

THE SEARCH

10

For half an hour Alec and Henry frantically looked for the Black. Up and down the streets they sped in Henry's car.

"Lucky it's so early in the morning, Alec—not so many people around," Henry said.

"What time is it?" Alec asked, never taking his eyes off the road in front of him.

Henry pulled his large silver watch out of his vest pocket. "Seven o'clock," he grunted.

"We've just got to find him, Henry—before it's too late!" the boy declared.

"What do you mean—too late?" Henry asked.

"I'm afraid of some cops shooting him. Gosh! That would be terrible!"

Henry nodded and pushed his foot harder on the accelerator. The car jumped ahead.

"Turn down this street, Henry—the park's just ahead; maybe he's there."

Alec saw two men on a street corner. "Pull over

there, Henry. We'll ask them if they've seen him. They seem to be pretty excited over something!"

Alec leaned out of the car. "Say, Mister," he yelled, "did you see a horse run down here?"

"Sure did," one of them answered. "He shot past here like a streak of lightning ten minutes ago! Where the devil did he come from?"

"Thanks," said Alec without answering the man's question. The car lurched ahead as Henry stepped on the gas.

"We're on the right track, anyway, Alec," Henry said grimly. A few minutes later they entered the park. Henry slowed down. "You look over there, kid—I'll take care of this side."

"It's an awfully big park," Alec said, discouraged.

"All the better," grinned Henry. "Not much chance of him hurting anyone then!"

The car rolled through tree-lined roads. Henry and Alec both leaned out the sides of the car. After a few miles they approached the rolling green fairways of the golf course.

"He might have gone out there, Henry," Alec said. "Plenty of hills, just what he'd be looking for."

"Let's park the car here and take a look, Alec," Henry said as he brought the car to a stop.

Alec had to trot to keep up with Henry's short but energetic strides across the fairway. The air was cool and crisp, but starting to warm up from the bright sun that was climbing higher and higher in the cloudless blue sky. Their shoes made deep squishing sounds in the early morning dew.

"Going to be a hot day," muttered Henry, never

slowing his pace. Alec jogged beside him. "Hope we can find him before the early morning golfers start coming out," he said.

When they reached the middle of the fairway, Henry stopped. "You'd better go in the direction of that wood over there," he said. "I'll go down this fairway a piece toward that hill. If either of us finds him, give a yell."

"Okay, Henry," Alec said. He started off in the direction of the wood. His feet were soaked. He stopped and started to remove his shoes, then thinking better of it, straightened up and continued at a fast pace. He went down into a large gully. At the bottom he turned and followed the gully as it wove in and out across the fairway. Soon he entered the wood. He climbed to the top of the gully and looked about. Henry was out of sight. The dew on the green grass glistened in the distance. The air was quiet and cooler in the shade of the big trees. Alec knew that on the other side of the wood was another fairway. He hastened toward it, following the path which he had traveled many times as a caddy during the summer months.

He reached the other side and looked across the stretch of green carpet spread before him. The Black was nowhere to be seen. Alec whistled—but there was no answer. He started across the fairway. "Still have a lot of ground to cover," he thought. "He's liable to be any place."

For what seemed hours, Alec trudged up and down the hills of the course looking for the Black. The sun was higher now and hotter. He became more and more desperate as he saw no sign of the stallion. He re-

moved his white sweater and flung it over his arm. He reached the top of a high hill and looked below him. In the distance he could see some men playing golf.

"Henry might have found him," he thought hopefully. He had covered more than half the course and the Black surely wasn't around here. Alec whistled again. If the Black was within hearing distance, he surely would recognize his whistle. But there was no answering call.

Perhaps the stallion hadn't entered the park at all. Perhaps he was still somewhere in the streets. But Alec felt the stallion was too intelligent for that. His natural instinct would lead him to the open spaces here in the park. He *must* be around somewhere! Alec began to climb back down the hill toward the fairway. He had covered his territory thoroughly. Then he stopped. He hadn't been to the Hole where he and the fellows always went for a swim after their day of caddying. It was off the course, but there was a chance the stallion's instinct had led him toward the water.

He had to look there—he mustn't let even a slim chance slip by. Alec turned in his tracks and went alongside the hill. His legs ached, and his wet feet weren't helping matters any. He walked about a mile before he came to another wood. He followed a well-hidden path down into a hollow and then up again. It was at least nice and cool in here. The Hole was just ahead now. Alec quickened his steps. He reached the top of the hill and looked down. The water glistened below him. The pool wasn't large and if the Black was there, he surely would see him. But there wasn't any sign of him.

The wood was quiet except for the staccato-like tapping of a hard-working woodpecker in a nearby tree. Hope faded within Alec—he had played his last hunch. It was the natural place for the Black to be—the only pool of water for miles around. He took one final look. Even the shadows on the side of the pool wouldn't have been able to conceal the stallion. He just wasn't there.

Back along the path he climbed wearily. What had happened to his horse? He saw the Black lying dead in the street, killed by a car or by a policeman's bullets. It just couldn't be—it couldn't end that way! Probably Henry had found him already.

A sharp, cracking noise broke the stillness. He whirled. It came from the direction of the pool. He hurried back and looked down. On the other side, something was making its way through the thick underbrush and coming in the direction of the water! Alec stood still, scarcely daring to hope! There wasn't any path over there. Whatever it was, was making its own way through the bushes. The noise became louder and louder. Then suddenly a huge black head appeared. It was the Black! Alec saw him reach his long neck down and bury his nose into the cool water.

Relief paralyzed him for a moment. Then he whistled softly. The Black raised his head, water dripping from his mouth. He looked up. Alec whistled again and ran down the slope toward the pool. The stallion saw him. He shook his head and whistled. Alec slowed down to a walk. Cautiously he covered the distance around the pool and approached the Black.

"What's the matter, fella—scared?" he asked.

The stallion shook his head and moved toward him. His black coat was dirty and his long mane covered with burrs. Alec patted the dripping muzzle. "Had a tough time, didn't you, Boy!" He ran his hand down the stallion's neck, wiping the dirt off. "It's sure good to see you!" he said.

The stallion again pushed his nose into the cool water and drank deep. When he had finished, Alec grasped the halter that was still around his head. "Come on, Boy, let's get going home."

The Black refused to move. Alec spoke softly to him and rubbed a hand across his neck, but the stallion stood firm. Alec pulled on the halter again. The Black's eyes swept around, then rested on the boy. He shook his head and slowly moved after him.

Alec led him up the path through the wood. When they reached the fairway, he stopped and looked at the horse. "Wouldn't give a guy a lift, would you, Mister?" he asked. The Black moved swiftly to one side, his eyes turned toward the open fairway. "I'm really pretty tired, Black—you gave me quite a chase, you know." He led the Black over to a tree stump, stepped on it and threw himself onto the stallion's back.

