

## **NATIONAL HORSERACING MUSEUM**

### **Awards for Young Writers on Horseracing entry**

#### **Nobody knows for sure**

The afternoon sky was the colour of charcoal and the wind kept howling in horror. The foals in the parade ring whinnied for mercy and the people leading them up looked soaked through, cold to the bone and fed up. Every now and then, I would try to make one smile as they passed, but it was like trying to start a fire with a match in the snow – impossible.

As John and I took shelter from the weather in the Green Room, warmth and the delicious aroma of steak and lamb filled the air. John found us a table and as we sat down he spoke almost through the side of his mouth, as if he didn't want anyone else to hear what he was saying. "Lot 365. He is a wee little thing but he'll do a job for us just fine," he said, almost whispering.

I soon found out why he was talking in that peculiar tone. He reached slowly into his pocket and pulled out an envelope, stuffed with splendid shiny violet and peacock blue banknotes, neatly stacked on top of each other. The flash of colour and the excitement made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. He stirred his teaspoon again and again, as if he was preoccupied by something that he was mulling over repeatedly in his mind.

John was an old man these days. Everybody said he was an introvert and kept himself to himself. Nothing much seemed to excite him – and yet buying young horses seemed to be the only thing that made him come alive. When he was young he had ridden champion racehorses on the gallops in Newmarket. Now he was back at the sales, with a chance of finding another good one, the years seemed to somehow roll away.

Perhaps being here made him remember the wind whistling in his ears and all the energy he had all those years ago. He had had his own horse and won some races as an amateur jockey, before his dream of being a professional jockey, perhaps a champion, had sadly passed him by. He had become a quiet old man. Yet here he was, full of a young man's excitement once again – and it was beginning to rub off on me.

Before I knew it, here was lot 365. He was a small foal and as he was being led around his tail lifted up in the wind and danced around. In one of his eyes was something I recognised as fear. He had four wobbly, weak knees and was tall and skinny. He was a light chestnut with a coat that had been made dull and dark by the rain. He looked unremarkable compared to the other foals being shown, ready to meet the auctioneer – but John must have seen something. "Come on, let's go," he said, and he hurried me through a crowd of men, who were all studying their sale catalogues and talking to each other in huddles, trying to escape the worst of the winter weather.

Inside the sale ring was lot 364 and the auctioneer was asking for bids from the crowd. "Against you on the stairs at fifty thousand," he said. "I'll sell on the acorn." I could see a

man in a green coat staring at the auctioneer, yet as a bid of sixty thousand was announced, he shook his head and snapped the pencil in his hand in half in frustration. John had seen it, too, and gasped in surprise.

Would we be frustrated, too? As the gangly chestnut came into the ring, I felt my heart beating faster and louder and a strange dry feeling in my throat. "Let's hope we are lucky," John said to me under his breath before he, too, fell silent.

"Are you sure, John?" I whispered. "Do you really think he can make a top racehorse?" He laughed. "The only thing we know for sure is that nobody knows for sure," he said. "There's only one way to find out."

And he raised his hand to bid.