"I just can't stand it that we had to move," Sophia complained. "When we lived next to Aunt Jess, I could ride their horses every day after school!" She stomped her foot in frustration. "We just have to get a horse."

"Horses aren't cheap, my girl, and that is why your mom and I will make the decision," Dad said firmly.

"But we have the barn and everything—" Sophia began again.

"That's enough!" Dad said. "Run along into the house and get washed up for dinner."

"Please wait until the bus is stopped, Sophia," the bus driver said as Sophia came hurrying down the aisle.

"Yeah, yeah," Sophia agreed and dashed down the steps to the road. Swinging her backpack over one shoulder, she stopped

short. Far down the long lane she could see movement behind the barnyard fence. It was Dad, and he was leading a—could it be—a horse?! Throwing her backpack to the ground, the girl took off running. *A horse! A horse!* Her thoughts ran race with her feet. *Here, right in the barnyard, a horse of my own!*

It felt like a dream.

Dashing down the stairs a few days later, Sophia was halfway out the back door when Mom's voice stopped her.

"Where are you going in your barn clothes?" she asked.

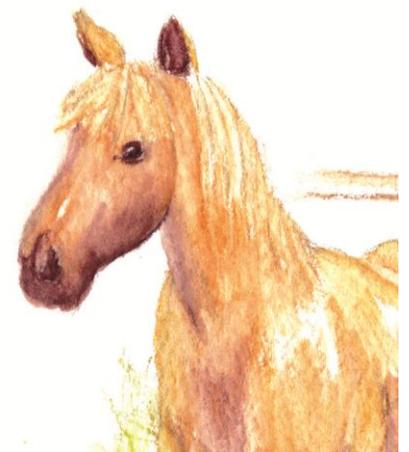
"I'm going to ride Patches," Sophia answered.

"I know you're excited," Mom said, "but your science report is due in two days and you still have a lot of work on it. I think it would be best to do your homework first—"

"Nah, it'll be fine. I'll do some tonight after supper," the girl called back and let the screen door bang shut.

Patches tossed his head warily before reaching out long lips to accept the apple from Sophia's hand. He snorted, then sputtered and pranced off to eat it on his own.

"Come back here,



you!” Sophia said commandingly to his broad backside. A swish of his tail was her only reply. “You have got to be the sassiest horse I’ve ever seen,” she scolded him. With a *humph!* of her own, she scrambled up the fence and hopped down into the barnyard.

Patches continued to ignore her, shifting only enough to give her the cold shoulder. He wasn’t scared, Sophia knew. His ears didn’t flatten at her touch, and his eyes didn’t widen; he simply moved away.

“Oh, fine!” Sophia stormed. “You don’t want to be friends? Well, see if I bring you any more apples.” Opening the gate, she went into the barn to get the saddle and bridle.

“Need any help out there?” Dad asked from where he was working.

“I’ll be fine,” Sophia said. “But that horse simply has the worst attitude of any horse I’ve ever met,” she huffed as she gathered up a brush and blanket as well. “No wonder you got him for such a good price. He must have been useless as a trail-riding horse.”

Dad just laughed.

“The rancher was probably glad to get rid of him!” Sophia finished.

And now he was hers.

Well, she was the boss. It was just a matter of teaching him that, Sophia was sure...but how?

Urging the stubborn creature through the gate, Sophia fit him with the bridle and tied the



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reins to a fence post. She wasn’t taking any chances.

Patches didn’t seem to mind the brushing, and even allowed her to place the light saddle blanket over his back. But when she set out to drape the heavy blanket on top, he resisted,

pulling back and jerking his head from side to side. He knew what that blanket meant: a saddle was coming.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Sophia said through gritted teeth, and grabbing his reins with one hand, she heaved the blanket on. The saddle followed and Patches seemed to resign himself

to its weight, for he stood quietly as Sophia tightened the cinch.

“There,” Sophia said and patted his shoulder. “That wasn’t so bad, was it? Now, let’s take a little ride and you can check out the new pasture.”

Loosening the reins from the fence, Sophia brought them up over his head and laid them on the nape of his neck. She tucked her feet in the stirrups and swung herself up onto Patches. Clicking her tongue, she urged him on with her feet. “Come on, boy, let’s go.”

