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Socks and Sophie

How to Speak "Horse"

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Sophie

She's twelve years old and has been crazy about horses since she was little. She takes lessons at the Michaelis Farm's riding school, and would love nothing more than to have her very own horse, or at least to foster a pony at the farm, and look after it every day.

Although Sophie is already quite comfortable in the saddle, she actually knows fairly little about how to handle a horse. As you follow her story, you'll find out all about how horses and humans can get along better with each other.

Socks, actually Socrates

He's a five-year-old Welsh cross pony, and stands at about 4'5". He's dark brown, but his right foreleg is white – hence his nickname. Socks is considered a problem horse (terms that look like this are explained at the end of the book). Although he's still young he's already passed through many hands, because so far no one has managed to tame him properly. What he longs for most is a permanent home where he'll be safe. As you follow his story, you'll learn to see the world through a horse's eyes!

1.

Hello, my name is Sophie! I'm twelve years old and live in Spandau, a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Berlin. I'm actually a completely normal girl. I go to school, have friends and like strawberry ice cream. I'm also a nutcase. At least, that's what my parents say. And the nut is called 'horses'. Yes, I admit, I'm crazy about horses! It looks like a serious illness. Thank God it isn't contagious, at least not for the rest of my family. They're all into football.

Is you ask me, it's much crazier not to love horses. I think horses are the most brilliant animals on the planet! They've helped humans out for thousands of years, and without horses our civilization wouldn't have progressed at all.

That's what I tell my parents whenever there's another argument. Dad would like me to play football. He coaches the under-9s and under-13s at FSV Spandauer Kickers, and spends all his spare time at the club. Mum is a real 'football mum'. Her muffins are legendary, she knows where they sell the cheapest boots, and you can always find plasters and spare socks and shin pads in her handbag. My little brother Spittle, who's real name is Sebastian, trains three times a week. There's usually a tournament at weekends, too, and the whole family goes to watch. Or rather, all except me. Ever since I've been allowed to ride my bike through the city on my own, I've preferred to spend my time at the stables.

Dad doesn't understand why someone would rather spend the weekend mucking out dirty boxes than stand on the splendid green turf of a football pitch.

I don't understand why I should fight over a ball with other sweaty kids, if I can stroke a horse's splendid soft nose instead.

'Football is about team spirit,' Dad always says. 'And if you have team spirit you can achieve anything in life.' For him, horse riding isn't a proper sport, more a hobby for excitable girls. And he thinks it's dangerous. As if you can't get injured playing football.

Of course, riding is also very expensive. On the Michaelis Farm, five riding lessons cost as much as Spittle's entire annual Kickers membership fee. Which is why I'm only allowed to ride once a week at Mrs Hess's riding

school, where I've been going since I was eight. But even on days when there's no lesson, I like cycling over to the stables in the afternoons. I sit on the grandstand and watch the other kids have their lessons. Or sweep the stable aisle and help with the mucking-out. Sometimes I'm allowed to take one of the privately owned horses on its cool-down ride. That's the highlight of my day.

When I get home from the stables, Spittle shrieks, 'Go away, you stink!' He does that to annoy me. Mum scolds him, but then asks me to take off my gear in the hallway and put it straight in the laundry room. They don't have a clue. If you've never breathed in the warm, spicy smell of a horse, you don't know true happiness. How can you not love these pretty animals? Those velvety ears, those gentle eyes! And imagine what it must feel like, to gallop across a cropped field on your favourite pony... Horse riding's a season ticket to paradise.

Do you know what it's like to want a thing so badly that sometimes it really hurts? That's how much I want my own horse. Or at least a foster pony to look after at the stables. I don't want to sit in the saddle only once a week, I want to care properly for a horse, every day! Feed it, brush it, clean its hooves, wash its mane and its tail. Muck out the stall. Grease the saddle and bridle. Go for a ride, or just for a little walk. I would love my horse so much, and take such good care of it – it would be the happiest horse in the world! It would neigh at the window of its stall the moment I roll into the yard on my bike.

My parents say I can forget it. We can't afford a horse. And it would be too much responsibility. They seriously think that I'll lose interest when I'm older. Total rubbish! I'll never lose interest in horses, I just know it.

Mum says: 'Sophie, a horse isn't a toy, it's a living thing.'

Dad says: 'If you need something to do, come along to the Kickers! A tough girl like you would do really well in the under-13s. And you'd be part of a team, imagine that!'

Spittel says: 'Also, football's much cooler.'

I love my family, but sometimes they're proper idiots.

2.

It's dark. There's a window high up in the roof, but it's so dirty with dust and cobwebs that hardly any light gets through.

I have no idea how long I've been in here. Twice a day someone throws hay into my stall. It smells mouldy, but I eat it anyway. If I didn't, I would starve to death.

Why have they locked me up? They must be punishing me. I think maybe I injured the boy. I didn't mean to. I was completely beside myself, and didn't even notice him fall off.

