

*It is June, 1825. On a farm in Hopkinton, New Hampshire, Clara Hargraves, 14, is telling us this story. In this excerpt, she is at the supper table with her father, her stepmother (Priscilla, whom Clara thinks of as "Prissy"), and her brother, Joss.*

"I do not need to take a bath every single Saturday night when I can jump in the pond to wash off anytime I like, at least in the summertime."

Prissy glanced at Father again. "Yes, I have been meaning to speak to you about that, Clara. Now that you are a young lady, you must not swim in the pond any longer. It is not seemly."

I looked at my stepmother in disbelief. "It is seemly enough, ma'am. I wear my chemise, and Joss's old breeches, if anyone is around, so I am well-covered."

"That's another thing. Now that you are fourteen, you are too old to wear Joss's clothes anymore," she said.

"Not even to ride astride?"

"*Especially* not to ride astride. You are not to do so any more."

"Wear the breeches or ride astride?"

"Both."

"But . . ."

Father spoke up. "No 'buts,' my girl, you heard your mama. She knows how young ladies must behave. If she says you must ride sidesaddle from now on, that is what you must do."

"Sidesaddle? But that is so silly!" I protested. "I cannot hold on properly with only one knee around the horse. It is like riding half a horse!"

Father leaned over and patted my hand.

"Nevertheless, daughter, you must use Priscilla's sidesaddle whenever you ride Feather." He turned to his wife. "Although that will not be for much longer, I am afraid. I have found a buyer for Feather in Warner. I am taking her up there on Monday. We can certainly use the extra money, with the new baby coming and all."

"But, Father, there is no other horse I can ride! Fury is getting to be too old for anything but pulling the whisky. And Flame is barely trained to the bridle, let alone any kind of saddle. She's not even two years old yet!"

"She will be two in a couple of weeks, daughter. Perhaps by the time she is trained, you will have learned to ride properly on your mother's sidesaddle."

Something about the way Father said this made my temper flare.

"If you insist, Father. But . . . but she is not my *mother*, she is only my aunt! My *real* mother's old maid sister!" I jumped from my chair and ran from the room, leaving shocked silence behind me