

STORM-SHY

FEELING MUCH HAPPIER, Paul and Maureen joined the throngs hurrying to see Black Comet. Black Comet was five years old. For three of those years he had been brought over from Pocomoke on the mainland to race for the Pony Penning crowds on the eve of the sale. And for three years he had won. Twice he led by several lengths, and once he led only by a nose. But always he won.

This night was no different. Black Comet pranced to the starting line, sure of himself. His jockey, too, was sure. They both seemed bored with the excited antics of the two other entries. One was a flashy black-and-white pony named Patches. He danced on his hind feet, bolted past the starting line, and had to be brought back again and again. The other entry was Lucy Lee, a nervous little mare.

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Black Comet threw back his head and let out a high horse laugh at them, as if to say, "You're wasting your time."

And they were! The race belonged to Black Comet from the start. He broke out in front and stayed there.

Maureen beat her fists on the fence rail. "Come on, Patches! Come on, Lucy Lee! Don't let Black Comet win every time!"

"Next year the Phantom will be in there!" Paul kept saying. "Next year the Phantom."

Just as Black Comet crossed the finish line, a bolt of lightning split the sky.

At that same instant Paul felt a strong hand grip his shoulder. It was Grandpa Beebe. His face was spattered with dirt, his clean blue shirt in ribbons.

"The squall ain't a promise no more," he shouted against the rising wind. "It's here! Paul, you stay and help the fire chief. Maureen, you come home with me.

"And Paul! If the storm gits too heavy," he called back over his shoulder, "you take shelter in our truck. It's backed up nigh to the colt pens."

The grounds burst into noise and confusion. The wind whined. It caught at the tent flaps, snapping them like whips. White paper programs spiraled through the air, driven first one way, then the other.



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Children, overtired and frightened, cried to be taken home. Thunder rumbled deep out of the heavens. Colts in their pens squealed. Stallions trumpeted.

Paul fought his way to the pony pens, dodging people, dodging pieces of paper which the wind swept into his face. He could scarcely see his way. The strings of colored electric bulbs waved back and forth, throwing weird shadows.

At last he came upon the fire chief, brandishing his cane and shouting directions: "Dan, you do this! Joe, you do that! Paul . . ."

Paul strained his ears to hear, but suddenly the skies seemed to open and rain fell in great torrents. The swaying lights went out, plunging the island into darkness.

"Everyone go home!" called the chief. "Nothing we can do now." A flash of lightning showed him limping toward his car.

Paul did not follow. The rain beat down on him fiercely. It felt cold and hard, like gunshot. How could Misty stand it? "She's so little," he thought. "She's bound to be storm-shy. I know what I'll do! I'll carry her to the truck and shelter her until the storm is past."

Warmed by his decision, he ran past the colt pens and on to the big corral. Lightning sizzled

across the sky, flooding the earth with an eerie white. It showed the wild ponies, separated into four bands. Paul's eyes leaped from one band to another, trying to find the Pied Piper's family, but darkness closed in. He held his breath, waiting for another flash. It came. It picked out the stallion's creamy-white mane.

Quickly Paul scrambled over the fence. He waited again, his eyes fastened on the spot where the Pied Piper's band stood huddled. He held onto the fence with one hand and made a watershed over his eyes with the other. He waited again for the lightning. It came tearing across the sky. He could see the Pied Piper's family as plainly as if it were daylight, but the Phantom and Misty were not among them. They were gone! Stolen! Some other stallion had stolen them! The thought flashed through his mind.

Shivering and drenched, he ran from one band to the other. He stumbled over tree stumps and fell flat in the water. His mouth was gritty with sand and mud. He went on blindly, feeling every hump in the grass, every fallen log; but nowhere in all that big corral could he find the tiny foal or her wild dam.

Running, slipping, falling, running, he made his way to the pony trucks. Most of the trucks were

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empty, waiting for tomorrow's sale. A few held a colt or two — big colts, big and shaggy.

Sick with fear for Phantom and Misty, he sought the shelter of Grandpa Beebe's truck to think out where they might be. Could Phantom have leaped the fence? Could Misty have rolled out under it? He stopped short. There, in the body of the truck, under a piece of tarpaulin, he felt rather than saw a slight stirring. He trembled, not from cold, but from fear that what he prayed was a mare and her colt would turn out instead to be bags of feed. He cried out for a flash of lightning. It came in a streak, filling the truck with yellow light. And in that split second Paul saw the Phantom and Misty, their heads lowered in a corner like children being punished at school.

