

# THE QUEEN

## 1

Although the early June morning was unusually cool and the sky overcast, the boy's body perspired freely beneath his thin sweater. For this morning, as on every Saturday morning, he had walked the five miles from his home to the training track just outside the town limits of Coronet, Pennsylvania. And now he stood beneath a tall elm tree, his eyes upon the drab gray sheds before him. Grim-faced, he walked toward them, his gaze never leaving the sheds—not even for the horses, who trotted about the half-mile track to his left. He heard neither the rhythmic beat of hoofs over hard-packed clay nor the clucking of the drivers to their colts as they sat in their two-wheeled training carts. And this was very unusual for Tom Messenger.

He walked down the road until he came to the last shed in the row, and there he hesitated, his long, thin face grave with concern, his arms hanging loosely beside his big-boned but gaunt frame. It was many moments before he moved to the closed door of the shed, his steps noticeably shorter and slower.

Looking through the window, he saw the two old men working over Symbol. Jimmy Creech stood before the horse's big black head. As always, Jimmy's muffler was wrapped snugly about his scrawny neck, and his cap was pulled far down over his ears. The tip of Jimmy's prominent nose held the only color in his pale face. George Snedecker stooped to the other side of the horse, his hands feeling about Symbol's hoofs.

Slowly the boy slid the door open, and he heard George Snedecker say, "Pains in my legs again this morning, Jimmy. Makes a man wish he were dead, that's what it does."

"We ain't so young any more," Jimmy Creech grumbled; then he saw the boy standing in the doorway. He nodded to him but said nothing, and turned back to Symbol.

With great effort George rose to a standing position. " 'Morning, Tom," he said. The chew of tobacco in his mouth was passed from one side to the other as his gaze shifted uneasily between the boy and Jimmy Creech; then he took a cloth from the pocket of his overalls and brushed it over Symbol's neck. He said with attempted lightness, "No need to work over Symbol, heh, Jimmy? He'll stir up enough wind to wipe him clean."

Jimmy Creech looked sullenly into George's grinning, tobacco-stained mouth. "Sure" he said. "Let's get the stuff on him now."

The boy stood there while they slid the light racing harness on Symbol and tightened the leather about the shafts of the training cart. Jimmy Creech had taken hold of the long reins when the boy said, "You're really going to sell *her*, Jimmy? You haven't changed your mind since last Saturday?" His voice was low and heavy with concern.

Jimmy Creech turned to George, motioning him to open the shed doors. "I'm selling her," he said quickly, without looking at the boy. "This morning ... the guy's coming this morning, just as I told you last Saturday."

"But Jimmy—" The boy was close beside Jimmy Creech now, his hands on the man's arm, his words coming fast. "Her colt may be everything you ever hoped to own. You figured it that way. You said—"

Jimmy Creech had slid into the cart seat. "I know what I said, what I figured," he interrupted, turning away. "You don't have to tell me, Tom."

"Then why do you want to sell the Queen at this late stage of the game?" the boy asked with sudden anger. "She'll have her foal in another three weeks. Why don't you do as we planned?"

Jimmy Creech drew his muffler tighter about his neck, and his eyes were upon Symbol's black haunches as he said bitterly, "I figured out one night that it was a pretty late stage in the game for me, too. I figured up how old I was and I got sixty-two. I figured that it's no time for me to be looking ahead a couple of years, and I'd have to wait that long before I could race this colt of the Queen's. So I figured two years is much too long for me to wait. That's the score, Tom. I'm sorry."

"But, Jimmy. You're being silly. You're not old. You're—"

But Jimmy Creech was taking Symbol from the shed.

The boy watched Jimmy until he had driven Symbol around the corner of the shed; then he turned to George, now seated heavily in his chair beside the door. "What's gotten into Jimmy?" the boy asked. "Why's he talking like that?"