It must be a week since it happened. They came and took me from the little sandy place where I was living with the other ponies. I actually liked it there. As long as no humans came near me, that is.

But they kept coming and wanting me to do things. They dragged me from the paddock and tied straps to my head, which they tightened so much that they cut into my face all over. When I struggled they yanked the reins, and the metal rod in my mouth would crush my tongue. It hurt so much! They led me into the riding arena and then came at me with that thing I call the 'black panther'. It's a big, heavy thing made of leather, which they strap onto the backs of horses. But the back's our vulnerable spot! In the old days, feline predators would try to jump onto our backs. That was a long time ago, but no horse has ever forgotten it. We pass our memories down the generations. I get scared just seeing the black panther.

But humans don't care. They throw the black panther onto my back, pull the straps tight, and the panther bites into my back. They did it that day, too.

Whenever I'm scared, my legs move. I can't help it. I just start dancing. The boy's father screamed at me,

‘Stand still, you thug!’ The screaming made me even more scared. And the more scared I became, the more my body thrashed around.

My legs whirled about, my tail whipped through the air, my head flew up and down. All I wanted to do was run away from this place, as far as my hooves would take me. Run till they left me alone.

But they held on to me.

‘Get up!’ the father yelled at the boy. ‘Let’s show this thug who’s boss.’

I think the boy didn’t really want to. I think he was as scared as I was. Still, he got onto the little stepladder and swung himself onto my back.

The lights went out in my head. A second predator had jumped onto my back! I reared up, my hooves drummed the air. I nearly hit the father. He let go of the reins, and now I could finally run away. I raced off, running round and round along the wall of the arena. I kept bucking, to get rid of the enemy on my back. At some point I felt lighter. I think the boy was lying in the sand. I kept running anyway. We horses flee until our instinct tells us that we’ve put enough distance between us and the threat. Even when we’re going round in circles.

Once I couldn’t run anymore, they caught me. The boy was sitting on the stepladder holding his leg. The father yelled at me, and hit me with the whip. I barely felt it. I was drenched in sweat and my whole body was trembling. I had no idea where I was.

Ever since then I’ve been in this dark shed. I haven’t seen the sandy place or the other ponies again. When a person comes near my stall I pin back my ears, swing my neck and turn my backside towards the door, as if I was about to kick. Humans are unpredictable: one moment they’re stroking me and giving me nice things to eat, the next they scream and shout and hurt me. You can’t trust them. Their eyes are close together, which is how you know that they’re carnivores. When they stare at me it goes right through me. Then I know that something terrible is about to happen again.

Worst of all is the loneliness. It’s like a steel band tightening itself about my chest. Sometimes I can hear the other ponies snorting or neighing outside by the hay rack. I want to go to them; after all, they’re my herd! We have stroked each other’s manes, dozed alongside one another and drunk water out of the big trough together. When I start missing the others too much I start kicking the walls and the door. Then the father runs over and screams at me.

There’s no point anyway. I’m locked up, and won’t ever get out. Loneliness is worse than death. Yes, it’s true: I wish I was dead.

19.

‘What were you thinking?’ shouts Mrs Vanderbilt. ‘Things were going so well with Socks and you. Why did you ambush him with the saddle, knowing how afraid he is of it?’

I’m too busy crying my eyes out to reply. Benno is sitting next to me at the edge of the round pen, looking concerned. Occasionally, he strokes my arm. I’d normally be embarrassed and blush, but right now I have bigger things to worry about.

‘Socks was really calm at the start,’ says Benno, who can be a good mate when he wants to be. He called Mrs Vanderbilt, and she came right away. ‘It looked good, the way Sophie put the saddle on him.’

‘He probably wasn’t calm, but in freeze mode,’ says Mrs Vanderbilt. ‘He was paralyzed with fear. And when it finally got too much for him, he lost it.’ She puts her hand on my shoulder and gives me a shake. ‘What was that all about, Sophie?’ she asks. ‘It isn’t like you at all.’

‘My dad...’ I sob, ‘My dad said it’s time that Socks let me ride him, or else... else...’

'Else what?' asks Benno.

'Or else we won't find a buyer, and they might...' I can't bring myself to say it.

'Slaughter him,' says Mrs Vanderbilt.

'Christ!' yelps Benno, shocked.

Mrs Vanderbilt shakes her head. 'That's horrible. It's not fair to blackmail you that way,' she says. 'A horse isn't always slaughtered, there are other options.'

'He didn't mean to be horrible,' I say in his defence.

'He didn't mean to be horrible, and neither did you,' says Mrs Vanderbilt. 'But most of the time it's not what we intend that matters, but what we do.'

At that, I start crying again. I know exactly what I've done. I've betrayed Socks. The thought hurts like a knife in my chest. So far I've always done as Mrs Vanderbilt says when training Socks. I was proud of his progress, and thought I was doing really well. But the moment I start making my own decisions, everything goes wrong. If I can't do it on my own, I think, all that work has been for nothing. Dad's probably right. I'm not ready yet. I can't look after a living creature yet, not properly.