"Come on, Boy," he said, "let's go."

The Black walked fast out onto the fairway, and then broke into a trot. Alec turned him toward the spot where he had left Henry. "Better get off this course in a hurry," he thought, "or they'll have the riot squad after us for tearing up the ground!"

After riding for about five minutes, Alec saw Henry in the distance walking toward them. "Had just about given up," Henry said when Alec rode up.

"I almost did, too," Alec said. "Found him away over by the Hole."

"Looks as though he's been rolling around in the dirt."

"He's had a time for himself, all right," Alec answered. "Look at the burrs on him—must have gone through a lot of underbrush."

"We can get those off." Henry glanced at his watch. "But right now we'd better be getting back—almost nine o'clock."

For the first time Alec realized that he had had no breakfast and that his parents didn't even know where he was. "Mother'll be wondering what's happened to me," Alec said. Late for his first breakfast home!

"And the Missus isn't going to be welcoming me with eager arms, either," Henry said gravely. "Promised her I'd go down to the market this morning, but it's too late now."

Alec jumped off the Black and walked beside Henry, holding the Black by his halter. Soon they reached the car. "Better go by way of Colden Street," Henry said, "and miss the traffic. Guess you'll have to lead him—that's the only way."

"You drive ahead slowly, Henry, just in case I need you," Alec said.

The car rolled out of the park and Alec and the Black followed it. Twenty minutes later, after no mishaps, they neared the stable. The stallion's ears pricked forward when he saw the barn. "I'm going to have to build that fence higher, Henry," Alec yelled.

"Fraid so," answered Henry, "or we'll be spending half our time chasing this fellow around!"

Henry drove up to the barn, and Alec followed with the Black. "I'll put him in his stall for the rest of the day, Henry," he said.

"Good idea," replied Henry. "He's sure had enough exercise for one day, and so have I."

"Me, too," answered Alec. "I'll put him away and then go home and eat. I'll come back later and clean him up."

"Okay, son. I'll probably be seeing you—that is," he laughed, "if I can get out!" He turned and walked toward the house.

Alec put the Black in his stall and ran a brush over his body. He put some hay in the stallion's feed box. "There, that'll hold you until I get back," he said. "Be a good fellow now and take it easy, won't you?"

The stallion pawed his foreleg into the straw and shook his head. "You'd better behave," said Alec, laughing. "You've caused enough trouble for one day." He shut the barn door and made his way home.

Alec heard the living-room clock strike nine-thirty as he walked into the house. "That you, Alec?" His mother's voice came anxiously from the kitchen.

"Yes, Mom," he answered, as he walked into the room. "Dad gone to work?" His nose wrinkled as he sniffed the appetizing aroma of griddle cakes and sausages.

"Yes," his mother answered. "He wanted to see you, but he couldn't wait any longer. Where on earth have you been all this time? And just look at you!"

"I've been exercising the Black, Mom," Alec answered. He didn't know whether he should tell his mother about the Black running away. He decided

against it—it would only worry her more, and now that the stallion was back, everything was all right.

“You certainly spend a lot of time with that animal,” his mother said. “I don’t know what you’re going to do when you have to go to school.”

Alec walked over to the kitchen table and sat down. He felt the water oozing out of his shoes. “Oh, I’m going to get up early every morning, Mom,” he said, “and feed and groom him before I go to school.” He fumbled with his shoelaces underneath the table, attempting to get his shoes off without his mother’s noticing him.

“When the weather’s nice,” he continued, “I’m going to leave him outside to graze during the morning. I’ll be in the early session at school this term and have classes right through, and get out at twelve-thirty. That’ll give me lots of time in the afternoon to be with him.” Alec slipped his shoes and socks off and wound his feet around the legs of the chair.

“I don’t want you to neglect your studies, Alec,” his mother said. “If I see you doing that, I’ll have to tell your father, and we’ll have to do something about the Black.”

“He won’t interfere, Mom,” Alec answered, as he hungrily applied butter and maple syrup to the griddle cakes his mother placed before him. Life was settling down to normal again—as normal as it could ever be with the Black.

PARTNERS

11

The rest of the day passed quickly for Alec. After breakfast, while his mother was in the living room, he slipped upstairs and put on dry shoes and socks. When he came down, he chatted with his mother, sharing little incidents of his experiences on the island and telling her about Uncle Ralph and the fun they had had together in India. In the afternoon he groomed the Black until the stallion's black body glistened, and his long mane fell smoothly down on his neck.

Henry came into the stable. "Been cleaning the attic," he grunted. He carried a large package wrapped in newspapers under his arm. He placed the bundle down on the floor. "Come here and look what I found," he said to Alec.

He began unwrapping the package, as Alec knelt beside him. The papers, brown with age, cracked and fell apart as he took them off. Inside was a small racing saddle and bridle. Henry gently lifted them out and looked at them. He didn't say anything. A minute

passed and then he reached down into the bundle again. Almost caressingly he drew out a blazing green jockey cap and shirt. Alec looked down into the bundle and saw a faded pair of riding pants and black boots.

Henry spoke softly. "Everything's here—even my number." He held the shirt in his hand. Around the sleeve still hung the white number 3. "Seems like only yesterday I wore 'em in the last race I ever rode."

Henry stopped. Alec didn't speak—he could tell from Henry's face that once again he was living that race over.

"We went to the post," the little man said, as if to himself. "It was the largest crowd ever to see the International Cup. They were all for Chang, too—he was the greatest race horse of the day. How they roared when we lined up. The other horses wouldn't stand still. But nothing ever bothered Chang—he let the others do the frisking. He just waited quietly for the barrier to go up.

"I never saw the rest of 'em in that race. Chang leaped ahead at the start, and I gave him his head—we won going away." Henry swept a hand across his eyes. "It wasn't until he had come to a stop that he suddenly trembled, staggered, vainly attempted to keep his feet, then fell to the ground dead. The doctors never knew what actually killed him—finally said that it was a blood clot or something like that. I never knew what to believe. The only thing that mattered was that Chang was gone—but the record he set that day still stands."

Henry stopped and his gaze turned to the Black.

"I never thought I would see a horse that could break that record—until now," he said. The Black's

long neck stretched far over his stall door. He shook his head and whinnied.

Carefully Henry put the shirt back into the bundle and rose to his feet. He carried it over to the corner of the barn and placed it inside the trunk. Then he turned around and faced the boy. "There's just one thing that stands in our way of putting the Black in a race, Alec."

"You mean because he's so wild, Henry?"

"No, I don't mean that. By spring we should have him calmed down a bit. But I read in the paper just now of how you got the Black. You didn't tell me this morning."

"I was going to, Henry, but why does that stand in his way?"