"He ain't been feeling good again," George said. "And sixty-two's not so young any more, like Jimmy says. Age is like that, Tom. For years you go along thinking you're a young bunny, then one morning you wake up and it's hit you right smack in every bone and muscle in your body. Like it did with me some years ago. And like it's doing to Jimmy now. And when that happens you find you don't start figuring too far ahead any longer." George leaned back in his chair. "Yep, I know what Jimmy means when he says he don't want to wait two years for the Queen's colt to come along."

Shaking his head, the boy said, "But all winter long Jimmy felt good. I know he did. He'd talk about this foal of the Queen's for hours at a time, telling me the colt was going to be the one he'd always wanted. You heard him, George. And you know our plans. He was going to send the Queen up to my uncle's farm, where she was going to have her foal. And I was going to take care of them both this summer while you and Jimmy were at the fair tracks racing Symbol. It was just the setup he wanted for them.

Uncle Wilmer has plenty of pasture; everything the Queen and her foal could want during the summer. I don't understand why—”

“You got to be older to understand, Tom,” George said slowly. “And Jimmy started changing last summer at the races. He started feeling old then, but he never admitted it. But I saw he was more careful in his driving, never taking any chances of a spill. And before that they never came any nerver, any better than Jimmy Creech. He became very critical of the driving of other men, too. And he got crabby and, I thought, a little bitter. It was old age creeping up, but Jimmy didn't know it. He's stuck to harness racing for near forty years because he loves the sport and the horses. And that's what made him great. But it's different with him now. It's like he's sore because he's suddenly discovered he's getting old and he wants to take it out on everybody.”

George paused and took off his soiled cap, exposing his bald head to the rays of the sun that had broken through the overcast sky. “When you came along this last winter,” he went on, “and Jimmy took such a liking to you, I thought maybe he was coming out of it. He liked the interest you took in the horses, although you didn't know a trot from a pace at the time. But you asked a lot of questions, and Jimmy liked that. He enjoyed talking to you and you were a good listener. Maybe he saw himself as a kid in you. I don't know. But he lived in Coronet, too, when he was about your age, an' he used to come out here on Saturdays, just hanging around, same as you do.”

George stopped again, chewing his tobacco thoughtfully. “I heard Jimmy talk about sending the Queen to your uncle's farm when you told him you were going to be there for the summer. I knew then how much Jimmy liked you or he wouldn't be trusting you with the Queen like that. An' I liked the way you had perked Jimmy up and I thought everything was going to be all right again. But week before last Jimmy had a couple of bad nights. I guess he must have been really sick, because he showed up here looking pretty awful. I guess I knew then that this was the beginning of the end for Jimmy Creech, professional reinsman.

“A few days later this guy from Hanover Farms comes around looking for broodmares and he sees the Queen. And he asks Jimmy how about selling her. He'd asked Jimmy that same question for the last three years, but Jimmy never even listened to him. But this time it was different. I hear Jimmy say quick-like, ‘Sure, if you give me my price.’ And that wasn't like Jimmy. Not in the 'most fifty years I've known him has he ever put a price on any horse he loves—and he sure loves the Queen. He lost mighty few races with the Queen.”

“If he really loved her he wouldn't sell her,” the boy said bitterly. “Why's he doing it, George?”

“He's asked a good stiff price, Tom. And with the money he can buy another horse to race this summer—maybe even two or three more.”

“He's got Symbol to race,” the boy said quickly.

“Symbol is too old jus’ like Jimmy and me,” George muttered. “He oughtn’t to be racing any more. Jimmy picked him up at the sales a couple of years ago. He was the only horse Jimmy could afford to buy. Jimmy doesn’t have much money any more. He’s just hanging on ... that’s all Jimmy’s doin’.” The old man paused to spit tobacco juice in the pail which he used as a spittoon. “So I guess Jimmy wants enough money to buy a good racehorse now. It’s like he wasn’t figuring on having many more years and he wants to do this one up big.”

“I still don’t understand,” the boy said.

