

Lila und Zausel

Bd. 1: Der Zauberhafte Ponyhof

LILA AND SCRUFF

BOOK 1: THE MAGIC PONY SANCTUARY

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Sample translation by Jackie Smith

The worst day ever

“No,” yelled the little girl sitting on Scruff’s back, “I don’t want my picture taken with this one! I don’t want a photo with the ugly pony! For my next go I’m going to have the cute horse with the black spots. Then you can take my photo, Mum.”

“That’s fine, Marie!” called her mother from the side of the ring where the ponies were walking round and round. “That’s what we’ll do.”

“Gee up, faster!” Marie swung her feet out wide before jabbing the heels of her shiny shoes into Scruff’s sides. Ouch! He flinched and did two quick sidesteps out of fright. Marie squealed in panic and yanked on the reins with both hands. The bit dug deep into Scruff’s soft mouth. He gave a startled neigh. At the same moment, the whip slapped him on the rear.

“What’s all that nonsense about, Scruff?” bellowed grumpy Graham, who was standing, whip in hand, in the middle of the pony carousel. Before, it had always been Mr. Kummerling standing there. He had never shouted at the ponies and had certainly never ever hit them. But he was now sitting in his caravan crying. And now it was Graham, instead, whose job it was to make sure the ponies went round in a nice, neat circle.

Scruff was now walking on very slowly and obediently. But Marie was screeching and wailing on his back as if he had bitten her foot: “This pony is NASTY! I want to get off! GET OFF!”

Scruff stared at Honey’s hind quarters, which were dotted with cute black spots, just like the rest of her body. Lila had braided a shiny pink ribbon into the pony’s black tail. She loved grooming the ponies, combing their manes and tails and making them look nice. She even took great trouble over brushing Scruff’s shaggy fur, although it was a bit of a wasted effort with him. He was shaggy and always would be. He drooped his head. Honey looked so pretty with the silk ribbon in her tail. No wonder Marie was so keen to ride her. “I want to GET OFF!” Marie yelled.

Grumpy Graham rolled his eyes and swirled his whip through the air. “Aaand stop!”, he commanded. All ten of the ponies in the ring came to a halt.

Before Graham had a chance to lift Marie out of the saddle, she had slid down by herself and run over to Honey.

“I want this one.” She tried to shove her foot into the left stirrup, but at that moment a little girl with bunches was lifted onto Honey’s back from the other side.

The girl with bunches looked down triumphantly at Marie. “This is my horse!” she said. “Go away.”

Marie glared back at her. But she soon realised she didn’t stand a chance, because the mum of the girl with bunches was standing next to Honey, making sure nothing happened to her daughter.

Marie quickly hurried over to Micky with the chocolate-brown mane and golden eyes, who was in front of Honey. Micky was not quite as cute as Honey, but he was still very sweet-looking.

“I was here first.” A boy already had the reins in his hand, and was looking menacingly at Marie.

She turned away without a word and headed for the next pony. First she ran to Fritz, the tubby one, then to Mara, the sandy-coloured Haflinger mare, then to the Suleika, who was jet-black with a star-shaped mark on her forehead, and then to Calypso... But by that point, all the ponies in the ring already had a rider. By the time Marie had gone all the way round, there was only one pony free. It was Scruff. “But I don’t want this one!” she screeched. “I want a pretty pony too.”

“Perhaps one of the other riders would like to swap with you?” Graham suggested, and looked around with a hopeful expression on his face.

Scruff raised his head and saw how the little girls and boys sitting on the other ponies were avoiding Graham’s glance. It was obvious that none of them had the slightest desire to give up their own pony and ride Scruff instead. And that wasn’t the least bit surprising.

For Scruff was the world’s ugliest pony. His mane was matted and his tail a shaggy mess. His legs were very short, but his greyish brown fur was quite long and dishevelled and dangled from his belly almost down to the ground. Even when Lila had spent hours grooming and brushing Scruff, afterwards he still looked as if he had just had a good roll-around in the dust. His right ear folded forwards, whereas the left one pointed backwards. And his eyes were different colours: the left eye was dark brown, while the right one was sky blue.

