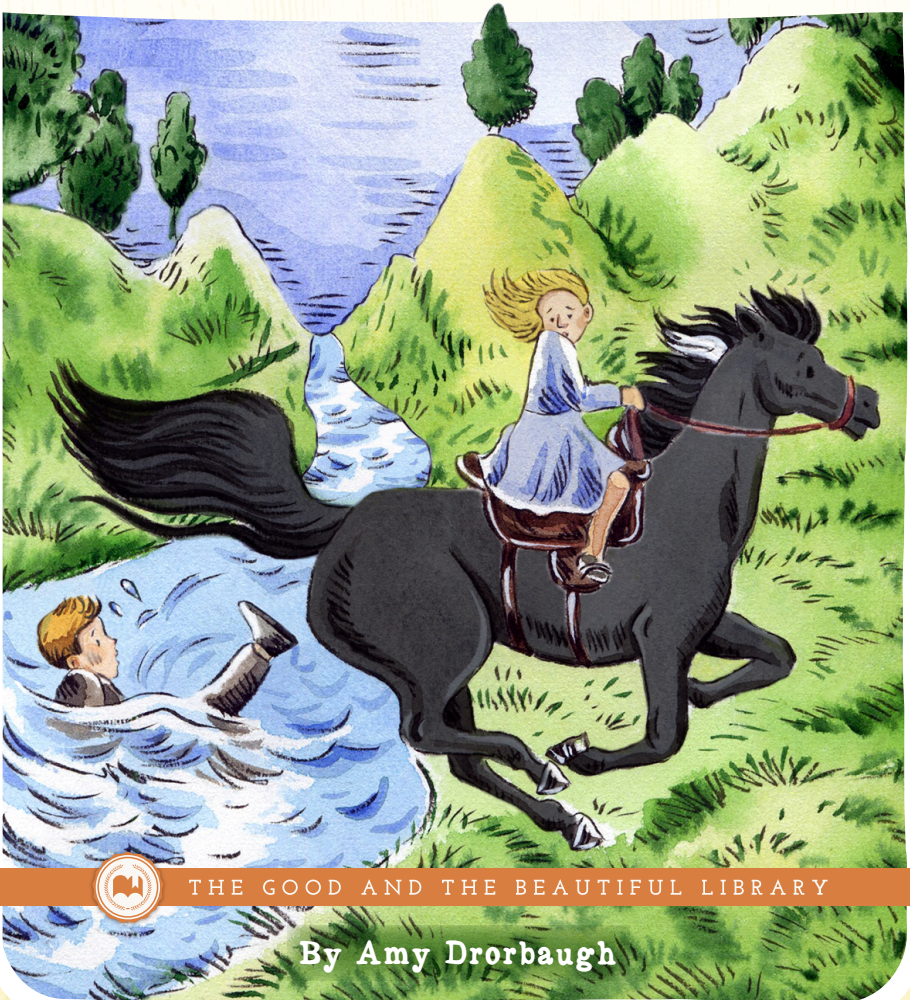




THE
BOOK
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CROOKED CREEK RANCH AND THE GREAT FLOOD



THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY

By Amy Drorbaugh

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CHAPTER ONE

SARA'S FIRST RIDE

“Sara, you can’t learn to ride a horse with your eyes closed.”

“How do you know I have my eyes closed? You can’t see them, no how,” Sara said pertly from her seat in the large saddle. She didn’t dare open her eyes or turn around to look at her brother Tommy, who was perched behind her. Her little hands gripped the leather reins so tightly that her knuckles were as white as her face.

“I thought you wanted to learn how to ride?” Tommy asked with a laugh.

“Storm didn’t look this tall from down on the ground,” Sara whispered, taking a quick peek down and then closing her eyes again quickly.

“Old Storm is as gentle as they come,” Tommy reassured her, “and I’m right here behind you. I won’t let you fall.”

“Promise?”

Tommy leaned forward and wrapped his arms around little Sara’s waist. “Promise for sure!”

Sara took a deep breath and tightened her hold on the reins. Storm, a black mare with a single white stripe in her mane, stood

Sara's First Ride

patiently, flicking her ears at wayward flies. She was a twenty-year-old mare, and both Levi and Tommy had learned to ride on her back. Nothing bothered the placid old horse. The three of them were standing in the south meadow, just below the creek, and standing was pretty much all they did. They hadn't moved one step since Tommy and Sara had mounted ten minutes ago.

Sara's first riding lesson was happening under a dark and cloudy sky. It seemed as if the skies were always dark and cloudy this winter, but at least it wasn't raining again. Tommy never thought he would be tired of rain, but this winter he would give anything for just one sunny day.

Sara slowly cracked open one eye. The ground still looked very far away. Scared, Sara leaned forward in the saddle and squeezed her legs tight around Storm's belly. At this signal Storm, who was a very well-trained horse, started walking forward. Sara squealed, dropped the reins, and grasped the saddle horn with both hands.