"Only that you don't have any record of who his sire and dam were, and, Alec, a horse must be registered to run in a race."

Alec felt a sick feeling in his stomach—he hadn't realized how much he had looked forward to seeing the Black race. "You mean, Henry, we have to find that out before we can put the Black on a track?"

"'Fraid so, kid," Henry answered. Alec could see that he was as disappointed as himself. "Isn't there any way you could possibly get that information?" the little man asked.

"I don't see how, Henry. I know the name of the port in Arabia where he got on, but that's all. Everyone on the ship was drowned, so there aren't any records we could possibly get."

Henry thought a minute. Then he said, "I'll drop a line to a friend of mine in the Jockey Club. Maybe he can help us—some way."

"Gee, Henry, I hope so!"

"We have all winter to try and find out," Henry said. "Maybe they can trace him from the town or somethin'. He looks like too valuable a horse not to be registered in a Stud Book somewhere!" He walked toward the door. "Have to be gettin' back now or the Missus'll be comin' down for me!" He stopped and put a hand in his pocket. He took out a piece of paper. "Wrote down what we need for the Black to eat, Alec," he said. "After you get finished, you can go down to the feed store and get 'em. We can't have the big boy eating all of Napoleon's grain, you know." He paused and his hand went once again inside his pocket. "Seein' that we're goin' to work together, it's only fair that I share some of the expenses, Alec, so I want to pay for this."

"You don't have to do that, Henry. Dad's going to give me a regular allowance for the work I do around the house."

Henry smiled. "Sure," he came back, "and we're going to need all the money we can get—it takes money to make a champion, y'know. And we can't skimp on the Black's food. That's why we're going to have to work together just like partners. C'mon now, take this money and beat it down to the store." Henry shoved the money into the boy's hand.

Alec looked from the old jockey to the stallion. "Okay, partner," he said, smiling.

The next morning Alec went back to school. Whiff Sample and Bill Lee fell in beside him as he left the building at 12:30.

"What's all this about you bein' in a shipwreck and everything?" Whiff asked excitedly.

"Yeah, it was in the paper yesterday morning, and you even came home with a horse," Bill finished.

"It's the truth," Alec answered. "And if you don't believe me, come on along and I'll show him to you. I'm going over to the stable now."

"We sure will," they answered together.

When they reached the barn, Alec saw Henry. "Hello," he yelled.

"So you brought along some spectators, heh, Alec?"

Whiff's and Bill's eyes were turned toward the field where the Black grazed in a corner. "Gosh," they said.

The Black raised his head when he heard Alec's voice. His ears pricked forward and he whistled. Alec whistled back. Suddenly the horse broke toward them. Whiff and Bill hung back with Henry, as Alec walked toward the fence.

The Black hesitated when he saw the newcomers. He screamed and trotted back down the field. Henry didn't have to urge Whiff and Bill to move out of sight. They ran into the barn—their eyes wide with excitement. "Did you see him!" gasped Bill.

"Boy, he's the biggest horse I ever did see and what a mean look!" answered Whiff. They watched from the window of the barn.

The Black broke into a long, loping gait and ran toward Alec, as he walked into the field. "Better get back, Alec," yelled Henry. "If he doesn't slow up, he'll hit you."

The stallion thundered down upon the boy. Five yards away he swerved, barely missing him. He ran to the fence, turned and once again ran toward him. He swerved as he had done before. "Better get out of there, Alec," Henry warned.

"He just wants to play, Henry," Alec yelled over his shoulder. "We did this all the time on the island! It's like a game of tag."

"Yeah," Henry called, "some fun!" He watched as Alec ran after the Black until he got him into a corner. The stallion reared and pawed the ground. He ran to one side, then to the other. Alec slowly approached him, both hands spread apart. The Black snorted, his long mane falling over his eyes. Suddenly Alec ran toward him. The stallion whirled and broke for the side. Alec reached out and slapped him on the hindquarters. The Black ran to the center of the field, then turned and looked back, shaking his head.

"What a pair!" Henry said to himself.

The stallion charged back at the boy, again swerving when he was almost on top of him. For ten minutes Henry watched the strangest game he had ever witnessed. And slowly he began to understand the strange understanding that had grown between this wild stallion and the boy.

A few minutes later Alec came up to him. His shirt was wet with sweat and his blue eyes glistened with excitement. "Do you see, Henry," he exclaimed, "he just wanted to play! Look at him, Henry—did you ever see anything so great in all your life?"

The Black had broken into a gallop and was running around the field. His mane flew back in the wind,

and as he neared them his powerful strides shook the ground. He swept past. Henry didn't say anything until the stallion had come to a stop at the other end of the field, had whirled and looked back at them. Henry's own eyes were bright, too. "No," he said, "I've never seen anything like him—not even Chang.

"I wrote to my friend in the Jockey Club," he continued after a moment's silence. "I explained the situation and asked if there wasn't some way we could check up on the Black's pedigree. He should be registered somewhere."

"How long before he'll answer you, Henry?"

"Should be sometime this week, telling us what to do, anyway."

"I hope so," Alec said. "It can't be too soon for me."

"Me, either. . . . Guess we'd better bring him in now; he's been out long enough. Then we'll make the fence a little higher in spots, so we won't be chasing him through the park like we did yesterday."

The boy whistled and the Black came running toward him. Alec grabbed him by the halter and rubbed his nose. He was leading him toward the barn when he heard someone shout, "Hey, Alec, keep away! Don't bring him in here! We're here!" The stallion snorted.

"What do you know, Henry, I forgot all about Whiff and Bill," Alec said. "They're still in the barn. . . . Come on out, fellows. I'll hold the Black here."

The two boys came out, a little sheepishly.

"Guess we'd better get home to lunch," Whiff said. They hurried down the driveway as the stallion screamed softly.

"Guess they believe me now," Alec said, grinning.

After dinner that same night, Alec went back to the barn. Tony had already stabled old Napoleon for the night. Alec saw him shove his white nose over into the Black's stall to steal some of his oats. The Black playfully nipped him, and Napoleon quickly withdrew his head. Alec couldn't get over the fancy the Black had taken to Napoleon. He wasn't afraid to leave him alone now, for as long as the old, gray horse was around, the stallion was quiet. A little later Alec bedded the Black's stall, turned out the lights and went home.

Days passed into weeks, weeks into months. And Alec's life, from the moment his alarm awakened him at five o'clock every morning until he closed his books at night, became as regular as a time clock. Always in the morning before school, he would feed, groom and ride the Black around the field. If the weather was nice, he would leave him outside, knowing Henry would be around to watch him. He didn't have time for games after school with the fellows any more. He had too many things to do. He would rush home at 12:30, as soon as his last class was over, eat lunch and then once again go to the stables where Henry was usually waiting for him.

