

Intruders on the Farm

Changes were coming to the McMurray dairy farm, and Willie was not the least bit happy about it. Mr. McMurray had decided to expand his herd of Holstein milking cows, and that expansion would require the addition of a new farm hand -- not to take the place of Willie, of course, after thirty years of loyal service, but to help in the daily workload typical of a busy dairy. Mr. McMurray had broken the news to Willie the day before, explaining that it was for the best, and that now Willie could take some time off. But the old farm hand wanted none of it.

He had just finished the afternoon milking and was hobbling past the open doors of Lucky Foot Stable when Mary and Jody burst into the sunshine to garner his advice on their latest crisis.

“Willie! We’re trying to get Star to square up like you showed us, but he won’t do it! He won’t even try!” Jody cried.

“He keeps stomping his foot and snorting at us!” Mary added.

Mary and Jody had been working for months to prepare the cantankerous colt for a yearling halter show in a nearby county, and Willie had been their guide. But this morning, he was in no mood for their problems.

“Daggonit, can you two ever pass a day without buggin’ me about somethin’?” Willie growled, never slowing his pace. “I got problems of my own to worry about!”

Mary and Jody stood in stunned silence, staring at Willie’s back as he continued up the gravel path toward the little tenant house where he lived on the farm. They knew Willie could be grumpy at times, even as cantankerous as the colt they were trying to train, but they had never heard such an edge in his voice.

Without a word the girls turned and walked back through the stable doors. Mary sat on a bale of hay and Jody picked up a broom and swept a few wayward pieces of straw from the dirt floor.

“I wonder what’s wrong with Willie?” Mary finally asked.

“I don’t know, but I guess we should leave him alone for a while,” Jody answered quietly.

“But we *can’t* leave him alone!” Mary cried, jumping up from her bale and pacing back and forth in agitation. “He’s *got*to help us with Star! The show is only two months away!”

“Well, Willie’s already shown us most of the things we need to work on,” Jody continued, “so maybe we can do it ourselves.”

Mary looked at Jody in disbelief. “Do it ourselves? Jody, the way Star is acting up, I’m beginning to wonder if we can do it even with Willie helping us!” Mary stopped pacing and looked out the door into the paddock. “I mean, come look at him right now!”

Jody threw down her broom and joined Mary at the Dutch door of the stable. She spotted Star in the far corner of the paddock by the loading ramp.

“Oh my gosh!” Jody exclaimed.

Finnegan, the cow herding dog, was at the top of the loading ramp. Mary and Jody, in their haste to run from the stable and appeal to Willie, had left Jody’s crop in the paddock, and Star had quickly adopted it as his new toy. The handle of the crop was now in Star’s mouth, and the other end was in Finnegan’s. The girls watched in amazement as colt and dog played tug of war with the crop, Finnegan growling and Star shaking his head from side to side in an attempt to loosen Finnegan’s grip. Finally the colt wrenched the crop from Finnegan’s teeth, threw his head up, and took a victory gallop around the paddock, kicking and bucking and waving the crop for joy.

Mary and Jody looked at each other in dismay, and without a word they turned from the paddock to contemplate what to do next. Before they could even begin their brainstorming, Finnegan began barking furiously. The girls, figuring he was barking at Star's antics, didn't even look up until they heard the noise out on the gravel lane. Peering out from the back door of Lucky Foot Stable, Mary and Jody were astonished at what they saw. [illus. 3-0A] rickety old blue flatbed pickup truck with deep dents marking the passenger side door rattled past, backfiring as it went. The girls had seen trucks come and go before, but never one quite as curious as this. For on the bed of the truck, piled high and tied with baling twine and rough rope, was what seemed to be a complete collection of someone's earthly possessions. Beds, chairs, a refrigerator, a washing machine, blankets, pillows, lamps, and tables were all piled helter-skelter. And the crowning glory, a huge white rabbit in a cage, was strapped to the very top of the mound. As the truck rumbled by, the girls caught a glimpse of the passengers, who were all crammed into the cab like sardines, no telling just how many.

"What in the..." Mary's voice trailed off. The truck came to a stop by the old house trailer that sat next to Mr. McMurray's tractor shed, and Mary and Jody watched with mouths agape as the driver's side door creaked open and passengers began emerging. Finnegan crouched on the ground next to the girls, sniffing the air and growling low in his throat.

"We've got to get Willie!" Jody whispered, grabbing Mary by the arm. "I think these people are trespassing or something! Come on, Finney!"

The girls took off at a gallop toward Willie's tenant house with Finnegan close behind. They were just about to jump onto the porch when Willie appeared in the doorway.

"What in tarnation..." Willie began.

“Willie!” Mary yelled. “You’ve got to come on the double! Some people just pulled up to the house trailer in an old pickup truck with all kinds of stuff tied on it, and they’re getting out of the truck like they’re about to move in or something!”

Willie’s face looked like a thundercloud as he absorbed this information, then he shook his head and pulled on his earlobe. “Well,” he said, squinting up at the sun, “I reckon they look like they’re about to move in because they *are* about to move in. I just didn’t think it would be this soon.”

