



13. A Strange Threesome

THE CARTER allowed Agba to live in his shed not from kindness but because he could use the boy. He had long wanted someone to load his cart each morning. Now, a slave had come to him as if by magic. And it cost him nothing at all—in money or food or clothing.

Agba gave up his job as awakener. Instead, he helped the fishmongers and the farm women at the market place by day, and so came to the alley at night with presents of little things that horses and cats like.

It was a strange threesome: the boy, the cat, and the horse. Each evening, at the first sound of cartwheels, Grimalkin would fly out of the shed. With a quick leap he was on Sham's back, miaowing and talking to him in his cat's way.

Agba would wait in silence, wait for the creaking wheels to come to a stop, wait for the deep bellowing roar of the carter. Always it was the same.

"You mute! You numps! A horse and a cat for company! Out of my way!"

At first the carter let Agba unharness Sham at night and tend his sores, but when he saw the fiery look return to Sham's eyes he was not pleased. And when, one day, Sham seized him by the breeches and bit him viciously, the carter flew into a rage.

"The brute can sleep harnessed and standing," he told Agba. "A few harness sores'll teach him to respect this!" And he snaked his whip in the air until it hissed.

On Sundays, however, the carter never came near the shed, and it seemed as if all day long the cat never stopped purring and Sham neighed his happiness in a pitiful, thin sound. As for Agba, there was a silent rapture in the way he worked. He washed Sham. He dried and smoothed his coat. He rubbed the horse's legs with the last of the *budra* which he had brought from Africa. He combed Sham's tangled tail and mane. He made cooling poultices of wet leaves and applied them with gentle fingers to all of Sham's sores. He packed the inner walls of Sham's hooves with mud. And he fed him three times a day with the oats he had bought with his own money.

As Agba ran his hand over the wheat ear on Sham's chest or the white spot on his heel, the words of Signor Achmet kept beating in his ears.

"The white spot against the wheat ear. The good sign against the bad. The one and the other."

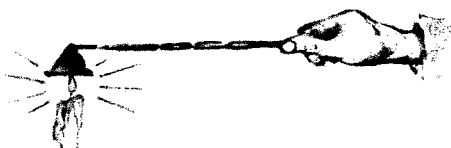
The days shortened into winter. Despite Agba's care, Sham's coat was not coming in thick and glossy as it had in Morocco. It remained harsh and staring. And some nights he was too tired to eat. He would only mouth the food that Agba brought, and drop it listlessly. Day by day Agba watched the skin of Sham's neck grow more and more flabby, and the hollow places above his eyes deepen.

One fierce, cold morning, in the dead of winter, the carter startled the three creatures out of their sleep with a shrill whistle. He stood over them, rubbing his hands in pleasure. *This* was the kind of day he liked. Last night's sleet had stopped. The air was sharpening. People would need plenty of wood to feed their fires. Business would be brisk.

He stood with hands on hips, singing a coarse song while Agba loaded the cart. Usually he was satisfied when the load reached the top of the great cartwheels. But this day he ordered the logs laid higher and higher and he kicked Agba when the boy tried to interfere. At last he had to help tie the logs with a stout hempen cord to keep them from toppling.

"Ho! Ho!" he sang out lustily as he swung his great hulking body atop the load, "I feel sorry for beasts on a frosty day like this, so I give 'em a big load to make 'em sweat. *Allons!*" he shouted, cracking his whip.

Agba saw Sham slip on the icy ramp that led out of the shed. He saw the carter pull him up by a savage tug on the bit. Then horse and cart were lost in the darkness.



Shopkeepers were opening their shutters and the tallow dips of the city were being snuffed out when the carter reached the Boulevard St. Denis.

His first stop was at the Hôtel de Ville, a big gray building with lions at the entrance. To get to the service entrance Sham had to climb a steady upgrade from the street. But try as he would, he could get no footing on the icy cobble stones. Balls of ice had formed inside his hooves, and after many tries he was still pawing and slipping at the very bottom of the incline.

The carter's temper was growing short. He laid the whip across Sham's bony hips. He stood up and lashed it across the horse's ears. He shouted and cursed.

"You tom-noddy! You puny nag! Back up, you beast of a carthorse!"

Icicles were forming on Sham's feelers, yet his body was wet with sweat. He backed up. He lowered his head, and as the whip struck him, he made a snatching pull. The load moved, and as if by some supernatural power Sham kept on going up the incline. When almost at the top, however, his forefeet began slipping. He clawed with them. The whip snarled

and cracked. It cut deep into his hide. Groaning, he tried again, and again. His veins swelled to bursting.

In spite of the bitter weather passers-by stopped to watch. A water-carrier set down his yoke, and stepped forward as if to protest. But one look at the livid face of the carter stopped him.