Henry had received an answer from his friend in the Jockey Club, giving him the address of a Stud Book Registry Office in the Middle East. "It's very doubtful whether they can help you, though," he wrote, "as you have so little information to work on. However, I'm sure that they will do their best."

Henry wrote to them. "Now all we can do is wait and hope," he told Alec. "It will take a long time. That isn't going to stop us from training the Black, though. I want to put a watch on that fella—even if we aren't ever able to put him in a race!"

They hadn't attempted to put saddle or bridle on the Black yet. Henry wanted to wait until spring. The weather became cold and the ground hard.

"Our real work begins in the spring," Henry told Alec. "Now we'll just take it easy!" Under Henry's expert tutelage, Alec's riding skill became greater and greater until Henry nodded with approval. "A grand combination," he said to himself as he watched the boy ride high on the stallion's withers as he galloped down the field.

After the workouts, Alec would usually spend the rest of the afternoon doing the odd jobs around home which his father gave him. "Have to earn your allowance," his father said.

He had found plenty of things for him to do, too. Alec never had known there was so much to be done around a house—and his father hadn't missed up on a thing. The front and back porch gleamed with new paint. The garage doors now opened easily and stayed open. The cellar shone with cleanliness. And Alec never knew so many leaves could fall from trees. One day he would rake up and burn hundreds of them; the next day the yard would be covered again. Then with the coming of cold weather, there was work to be done in the house. Luckily enough, even though it was now January, snow hadn't fallen and the walks didn't have to be shoveled.

There was still no news about the Black's parentage.

"I'm afraid it's no use, Henry," Alec told him.

"Don't give up yet, son," Henry replied, but Alec could tell that he, too, had very little hope.

One afternoon, Alec walked toward the barn. The sky was overcast and the air cold. "Have to take it easy with him today," he thought. He pulled open the barn door. Henry sat in his favorite chair, tipped perilously back on two legs against the wall. He was looking at the Black, who was moving restlessly in his stall.

Henry turned as the boy closed the door. "Hello, Alec," he said.

"Hello, Henry. What's the matter with the Black?"

"He's all right," replied Henry. "Kept him in all morning, though, and he's pretty fidgety. The ground's pretty hard, and I didn't want him out there by himself. He'll feel better after you've given him a few turns around the field. Do your best to hold him down."

The stallion snorted and reached his head out toward Alec. Alec went over and placed a hand on his nose. "Hello, fella," he said. "Want to get some air, don't you?" The stallion shook his head.

"How's everything at school?" Henry asked.

"Managing all right, Henry. Made up most of my work, and things seem to be working out better than ever before. Guess it must be the regular hours," and he laughed.

"Yep," said Henry. "Keep it up, Alec, and we'll show your folks that you can raise a champion race horse and get good marks at the same time!"

Alec looked out the window. "Henry," he exclaimed, "look, it's snowing!"

The front legs of Henry's chair came down with a bang. He went to the window beside Alec. "Sure enough it is," he said. They watched the snow fall heavier and heavier. "Well, it's about time, anyway. Never seen it hang off so long before," he said.

"Yeah," said Alec glumly, "and I can just see myself shoveling tons of it off the walk!"

A regular blizzard started raging outside. "Sure is coming down," said Henry.

The Black was watching the snow, too. His eyes were wide with wonder, his ears pitched forward. "Henry," said Alec, "look at the Black. This is the first time he's seen snow!"

"That's right!" exclaimed Henry. "They don't have any where he comes from!"

"Wonder how he's going to react to it?"

"Shouldn't bother him any," answered Henry. The Black pawed the bedding of his stall.

"Seems pretty nervous," Alec said.

"Yep, but that's because he hasn't been out," replied Henry thoughtfully.

For the next half hour, Henry and Alec watched the falling snow. "Seems to be stopping now," said Alec.

A few minutes later the sun broke out of the clouds. "Certainly is beautiful out there now," said Henry as he and Alec watched the sun's rays glisten on the white snow.

The boy turned toward the Black. "Do you think we dare take him out, Henry?" he asked.

Henry looked at the stallion, who was still pacing his stall. "He sure needs the air, Alec. It's hard to keep a horse of his nature penned up, even for a day. Do you think you could manage him?"

Alec smiled. "I'm not afraid of anything with the Black, Henry—you know that," he answered.

Henry grinned. "Okay, let's get him out!" he said as he walked toward the stall.

As soon as Henry opened the stall door, the Black pushed his way out. Alec grabbed hold of his halter. "Whoa, Boy," he said.

Henry moved toward the barn door. "Better lead him around awhile until he gets used to it," he said as he pulled back on the door. The Black shied and Alec took a firmer grip on the halter. Cautiously he led the stallion out of the barn.

The air was cold and still. The Black's hoofs sank into the snow. He moved gingerly around the boy, never letting his feet remain more than a fraction of a second in the same spot. The snow flew in all directions. Slowly Alec led the Black around the yard in front of the barn. The stallion kept shaking his head, and his breath shot from his nostrils, sending two streams of thick vapor into the air.

Alec attached the lead rope to the halter, giving him more room to run around. The stallion made a circle around him. Suddenly he stopped. Cautiously he lowered himself to the ground and then rolled over on his back. His legs waved above him.

"Look at him!" Alec shouted to Henry. "He loves it!"

After a few minutes, the Black climbed to his feet.

Alec took him by the halter. "How'd you like it, fella?" he asked. The stallion shook his head. Alec laughed and brushed the snow off his back. "Okay to get on him now, Henry?" he asked.

"Sure," answered Henry. He walked over beside the Black and boosted Alec onto the stallion.

"Remember, take it as easy as you can," cautioned Henry, as Alec guided the Black into the field. He went at a fast walk, his legs sinking deeper and deeper into the snow.

Alec reached down and patted the Black's neck. "How do you like this, fella?" he asked again. The Black swerved a little and broke into a slow trot. Alec let him go and then drew him up into a walk again. "Take it easy, Boy," he said.

Now Alec let the Black go where he wanted to. He knew the stallion was enjoying the snow. He headed down into the hollow at the lower end of the field. The snow was a little deeper there. The stallion stepped high and once he rose a little on his hind legs. Alec guided him out of the hollow. The Black broke into a canter and Alec let him go, but kept a firm hand on him. The cold wind blew in his face and the snow went flying. When they reached the end of the field, he pulled the stallion up.

After an hour of riding, he saw Henry wave him in. He turned the Black toward the barn. "He liked the snow," he said when he came up to Henry.

"Sure looked that way," Henry said, grinning. "Wasn't as bad as I thought he'd be!"

Alec dismounted. "He's acting more like a gentleman every day," he said.

"Yep," said Henry, "and when spring rolls around he should be all ready for us to go to work on him."

"Spring," repeated Alec. "It isn't far away, Henry—just a few short months."