“I do,” George returned slowly. “I guess I understand pretty well how Jimmy Creech feels.”

The boy shifted uneasily upon his feet, his eyes leaving George for the semi-darkness of the shed’s interior. Finally he walked inside, coming to a stop directly beneath the bared light bulb just within the door. He twisted the bulb almost savagely, extinguishing the light; then, turning, he slid the shed doors wide open, allowing the sun to penetrate the gloom. “It’s like a morgue in here,” he shouted angrily to George Snedecker. “It’s almost summer. Remember?”

“Sure,” George mumbled. “It’s almost summer.”

The boy walked into the tack room, his eyes gleaming, his steps hurried. He took a quick look at the worn harness, then went to the two windows, opening them wide. Leaving the room, he hurried down the shed, passing the empty box stalls. When he came to the door at the opposite end he pushed heavily against it until, creaking, it too slid open, and the morning light flooded the shed.

For a moment the boy stood in the doorway, staring at the track before him. Two trotters swept by, the wheels of their training carts gleaming in the sun. Then Jimmy Creech went by with Symbol, and tears welled in the boy’s eyes at the sight of Jimmy’s thin huddled figure in the seat. “Why don’t you take off that muffler and that silly cap, Jimmy?” he muttered angrily. “Why don’t you look up at the sun? Let it get at you, Jimmy. That’s what you need.”

Then abruptly, Tom turned and walked toward a box stall on his left. Opening the door, he went inside, and his eyes and voice were soft as he said, “Hello, Beautiful.”

The heavy-bellied bay mare came to him, shoving her soft muzzle against his chest. And as his hand followed the white blaze that ran from her forehead to her nostrils, she sought the pockets of his sweater for what she knew would be there. He let her pull the carrot from his pocket, then took it from her again, breaking it into small pieces and feeding them to her one at a time. “And chew them well, Queen,” he said. “You have to be careful about everything you eat and everything you do now. It won’t be so very long before your foal comes.”

Then the boy stopped talking and looked at the docile head before him. He raised his hand to touch her again, hesitated, then threw his arms about her neck, burying his head in her long black mane.

When Jimmy Creech brought Symbol back from his workout, he found Tom in the Queen's stall. For several minutes he stared at Tom's turned back without the boy's knowing it, then moved on.

George Snedecker had the cooling blanket on Symbol and was walking him alongside the shed when Jimmy joined him.

"Tom's taking it pretty hard," Jimmy said quietly.

George nodded but continued walking Symbol.

Jimmy fell in beside him. "I never should have let him hang around so much," Jimmy said. "That's what I get for taking an interest in the kid."

George looked at him but still said nothing.

"Have you seen that guy from Hanover Farms yet?" Jimmy asked. "He said he'd be around at eight o'clock."

"I saw his car up the row. He might be in one of the other sheds." George paused. "Why don't you go up and see? Let's sell the mare if we're going to," he added sullenly.

Jimmy looked at him. "What's ailing you?"

George Snedecker made no reply.

"Has the kid got to you, too?" Jimmy asked bitterly. "I suppose you think I'm a heel too. Whose mare is she, anyway? And who has to foot the bills around here?"

"Your mare. You foot the bills," George said brusquely.

They walked for a while before Jimmy spoke again. "That's what I get for playing nursemaid to a kid. I should have sent him on his way when he first came around."

"But you didn't," George said quietly, turning Symbol around. "You let him stay and you talked horse to him by the hour. You wanted it that way. For some reason you wanted it that way."

Jimmy Creech said nothing, but George heard his footsteps and knew he was following him.

"Find that guy from Butler and sell the mare," George said again. "They don't get a chance every day to buy a broodmare like the Queen. An' like you said, she's yours. I don't care what you do with her. I only work for you. And what do you care how the kid feels? He's nothing but one of the hundreds running around towns like Coronet. He'll forget all about the Queen in a week. Maybe he'll forget all about horses, too—forget everything you ever told him. He's nothing but a skinny, overgrown high-school kid who ought to be running around with fellows his own age anyway, instead of hanging out with us old fogies."

