



The stockyard is no place for a woman. I had heard the same quip more than once in Sioux City. And yet an impertinent remark has never fazed me. Why should it? So when I heard the gentleman in the derby hat drop the familiar comment, followed by banter about my “loco” stock from Idaho, I strode toward him without hesitation.

“Sir, would you like to look at my horses?”

He turned from the group of men standing around him and his eyes held more than just a smidgen of surprise. “Madame, I was not looking for any horses to buy today.” His lips curled around his dark, wet cigar stub. “I will sell you some, however, should you decide you need something good and broke.”

He was referring, of course, to my thousand head of horses that were fresh off the range in the wilds bordering Idaho and Nevada. It was true that my buckaroos had taken the rough off of them only weeks prior to my arrival at the Sioux City Stock Yard. It was also true that this two-bit horse trader would not get the best of me. I was there to sell my horses, my *fine* horses, and sell my horses I would.

“Don’t mind him, ma’am.” A tall wiry man with a wispy white handlebar mustache handed me an amused grin. He reminded me very much of my ranch foreman. “Walter here is just jealous you might cut him out of a sale on his own mangy critters.”

I glanced into the holding pens behind this “Walter.” The “mangy critters” milling about were finely groomed, trim at the fetlocks, their manes lying flat and soft against slender necks, their red coats gleaming in the morning sun. The chestnuts with blonde mane and tails were no doubt bred to provide matched pairs and quads for the carriage. Yet I could not help but notice that their fine and flashy limbs appeared almost fragile. They would be showy and high-stepping pulling a fine barouche or cabriolet. But sturdy they were not.

“Captain Armistadt, Miss.” A blue-uniformed army man extended his hand.

I clasped his hand firmly. “Kit Wilkins, sir.”

“I would very much like to see your horses, Miss Wilkins.”

I nodded to him. “Thank you.”

A confidence and calm came over me as I led the group of men to my section of the stockyards. Just as it always did when I was in a contest of wills. Don’t ask me why, because I simply don’t know. There’s something about me that rises to the occasion when I am challenged. I cannot help it. My father says it is the “Wilkins Will.” He mentioned it when he saw me off at the train station in Mountain Home, Idaho.

“My darling daughter,” he said, “your first trip alone to Sioux City—I know you will do very well. I would offer my advice, but I have already taught you everything I know. And now I will simply say trust your instincts. They will serve you well and are far beyond anything I could impart to you. You have the ‘Wilkins Will’ in spades, my dear.” With that he kissed me on the forehead.

I waved at him out the window of the Oregon Short Line train, then leaned out to watch the carloads of horses snaking behind

me, the river catching sparkles of light from the autumn morning sun.

And now my moment had come. With the family fortune gone up in the same flames that destroyed the Wilkins Hotel, our once promising prospects had turned to ash. Without a successful sales trip, we would have nothing to live on for the winter. I suppose it should seem surprising that my father left so much riding on the coattails of a young woman like me, and yet in our family, I could stand on equal footing with any of my three brothers. Johnny, the oldest,



always said when it came to knowing how to sell a horse, I could outshine a polished penny.

The holding pens for my thousand head of horses spread out before us for what seemed like miles of pens at the stockyard. Between the restless whinnying of the horses, the incessant lowing of the cattle, and the baaing of the hundreds of sheep nearby, I wasn’t sure if I could raise my voice enough to be heard. But I picked a stopping point in the aisleway of the yards and climbed up a post, perching on the fence. At least the men could see me better that way.

Walter—the derby hat man—took his opening before I could say a word. “These nags have never seen the inside of a barn. They’ll never be worth a plugged nickel. Damn mustangs is what they are.”

I looked out across my sea of horseflesh—the very best of my two- and three-year-olds. My foundation mare had been purchased by my father when I was only three years old, and most of the horses before us were descended from her. Certainly there were mustangs on the open ranges that interbred with my horses—

although I was not about to admit to such—but for years my family had been improving the herd with Thoroughbred, Morgan, and Standard bred stallions and mares.

“It’s true that my horses have never been stabled,” I said in the loudest voice I could muster. The men pressed in to hear. “But that is far from a disadvantage. All of the horses you see were born at an altitude of 8,000 feet in southern Idaho. The pure, dry atmosphere develops a superior lung capacity in my animals. That’s what you want in your horses for endurance. They’re strong and healthy. No wheezers or cribbers in the lot of them.”

I searched the faces of the men who had gathered, and I knew that these men were interested not only in my horses, but in how a woman horse trader was going to fare in the male domain of stockyard negotiation. “The grazing land of the high desert is underlaid with a stratum of limestone,” I continued. “That limestone-rich forage has built strong bone into them. That’s what you want for a horse that can pull or carry weight all day and still have ‘go’ in them after a long day’s work.”

