



TWO GIRLS.
ONE HORSE.
A PROMISE.

TAKING THE REINS



DAYLE CAMPBELL GAETZ

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Canada



*To all the girls and women,
both foreign and native born, who helped
tame these “wild and free” colonies.*

Katherine

A Lady in Breeches – On Sunday last, a...lady was observed on Esquimalt wharf, about the time of the departure of the *Oregon*, wearing a complete suit of gentleman's clothes – breeches and all! After the steamer had cast off, she quietly mounted a fine horse, in true gentlemanly style – which means with a pedal extremity on either side of the animal – and rode off briskly towards Victoria, leaving a large and curious crowd of spectators to wonder as to who she was, whence she came, and whither she was bound...

– *The British Colonist*, April 15, 1862



TWO GIRLS. ONE HORSE.

1



The saddle creaked as Katherine leaned forward to run her fingers through the thick hair of Nugget's mane. "Good girl," she whispered, "only this last rough bit and we're almost home." She loosened the reins and let Nugget pick her own way down a narrow, rock-strewn trail carved into the side of a steep rock face. Below them the Fraser River slid seaward, filling the valley with its cavernous roar.

Her horse flinched when Duke snorted, so close at Katherine's heels she felt his warm, moist breath clean through the fabric of George's old breeches. "You're doing fine," she reassured Nugget. She would trust her life with this horse. Not so much with her brother.

Katherine glared over her shoulder at him. "What are you trying to do? Knock us over the edge?"

George squirmed in the saddle. He pushed his wide-brimmed hat further back on his forehead and urged Duke even closer, trying to squeeze past Katherine in spite of the risk. "Must you be so slow?"

"What's your great hurry, George? Not so long ago you couldn't wait to run away from the farm. Now you'd

endanger both our lives simply to arrive home a few minutes faster?"

He kept his eyes on the trail ahead. "I wouldn't expect you to understand, your being such a young girl and all."

"Understand what?" she snapped. Honestly, sometimes talking to her brother was like chatting with a fence post.

His eyes remained on the trail as if Katherine weren't there at all. "A man needs some danger in his life. Trudging behind you bores me."

"Oh! Then if risking your own life is so important, you can go right ahead, but you have no right to endanger the horses or me either."

George's gaze skimmed past her and slid over the cliff edge to the fast-moving water at its base. His head and shoulders dipped. His hat slipped low on his forehead. He grunted and eased Duke a safe distance behind Nugget.

Katherine returned her attention to Nugget. "You may not have noticed, girl, but I think George just apologized to us."

Before long the trail leveled off and widened into a dusty road between dry grasses. George didn't waste a second. He moved up beside Nugget, pushed his hat back, and urged Duke into a gallop. Leaning low over the white horse's outstretched neck, George flung a challenge over his shoulder. "You'll never catch us now!"

"No, and I don't want to either!" Katherine shouted, but knew he couldn't hear. Horse and rider vanished in a swirl of dust until all she could see of them was the ghost-white shape of Duke's rump and the occasional glint of a horseshoe rising and falling like a silver-toothed grin, mocking her through rising clouds of dust.

Katherine had no reason to hurry, no reason to race her brother today. Not like before. The day she caught up with George's pack-train and told him he was needed at home, he had refused to listen. He told her to go home where she belonged. He called her ridiculous and said she could never keep up with him because she was a girl. Not that his horse was faster or he a more experienced rider. Only that she was a girl.

Katherine had felt a flash of anger but quashed it in favor of tossing out a challenge. "Not only can I keep up to you, I can beat you. And what's more, I'll bet on it. If I lose, I'll go home, empty-handed, without another word. If I win, you'll come with me and you won't complain, not once."

How George had laughed at that, so sure of himself. So sure he would win. What man couldn't beat his little sister in a horse race?

Katherine patted Nugget's neck, just ahead of the saddle horn. "We showed those two, didn't we, girl?" She chuckled, remembering the shock on her brother's face when she sped past him on her beautiful bay mare. "You're the best horse ever."

And now they were almost home.

Katherine didn't want this adventure to end. Not yet. She had never known such freedom as she experienced over these past days, nor half so much excitement. She would like nothing better than to turn around and run away from her lonely life on this wretched farm where everything she did reminded her of Susan.

She blinked back tears. It seemed like years since her sister had died. Years since their journey from England came to such a tragic end. Since that ghastly day nothing

had gone right until at last George could take no more and ran off in search of gold.

Would her parents ever forgive her for chasing after him? Running off after leaving only the briefest of notes on her pillow?

