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Leonard's Pony

(a children's story)

a short story

by

John A. Hofland

From Ben's place, Leonard's farm, with all its gleaming white buildings, looked almost like a whole town set on the hill. People referred to ordinary farms like the one Ben lived on as just plain farms. But if a farm were really big, they called it a ranch. Everyone called Leonard's farm a ranch, and it was the biggest ranch around. Once Ben counted twenty buildings, and every building was spotlessly white under its dark green roof. Over Leonard's driveway was a high white arch that said "Hillcrest Farm." Whenever Ben rode his bicycle under that arch, he felt just a little bit taller.

The best thing about Leonard's farm, however, was not the spotless white buildings, nor the arch over the driveway. The best thing was that Leonard had horses. All kinds of horses. Quarter horses, Arabians, pintos, appaloosas. But of all the horses, Ben's favorites were the eight Shetland ponies. Every summer Leonard would hitch all eight of them to a small covered wagon, and they would lead the Memorial Day parade. Four pairs of pure white ponies, and behind them the wagon, with Leonard driving.

Even though he lived half a mile away from Ben, Leonard was Ben's closest neighbor, and even though Leonard was a grey-haired man, Ben thought of him as his best friend. So every Memorial Day Ben would stand in front of Casey's Bakery, where the parade started, and he would wave to Leonard, shouting, "They look perfect, don't they!" Leonard would wave back, smile at Ben, and the parade would begin.

Memorial Day came just before summer vacation, and during the summer Ben liked nothing better than to bicycle to Leonard's horse ranch, and spend his day watching Leonard mending harnesses or training his show horses.

Sometimes, if Ben arrived early enough in the morning, Leonard would be in the horse barn, training the tall, dark Arabian. "Snap" would go Leonard's fingers, and the horse would arch its neck, lift its head, and raise its right forefoot. "Snap" again, and the horse would rear up on its hind legs. "Snap" once more, and the horse would kneel. "A show horse has to look perfect," Leonard would explain, and then Leonard would let Ben give the Arabian a treat. Ben loved to feel the horse's soft nose against his hand. (Have you ever felt a horse's nose on your hand as you fed it grain? A horse has huge, sharp teeth inside its mouth, but all you feel when it eats from your hand is the soft, marshmallowy nose.)

But Ben's favorite times were the afternoons when Leonard was sitting in the small white tac shed, mending the harnesses and saddles. Leonard would work so quietly that the only sound Ben could hear for long minutes was the squeak of leather, or the buzzing of flies. After a long while Leonard would take a deep breath and look up. "I remember the first horse I ever had," he might begin. Or "Silver Star was the first horse to wear this saddle. She took first place at the state fair." And then oh, the stories he would tell.

But one hot summer afternoon Leonard seemed to have no stories. He stopped cleaning the saddle on his lap, sighed, and bit the side of his lip. Finally he began to say, "I've been thinking . . ." He sighed again, and looked at the floor. "That one white pony is getting sway-backed. Next year I'm going to need a new one. I know where I can get a new pony all right, but she's not trained." He stopped to stare out the door again. "Training would take from now 'til next Memorial Day, and I don't have the time."

It was quiet until Ben cleared his throat. "Leonard," he said, "we have an empty pen in our barn. What if you kept her there? Maybe I could train the pony. You could tell me what to do. I've watched you a lot."

Leonard picked up the cleaning cloth again, and began rubbing the saddle. "I don't know. You'd have to work with her every day . . . clean her pen . . . curry her. I guess that's what I'm not sure about. Your dad doesn't keep his barn all that clean. This pony would be a show pony. My show horses have to look perfect. Even when I'm not showing them. A horse gets used to the wrong things, and then at show time they DO the wrong things."

But even though Leonard didn't say so right away, he liked the idea, and finally he agreed. The new white pony would spend the winter in Ben's barn, and every day Ben would train him, feed him, and clean his pen. Leonard promised to bring the pony in October. Ben was so happy that by early September already he had the pen fixed up and clean. Finally October came, and as the year's first fluffy snowflakes floated slowly out of the sky, Leonard arrived with the white pony. Ben led her off the trailer, and brought her to the pen in the barn. "Look, Leonard," he said, "it's spotless, with fresh, clean straw, and even a new feeding trough. I did it all by myself!"

"Good," said Leonard, "with that kind of a home, and with you fussing over her and riding her a little every day, she'll be just fine when it comes to parade time. If the weather's not too bad, why don't you let her outside as much as she wants. The exercise would be good for her."

So every morning Ben would feed the pony and let her outside. Every evening he would clean the pen, ride the pony, and bring her back into the barn. There he would comb the pony's mane, brush her coat, and clean her hooves.

Once in a while Leonard would drop by for a visit. He would study the pony quietly for a few minutes, nod his head slowly, and smile. Sometimes he would pat Ben on the back and say, "Keep it up."

But then the snow began to fall, and soon it was too cold to leave the barn door open all day. So the pony stayed inside. The cattle also stayed inside the barn to keep warm. Worst of all, however, to keep the cattle from overcrowding, Ben and his dad decided to take two calves out of the cattle pen, and put them in the pony's pen.