Sham was sucking for breath, his nostrils going in and out, showing the red lining. Once more he threw himself against the collar of his harness. He struggled to keep his footing. The onlookers were pulling with him, breathing heavily, tensing their muscles as one man, straining, straining to help. But it was no use. With a low moan, Sham fell to his knees.

A great crowd had gathered and a collection of dogs began barking as the carter jerked the reins, trying to lift Sham up by sheer force. But he was caught fast between the shafts of the cart. His eyes were wild and white-ringed with fear, his mouth bleeding.

Leaping to the paving stones the carter braced the cart with a log. "Now," he yelled to the crowd, "I'll take my own faggots and build a fire under his tail. That'll make the stubborn beast rise!"

As he was reaching for his faggots, an Englishman of stately bearing made his way into the crowd. He wore the collarless black coat and the broad-brimmed black hat of a Quaker. Although his garments and manner were sober, there was a fiery look in his eye.

"My friend," he addressed the carter in perfect French, "I have long wanted a quiet old horse." Opening his greatcoat he drew from his inner pocket a handful of gold. "I am pre-



pared," he said coolly, "to offer fifteen louis for the creature."

At sight of the gold the carter's mouth went agape. A greedy light leaped into his eyes. He dropped the faggots. "Fifteen louis for a done-up nag?" he asked incredulously.

"Aye, friend," the Quaker nodded. "I have need of a smallish horse for my son-in-law, Benjamin Biggle."

Even the onlookers were round-eyed now. Why, fifteen louis would buy a fine, high-stepping hackney!

"I suppose ye want my cart and my wood, too," the carter sniveled.

"I want only the horse," the Quaker replied. "I am Jethro Coke of London and didst thou know me, thou wouldst make thy decision quickly. Unharness the poor brute or I may change my mind."

The carter laughed roughly and gave his whip into Jethro Coke's hands. With one eye on the gold he turned to unfasten Sham. But he was too late. A slim brown boy had come seemingly from nowhere at all and was kneeling at the horse's feet, unhitching his harness. What surprised the crowd even more was to see a tiger cat poke his head out of the boy's hood and begin to lick the horse's face.

Such a laughter and a clapping went up that it sounded more like an audience at a puppet show than a group of early morning citizens on their way to the day's tasks.



14. Benjamin Biggle Goes for a Ride

THE QUAKER, Jethro Coke, was a retired merchant who owned a parcel of land on the outskirts of London. The plight of the over-burdened horse had moved him to action. Now he saw a boy who also needed help.

“At the foot of a wooded hill,” he told Agba, “I’ve an olden barn. It has not heard the whinny of a horse nor the cushioned footfalls of a cat for many a year. Thou and thy cat, too, will be welcome there. The poor broken-down horse has need of you both.”

And so, within less than a week, Sham and Agba and Grimalkin were on their way to England.

When Agba beheld the comfortable barn and the hillside pastures owned by Mister Coke, he was certain that the power of the wheat ear had spent itself.

Jethro Coke's wife was dead, and he had given the running of his household to Mistress Cockburn, a plump, motherly person who had eyes like black raisins and always a red spot on each cheek, as if she had just been bending over a hot fire.

Mistress Cockburn not only found time to roast great haunches of mutton and stir up puddings and cakes, but she waited upon Mister Coke's daughter and played nursemaid to her new baby. As for Benjamin Biggle, Mistress Cockburn set a place at table for him and nodded a stiff good morning to him with her starched cap. More than that she would not do.

"Benjamin Biggle is a fat dolt!" she told Mister Coke on more than one occasion. And while Mister Coke was inclined, secretly, to agree with her, he tried to make the best of matters for his daughter's sake. Besides, he was a birthright Quaker and he looked upon all God's creatures as friends.

"Benjamin," he said to his son-in-law shortly after his return from Paris, "I've a surprise for thee. Follow me."

With an expectant gleam in his eye, Benjamin Biggle followed Mister Coke down the hill to the barn. There they looked in upon a busy scene. Agba, his hood thrown back, was dyeing the white tufts of hair that had grown in on Sham's knees where he had cut them in the streets of Paris. Meanwhile Grimalkin was sitting on Sham's back, polishing his own whiskers.

"Good morning, friends," the Quaker nodded in turn to Agba and Sham and Grimalkin.

The sound of Mister Coke's voice fell pleasantly upon Sham's ears. And Agba's hands, as they applied the dye made from rootlets, felt comforting to him. He stood so still he might have been a stuffed horse in a museum.

"I bought this poor beast out of pity," Mister Coke was saying to his son-in-law. "He appears to be gaunt and bowed by years and ill use, but with the good care of this devoted boy he will fill out and make thee a nice quiet pacer."

"Aye, Papa Coke," replied Benjamin Biggle as he squared his hat over his small black wig. "Upwards of a year I have needed a horse and carriage."