The man and boy looked at each other—both thinking the same thing. Henry's gaze shifted to the Black. "Maybe around the first of April, if all goes well," he said.

TRAINING BEGINS

12

Alec's feet scraped beneath his desk. He fidgeted with the pencil in his hand. The paper in front of him was blank. He couldn't think about geometry at a time like this. His eyes again went to the clock on the side of the wall—12:15. Another fifteen minutes and he'd be on his way! His gaze shifted to the huge calendar hanging over the blackboard—April first! He had waited so long for that date, and now it was here. Today, after months of preparation, they were to break the Black to bridle and saddle, start the real training of the Black, even though no word had yet reached them from the Middle East concerning the stallion's pedigree. Henry had written two more letters in the last few months.

Alec saw the teacher looking at him, so his gaze dropped to the paper in front of him. The minutes crept by as slowly as all the months of waiting. He couldn't stand this much longer—he'd just have to go!

Suddenly the bell rang, and like a sprinter off on his marks, Alec leaped for the door. He had it opened

and was out in the corridor before the rest of the class had started to move. He ran down the hall, heard an authoritative voice tell him to stop, but kept running. Nor did he stop when he reached the street. He ran until he was too tired to go farther, then slowed down to a fast walk.

He rushed into the house and threw his books on the couch. His mother had lunch ready. He sat down to eat, but he was too excited. He looked up at his mother. "I'm sorry, Mom, but I'm not hungry today," he said. His mother looked at him. She saw the high flush of excitement on his face.

"Something important going on?" she asked.

"Kinda, Mom," Alec answered as he finished a glass of milk. "I won't be home until dinner. I'll make up for my lunch then!" He ran out of the house. His mother stood in the doorway and watched him as he tore down the street.

Alec found Henry nervously pacing up and down in front of the barn. "Hello, Henry!" he called.

"Hello, son," Henry replied, taking the pipe from his mouth. "Nice warm day for it." He looked up at the sun high overhead.

Alec saw the stallion out in the field. "How does he feel today?"

"He's been pretty frisky all morning. Guess the warm weather is making him feel pretty good, too," answered Henry.

They watched the Black for a few minutes. Then Henry said, "Well, son, we might as well get started. Feel okay?"

"Sure. What's the difference riding the Black with a saddle or without one?"

Henry knocked the ashes from his pipe. "All depends on the horse, but let's get going. I picked up an old saddle in New York yesterday. It isn't so good, but it'll do the trick until we get him on a track and can use mine." Henry walked toward the barn.

Alec whistled. The Black raised his head and came trotting up to him. "Hello, fella." Alec put his hand on the stallion's neck.

The Black shoved his nose into Alec's side pocket. Alec playfully shoved him away and pulled a couple of lumps of sugar out of his pocket.

"Want some sugar, heh, Boy?"

The stallion swept his long, pink tongue over Alec's hand and the sugar disappeared.

Henry came toward them carrying the bridle and saddle. "Let's get over in the middle of the field where you'll have plenty of room."

"Okay," answered Alec. The Black trotted beside Alec. When they came to the center, Henry placed the bridle and saddle on the ground. "We'll try the saddle first," he said. "No telling what's going to happen."

Alec stood at the Black's head, a firm grip on the halter. Henry took the saddle in his arms and went around to the left side of the stallion. Alec saw the Black's eyes turn toward Henry. He sensed something was up and moved uneasily. Alec stroked him and spoke in his ear.

Henry said, "Hold him now, son."

Alec gripped the halter tighter. Henry raised the

saddle over the Black's back and gently placed it on the stallion. He never got the chance to grasp the cinch. The stallion's hindquarters rose in the air and the saddle went flying. He turned nervously in a circle, and Alec had his hands full trying to hang on to him. Henry picked up the saddle and once again approached the Black. "This isn't going to be easy," he said, between clenched teeth. "Hold him again, Alec!"

Once again Henry placed the saddle on the stallion and once again it went flying in the air. "Doesn't give me a chance to tighten the cinch," he said as he picked it up.

Fifteen minutes passed and they still hadn't succeeded in getting the saddle on the Black. Henry and Alec were both tired. Yet the stallion wasn't as excited as Alec had expected him to be. "He's just being contrary," he told Henry.

The Black wouldn't leave the saddle on his back long enough for Henry to get the girth straps through the buckles. "If I could only some way get 'em through and tighten that saddle on him!" he said.

Alec thought a minute. "It's the cinch that bothers him. Let's lengthen it all the way on my side, then I'll hold the saddle just above his back while you get the ends of the straps through the buckles. Once I drop the saddle, you tighten. You'll have to work fast. . . ."

"Might work," said Henry.

The Black moved nervously around. "Whoa, Boy," Alec said. He lowered the saddle as close to the stallion's back as possible, so Henry could get the straps into the buckles.

"All set, Henry?" Alec asked.

"Just a second," came the answer.

The Black was looking toward the far end of the field. Henry said in a low voice, "Okay, now."

Quickly Alec placed the saddle on the Black's back. The stallion reared. Alec jumped to one side. Henry was dangerously close to the Black, his hands feverishly pulling the straps through the buckles. Alec saw him give a final tug, then he flung himself out of the way of the Black's pawing hoofs. "Got it," he shouted. "Get out of his way!"

The stallion reared again and then raced down the field, swerving and throwing his hind legs in the air. He tried desperately to get rid of the saddle. Alec and Henry watched him as he plunged around the field. Suddenly the Black reared high on his legs and then fell over backward. They heard the saddle break.

"There it goes," said Alec.

"If he doesn't get it off, it'll be worth it!" answered Henry.

The Black finally climbed to his feet. The saddle was torn and broken, but still on his back. Again the stallion raced up the field, his excited eyes shifting from one side to the other. As he neared them, Alec whistled. The stallion swept past them. Alec whistled again. Suddenly the Black stopped, half-reared and turned. His ears pricked forward and he stood still for a few seconds. Then he was off again down the field, swerving and kicking.

"It's a good thing you were able to get that cinch tight, Henry!"

"Yeah," answered Henry, his eyes still following the Black.

Alec whistled again when the stallion came up the field. The Black stopped about thirty feet from them. Alec cautiously walked toward him.

"What's the matter, fella? Frightened of that saddle on your back?"

The stallion turned and Alec thought he was going to run down the field again. Instead he circled and then stood still. Alec put his hand in his pocket and drew out some sugar. He held it out toward the Black. "Here, Boy." Slowly he walked up to him and gave him the sugar. He stroked the long, sleek neck. "You'll get used to it, fella." He saw that the saddle was pretty well damaged but still usable.

"Walk him around a few minutes, Alec," Henry shouted.