Dear Mother and Father,

Don't worry about me. There is something I must do. I will be back in a few days.

Love, Katherine

She had dressed in George's old clothes, tucked the gold rose nugget in her pocket, safely wrapped in a small cloth bag for fear of losing it. Then she tiptoed from the cabin, carrying her boots. Guided by silvery moonlight she set off on foot to find her brother, whose help was needed at home since Father's injury.

Now Katherine touched the small hard lump in her pocket. Susan's gold rose nugget protected her and kept her sister close. Without it, Katherine would never have gotten Nugget, and without such a fine horse she would never have caught up to her brother.

As if sensing her mood, Nugget came to a full stop. "Thank you, girl." She patted the warm softness of Nugget's neck. "I'll be all right now."

Nugget plodded to the top of a small rise and stopped again. Nestled beneath tall firs, the cabin waited for Katherine, looking even smaller than she remembered. Dust settled on the trail behind her brother as he galloped ahead, reined Duke in, and leaped from the saddle. Before his feet hit the ground, the cabin door burst open and Mother came flying out. The wide skirt of her long,

blue dress billowed around her as she darted across the porch, down the two steps, and reached up to throw her arms around her son.

Katherine stared. Mother was always so prim and proper, so unwilling, or unable, to show affection. But there she stood, hugging George so hard his eyeballs must be popping clear out of their sockets. She felt a quick tightness in her chest. Where was Father? Why didn't he come out of the cabin? Is that why Mother was so emotional? Had Father's condition worsened?

George escaped from their mother's embrace and hurried into the cabin. Katherine's fingers twisted around Nugget's reins. She swallowed. Moments later, two figures emerged through the rustic wooden door. George's arm encircled a smaller man, helping him onto the porch. Surely that could not be...

The thin, hunched-over man raised his hand to shield his eyes from the sun and peer in her direction. Then he waved one arm above his head as if he might be glad to see her. Katherine shook her head. She knew her father, and he would never show half so much excitement. How could this be?

Mother lifted her long skirt in both hands and began running toward Katherine. In the next second, Katherine couldn't wait to be home. She tapped her heels against Nugget's sides and the horse broke into a canter.

They were twenty feet apart when Mother stopped abruptly. Her hand flew to her mouth. Katherine pulled so hard on the reins Nugget reared up and dropped to a standstill. Her mother stumbled backward, raising her arm as if to push Katherine away.

What was wrong?

Mother glanced over her shoulder at George, then back again to Katherine, both hands pressed over her mouth. Her soft blue eyes travelled from Katherine's left boot snug in the stirrup, up and over Katherine's leg clad in George's old breeches, filthy from so many days on the trail through dust and rain and nights sleeping on the ground. Her gaze continued past the grimy shirt and vest to Katherine's face, shadowed by a wide-brimmed hat.

Katherine had become so used to dressing like a boy she had forgotten how very different she must look. Even her own mother didn't recognize her. Katherine smiled. "It's me, Mother. It's Katherine."

Mother's face hardened. Katherine bit her lip and stared down at her hands, twisting at the brown leather reins. Why had she ever thought her parents might understand, that they might even be grateful to her? She made a half-hearted attempt to explain. "I was afraid. I didn't want all those men out there to know I'm a girl because..."

"Katherine?" her mother interrupted. She ran to grab Nugget's bridle. "Get down from that horse this instant!"

Oh, Mother was so unfair! Katherine pressed her lips together and held her anger inside as she swung her right leg over the horse, slipped her left foot from the stirrup and dropped easily to the ground. She had tried so very hard to do the right thing but, as usual, had only managed to upset her mother by breaking some stupid rule. *Young ladies must always wear a long dress, never breeches. Young ladies must always ride side-saddle, never astride a horse.*

What would people think?

With the reins clutched tightly in her hand, Katherine

pressed close against the soft, reassuring warmth of Nugget's side and breathed in the strangely comforting scent of horse. She couldn't turn around and face her mother's anger. She simply could not.

"Katherine." Unexpectedly strong hands clasped her shoulders and swung her around.

Katherine stared at the hard line of her mother's lips, shut her eyes tight, and fought for composure. How could she make Mother understand? She opened her eyes. "Mother, I..." But her voice cracked, and she couldn't go on.

Mother's grasp slid to Katherine's upper arms. She studied her daughter's face as if she had never seen it before. "Katie? Oh, Katie, just look at you!" She reached up and whipped the hat off Katherine's head. "Your poor hair! You look exactly like a boy and I'm so..." Mother frowned. All traces of anger spilled out of her, suddenly, in the space of a breath. Her shoulders sagged and tears sprang into her eyes. "I'm so grateful to you."

