

My Horse, Mr. Punch

by Jill Pickett



“Mum, the horse box is coming!” My brother Julian and I ran out the front door and stood on the grass verge as the horse box came up the

slight hill on the narrow country road, to park in front of our front hedge. We watched excitedly as my horse, Mr. Punch, was led out of the horsebox. He stepped gingerly down the ramp onto the grass, looking around at his strange new surroundings. Once we took hold of his halter and Mum signed some papers. He was really mine!

A horse had been on the top of every Christmas and birthday list since I was about four, when I first started to ride.

I was now thirteen, and we had moved the last year from the busy

Jill on Mr. Punch, in the back garden, 1959

village of Ixworth, with its small back garden, to Greenacre, a red brick house in the tiny, quiet village of Chevington where we had over an acre of garden and orchard. Some months earlier I accompanied Mum and Dad to buy a pedigree miniature black and tan dachshund, Teasel. While talking with the dog breeder somehow the subject of my love of horses arose. The owner’s daughter had taken a new job in the city of Cambridge and could no longer spend time with her horse. After my parents contacted her she offered to lend

him to me for an indefinite period.

Thus it was that Julian and I welcomed Mr. Punch, a twenty-two year old bay, with joy. But he looked very rough and disheveled,

due to the incredibly long hair hanging down his face, neck, and legs and under his belly. I ran to the house to get two pairs of scissors and Julian and I set to work cutting his hair, being careful not to scare him, especially as we trimmed under his belly. He seemed very easy going about it all. Julian and I had plenty of experience with normal grooming of horses, but had never trimmed their hair before. It was fun working together, seeing the transformation.

After trimming he looked much more presentable. I held my face

against his neck and stroked his soft hair, breathing in his horsey scent, which I loved.

We led him through the gate into the orchard, poured water into a large trough and finally left him to graze.

I imagine I did not sleep much that night. I was so excited.

If Mr. Punch had just eaten the grass in

the orchard things would have been fine. However, he was very much attracted to the leaves of the fruit trees, stretching his neck and reaching as high as he could to nibble them. It soon became obvious we needed an alternative place for him.

I realize now that my parents were very loving in their willingness to take on this extra responsibility, and to go the trouble to find a home for my horse. When the orchard became problematic, they asked several farmers in the village if they could find room for Mr. Punch in a field, but none had space where they could accommodate him. Mum finally found a farmer in another village who let us put Mr. Punch in with a couple of his horses. The next weekend my parents drove there while I rode Mr. Punch along the narrow winding roads four or five miles to the farm where Mr. Punch became seemingly happily ensconced, with two new friends. From then on I went on my bike two times a week to ride him. It may seem ungrateful of me, after my longing over all those years and finally getting my wish. But



My house, Greenacre in Chevington, Suffolk

I did not really enjoy the long bike ride each way, in all weathers, especially coming up a long hill on the way home. I wished my parents would drive me. Sometimes they did, but not often.

The event that sits firmly in my memory was fun, exciting, and scary. I could not have anticipated what happened as a result. By this time I had been riding Mr. Punch for more than two years, when the pony club planned to go on a hunt. As a novice to hunting, I joined the group with excitement and some trepidation. Riders in their breeches, boots and hard hats moved around restlessly waiting for the hunt to begin. Then we heard a horn and the hounds took off baying, followed by the riders. I stayed close to the back of the group, hoping I would be able to keep up. I need not have worried about that. Mr. Punch's personality changed instantaneously, from a steady, placid elderly horse to a trembling, vigorous hunter, anxious to keep up with the other horses. He took off, cantering along the road, around and across the fields at full speed, jumping everything in sight, including barbed wire fences. The

grass was rough and I was afraid he might catch his foot in a hole. All I could do was grip him tightly with my knees, lean forward and hang onto the reins and his mane. The hounds and horses were eager to keep in pursuit of whatever fox or lure might be ahead of them. My horse clearly

had hunting experience and was not going to

be left behind.

I was relieved when the hunt ended. Mr. Punch was by then puffing out blasts of steamy breath. I slid off his back and stood trembling. The sad thing was that he now had a limp. We took him to the vet and rubbed ointment on his leg. I rode him little after that because I was afraid I would make his leg worse. He mostly rested in his field and eventually went back to his owner. Still, my dream came true and I had a horse for almost three years. By that time I was sixteen and studying for the GCE, national exams, so I had less time for riding.



Jill Pickett grew up near Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk in England and immigrated to the United States in 1976 where she became a counseling psychologist and school counselor. She has three children and three grandchildren.

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