Alec took the Black by the lead rope and started down the field. The stallion stepped lightly along, every once in a while throwing his hind legs in the air. Ten minutes later Alec led him back to Henry. "He isn't so bad now," he said.

"Hop on him then, and let's see what happens."

"Okay," answered Alec, moving toward the left side of the stallion.

Henry gave the boy a boost and he landed in the saddle. A fraction of a second later he found himself flying through the air. The ground rushed up at him. Alec managed to draw his feet up under him and break his fall. He lay still a moment, his body aching. Henry rushed over and knelt down beside him. "Hurt, son?" he asked anxiously.

"Guess not, Henry. Just a little jarred."

Henry ran his fingers over Alec's legs. "Try getting

to your feet," he said. Alec pulled himself up. He was unsteady for a moment, and then his head began to clear. He saw the Black a few feet away. The stallion looked at him and then came forward. He pushed his nose into Alec's side pocket. "Seems just like old times on the island," Alec said. He turned to Henry. "Why does he throw me just because he has a saddle on his back?"

"Guess it's just one of those things, Alec. You never know how a horse like this is going to act," Henry answered. "He isn't used to the saddle yet, and I don't think he really knew you were on his back; all he could feel was that extra weight. Now this time talk to him like you always have before, let him know you're getting on—guess we sort of sneaked up on him then. Let him feel your arms and legs."

"Okay, Henry." Alec once again went to the Black's left side.

"Sure you feel all right?" Henry asked. "Want to wait a few minutes?"

"No," replied Alec. He looked at the stallion and held the halter with his two hands. "Now listen, fella, take it easy!" The stallion shook his head, almost taking Alec off his feet.

Alec kept talking into the Black's ear, and his hand ran up and down the stallion's neck. Then he was in the saddle! The Black reared, but this time Alec was prepared. Up he went with the stallion high into the air, both hands grasping the Black's mane. The stallion came down and bolted across the field. Alec leaned forward and kept talking to him. The stallion's speed didn't slacken, and Alec thought he was in for another

ride like the one on the island. Suddenly he found that he was able to guide the stallion—he had control of him. He turned him away from the fence and up the field again. They swept past Henry, and Alec shouted, “Okay!” The stallion didn’t have room enough to run as fast as he wanted to, and after a short while, Alec managed to slow him down and bring him to a stop near Henry.

“Nice going, Alec,” Henry said, gripping the Black’s halter. “We’ll put the bridle on him right away.”

“But don’t you think he’s kind of tired, Henry?”

“That’s one of the reasons why I want to do it now,” Henry answered. “Besides, I don’t think he’s going to mind this as much as the saddle; it has a very light racing bit, and isn’t much more than the halter he’s got on now.”

“You’re the boss, Henry,” Alec said. “How’ll we do it?”

“You stay right on his back. I’ll get the bit in his mouth, and then you can draw the bridle right over his head.”

“Okay,” Alec said, as Henry moved in front of the Black.

Henry’s experienced hands had the bit in the Black’s mouth within a few minutes. Alec quickly drew the bridle over the stallion’s head. The Black shook his head and moved uneasily around in a circle. Alec let him alone. For fifteen minutes he let the Black get used to the bit, then he guided him down the field. Carefully, and in much the same manner as he had done back on the island, Alec taught the Black to turn right and left by a slight touch of the rein. There wasn’t much differ-

ence between Alec's old way and the use of the reins, and the Black caught on quickly.

Alec rode back to Henry and dismounted. Henry smiled. "That, Alec," he said, "is what I call a good day's work."

"Sure is, Henry." Alec rubbed the Black's nose. "Nice going, Boy," he said proudly.

The sun was sinking behind Manhattan's skyscrapers in the distance as the man, the boy and the horse made their way back toward the barn.

NIGHT RIDE

13

Alec glanced at his wrist watch as he hurried away from the still-dark house where his mother and father were sleeping. One o'clock. It was two weeks since they had broken the Black to bridle and saddle. The full moon was high overhead; the stars were out; a warm spring breeze blew against his face. Henry would be waiting.

He reached the gate and let himself in. The truck Henry had borrowed was standing beside the barn. Henry was leaning against it.

"Everything all set, Henry?" Alec whispered.

"All set," came the quiet answer. He opened the barn door carefully so as not to make any noise. "Don't put on the light," he said over his shoulder, as Alec followed him inside.

The Black neighed when he heard them. Old Napoleon stuck his head out of his stall and neighed, too.

"Shhhh," said Alec and Henry together.

"Get over there and quiet them," Henry said. "I'll get the tack."

Alec put a hand on each of their noses. "Take it easy, boys," he said. "We don't want to wake anyone up, you know."

The horses recognized him now in the moonlight. The Black tossed his head gently; Napoleon brushed his long tongue around the boy's hand.

Henry returned, carrying the bridle and saddle. "Okay," he said. "Bring him out."

Alec led the Black out of his stall, without removing his blanket. The stallion stepped skittishly, his hoofs shaking the barn floor.

"Hey, Alec," Henry cautioned, "try to get him to stand still! He's going to wake the Missus sure as shootin'!"

"I'll try, Henry," the boy answered. "He seems pretty nervous, though; guess he isn't used to being awakened in the middle of the night!" The Black looked back at Napoleon and whinnied as Alec led him toward the barn door. Then Henry closed the door behind them.

Suddenly Napoleon neighed inside the barn—louder than either of them had ever heard him before.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" said Henry, as he ran toward the barn. "We'll never get out of here without waking someone up!"

The Black raised his head high in the air, his ears pitched forward, and he answered Napoleon's call. Alec looked at him, then at the barn.

"Henry," he said.

"Yeah."

"I've got an idea. Why not take Napoleon with us? The two of them can fit into the truck—and I've a feeling it'll make the Black a lot easier to handle, besides being a lot quieter."

Henry looked thoughtfully at the restless stallion. "Okay," he finally said. "It's worth trying." A minute later he led Napoleon toward the truck.

The Black neighed softly when he saw him, and Alec had no trouble getting him up the ramp into the truck. Henry followed with Napoleon. "Now," said Henry, "we not only have to get this moving van back to the guy I borrowed it from before six, but we have to get Napoleon back to Tony as well!"

"It's only one-thirty now," Alec said.

"We have to be over there by two." Henry climbed into the driver's seat and Alec sat beside him. A minute later the truck was moving down the driveway. Only the sound of hoofs came from the back of the van.

Henry drove rapidly through the darkened streets, and half an hour later they pulled up in front of a high iron gate. He touched the horn lightly twice. Over the gate Alec made out the name BELMONT. A glimpse of white caught his eye. Two hands grasped the bars, and a head topped with snow-white hair peered through.

"That you, Henry?" an aged high-pitched voice asked.

Henry leaned far out over the side of the car. "Yeah, Jake—it's me," he answered softly. "Everything okay?"