“I don’t want to, I don’t WANT to!” Marie bellowed. She threw herself down on the ground in the middle of the ring and hammered the earth with her fists.

“That pony’s nasty. He bites and he kicks and he stinks!”

“That’s not true, though. Scruff’s harmless as anything.”

Graham turned, with a syrupy smile, towards the ginger-haired girl sitting astride the grey mare Izzy. As always when he addressed the children, his voice sounded as if he had just licked out a jar of honey.

“Perhaps you would like to ride him?”

The little red-haired girl chewed her lips and shook her head without saying a word.

“How about you?” Graham turned to the boy sitting on Sultan.

“No thank you.” The boy gripped the pommel of the saddle nervously.

“Hmm.” Graham held up both his hands and looked regretfully at Marie’s mother.

“Then I guess there’s not much we can do, is there?”

“Not much we can do?” hissed the woman angrily, stomping into the ring with big strides. “You’d be surprised! I’m going to lodge a complaint about you and your pony. An animal as ugly and nasty as that shouldn’t be in a pony carousel in the first place. It’s outrageous!” She had now reached Marie, who was still wailing, took her by the arm and dragged her to the other side of the barrier. Graham’s smile froze on his face. Scruff was sure he couldn’t stand most children – even though he always acted as if he was thrilled to see them.

Now Graham raised the whip high in the air and swirled it around the ring. “Aaand walk on!” he bellowed loudly.

The line of ponies moved off. Scruff, too, trudged off again, but without a child on his back.

That's how it was, and that's how it stayed. No one else wanted to ride Scruff for the rest of the day, even though there were always plenty of children standing beside the ring who had been there ages waiting their turn. But word had quickly got around about what Marie had yelled. No one really wanted a nasty, ugly pony that bit and kicked and stank.

"Never mind," Honey whinnied to Scruff as they trotted back to the stables side by side. "You were just unlucky."

"Things are bound to be better tomorrow," Micky reassured him, and blinked at Scruff with his golden eyes.

But when grumpy Graham handed out the food, he told Scruff: "Today you only get half a portion of hay. If you don't work, you don't need to eat either."

Scruff snorted quietly. The business with the food was not so bad. He wasn't hungry anyway. He was much too sad to eat. Why couldn't he be as pretty as the other ponies in the pony carousel? It was a long time before Scruff finally managed to fall asleep. And then he woke up again with a jerk.

"Can't you sleep either?" Suleika whinnied quietly from the stall next to his. The dividing wall between them was not very high, and Scruff could make out the silhouette of her head in the darkness. He was about to reply when he realised that Suleika had not even noticed he was awake. She had been talking to fat Fritz.

"How am I supposed to sleep when my stomach just keeps rumbling?" Fritz complained.

“Stop grumbling.” Suleika shook her mane. “You had enough to eat. Scruff hardly got anything, though.”

“Awful,” said Fritz. “Poor thing.”

“I’m really worried about him,” Suleika murmured.

“Why’sh thath?” Fritz must have discovered a handful of hay in the bottom of his trough after all, and was now chomping on it.

“Don’t you know what happens to ponies that no one wants to ride?”

“No,” said Fritz with his mouth full. “Whath?”

“They disappear from the stables.” Suleika was now speaking so quietly that Scruff could barely hear her. “One day they’re suddenly gone.”

“Sho whath?” Fritz swallowed. “Maybe they’re bether off afterwardsh. Maybe Mr. Kummerling takesh them to a nithe farm.” Suleika gave a scornful whinny. “In your dreams.”

Scruff stared into the darkness of his stall, his eyes wide open. He was not particularly happy in the pony carousel. But at least he had the other ponies and Lila for company, had a roof over his head and usually got enough to eat. He knew nothing about the place where Mr. Kummerling took the ponies no one liked. And on reflection, he didn’t want to know anything about it either.