He threw back his head for joy and let the rain beat on his face. So that was why Grandpa's shirt was torn and his face seamed with dirt! He had brought them to shelter before the storm broke.

Paul opened the door of the cab, half expecting Grandpa to be there. It was empty — except for Grandpa's old rain jacket that lay on the seat, and the strong smell of tobacco. He ripped off his wet shirt, his denim pants. His teeth chattered as he pulled on the warm, dry jacket. It was so long it almost covered his underwear. He ran around to

the tailgate of the truck and steadied himself on the spare tire. Slowly, cautiously, hardly daring to breathe, he climbed up and over the tailgate and into the truck.

The storm blotted out any sound he might have made. But the Phantom sensed his presence. She neighed sharply to Misty, who caught her fear. Paul could hear the small rat-a-tat of her hooves.

He leaned hard against the stakes of the truck, every muscle tensed. Phantom would either charge him or stay as far away as possible. He waited, counting the seconds. He could hear the rain sloshing over the tarpaulin, spilling down the sides of the truck. He could smell the steamy warmth of furry bodies. He could smell the sea. And in the occasional flashes of light, he saw the copper-and-white tail of the Phantom sweeping nervously over Misty. Paul let out a deep sigh of relief. She was *not* going to charge him.

He never knew how long he stood there. He only knew that after a while the Phantom no longer mistrusted him. She seemed to doze off for seconds at a time, as if she felt a oneness with him; as if she and her foal and this shivering, wet boy were fellow creatures caught in a storm, prisoners of the elements. Prisoners together.

Together! The word sounded a bugle in Paul.

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Time stood still. There was only the wind and the rain and the three creatures together! Together!

Aching to reach out and touch first the shaggy coat, then the silky one, he plunged his hands deep into Grandpa's pockets to stay the impulse. His fingers felt a firm, slightly sticky object. He squeezed it. He traced a few dried stems, then paper-thin leaves pressed solidly together. It was a twist of chewing tobacco! Quickly he pulled it out of his pocket. The spicy sweetness of molasses filled his nostrils. He took long, deep breaths of it. His mind was turning somersaults. Molasses! Molasses! How ponies love it! Often he had seen Grandpa cut a quid for Watch Eyes. With trembling fingers he broke off a sizable piece and held it on his outstretched hand.

For a long time he waited. When he could stand no longer, he sank down on the cold, wet floor of the truck, still holding his hand toward Phantom.

He waited, motionless.

He listened to the storm bell tolling out in the bay, and to the rain swishing and swirling around him. He felt little rivulets of perspiration run down his back. He grew hot and chilled by turns. His arm grew numb, then began to prickle as if hundreds of red-hot needles were jabbing him. His head reeled. It ached for lack of sleep.

And just when his hand was about to drop, he heard slow, questioning hooves placed one at a time on the floor of the truck. One step forward. Then a long pause filled in by the sobbing of the wind. Then another step. And another. Now a breath on his hand, now feelers sending chills of excitement up his arm, racing through his whole body. Now a soft muzzle lipping his palm. The tobacco gone! Lifted out of his hand by a pony so wild that she had upset a boat, so wild that for two years no one had caught her. A wild thing eating out of his hand! He wriggled his fingers in wonderment. All the numbness had gone out of them. He was not even trembling! Only this sharp ecstasy, this feeling that all of life was worth this moment. The roundup, the discovery of Misty, the swim across the channel — they all melted into this.

The moments rushed on. The storm quieted. Paul could hear the Phantom mouthing the tobacco. He tried to keep awake to enjoy the pleasant, soothing sound, but his eyes drooped. His breath steadied. He fell into a deep sleep, unmindful when the Phantom nosed him curiously from head to foot. Then she, too, began to doze.

At last Misty sank down in exhaustion. Her head fell across Paul's lap, not because she wanted human comfort, but because she was tired from the

hard drive and the swim. The floor of a truck or a boy's lap were all the same to her, so long as her dam was near.

It was thus, at dawn, that Grandpa Beebe found them.