"Okay," came the answer.

Alec heard the rattle of keys, then the turning of the lock. A moment later the gate swung open. Henry put the car in gear and drove through. The gate was closed behind him. Henry didn't stop; he drove as if he knew his way around.

"Who was that, Henry?" Alec asked.

Henry kept his eyes on the graveled road in front of him, but Alec noticed a slight smile on his lips. "That's Jake," he answered. "We've been pals from 'way back. In fact," he grinned, "Jake taught me to ride. I was just a kid who loved horses and I wanted to ride, but I'd never even been on a horse. I used to go around and watch the early morning workouts, dreaming of the day when I'd be out there on some thoroughbred. Jake was a well-known jockey then—and I guess I sorta idolized him, but then all the kids did. Well, I guess Jake took me in hand just because he couldn't get rid of me. Anyway, he taught me 'most everything I know—and if I've been a success, he's the reason for it. Jake later went into training horses—and now he's sorta, well—retired, I guess you could call it."

Henry paused as he carefully turned a corner. Then he continued, "Y'know, Alec, horses are kind of like the sea, you'll find out—once you get used to 'em and learn to love 'em, you can't ever give them up. That's Jake and that's me. Jake's only the watchman around here now, but he loves it. There are horses training around here most of the year, and the track'll be opening up pretty soon, so he's content." Henry brought the truck to a stop beside the track.

"Are you sure no one's around, Henry?" Alec asked.

"Sure," answered Henry. "There are only a few horses in training and Jake's keeping an eye on them, so we practically have the place to ourselves."

Henry had pulled up beside an unloading ramp. They jumped out and went around to open the back doors. The horses whinnied as Alec climbed in beside them. The stallion threw back his head and tried to break free.

Alec grasped him by the halter. "Whoa, fella, take it easy," he said. He backed the Black out onto the ramp and then down to the ground.

Henry followed with Napoleon. "It'll be a good thing to have Napoleon around where the Black can see him," he said. "Now you'd better walk the Black up and down a few times to get him loosened up."

"Okay," Alec said.

A few minutes later, when he walked the Black back toward the truck, he heard old Jake's high-pitched voice again and saw the little white-haired man talking to Henry. "Bejabbers, Henry," he was saying, "don't tell me that gray imitation of a hoss there is the champion that I'm riskin' my job for!"

Henry laughed. "Bejabbers yourself, Jake," he said. "Don't jump to conclusions so fast. You haven't seen this gray devil run yet."

"I'm too old a hand around here, my lad, for you to make me believe this critter can do anything but go around that track in a walk—bejabbers, I am," Jake replied.

Alec couldn't help laughing. Jake heard him and turned. Then he saw the Black, and his mouth opened wide. Slowly he walked toward the stallion. The Black

reared a little, but Alec quieted him down. Jake went around him, his eyes covering every inch of the Black.

Henry came up. "Well, Jake," he said, after a minute of silence, "what do you think of him?"

Jake looked up at him. "You sure were right, Henry. You've got a real horse here."

"Worth risking your job for?" Henry smiled.

"Worth risking my job for," the old man answered, nodding his head. "Haven't seen a horse like him"—he continued—"since Chang."

"That's just what I told Alec," Henry said. He winked at Alec. "Jake," he said, "meet the owner of this black stallion, Alec Ramsay—Alec, this is Jake."

Alec grasped the old man's hand in a warm clasp, and was surprised at the strength in Jake's fingers. "Glad to know you, son," Jake said.

"And I'm glad to know you, sir," answered Alec. "It was awfully nice of you to let us in here. Henry and I certainly appreciate it."

"Glad to do it," Jake replied. "Guess Henry knows my weakness. When he said you had a champion, I had to see for myself."

"You'll never change, Jake." Henry laughed.

"'Fraid not." The old man grinned.

The Black tossed his head, and the night breeze blew his mane. "He's rarin' to go, Henry," Alec said.

"Okay, I'll get the saddle." Henry moved toward the truck. "Stick around, Jake," he said over his shoulder, "and you'll see the fastest thing on four legs."

"Don't worry. I'm not a-goin'," Jake answered. "Come on, son." He turned to Alec. "We'll take him down near the gate."

A few minutes later Henry came up and threw the saddle on the Black. The stallion pranced easily, then reared a little when Henry tightened the cinch. Alec and Jake put the bridle on him.

"All set," Henry said, when they had finished. He turned to Alec. "Now the idea tonight, kid," he said, "is just to get him used to the track. Lucky there's a full moon so it isn't so dark out there, and I don't think you'll have any trouble seeing. Keep him under control as much as you can—try not to let him have his head until coming down the homestretch, then if everything is okay, let him out for a few hundred yards. I've been waiting a long while for this! Before you start, walk him down a ways and back. Got it?"

"Right," answered Alec.

Jake was leaning on the fence, his white head against the rail, his eyes on the stallion. He moved slightly and Alec saw the flash of silver in his hand. He knew Jake held a stopwatch.

Henry boosted Alec up on the Black's back and adjusted the stirrups. His knees came up, and he squatted on the small racing saddle like a veteran. The stallion moved uneasily. Henry led him out on the track.

"Okay, son," he said. "Walk him down and back first."

The Black stepped quickly over the soft dirt, his head high, his eyes shifting from side to side. Alec reached over and patted his neck. "Take it easy, fella," he murmured. The stallion wanted to run and Alec had his hands full keeping him to a walk. He went to the first turn and then came back. The night was warm, and as they approached Henry, Alec pulled off his sweater.

"Save this till I come back." He tossed it to Henry, and walked the Black a few yards past him.

"Here goes," he said as he whirled the Black around.

The stallion reared. The boy clung to his neck, his white shirt standing out vividly against the Black's body. Then the stallion bolted forward. Alec tightened the reins and held him in. Down the track they streaked, the stallion's giant strides swallowing up the yards. Alec, high in his stirrups, hung low beside the Black's neck. The wind blew in his face and tears streamed down his cheeks. They swung around the first turn and into the backstretch. Alec kept him close to the white fence. He still held the Black in, but never before had he gone so fast, except on the island.

The stallion loved it and fought for his head. Alec tried frantically to hold him but, halfway down the backstretch, he got the bit in his teeth and ripped the reins out of the boy's control. Once again he was wild and free. Alec pulled on the reins with all his might, but the Black ran faster and faster. Alec couldn't see any more. The wind whipped him like a gale, tearing at his shirt.

As they rounded the far turn, the boy swayed in the saddle. Instinctively he clutched the Black's long mane and hung on for dear life. The stallion thundered into the homestretch. His legs were pounding the turf. They flashed past Henry and Jake, and then around the first turn they went again and once more into the backstretch.