“What do you mean, Willie?” Jody cried. “Why would people be moving into the house trailer?”

“Because I’m gettin’ old, that’s why. Any more questions?” Willie answered in the same harsh voice he had used earlier. Then he took off his farm cap, slapped it against his knee, said “come on, dog,” and went back inside the tenant house with Finnegan, slamming the door behind him.

For the second time that day Mary and Jody could only look at each other. Then they turned and flew up the gravel drive to the big stone house where Mr. and Mrs. McMurray lived. Not even stopping to catch their breath, they took turns knocking furiously on the double front doors. Before very long, the doors were pulled open and Mrs. McMurray stood in the center, a doorknob in each hand.

“What’s all this, then?” Mrs. McMurray asked in her lilting Irish brogue. Surprised by the panicked look on the faces of the two girls, she continued, “whatever is wrong?” “Oh, Mrs. McMurray, we don’t know what’s wrong,” Jody said, red-faced and panting. “But there are some people down by the old house trailer, and... and...”

“...and Willie’s mad about it, and we don’t know why, and he just slammed the door right in our faces!” Mary finished.

Mrs. McMurray brushed a strand of silver hair from her face and wiped her hands on her apron. She gazed down the lane at the little tenant house where Willie lived and then at the distraught girls waiting expectantly for an answer. Saying nothing, she turned and beckoned for Mary and Jody to follow her into the house.

“Would you girls like a cup of tea?” Mrs. McMurray asked with a polite smile. Mary and Jody sat side by side at the wooden trestle table in the middle of the blue and yellow farm kitchen, wriggling impatiently while Mrs. McMurray took two delicate china cups from the corner cabinet.

“Oh yes, ma’am, we’re really thirsty,” Mary answered for both of them. Mrs. McMurray placed the cups on the oilcloth table cover and carefully poured hot tea from a kettle into each cup. When she turned her back to replace the kettle on the stove, Mary and Jody made faces at each other. They had expected iced tea!

“Now, girls,” she said, turning from the stove and crossing her arms, “I think you know that Willie’s getting on in years.”

Mary and Jody looked puzzled.

“Why, he’s been with us for more than thirty years, and with the horses for some twenty before that...”

At the word *horses* Mary and Jody raised their eyebrows with interest.

“So Mr. McMurray thought it would be a good idea, with us expanding the herd and all, for Willie to have some help.”

The girls' mouths slowly dropped open but no sound came out as Mrs. McMurray's explanation gradually sunk in. The people down at the house trailer were moving onto the farm! Intruders on their domain! Taking Willie's place! It couldn't be true!

"Now, they're not taking Willie's place," Mrs. McMurray assured, as if reading their minds. "Just helping out, you know. But Willie's set in his ways, and I know he's not too happy about it."

Mary and Jody didn't speak but shook their heads in unison.

Mrs. McMurray sat down on the wooden bench across from the two girls and leaned in conspiratorially.

"I know Willie's been helping you with the baby," she murmured. Mrs. McMurray always called Star *the baby* even though he was more than a year old now. "So maybe if he keeps on with that and you two make sure he knows you need him, he'll be able to get used to the idea of being away from the cows sometimes. What do you think?"

The girls looked at each other and then at Mrs. McMurray. "Willie *has* been helping us with Star and with Lady and Gypsy too..." began Mary.

"Yes, ma'am -- did you know that Willie helped us take Lady to the horse show and that he taught Gypsy to pull the sleigh?" Jody asked.

Before Mrs. McMurray could answer, Mary went on, "...but he's always so busy that as soon as we really get started with something, he has to quit and go for the milking..."

"...and there's a yearling show in June that we want to go to, but Star's not ready, and we don't think he'll ever be ready, he's so 'daggone ornery,' as Willie says. But if Willie had more

time..." Jody finally stopped to take a breath, and Mrs. McMurray took the opportunity to get a word in.

"There you have it then. You girls will just have to convince Willie that he's got to help you more. Then maybe he won't miss the cows so much."

"We'll try, Mrs. McMurray. But I think Willie's so mad at us right now he won't listen to us at all," Mary sighed.

"It's not you he's mad at, Mary. He's mad at the way life moves on, and there's no stopping it." Mrs. McMurray gazed out the window, a faraway look in her eyes. But suddenly she slapped her palms down on the oilcloth, making the girls jump. "Now off you go, and do your best," she said cheerily. "I'll show you out...but... you girls haven't touched your tea!"

"Oh, that's OK,, Mrs. McMurray, we weren't as thirsty as we thought. And don't worry, we'll take care of Willie," Mary promised, skipping down the hallway arm in arm with Jody. As they stepped out into the sunshine, Mary turned to face the kindly woman once more and asked, "Mrs. McMurray, what was it you said about Willie being 'with the horses' for twenty years? What did you mean?"

"Well, you'll just have to ask Willie about that," she replied with a wink.