Walter was not deterred in his effort to sow a seed of doubt. “Horses grow like weeds in the wild, but they have no quality to them and no temperament for being broke. The Captain here can tell you if you’ve time to listen. The army doesn’t want rough stock with hard mouths that can’t ever ride easy. Your horses would be nothing but trouble for him.”

Captain Armistadt set his foot on the fence railing. “It is true, Miss Wilkins. I like the look of your horses, and your claim about strong bone is just what I need in the army mounts. But I need seven hundred head ready for my cavalry in a month’s time. If they’re not at least fair broke, I’m afraid I can’t use them. I simply don’t have time or the manpower to take the fight out of them. If they’re not used to humans, they would take too much time to gentle.”

A wiry cowboy fingered the velvet nose of one of my fillies, who had stretched out her neck to sniff the man. The whiskers on her muzzle weren’t trimmed, and her tangled mess of a mane pointed in every direction, but her inquisitive eyes showed good sense.

“Why, that wouldn’t take nothin’ to break these critters,” the cowboy said.

“You just shet your mouth, Stumpy.” Walter looked at him and growled as I pulled the lariat off the post.

“Stumpy,” I said, handing him the coiled rope, “if you would be so kind, please pick a horse from my herd and separate him while I retrieve my saddle.”

“Why, I shore’d be glad to.” Stumpy shook out the rope and re-coiled it, walking toward the pen.

“Wait one minute,” Walter’s gravelly voice was beginning to grate. “How do we know but what you’ve got a decoy in there, and Stumpy is in on it.”

“I invite you, sir,” I said, leveling my gaze directly into his face, “to pick the horse.”

Walter walked up and down the line of pens, climbing up the fencing to look out over the fuzzy backs. In the cold nights of the high desert, the horses had already started putting on their winter coats.

“That one over there,” Walter pointed. “The dun with stripe.” He climbed off the fence and pulled a cigar out of his pocket. “The one with the wild look in her eye.” He winked at me and grinned.

The sea of horses panicked and parted at the sight of Stumpy’s flying lasso. They knew what the stinging rope meant. The dun bit and kicked her way through the herd to escape deep in a corner, but

Stumpy’s aim was true. The minute the rope landed around her neck, the dun launched into a buck that would make even the rankest bronco proud. I knew this animal, and it was good that she was getting her nervous energy out at the end of the rope. That meant less buck under the saddle.

I never did the rough breaking myself, but I was always with my buckaroos at camp when the breaking was done. I oversaw everything at the camp at the hot springs, on the back of my horse from sunup to sundown, just like the men. My horses, my ranch hands, and my foreman all knew and trusted me.

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My foreman, who was also my top hand, had gentled this mare. She might look hostile, but she was the daughter of one of our top American sires, a stallion with the gentlest temperament I had ever seen. On the other side, her dam was hardy and strong but cantankerous; descended from a wild herd several years back. But I was trusting the stallion’s temperament to overcome the other side of her bloodline. And I was relieved that Walter’s choice had been gentled by my foreman. Cliff liked to put his own stamp on the breaking process. If his training held with this mare, my demonstration would hold a promise of more than getting sent headlong into the dirt.

Stumpy pulled the mare over toward us, and she shook her head to loosen the grip of the lasso around her throatlatch. All four feet were planted as though she were about to explode into a buck again at any moment. I went to her head and laid my hand against her neck, speaking in soft tones. When I felt her relax, I fastened a halter behind her ears, loosened the offending stiff rope, and tossed it aside. She flung her head high with a snort, but listened, one ear swiveling frontwards, then backwards.

“Remember there girl.” I stroked her shoulder. “Remember all that Cliff taught you. You’re on now. Time to show your guts and gumption.”

Stumpy held the gate as I led her out. Horses sense our confidence, our

inner man or woman, as it may be. She was looking for a sense of relief from the pressure of the tight, stiff lariat, which had sailed out of nowhere and landed on her, stirring her ancient instincts to unseat a predator sinking its claws in her back.

In me she found comfort and relief. I walked forward beside her shoulder, ready to pivot out of the way just in case she should take to bucking and kicking again, but there was no need. She dropped her head in submission and mirrored my steps. When I picked up my long woolen skirts with one hand and quickened my step, she trotted beside me. When I stopped, she halted with me. When I shortened the rope, pulled back and clucked, she backed three steps. I dropped the rope and walked away. She stood motionless, head low and ears back, as I breathed a word of thanks to Cliff for putting his trademark ground tie on every horse he broke.