Alec was weak from exhaustion. He tried to think. He had to stop the Black. He pulled desperately on the

reins, but the stallion was once again on his own, running as he had been born to run.

It wasn't until they were halfway down the backstretch again that Alec felt the Black slow up just a little. Alec spoke into his ear; he loosened one hand from the mane and rubbed the stallion's neck. From then on his speed lessened gradually and, when they whipped by Henry again, Alec had him almost under control. He managed to slow him down after the first turn, and in the backstretch, Alec at last brought him to a stop.

He turned him around. The Black whistled and shook his head. He was breathing heavily, and a white lather covered his black body. He stepped lightly down the track toward Henry. A few minutes later Henry and Jake ran up to them, and Alec weakly climbed down from the saddle. Henry took the reins—they were sticky and wet with blood. He looked at Alec's bleeding hands, then gave the reins to Jake and put an arm around the boy to steady him. "Take it easy, son," he said.

"I'm all right, Henry," Alec said. "Just beat."

"After that ride you should be," Henry said.

"No one will ever be able to control this horse," Jake said. "Once he gets his head—only thing to do is what y'did, hang on and wait until he tires."

"I'll control him—one of these days," Alec said determinedly. He felt better now; strength was returning to his body and the earth was beginning to stand still. The stallion turned his head toward him, his ears pricked forward and he neighed softly. He shoved his nose against the boy.

Alec put a hand wrapped in a handkerchief against

the soft muzzle. "You can't blame him, Henry," he said. "It's the first real fun he's had in a long, long time. I've just got to learn to stay on his back and enjoy the ride with him, that's all!"

"Yeah," said Jake, "that's all."

They walked off the track, Alec leading the Black. No one spoke again until they reached the truck. Napoleon stood there tied to the side. He raised his old, gray head curiously. Alec led the Black up to him and they put their heads together, the stallion obligingly lowering his.

Henry turned to Jake. "Guess you'll have to admit there isn't a horse in the country that can come close to him," he said.

Jake glanced down at the watch in his hand. "No," he answered. "No, I've never heard of any horse doing the time he did tonight. Sun Raider and Cyclone would give him a race, but he'd beat them—if he ran."

"What do you mean—if he ran?" asked Henry.

Jake nodded toward the Black. "If he ever got on the same track with those horses, there'd never be any race. That horse would want to fight—not run. He's as wild as they come. Where'd you get him, son?" he asked.

Alec looked at Henry, who nodded. Alec told Jake briefly how he had acquired the Black.

When he had finished, Jake said, "Quite a story, son." Then he turned to Henry. "How do you know he's registered anywhere?" he asked. "You know as well as I do he can't run in any of the race meetings without bein' registered."

"Yeah, I know," Henry answered. "We're hoping

he's listed in the Arabian Stud Book. I've been writing to them but they haven't answered—guess they can't find anything!"

Jake looked at the Black. "That horse was born wild, Henry. If I'm any judge—you'll never find him registered."

"I'm afraid you're right, Jake," Henry said, "but you never can tell, something might come up. We can race him against time and have him break a few records—then they'll have to notice him!"

Jake nodded. "Not a bad idea. Lots of people would give their right arm to see what I saw tonight!"

Alec walked the Black up and down for a while and then led him into the truck beside Napoleon. After tying the two horses securely, he jumped off the truck and went around to where Henry and Jake were talking. Henry was saying, "We won't be around tomorrow night—give the boy a rest, but we'll make it the following night. Be at the gate by two o'clock."

"Okay," Jake answered.

Alec and Henry climbed into the front seat. Jake stood on the running board. Alec glanced at his watch. "Three-thirty," he said, as the truck started to roll. "Hope my folks haven't missed me."

"Yeah," murmured Henry, "and I hope the Missus hasn't missed *me* or there'll be plenty of explaining to do when I get home!"

Jake laughed and stuck his white head in through the window. "So she's still wearing the pants in the household, heh, Henry?"

"No, 'tain't that bad." Henry turned a corner sharply. "It's just that she's had enough of horses, and she expects me to be through with 'em, too!"

"Then she still don't know you, does she?" Jake grinned. "You're like me, Henry," he continued, "as long as there's a breath left in your body, you'll want to be around horses and nothing in this world will keep you from 'em."

There was silence until the truck rolled up to the gate. Jake jumped off the running board and opened the gate. As it closed behind them, they waved good-bye to the old man.

"Well, son, you had a tougher time than either of us expected, didn't you?" Henry asked.

"Guess so, Henry," Alec answered, "but I'll be ready for him next time!" He relaxed in the seat and let his head fall back on the cushion behind him.

"Tired?" Henry asked.

"Kinda"—Alec tried to hide the weariness in his voice—"even in spite of that nap I took this afternoon. Mother couldn't understand it—said it was the first time she'd seen me in bed during the afternoon since I was four!"

"Guess you'll have to keep doing that for a while, Alec. I've fixed it up with Jake to go over there about three nights a week. You see, we have to take advantage of the time that we have now, before the track opens up for the season. There'll be too many horses and people around then to risk going in. I don't want to let anyone know about the Black until he races—that is, except Jake; we can trust him."

"If he *does* race," Alec said soberly. "We should've had a letter by this time if he's registered at all!"

"Aw, you never can tell," Henry answered. "They're pretty slow over there, y'know, and then there's probably a lot of things they have to look up."

"Yeah," Alec agreed sleepily. He curled his legs underneath him. "Anyway," he continued, "it's pretty exciting just riding the Black like I did tonight on a track."

"Yeah, and I must say you and the Black did a pretty good job. Made the track record look like it was made by a hobbyhorse!"

Fifteen minutes later they pulled up in front of the barn. Alec led the Black into his stall. Henry stabled Napoleon and then followed Alec into the Black's stall. Together the boy and the man rubbed him down.

A few minutes later they left the darkened barn.

"Good night, Henry," Alec said. "See you tomorrow."

"'Night, Alec."

The Ramsay house was still dark. Alec opened the door carefully and climbed the stairs to his bedroom. All was quiet except for an occasional snore from his father.

Wearily he undressed and climbed into bed—his body aching.

A few hours later the alarm clamored in his ear. Half-consciously he reached for it and turned it off. A sharp pain in his hand drove all the sleepiness from him. He sat up and looked at the blood-stained handkerchief still wrapped around his hand. He let his head fall back

against the pillow. Then it hadn't been a dream! He *had* ridden the Black last night! His eyes rested on the chair beside his bed where he had thrown his clothes. Hanging on the arm was his shirt—ripped by the wind.

His body still ached all over as he threw the blankets off and climbed out of bed. Quickly he dressed and tucked the torn shirt underneath his arm—he would throw it away before his mother saw it. He went into the bathroom, washed and took care of his cut hands. He clenched his teeth as he poured iodine on his hands—but his head was feverish with excitement.