That made it harder to keep the pen clean. Every day, when Ben came home from school, the pony had dirt and straw in its mane and tail. Ben combed it

out, and took the pony for a ride, but the next day there was always more straw and more crusty dirt, especially in the tail. One day as he was tugging to get the dirt out, he began to mutter, "What will Leonard think if he sees this? A show horse is supposed to be perfect. I wish these calves didn't have to be here. Nobody ELSE puts calves with horses! I PROMISED Leonard to keep it CLEAN! It isn't FAIR!"

He jerked on the comb, trying to get the dirt loose. Suddenly the pony jumped and kicked, and Ben fell backwards against the back wall of the pen. In his hand was the comb with a big chunk of dirt, and in the dirt were long hairs from the pony's tail. No wonder the pony had kicked.

There was only one more chunk of dirt and straw left in the tail, but it seemed to be stuck even more tightly. Ben didn't want to get kicked again. He remembered that his father kept a tinsnips in a box by the barn door. He jumped over the wall of the pen, and ran to get the tinsnips. Carefully he clipped the hair, and the chunk fell to the ground with the hair still in it. Ben patted the pony on the nose. "Sorry I pulled so hard on the first clod," he said. "But you didn't feel anything when I took the last one out, did you? Oh well, I guess we've figured out how to solve that problem!"

The next night there was dirt in the tail again, and again Ben clipped it out. On the third night, Ben noticed that the tail had begun to look funny. Instead of flowing straight to the ground, the long white hairs on the right side of the tail suddenly stopped short in mid-air. Ben stood looking at the tail for a long while, and then suddenly he knew what to do. Carefully he reached down and clipped all of the hairs so that they were the same length as those on the right side. But still something looked wrong. The tail was flat on the bottom. Tails don't normally grow that way, thought Ben, so he trimmed the edges round.

He picked up all the hair, and showed it to the pony. "Now you'll be able to keep clean," he said. Then he chuckled, "Look! If my mom cut off this much hair, she'd be bald!" Ben put the tinsnips back in its box, but he didn't know where to put the hair. He thought a moment before he carried it behind the barn, stuffing it into some tall grass that stuck out of the snow. That night he combed the pony twice as long as usual, cleaned the pen, and put in a new bed of straw. "By spring your tail should grow long again, and you'll look perfect," he explained as he gave the pony an extra dipper of oats.

The next night, just as Ben was combing the pony, Leonard walked into the barn. Ben bent low under the pony and combed her stomach. Somehow he didn't want to talk to Leonard. Leonard stood quietly. The only sound in the barn was the scratch, scratch, scratch of the curry comb. Finally Leonard spoke. His voice was quiet, but it sounded like thunder. "What happened to the tail?"

"It was dirty," mumbled Ben.

"Pardon me?"

"It was dirty, and I cut the dirt out," Ben said a little louder.

"You know, don't you, that it will never grow back in time for the parade." Leonard didn't raise his voice. Instead, he looked right into Ben's eyes and continued, "I had been counting on him to lead the team."

"I'm sorry."

Leonard didn't get angry. Ben wished he would. He wished Leonard would get really angry. He even wished Leonard would punish him. Then it would be all over, and Ben could just go on with things.

But Leonard just walked slowly out of the barn, closed the door, and was gone. Ben was left alone in the barn. The pony's rump, with its short tail, faced him.

After that the winter seemed very very long. Leonard came occasionally, but he never spoke about the tail. Once Ben said, "Leonard, I'm sorry about the cutting the tail," but Leonard didn't say anything back. He just blinked his eyes, raised his eyebrows, and bit the side of his lip.

In April Leonard came with his trailer and took the pony home. Soon it was the end of May, and time for the Memorial Day parade. Ben didn't want to go, but his parents brought him to town anyway. "Nobody should miss the parade," they said. That year, Ben watched the parade, but he did not stand in front of the crowd at Casey's Bakery. Instead, he slipped behind the people at Kuiper's Grocery, in the middle of the parade route, hoping Leonard would not see him.

When the parade came by, Leonard was leading it just like always. Four pairs of pure white ponies, and behind them the wagon, with Leonard driving. Ben peeked past the man in front of him. The new pony he had trained was part of the team! How would Leonard dare to use a pony with a short tail? But the pony did not have a short tail! Its tail was just as long as all the others!

Suddenly Ben heard Leonard's voice. "They look perfect, don't they, Ben!" he shouted. Then the ponies and the wagon stopped. "Come on up for a ride!" It was Leonard's voice again. "Yes, you, Ben!"

Ben hesitated, and stumbled through the crowd. Leonard's big hands reached down and pulled him up. "You see this guy here," Leonard shouted to the crowd. "He's the one who trained my lead pony." The crowd applauded, but Ben hardly dared to look up.

Then the parade started again. "What happened to the tail?" asked Ben.

"I bought that pony a wig," said Leonard.

"A wig?"

"A fake piece. It's attached to the end of her tail. You and I are the only ones who know about it. Not too bad, is it?"

They sat quietly, looking ahead, staring at the ponies. "Leonard, I'm sorry about cutting the tail," said Ben.

Leonard bit on the side of his lip.

"Are you still mad?" asked Ben.

"No." Leonard bit the side of his lip again. "Don't worry. You worked hard training her. It shows."

When the parade was finally finished, Leonard cleared his throat. "I have to be sorry too. I should have told you what I was going to do instead of just letting you feel bad." As he got off the wagon, he added, "Next year I may need to replace the other lead pony. Would you mind training another one for me?"

Ben smiled. Leonard smiled back.