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Opening extract from  
**Marianne Dreams**

Written by  
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## Marianne's Birthday

Marianne had looked forward to her tenth birthday as being something special; quite different from any birthday she had yet had, for two reasons. First, that she was at last going into double figures, where she was likely to stay for a considerable time: and second, that her father and mother had promised that when she was ten she could have riding lessons, which was what she wanted more than anything else in the world. Marianne and her family lived, very unfortunately, she thought, in a town, and there was no question of keeping a pony, or riding at a farm, or competing at gymkhanas, like the lucky country children in the books which Marianne read. Even the milkman had given up the pony which used to pull his milk cart when Marianne was a little girl, and

now delivered milk from a boring sort of trolley that worked by electricity.

But there was a common near Marianne's home, and a riding stables the other side of the common, and on her birthday, the very day itself, fortunately a Saturday, she was to have her first lesson.

Marianne had imagined the lesson in a hundred different ways before it ever happened. Sometimes she rode a cream-coloured pony so beautifully that the riding master, or mistress, couldn't believe that she was a beginner and had never ridden before. Sometimes, forgetting her age and size, she rode a Shetland pony who, at first sight, loved and obeyed her, and was so unhappy when she left the stables that she had to be allowed to take it home and keep it. Sometimes, on her first visit to the stables, she met a nervous Arab mare who appeared vicious and unsafe to her owners. Marianne had only to speak to her quietly, and lay a gentle hand on her black satin neck, and she became docile and tractable at once. The stable hands were amazed. 'We have never seen anything like this before,' they said. And so on, and so on, and so on.

Marianne knew that this was half nonsense and that people didn't become experienced horsewomen in an hour. And yet she half believed and hoped that something of the sort would happen and that her first riding lesson – especially as it was going to be actually on her birthday – would see her miraculously transformed into a finished rider, ready for the show ring.

Perhaps no riding lesson could have come up to quite so much expectation; the earlier part of the day exceeded all hopes with a totally unexpected wrist watch, a box of conjuring tricks, several new books, and a pair of riding gloves. Later in the morning Marianne realised that even a well-trained pony has a personality to be reckoned with, and that she had far more to learn about riding than she had ever dreamed of. But it was exciting to be on the back of a real horse at last; and the riding master, though he didn't say he couldn't believe she was a beginner, did say that she seemed to take to it naturally, which was as much as anyone in their senses could hope for.

It wasn't till the lesson was over, and she was home again, that Marianne realised how tired she was: not agreeably, after-exercise tired, but extraordinarily, aching tired all over; an unpleasant sensation. She dragged herself upstairs and changed out of her riding trousers, and then went down to the kitchen to find her mother and to see how her birthday lunch was getting on. It was when the smell of chicken and peas came floating up the kitchen stairs that she first realised that she wouldn't be able to eat any of it.

Not to be able to eat your lunch in the ordinary way is bad enough. It is worse if you have had your first riding lesson and know that you ought to be hungry. But not to be able to eat your birthday lunch is worst of all. A birthday lunch which you have chosen yourself is the peak of the day. You aren't, or shouldn't be, too tired to enjoy it, and there is still more to come. Marianne knew this. So when she saw the chicken, golden and crackling, and the roast potatoes and the peas and the bread sauce and the gravy, and found that as far as she was concerned they were all going to be wasted, she burst into tears.

‘Darling, what’s the matter?’ her mother said, putting the hot plates down on the table very quickly and coming round to her.

‘I don’t know,’ Marianne sobbed. She leaned against her mother and tried to get comfort from her familiar smell. ‘I can’t eat any lunch.’

Her mother repressed some natural feelings of disappointment; after all, she had spent the best part of the morning cooking; and said, ‘You’re tired, darling. Perhaps the riding went on too long and you got too hot. I’ll put it back in the oven and you can have it later.’

‘I don’t think I’ll want it later,’ Marianne said indistinctly, her face on her mother’s shoulder.

‘Never mind if you never want it, duckling, only stop crying. It won’t waste, I can promise you, and I’ll try not to let Thomas eat all the best bits. Come upstairs and cool down a bit – you’re terribly hot.’

‘I’m not,’ said Marianne, surprised at her mother making such an obvious mistake. ‘I’m cold. And my throat hurts. I think I must have swallowed a lot of dust while I was riding; at least, that’s what it feels

like – sort of gritty and aches a bit. And I’m terribly tired. I ache all over.’

So, instead of eating chicken and raspberries, Marianne went upstairs again. Her mother ran back into the kitchen to put on a kettle, and then came up to find the thermometer. And sure enough Marianne’s temperature, when taken, was considerably higher than normal, and the only thing to do was to put her to bed and pile on blankets and give her the hot-water bottle for which the kettle had been put on to boil, and send for the doctor.

‘I shall be well enough for my next riding lesson, shan’t I?’ asked Marianne, for perhaps the fourteenth time as her mother moved about her bedroom, putting away her clothes, tidying up books and arranging all Marianne’s birthday presents on the bookcase by her bed where she could see them easily.

‘I hope so,’ her mother said, also not for the first time. But she didn’t sound very hopeful, and Marianne herself had by now reached a stage when she had ceased feeling very strongly about anything and she only continued to ask about her next riding





lesson because that had been the last thing she felt as if she had really cared about. At the moment she was engrossed in feeling quite extraordinarily tired and yet not sleepy. Her throat ached and her head ached and her legs and arms felt hot and heavy and ached too, and she didn't feel like riding at all. But even so she longed for her mother to say, yes, she would be able to have her next riding lesson, more than she longed for anything in the world, because that would be a promise that she would be better very quickly and wouldn't any longer feel so queer and unreal and not able to care about anything.

The doctor came later in the afternoon and said, as doctors so often do, that we must wait and see. He gave Marianne some medicine, which was soothing, and which made her aches better and her temperature

drop a little. But he was quite emphatic that she was not to get up, even if she felt quite well the next day. He would come and see her again and then perhaps he'd be able to say what might be the matter.

But the next day he didn't say what it was, nor on the day after, and Marianne was sufficiently miserable not to care whether he could put a name to her illness or not. Everything seemed to have gone wrong, or rather different, as things tend to do when you are ill. It's like looking through the wrong end of a telescope and seeing things which you know are really quite close and which you could easily touch with your hand, looking tiny and far away. Marianne's birthday and the riding lesson and her school term, which had only just begun when she started to be ill, all receded into an immense distance. She knew they were there and had only just happened, but they had nothing to do with her. She didn't notice how the days passed. There was nothing to distinguish one from the other, and Marianne lost count. She felt as if she had never done anything else but lie in bed waiting. Sometimes she was waiting for the doctor, sometimes she

was waiting for meals, in which she was strangely uninterested. Sometimes she was waiting for her mother to come back from shopping or her father to come home from work. A great deal of her waiting time she spent asleep or being read to by her mother and quite often falling asleep during the reading. But in a way she felt that it was still her tenth birthday. Because the illness had begun on her birthday itself, she had a feeling, especially as she gradually began to get better and to take more interest in what was going on, that when she was quite well and was up and about again, she would go on from exactly where she had left off: she even had a sort of feeling that if she went down to the kitchen she would find the table laid with her birthday lunch still waiting for her – roast chicken, bread sauce, raspberries and all.