To her surprise, the horse set off in an easy canter, allowing her to guide him. But after a dozen yards or so, he jerked to the right. Before Sophia knew what was happening, the saddle slipped to the side. With a *thump!* she hit the ground as Patches trotted cheerfully back to the barn.

The girl was more angry than hurt. “So that’s the way you play, hey?” she shouted after the retreating horse. “I should have known you would pull that trick.”

Sophia had heard of horses that puffed out their bellies while being saddled. Holding air in their stomachs kept the cinch from being tightened properly, and once the rider took their seat the horse would release the air and the saddle would be loose.

Sophia stood and dusted off her pants. “Just you wait,” she threatened. “You’ll find out soon who’s the boss.”

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“I can’t believe that horse!” Sophia exclaimed. It had taken the dinner bell to bring Sophia out of the barnyard and into the house. She was spending every spare minute she had with her new horse.

“After I figured out his belly trick and got the cinch tightened properly, he wouldn’t budge!” the girl continued. “At last I got him moving, but he just ran a tight circle back to the barn. For a horse supposed to have a small brain, he knows an awful lot of tricks.” She shook her head in frustration as she swirled her fork full of spaghetti.

“Maybe he just has a lot of character,” her older brother teased. “That’s your standard excuse for going your own way.”

“Patrick,” Dad said as he poured the drinks. “We don’t need to hear that. It does seem like the horse needs a few lessons in submission, though,” he agreed.

“That’s it!” Sophia said. “That’s exactly what I told him. He needs to learn that I’m the boss.”

“Well, why don’t we take him to the round pen after supper,” Dad said. “That’s where his training will begin. Because a creature that goes his own way is no use to anyone.”

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Sophia spent a half hour with Dad and Patches in the round pen. Dad showed her how to hold a whip in the hand and strike the ground with it. The horse was expected to run until the trainer looked down and lowered the whip. As Dad worked with Patches, it quickly

became clear that the horse knew what was expected of him, but wasn't willing to perform.

"What a stubborn horse!" Sophia sputtered.

"We're all stubborn," Dad said wryly as he walked Patches again around the ring. "How many times do we know what's right, but go wrong? We need training in the school of *God's* discipline!"

"I know, I know," Sophia said. "That's why we study the Bible and learn verses by heart."

Dad nodded. "That's the easier part: memorizing the textbook, the Bible," he said and looked seriously at Sophia. "But what's really in our heart shows during the practical training of daily life."

Sophia didn't answer, but watched as he brought Patches over to the gate.

"By the end of his training," Dad explained, "you need to be able to walk away from Patches without looking at him, and he must follow you."

"Let me try it, now," Sophia said holding out her hands for the whip.

"No, I think this fellow has had enough for one day," Dad countered. "Why don't you rub him down, give him a treat, and you can have a go at it tomorrow."

The sun had slipped beyond the trees and only the palest of blue lit the sky above.

Still the girl protested. "Aw, come on," she whined. "Just for a few minutes. I want to get the hang of it."

Raising an eyebrow, Dad passed the lead rope into her hand but held onto the whip. "For a girl who's supposed to have a small



brain, you know an awful lot of tricks," he said dryly, and headed off towards the house.

Crickets broke the stillness as Dad's footsteps faded away. Sophia stared after him, her mouth ajar. *Was Dad serious? Am I like Patches? Stubborn and always wanting my own way?*

A heaviness settled over her spirit as the thought dampened her urge to train. She had never seen herself through anyone else's eyes before. *Am I really full of tricks meant to get my own way?* the girl wondered. There, in the hush of the gathering dusk, Sophia heard herself for the first time—pestering Dad, making excuses for not listening to Mom, brushing off the bus driver's warnings. *Don't I ever simply obey?* she wondered. And to her shame, the girl couldn't say she did.

By the time she had rubbed down the horse and given him water and some oats, the stars were coming out. Sophia secured the barn door behind her and headed to the house. The trill of spring peepers echoed from the pond, and her shoes crunched in the gravel underfoot. It was a night that would make one

glad to be alive, but Sophia's mind was on other things. Pausing by the training pen, she ran a hand along a rail. Yup, Patches' attitude sure needed some work, but so did hers.

Dad had said it was daily living that showed what was in one's heart, Sophia mused. *And where had he said our training must begin? In the school of God's discipline.* Humbled by the view of her own heart, Sophia knew it was time that she confessed her sinful attitudes to her heavenly Schoolmaster.