Time for the saddle. I turned to a hitching rail in the aisleway, where I had left my sidesaddle earlier that day, but it was gone. Instead, Walter appeared with it in his burly arms. "Allow me, Miss Wilkins." Although I didn't trust his sudden politeness, I stepped aside as Walter lifted the bulky square-skirted sidesaddle over his rounded belly, then up and onto the mare's back.

My saddle, sitting on a Western tree, was rigged with two cinches for stability—one in front and one in back. I held the mare's head and called out instructions to Walter since he seemed a little baffled by the rear cinch.

Stumpy brought my bridle and I slid the bit in the mare's mouth, then checked the cinches to be sure they were tight and correctly placed. It wouldn't do to have a loose saddle, and since I wasn't quite sure what old Walter might have up his sleeve, I was leaving nothing to chance.

I was accustomed to mounting by myself from the ground, and as I am tall and agile, I sprung into the saddle. I sat for only a moment before the mare began to pitch wildly, hump backed and stiff legged.

My buckaroos always said, "Kit can ride anything with four legs." The mare would test that truism. Twisting this way and that, first springing high, then kicking with all her might, she bumped into the rails of the fence and nearly knocked us over. She snorted and shook when she hit the fence, and I took the opportunity of her stunned stillness to slip to the ground.

As soon as my weight was off her back, she dropped her head and blew air through her nostrils. She was trembling, but accepted my strokes on her neck. I tucked pieces of my tumbling hair upward and re-pinned them as I considered the mare's unexpected response. I strolled over to pick up my whip that had slid from my hand during the violent show of horse power. The fear in her eyes made no sense. This mare had been well broke by my top hand. As I reflected on the situation, the men assessed from a distance of safety.

"While that was quite a display of horsemanship, I am sorry for you Miss Wilkins." Walter latched his fingers over his belly and pontificated about the dangers of horses raised in the wild, adding his bit about "this is what comes of women doin' business in the stockyards."

A swarthy man with wire glasses and bucked teeth spoke. Certain of his words sounded almost like a whistle as they came through his protruding teeth, and had I not been so distracted by the problem at hand, I would have had to stifle a laugh. "I was ready to bid on

a hundred head of these endurance horses bred at high altitudes. I must withdraw. Although they are fit, I can't with confidence tell my clients they are useable."

The Captain walked over. "Next time," he said under his breath, "if you can manage to get them broke first, I'll be very interested. I can't use any in this group, however. I'm sorry, Miss Wilkins."

As the gathered crowd began to disperse, Walter's voice boomed. "If you'd like to see what a truly useable horse is, under saddle, cart, or anything else you'd like to do with him, just follow me."

The crowd moved with Walter, but Stumpy stood beside me as though to lend empathy by his presence alone. He did remind me of my best buckaroos. The dun bronco pushed her muzzle into his chest. "Shore is a pretty mare."

Although Walter was gone, the musky aroma of his cigar lingered, mixing with the familiar smell of horse sweat radiating off the mare's hot skin. As the two smells pulled at each other, my mind whirled, even as I vaguely recognized the irony of how one smell irritated me while the other was familiar and comforting.

Sudden inspiration flooded through me like rays of sunlight, warming me to the tips of my extremities. "Stumpy, I've an idea. Perhaps all is not lost after all. Follow me. And bring the mare!"

I made a beeline for Walter's section of the stockyard pens. His braggadocio echoed out to all within earshot. "*Come and see the most amazing creatures ever beheld!*" I had to admit the tall, clean-limbed

chestnut gelding walking next to him was an example of particularly fine horseflesh. The soft eye signaled a good disposition, too.

"Just take a look at this remarkable steed," he said, slapping the glistening reddish-gold neck. "This is what I call broke. This horse can do it all. He can pull a cart, he'll make you the talk of the town when he's under

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saddle. He's got spirit and step, but he's good broke. Gentle enough even for a woman."

I stepped forward. "Gentle enough for this woman?" My words projected through the air and settled on the astonished crowd. All became silent save the din of animal noise. "You chose one of my horses for me to demonstrate to these buyers, sir. May I now choose one of yours?"

Walter was tongue-tied for the first time since I met him. "Well, I..."

I walked to my mare, undid my saddle, and pulled it from her back.

"No, no, no ma'am," Walter said as I approached, saddle in hand. "That won't be necessary. Oh, my gelding is not trained for a lady's sidesaddle. Not that heavy saddle. He won't like it." Walter hurried to the corner of the pens to pull out a flat English saddle. "Use this lighter saddle with his fitted sheepskin blanket. This is the one he's used to."