Katherine couldn't believe what she heard. Grateful? Mother? To her?

Mother slipped an arm around her shoulders. "It was so clever of you to dress as a boy, Katie. With all those rough men arriving here from all parts of the world and so few women to remind them how to behave, a young girl cannot be too careful."

Katherine nodded, unable to speak.

"Come now, your father is waiting."

"Is he feeling better then?"

"Much. But he is unable to walk without help."

Katherine stood in front of her father. He looked so tired and frail leaning on George that she could scarcely

comprehend he was the same man she had known all her life. The man who always got his own way, the angry man who frightened her with his harsh words and disapproving looks. Even more confusing were the tears that filled his chocolate-brown eyes.

"Kate," he whispered, and reached out to gently touch her cheek with his fingertips. "I was so afraid we would never see you again. We had no idea where you went."

"I'm sorry Father. I never meant to worry you, but I thought, with you being injured and all, we would need George to finish the well and barn and help get things ready for winter. I knew, if I asked, you would never let me go after him."

"Quite right." He pulled himself up a little taller, pushing away from George. "It is not fitting for a girl..."

"Peter! Not now," Mother interrupted.

Katherine stared at her parents, back and forth, one and the other. She wondered if there had been some huge mistake. Had she somehow stumbled into the wrong family? These people simply did not fit. Her mother never contradicted her father, not ever. If anyone in the family so much as disagreed with the tiniest thing he said, Father always got so angry his face turned purple and he spit out stupid, hurtful words that did not make any sense at all.

Katherine glanced at her brother. George stood absolutely still. His mouth gaped open and he eyed their parents as if he had no idea who they were. Then his eyes rolled to Katherine, his mouth snapped shut and he raised his eyebrows, up and down, up and down.

She grinned.

They both turned to Father who looked exhausted, as if the effort of getting angry was simply too much for

him. He swayed on his feet, and Katherine took his arm to support him. "It's so good to be home!" she said, and meant it.

After dinner that evening, the family lingered around their hand-carved wooden table sipping sweet, hot tea. Dinner had been filling enough, if not terribly exciting. Fresh potatoes, carrots, and beans Katherine brought in from the garden. Cups of thick milk George managed to obtain from Genevieve, even though milking was not normally his chore. No bread, no butter, no meat.

"There has been so much to do with both of you gone," Mother explained. "Caring for your father, tending the garden, milking Genevieve, I haven't found a moment to bake bread or churn butter. And we are desperately short of supplies."

"Give me a list," George offered. "I'll ride into Hope tomorrow and Katherine can bake some bread."

"Oh, no." Katherine glared at her brother. "You're not doing that again, leaving me trapped on the farm while you go off and have fun in town. I'll take Nugget for supplies while you work on finishing the well you started before you ran off in some foolish search for gold."

"Katherine," he sneered, "I left for the Cariboo because our family needs money. And I'm not going to town for fun, only to get the things Mother needs."

Maybe. But if she let him get away with it now, everything would slip right back to the way it had been. She would be trapped on this farm for the rest of her life. "George, if you expect me to believe that..."

"Children!" Mother sat very straight, pressed her shoulders back, and frowned from George to Katherine, on opposite sides of the table.

"I am not a child," Katherine informed her. "I'm fourteen years old."

"And I most certainly am not a child," George said through clenched teeth.

Katherine scowled at her brother.

He dismissed her with a look, his blue eyes cold and hard. She stared down at her hands, clenched into tight fists on the table. Until this minute, she had dared hope they might get along better after spending so much time together on the trail, but it seemed George was determined to slip back into being his old, obnoxious self. "Oh," she said, "you think you're so marvelous just because you're nineteen? Well, let me tell you, George Harris, I can shoot a rifle better than you and beat you in a horseback race, and do a whole lot of other things better than you ever will. And what's more, you know it."

George grunted. He busied himself stirring cream into his tea.

"No one is going into town," Mother whispered.

Both George and Katherine turned to their father. He must be very ill to remain silent for so long. Indeed, Father's face had gone pale. His chin sank so low it threatened to dip into his plate of unfinished food. Father picked up his teacup but his hand shook so badly he replaced it, rattling, onto its saucer, slopping milky brown liquid over the rim. "It is not fitting for a young girl..."

"Ohhh! You keep saying that!" Katherine hissed. She refused to be told what was fitting and what was not. Why should she be bound by some silly rules made up in

a country half the world away? Everything was different here. This land was huge and wild and free. She would not be a prisoner, confined to this one patch of land.

