

Chapter 10

COLTS HAVE GOT  
TO GROW UP

AS PAUL AND MAUREEN STOOD INSIDE the big corral, looking at Misty, they knew she was the finest-blooded foal in the world. Oh, the beauty of her! She was neither silver nor gold. She was both. And she had a funny white blaze that started down the left side of her face, then did a right-about and covered her whole muzzle. It gave her a look of wonderment and surprise. Like her mother, she too wore a white map of the United States on her withers, but the outlines were softer and blended into the gold of her body.

They could have gazed at her forever, exclaiming over her gold eyelashes, her pink underlip, her funny knobby knees, her short flappy tail, the furry insides of her ears. But suddenly Paul was aware of an uneasy feeling, as though someone were eying him. Then he felt a hot breath on the



back of his neck. Slowly he turned his head and came face to face with the Pied Piper.

For an instant neither the stallion nor the boy winked an eyelash. Pied Piper stared fixedly at Paul from under his long forelock. He was like a man peering out from ambush. Paul could see the white ring around the stallion's eyes, the red lining of his nostrils, the ears flattened. He could smell the wildness. He sensed that one false move, and a darting



foreleg might knock him down as if he were a cornstalk. He opened his mouth to speak, but for a long time no sound came.

"Your baby," he spoke at last in the softest of voices, "your baby is — is beautiful."

The Pied Piper's ears twitched ever so slightly.

"You mean *our* filly!" corrected Maureen in her strong, high voice.

The Pied Piper laced his ears back again. He bared his teeth, breathing loudly.

"I'm not talking to you, Maureen," Paul whispered, his face pale. "Turn your head."

The Pied Piper's ears pricked once more. That curious soft voice!

"Oh," Maureen breathed, as she caught sight of the stallion. "Your baby is beautiful," she gasped. "And so is your mare."

"So are all your mares," added Paul for good measure. "Excuse us, sir, but we must see the race now." He and Maureen began backing slowly toward the fence.

Just then a stallion from another band came over to study the Pied Piper's family. The Pied Piper forgot Paul and Maureen in the more important business of bunching his mares behind him.

"Whew!" said Paul breathlessly, as they scrambled over the fence, "that was a close one."

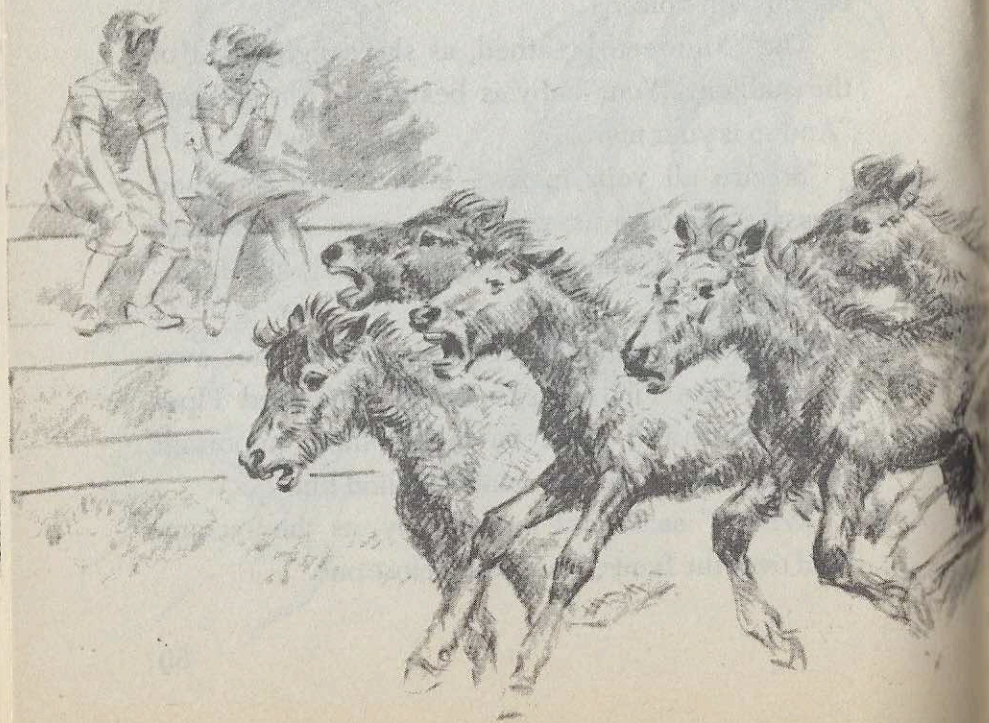
On the way to the race track they had to pass between the colt pens.