"Surely you are not asking me to compromise my feminine dignity by sitting astride," I said. "I assure you, I only ride to the side, sir, and I trust you would not expect a lady to do anything else. I'm sure this well-trained and *gentle* horse will adjust perfectly without the least fuss."

Walter stood in front of me, the flat saddle in his hands, mouth agape, while I took advantage of the pudgy one's frozen state to hoist my sidesaddle and blanket onto the gelding's back. He was taller than any of my horses, standing well over sixteen and a half hands, with high, sharp withers, but I managed with some speed to adjust the thick Navajo blanket under the sidesaddle and cinched him tight. Then I gathered the reins, put my foot in the stirrup, and with a bounce, was aboard.

When my weight settled in, the gelding threw his head high, squealed, and reared. I was ready for him, and when his front legs left the ground I pulled his head to the side, hard. It threw him off balance so that he fell to his off side as he came back down to the ground, allowing me to step off as he rolled to his side. The gelding groaned, his rising and falling stomach the only motion in his body. Attempts to pull him up were in vain. The gelding was immovable.

I worked to free the saddle and Stumpy was at my side, unbuckling the back cinch while I undid the front. With the tight cinch now loosened, I slid one hand between the saddle and the Navajo blanket, moved my other hand underneath the blanket, palm up next to the horse's skin, and pressed together, hard. In a moment I had located it. I wiggled the sharp object loose and pulled it out, clutching it inside my fingers. "Could this gentle horse's reaction be not due to training, but this?" I opened my hand and held the offending object high.

"This nail," I said, "was somehow trapped in my saddle blanket. When the saddle was empty, there was no pressure and so the nail was not felt. But as soon as any weight was put on the horse's back, the sharp end of the nail was pushed downward and into the poor animal's spine."

Stumpy grinned. "Well, I'll be a suck-egg mule."

With the growing crowd's fascination glued to my every word and action, I tugged the reins on the downed gelding, who scrambled to his feet. Stumpy finished removing the saddle and saw my purpose as we walked to the mare who had bucked and pitched so violently just a half hour before. Soon we had her saddled again. I knew she would be skittish and probably expect the sharp pain as I mounted and settled. Sure enough, she rushed forward when I put my foot in the stirrup. I had ridden many a horse who took off before I was

seated, and so it was no trouble for me to complete the mount and sit in the saddle even while she was in motion.

In no time, she understood that the predator's claw was no longer a threat, and I delighted to find she was as responsive as I had hoped. I walked, trotted, cantered, stopped, backed in front of the crowd. By now I could tell the potential of my mount, and though it was a risk, I thought I could manage it. I ran her at flat-out speed down the aisleway between

the pens and slid her to a stop. I turned her sharply and walked back to the group of men, stopping directly in front of Walter, who sucked on the wet

tobacco leaves of his misshapen cigar stump.

I tried to maintain my composure while smirking at the rotund little man—and I think succeeded—as I called out, "Perhaps there are some of you men who would like to take another look at this stockyard woman's horses."

Within 24 hours, all thousand head of my horses sold. The Captain was the first. He brought me a contract for 700 head — the entire number of mounts he was seeking for his purchase at the stockyards that fall, and the \$65 price per head we settled on was not a penny short of what I had asked. Some of my horses sold for even higher as they were pieced out in lots of 10 to 25. In fact, buyers were still coming round to inquire even after every last head was sold. It seemed I had stirred quite an interest in my horses from the West.

As soon as the last horse was spoken for, I telegraphed my father from the stockyard office.

ALL THOUSAND HEAD SOLD. stop. PRICE 65-75. stop. COULD HAVE SOLD MORE. stop. HAD A LITTLE TROUBLE BUT ALL NOW WELL. stop. WILKINS WILL PREVAILED AGAIN. stop.

As I walked out of the telegram office one of the clerks called me

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back. "Miss Wilkins, a newspaper reporter is looking for you. He wants to get your story, ma'am."

"My story?" I considered. "I can't imagine why. But if he insists, tell him to call for me at the Garretson Hotel."

Right now I would let nothing hold me up. My tired bones could use a nice hot bath. Then I would find my best silk dress packed in my trunk that came from Idaho, have a glass of brandy, and see what new adventures might lie before me. Maybe ol' Walter would be up for a game of pinochle or faro. I wouldn't lay down any money. At least not much.

Note: This fictional account is based on a woman who lived in the 19th century American West, Miss Kittie Wilkins, horse trader extraordinaire, who still holds the record for the largest horse sale ever in American history, when she sold a reported 8,000 head in one contract in the early 1900s.

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