There was no answering anger from Father. Far from it. Instead of glowering at her, he seemed to shrink into himself. His chin sank even lower over his plate. Katherine closed her eyes, took a slow, deep breath, and let her anger fall away.

"Father," she said calmly, "I have travelled all the way up to the Thompson River with..." She stopped and took a quick sip of tea to cover her blunder. A shiver ran through her. She had almost said, *With William's help*, and only just caught herself in time. She must be more careful.

Katherine held her teacup with fingers daintily clasping the handle, exactly as Mother had taught her, and completed her sentence, "...without any problem. So I think I am capable of riding into Hope by myself."

"We could go together," George offered. "I'll take the wagon for supplies."

"Oh. Yes, of course," Katherine said, grateful for George's unexpected compromise.

Mother pushed her cup and saucer away. "Did no one hear me? No one is going into town." She placed both hands on the table, pushed herself heavily to her feet, and stumbled toward the open door.

Katherine and George stared across the table at each other. Again they both turned to Father, but he only gazed gloomily into his teacup as if unaware of all that was going on around him. Sister and brother stood and followed their mother outside.

They found her seated on the top step. Elbows resting

on her knees, she cupped her chin in both hands and gazed up at the mountain that loomed above their farm. Twilight shadows turned its topmost peak to gold and accentuated every crevice in the naked rock.

Katherine settled beside her mother. Something was troubling her. Something beyond the loss of Susan and the worry over Father. Katherine could see that now.

They stayed for a few minutes that way, sitting side by side, absolutely still, with George hovering behind them near the door. No one spoke until finally Katherine broke the silence. "Why don't you want us to go into town, Mother? Don't you trust us?" Another thought occurred to her. "Or are you ashamed of the way I look, with my short hair and sun-browned face?"

Mother's forehead sank to her knees, pressed against her two hands that rested there. "I only wish it were that simple," she whispered.

Katherine leaned closer. "Then what?"

"We have no money." Mother's voice was muffled by her full cotton skirt.

"What? None?"

"Very little," she said. "Barely enough for a sack of flour. What with the medicines I needed for your father, and the money he gave to George..." Her voice faded away.

After a moment, Mother spoke again, so quietly Katherine strained to hear. "I'm afraid your father has never been good with money. And of course our journey from England cost more than planned, due to our prolonged stay in San Francisco when..." Her voice collapsed altogether.

Katherine knew what Mother couldn't say. *When we all took ill, Susan worst of all.*

That night Katherine lay on her simple bed, so tired her entire body ached. She snuggled under the warm blanket and closed her eyes. She would sleep well.

No money.

Her eyes popped open.

They faced a long winter with not enough food and little money. Nothing to buy essential supplies. Fear crept into her belly. Katherine had never been poor, never been forced to go hungry, and the thought of it terrified her.

Would they have had enough if Father hadn't been hurt? Possibly. And that made it all her fault. If only she had called Father that morning, or paused to grab the gun herself, everything would be different. Instead she had raced from her bed waving her arms, furious at that mother bear and cub for digging up her precious vegetable garden. The cub had ambled away but its mother turned on Katherine, and when Father ran outside he was mauled trying to protect her.

If she had stopped to think, they might have dried bear meat in storage and a warm bearskin rug to help keep out winter's chill.

If it's your fault, then it's up to you to do something about it. The voice came out of the darkness, not Susan's voice exactly, but there nevertheless. It was a quiet voice that continued to give her direction whether she wanted it or not. Katherine tried to push it away but the idea caught hold. She had to make this right and there was only one way to do so.

Katherine stumbled out of bed and made her way through the dark to her bureau. She slid open the top

drawer and felt inside until her fingers closed around the small cloth bag. She felt the hard lump inside and dropped it onto her hand. The gold rose nugget. Susan's final gift.

She climbed back into bed and curled on her side, clutching the nugget in her tightly closed fist. Sometimes she needed so badly to talk to her sister that it seemed impossible she could be gone forever. Tears trickled over her nose and onto her pillow. She had promised Susan to keep the golden rose for the rest of her life. How could she even think of selling it? She couldn't, she wouldn't. The nugget was all she had left of Susan, a token to keep her sister's memory alive for a lifetime.

And if they all died of starvation, is that what Susan would want? No, Susan would tell her to sell the nugget and purchase provisions.

Oh, but she had promised!

Katherine's thoughts kept going back and forth until at last she slipped into a troubled sleep.

She awoke with a start. Her room was black and close around her. She knew now that there was another choice, something else she could sell in place of the golden rose.

But how could she bear to part with Nugget?