The footsteps behind him had stopped, but Jimmy's tense voice came easily to George. "He'll never forget the Queen—or horses. It's in him deep, just as it was in me."

The footsteps came again, but this time they were retreating and George knew that Jimmy Creech had gone to find the buyer from Hanover Farms.

George was still walking Symbol when he saw Jimmy Creech returning. Jimmy's head was burrowed deep in his brown muffler, but his skinny legs moved quickly over the road. George stopped walking Symbol.

"Shall I get the mare out?" George asked when Jimmy was within hearing distance. "Does he want to take her now?"

Jimmy raised his thin face, and the only thing about him that seemed alive were his hazel eyes flecked with tiny pinpoints of brown. "No," he said. "He didn't buy her." His gaze dropped as he added. "He wouldn't give me my price."

"Uh-huh," George said.

Jimmy looked up at him. "He tried to talk me down, but I wouldn't have any of it."

"Sure," George returned, smiling. "Sure, Jimmy."

Their gazes met and held.

"That's the story," Jimmy said.

"That's *your* story," George replied. He motioned with his head in the direction of the shed. "Go in and tell Tom. He'll be anxious to hear it."

Jimmy moved away. "Yes, I'd better," he said, "because he'll be taking care of the Queen this summer—"

"And the foal," George interrupted, laughing. "Don't forget to tell him what to do when the foal comes."

George watched Jimmy until he had disappeared inside the shed; then he turned to the sun, shining brightly now in a cloudless sky. "Summer," he said. "Good old summer. What it can do to a man! The sun and the kid. What a combination! Maybe it's not the end of Jimmy Creech, professional reinsman, after all. Maybe not by a long shot." And humming, George continued walking Symbol.

## THE FOAL TO COME

### 2

Ten days later Tom Messenger stood anxiously at a fork in the road, awaiting the Queen. He had been there for many hours, watching the heavy traffic come over the hill, most of it speeding by to his left on its way to Philadelphia. To his right was the blacktop road which led through rolling fields beyond to the sanctuary of his uncle's farm, where the Queen would have quiet and peace to bring her foal into the world.

Very often Tom would glance at the clock on the gas station behind him. It was well after three o'clock. If Jimmy had shipped the Queen at dawn, as he had planned to do, the truck should have arrived an hour ago. It would be an open truck, a two-and-a-half ton truck, Jimmy had said. He couldn't miss it, for the Queen would be

standing right there for him to see. She would have been on the road nine hours by now. Would it have hurt her any? In her condition, he meant. The Queen was due to foal sometime next week. Jimmy had said the trip wouldn't hurt her. He'd said he had shipped many mares only a few days before they foaled, and it had never bothered them. Tom hoped Jimmy was right. He hoped desperately that Jimmy was right. He didn't want anything to happen to the Queen—or the Queen's foal to come.

The boy's eyes remained on the traffic coming over the hill. He wouldn't look at the clock again, he decided. It didn't make any difference how late the Queen got here, just so long as she got here. That it was late was so much the better. It meant that Jimmy had hired a good driver, one who was going slowly, taking it easy for the Queen's sake. *So there's no rush, Tom thought. I've got all the time in the world. Just take it easy with the Queen, Mr. Driver, and I'll be here whenever you come.*

While Tom waited patiently, he let himself think of what it would mean to care for the Queen all by himself. There would be just the Queen and himself this week, but maybe next week there would be three. He'd always dreamed of something like this happening to him. And Jimmy Creech had made it possible.

"I know the Queen will be in good hands, Tom," Jimmy had said. "I know how much you love her, and that's more important than anything else at this point. Just take good care of her, as I know you will, and nature will do the rest."