"We almost forgot our promise to look at the colts!" they both exclaimed in the same breath.

Hurriedly they squeezed in between the spectators and perched on the top rail of one of the pens. Their faces paled as they looked down.

Round and round the pen the colts were plodding, searching for their mothers, flinging their heads up, whimpering, trying to suckle anything their muzzles could reach.

"Why, they're as close-packed as oysters in a barrel!" exclaimed Paul.



"They're children, lost and scared," said Maureen. "Let's go!" she cried through white lips. "Let's go! I can't abide the nickerin'. The young things are hungry."

Paul felt as if he were going to be sick. "I can't abide it either," he said. Then his mouth thinned to a line and he doubled his fists. "I'm going to see the fire chief about this!"

The fire chief was a big broad-shouldered man who walked with a cane. There were times when the cane seemed to dangle uselessly in his hands. But when he was tired, he leaned on it heavily.

They found him now in the center of a group of visitors, both hands gripping his cane. His face was sun-blistered and weary, but his eyes lighted when he saw Paul and Maureen.

"Here's Paul Beebe, the lad who swam the colt ashore," he explained to the little group. "And his sister, Maureen, who . . ."

The crowd shifted, began surrounding Paul, pelting questions at him. "Did the colt try to drag you down like a drowning person?" "How old is it?" "How wide is the channel where you swam across?"

Paul and Maureen scarcely heard the questions.

"What are you two looking so hollow-eyed about?" the chief asked as he drew them aside.

"It's about the colts," Maureen stammered.

"Yes," said Paul. "We don't believe they should be taken from their mothers, and we aim to do something about it — if you'll let us, sir. We got lots of milk in the ice chest at home, and once we raised up a foal on a big nursing bottle and we still got the bottle. It's cruel to starve the young things."

The fire chief stood silent and thoughtful. He looked past the grounds and out to the bay, where the masts of the fishing boats formed spider-thin lines against the graying sky.

"I don't know if I can make you understand about this, but I'll try," he began slowly. "Colts have got to grow up sometime. Their mothers can't go on babying them all their lives. Haven't you two seen a mare tell her youngster to rustle his own living?" Paul and Maureen nodded in silence.

"She can't tell the colt in so many words," the fire chief continued. "She just kicks him away. Gentle-like at first. Then good and hard if he won't understand. Sometimes she has to get pretty rough, especially when she's going to have a new foal soon."

"But those little colts . . ."

"Those little fellows," nodded the chief, "are old enough to fend for themselves. Separating them from their mothers is the kindest way we know to teach them how."

quaa 7

Paul and Maureen reddened. They felt very young and foolish as they thanked the fire chief for explaining things.

"Don't thank me, you two. When I was rising up atwixt a youngster and a grownup, the same question worried me every Pony Penning Day. Finally I watched a mare tell her colt to grow up, and then I quit worrying. Now I want you to quit worrying, too.

"Besides," he added as he pulled out his watch, "it's almost time for the race. Black Comet will be running any minute now. It's high time," he said, tapping his cane in the sawdust, "it's high time we islanders raised up a competitor for Black Comet. Things have been much too easy for him."

"Tell him now," nudged Maureen, her eyes shining.

"Chief!" said Paul, trying to make his voice behave. "Next year Black Comet will have a *real* competitor. Maureen and I want to buy the Phant—"

But the fire chief never heard what Paul had to say. His words were drowned by a voice blaring over the loud-speaker.

"Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, Black Comet from Pocomoke is racing against Patches and Lucy Lee of Chincoteague."