“Make her stop, Tommy! Make her stop!”

“Whoa, girl,” Tommy said cheerfully, leaning around Sara to grab the reins. Obediently Storm came to a stop, not at all upset by the squealing girl on her back. Tommy handed the reins back to Sara.

“It's all right, Sara! Storm just thought you wanted her to walk. When you want her

Sara's First Ride

to stop, tell her 'whoa,' lean back, and pull lightly on the reins. When you want her to go, click your tongue, lean forward, and squeeze her with your knees. Go ahead and try it."

From the front porch of the ranch house, Mama kept one eye on the riding lesson while she shelled the last of the fall peas. Her other eye was on eight-year-old Levi, who was currently seated at the kitchen table struggling to finish his math sums. Mama smiled at the dark head bent over his work, knowing how much Levi would rather be out with Sara and Tommy.

As Mama turned her attention back to the meadow, a thin beam of sunlight broke

through the clouds and lit up the two children on the dark horse. Sara was only six, with her messy blonde curls and her determination to do everything her brothers did. Tommy was almost eleven now, and sometimes Ma could see the man he would someday be, hiding behind his green eyes and freckles. He rode Storm easily, even perched as he was behind the saddle on Storm's wide back. After their rough start, Mama could see Sara now directing Storm to walk, stop, and turn. Tommy was a good teacher.

A raindrop landed in Mama's blue glass bowl alongside the small mountain of green peas. Ma sighed. The strange, unseasonable

rains just kept falling this year. It had done nothing but rain for the last month, and if it didn't stop soon, they would lose their winter crop. The warm temperatures and lack of snow in Southern California meant that most farmers could plant crops year round. The winter crops provided a valuable food and money source for the local farmers. Generally rain was a blessing in this sunny climate, but this constant rain was strange and worrisome. She stood up to go back inside.

“Tommy,” she called out and saw his head turn toward her. “Time to come in. It’s lookin’ to rain again.”

Tommy waved back to let Ma know he had

heard, and told his sister, “All right, Sara, it’s time to go in.”

“Aww, but I was just figgerin’ it out!” Sara complained as she reined Storm to a slow stop. “Why don’t you take us back to the barn, then?” Tommy suggested.

“Across the creek? Really?”

Without waiting for Tommy’s answer, Sara used her newfound skill to turn Storm toward the creek and awkwardly moved her to a slow walk. The creek ran the whole length of their property, wandering back and forth across the meadows and down the canyon. Its crooked path gave their ranch its name: Crooked Creek Ranch. Normally it was not a large creek, and even small Sara

could walk across it in most places. However, the constant rain had swollen it to twice its normal size, and as it grew, it picked up speed as well. Now the creek measured about eight feet across and swirled darkly in the middle. Old Storm, reaching the edge of the water, snorted and came to a stop.

“What’s wrong, girl?” Sara patted her neck. “It’s just the creek.”

“She’s just nervous because it’s bigger than normal, I reckon,” Tommy said. “She’ll be fine. Just give her a little kick like I taught you, with your heels.”

Sara tapped Storm’s side with her small heels, but the old mare didn’t react at all.

“I’ll do it,” Tommy said and smartly kicked

his heels. At the exact same moment, a giant crash of thunder sounded right above them. Sara jerked on the reins in surprise.

Startled by the kick, the pull, and the thunder all at once, gentle Storm reared up onto her hind legs and then bolted across the creek with a toss of her mane.

Tommy, with his precarious seat behind the saddle and nothing to hold on to, slid right off the back of Storm, over her tail. He didn't even have time to yell before he landed with a hard *plop* and a cold *splash* in the freezing creek!

Up to his neck in the cold waters, Tommy watched Storm, with Sara still on her back, run all the way back to the barn. Sara had





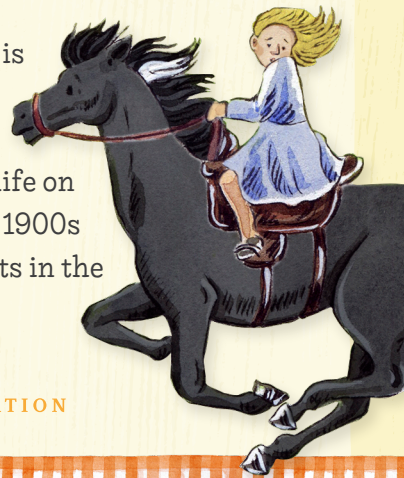
CROOKED CREEK RANCH AND THE GREAT FLOOD

"Ma! Look what I found," she said as she burst into the kitchen. . . . "I couldn't find any flowers, but I picked these beautiful leaves instead."

Ma looked up with a smile that quickly turned into a gasp of horror. "Sara! What did you do?!"



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