Mrs Vanderbilt gives me a sidelong glance. 'Poor Sophie,' she says. 'You let them pressure you. But Socks is your friend. You know what's good for him. Even if other people want you to do things differently, when it comes to Socks you have to listen to your heart. Understood?'

Every single word of hers hurts. I manage to nod. I'm crushed. 'I messed everything up,' I say. 'He'll never trust me again!'

'Nonsense.' Mrs Vanderbilt gives me an encouraging pat on the arm. 'Horses don't bear grudges. They always give us a second chance. Come on, get up.' ...]

20.

It wasn't a black panther, but something like it, and I know exactly that the thing is going on my back. It has a belt with a buckle, which goes round the belly. No, I don't want it!

When Sophie takes my halter and touches my neck with the thing, I struggle like mad. Just because Dompi's mistress did it, it doesn't mean she can do it to me. I run backwards, pull to the side, spin round and round. Sophie holds on to the halter, follows me and keeps pressing the thing against my neck. I stomp and thresh about. No! I don't trust you anymore! You're not my lead horse!

Sophie doesn't give up. Neither do I. We fight. Finally, when I stand still for a moment to take a tiny breather, she takes the thing away and walks off, still holding on to the long halter. I automatically follow her.

We walk about the round pen for a bit. I snort, lick my lips and try to get my thoughts in order. So that's how it is. She does exactly the same as Dompi's mistress. As soon as I stop she leaves me in peace.

Before I can make up my mind how to behave, Sophie starts up again. The thing is at my neck, this time on the other side. Ugh, it's so annoying! I leap a bit to the side, and Sophie follows. Okay, okay, I get it. I stop – and she immediately walks away. I follow her. Stupid game. Too tiring. The next time Sophie comes up with the thing I don't even run away. She rubs it along my neck, first on one side and then the other. It doesn't hurt. Are you done yet? Right, now we walk for a bit. I snort. I slowly calm down. Sophie praises me: 'Good boy!' I have to admit, I still like hearing her cheerful voice.

Dompi's mistress calls out to her, and Sophie nods. Again the thing touches my neck. Yawn. How boring. Now she rubs it along my back. I flinch, but don't bother to run away. Sophie immediately leaves me be. We walk a bit. The thing's back. We walk a bit. We keep switching between them. Thing, walk. Thing, walk. Now she lays it on my back. It doesn't hurt, and I'm not afraid anymore. I don't even know why I was so upset earlier.

Thing, walk. At some point I lose track of what we're doing. Thing, walk.

Suddenly everyone cheers like mad. Sophie flings her arms around my neck and gives me a kiss. The boy takes photos with his mobile. What's he taking photos for? I look round. Oh, I see! The thing's lying on my back, and I've done a whole lap of the round pen with it on. Who'd have thought it. I never even noticed. And that's cause for celebration? Well, well. It's not that hard. Nothing special, really. At least not for a clever pony like me. [...]

GLOSSARY

[...]

How do horses communicate?

Horses can't use words to talk, but they express themselves and communicate with each other in a multitude of ways. It's easy to learn what the different signals mean. It's certainly useful to do what Sophie did and read a book about horse language, but you'll learn most about it simply by leaning on the paddock fence and watching them interact with each other.

Having said that, the problem in the relationship between horses and people is usually not that we don't know what pinned-back ears or a whipping tail mean – but that we don't know why the horse is behaving that way. Then we develop feelings like helplessness, disappointment or even anger, and unconsciously give off signals that unsettle the horse more and make it act more hostile. This vicious circle prevents horses and people from building a trusting relationship. Sophie later finds out how to break that vicious circle, so that the horse can feel safe around humans again.

But first you have to know how to interpret body language. If you observe your horse carefully all the time, you may be able to predict what it will do next, and thus prevent a problem before it becomes one. Here are a few examples, though as you spend more time around horses you'll discover many others:

Ears pricked up, face relaxed, neck swinging loosely: I'm in a good mood and curious, and want to make contact with you.

Ears pinned back, pinched face, neck stretched forwards: Go away! Don't come any nearer! I'm warning you!

Ears pricked up, neck extended upwards, eyes wide and nostrils flared, sometimes giving a big dragon-like snort: I've seen something that scares me, and am on the alert! I might run away any moment!

Tail swishing restlessly, clenched jaw: I'm not happy. I'm nervous, and may even be in pain.

A spluttering snort, head hanging loosely, licking and chewing my lips: I'm relaxed, and handing over the reins to a higher-ranking animal, or to a human.

A shrill whinny: I'm lonely! Where is everyone?

A low, bubbly neighing: Hey, there comes a friend! I like you!

Hindquarters facing you, back leg raised: Watch out, you're making me really cross! I might kick you!

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Pursed lips, and stretching contentedly: someone's scratching me in just the right place!