Jimmy had made it sound so easy. But then Jimmy had seen a countless number of foals born, while this would be Tom's first experience. As he thought about it, Tom felt a little queasy. What if something went wrong? Jimmy had said it wouldn't be necessary to get a veterinary unless complications set in. Nine chances out of ten everything would be all right, Jimmy had said. But then, Tom figured, there was one chance in ten something *would* go wrong, and it was this lone possibility that caused the palms of his hands to sweat while he waited for the Queen.

He saw the open truck as it came over the hill. He made out the Queen's blanketed body as the truck drew closer. Her haunches faced the front of the truck. Jimmy had put her in backwards to keep the wind from her face.

Tom moved quickly to the middle of the fork, one arm raised, his heart pounding. The truck pulled out of the long line of cars and headed for the blacktop road, slowing as it neared him.

Tom's eyes were upon the Queen. He saw that her hooded head was down low, her body slumped. "Is she all right?" he asked anxiously of the driver.

"A long haul, but I took it easy," the man said. "Where do we go from here? I've got to get back tonight," he added impatiently.

"Just a few more miles," the boy said. "Follow this road. I'll ride in back."

Quickly Tom climbed over the rail of the truck. It lurched forward and Tom steadied the mare. She raised her hooded head, recognizing him; then her nose went to his pocket. Smiling, he produced a carrot and fed it to her.

“Soon you’ll be home,” he said. “Just a little farther and then you’ll be able to take it nice and easy.”

The road wound with the foothills, going ever upward in the direction of a low range of heavily wooded mountains. Tom looked toward them, for in the valley at their base was his uncle’s farm and a home for the Queen.

The driver called back to him through the cab window, handing him a long envelope. Tom held the letter in front of him, shielding it from the wind. It was, of course, from Jimmy Creech.

R.D.2  
Coronet, Pa.  
June 17

*Dear Tom,*

*I’ve shipped the Queen the best I know how, and she should arrive okay. Feed her light on grain this week, about three quarts in three feedings. Add a little bran each time. Let her have all the grass she wants; it’s the best thing for her now. And don’t forget to exercise her daily, working her on the longe same as we did here. It’ll make it easier when her time comes to have the foal. This week I’d leave her in the pasture every night the weather is good; but next week you’d better bring her in nights. And you’d better watch her closely then. As I said, there won’t be much to do when her time comes, but it’s better to keep a close watch over her.*

*George and I are starting off the season at the Carlisle Fair next week, but you can reach us by writing to me c/o the race secretary at the track. Write as soon as the Queen’s had her foal. I’m hoping it’s a colt, but George says he’s hoping for a filly (he always was partial to girls!). Either way it should be a good one. And Tom, I’ve got full confidence in you. Use your own judgment if anything comes up. You’ve got a good head and, most important, the right feeling for horses, and that always pays off in the end.*

*There are just a few routine things I want to tell you to do when the foal comes. Be sure to wipe him dry if the mare doesn’t take care of that. Pay special attention to his nostrils, wiping them clean so he can breathe good. It’ll be important to a little fellow like him. And next thing you do is see to it that the foal nurses as soon as possible. The mare’s milk right after she’s given birth is the most beneficial of all, and it’s important he should get it right away. You help him, if he needs any help. After that you can pretty well relax. Feed the mare light the first two days, giving her a hot bran mash right after she’s foaled. That’s four quarts of bran and a handful of salt; pour enough boiling water over it to wet it good, then put a sack over the pail and let it steam until it’s cool enough for the mare to eat.*

*Handle the little fellow from the moment he’s born. That way he’ll just accept your being around, and it’ll make things easier for me later, when I go to break and train him.*

*I guess that's about all for now. As soon as I hear from you that the foal has been born, I'll write more on what you should do. The money I gave you should be enough to buy all the grain you'll need in addition to paying your uncle whatever he may want for keeping the mare there, but if anything comes up and you need more, let me know.*

*Your friend,  
Jimmy Creech*

*P.S. It might be best to have a vet lined up just in case anything goes wrong. As I said, use your own judgment in anything like that.*

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