The blood mounted in Mister Coke's face. For a long moment he seemed unable to speak. Then he controlled his voice with effort. "A horse, aye," he said, "but a carriage, no! A carriage is not necessary and therefore would be a vain adornment. Pride and conceit are against my principles."

"But, Papa Coke," pleaded the son-in-law, biting his lip nervously, "I have never sat a horse!"

"Pshaw and nonsense! I can assure thee that a child could sit this sedate mount. He is just the horse for a draper like thee. In my mind's eye I can already see thee, traveling about the countryside, calling on housewives."

Benjamin Biggle's face was growing as white as a mixing of dough. He took a sidelong glance at Sham, who returned the look with a warning movement of his ears.

"It would seem best," said Mister Coke as he lifted the pocket flap of his coat and took an almanack from his pocket, "it would seem best to wait until, say, Third Month, Fourth

Day. The almanack promises more settled weather then and the little cob should be ready for a gentle canter. Shall we say the forenoon of Third Month, Fourth Day, for thy first ride? ”

Benjamin Biggle sighed in relief. Third Month was a long time off. “ Be it so, Papa Coke,” he said brightly. Then he squinted at the position of the sun. “ Mistress Cockburn is probably buttering the scones for our tea. We would better go.”

Agba watched the two men walk up the hill—the long strides of Mister Coke and the quick, rocking gait of Mister Biggle. Then he went back to work on Sham’s scars.

With the coming of spring, Sham lost his starveling look. He began to appear the four-year-old that he really was. Once more his coat was burnished gold, with the course of his veins showing full and large.

Under the kind mothering of Mistress Cockburn, Agba thrived, too. She filled his plate with pigeon pie and dumplings, and when she discovered that the boy had a special liking for confections, she saw to it that each day he had a goodly helping of whipped syllabub or almond cake, or perhaps an apple pasty. All the while the boy ate, Mistress Cockburn kept up such a stream of conversation that it was scarcely any time at all before he understood such English words as: *eat, poor boy, a bit of cake, beautiful daughter, fat dolt*. Mistress Cockburn even found time to teach Agba his letters from her cookery book.

In return he would show her the amulets in his bag and Sham’s pedigree. Of course she could not read the Arabic writing, but she was tremendously impressed with its importance.



Fourth Day of Third Month dawned. In spite of the promise of the almanack, there was a fine drizzle in the air. But Jethro Coke was not one to be thwarted by weather. He saw to it that his son-in-law was up and about early. He even fitted him with an oiled cloth cover for his hat and an oiled cloth cape for his shoulders.

As Agba led Sham, all saddled and bridled, out of his stall and up the winding path to the house, the horse took one look at the flapping figure coming toward him. Then his ears went back and he jolted to a stop. He snorted at the voluminous cape of oiled cloth. He listened to the noise it made as it bellied in the wind. Benjamin Biggle must have seemed like some great monster to him. It was all Agba could do to keep him from galloping back to the barn.

At sight of Sham, Benjamin Biggle halted, too. For a full moment it looked as if his knees might buckle under his weight. If Sham was afraid of him, it was plain to see that he was twice as fearful of Sham.

"Be not unnerved, son," said Mister Coke. "It is thy oiled cloth cape that alarms the creature. Step right up."

Agba led Sham to the mounting block, then stood holding the reins.

"Come, come, Benjamin!" reasoned Mister Coke. "Let not the horse sense thy fear. Here, take the reins thyself. Now then, swing aboard!"

Shaking in fright, Mister Biggle took the reins. Then with his right hand he took hold of his left foot and tried to thrust it into the stirrup. Instead, he gave Sham a vicious jab in the ribs.

With a quick side jerk of his head, Sham turned around, knocked Mister Biggle's hat off, and sank his teeth in the man's black wig. The moment Sham tasted the pomade, however, he dropped the wig on the rain-soaked path.

Benjamin Biggle was furious. "I'll ride the beast if it kills

me,” he said between tight lips. And donning his wig at a rakish angle, he swung his leg over Sham’s back, heaved into the saddle and grabbed the reins up short.

Like a barn swallow in flight Sham wheeled, and with a beautiful soaring motion he flew to the safety of his stall. As he dashed through the door, Benjamin Biggle was scraped off his back and into a mud puddle where he sprawled, his breeches soaked through and the wind knocked out of his body.



As if this were not enough trouble for one day, Grimalkin pounced on his head, screamed in his face, and ruined what was left of the black wig.

That afternoon as Agba cleaned Sham's tackle, a faint sound, very much like a chuckle, escaped him every now and again. Even Grimalkin wore a smirk on his face as he perched on Sham's crest and watched Agba remove all traces of mud.

Suddenly Agba looked up to find Mister Coke, Bible in hand, standing in the doorway. His face looked lined and old. For a long time he stood quietly, and the silence was a cord between the boy and himself.

At last he spoke, using little words and short sentences so that Agba would understand. But if he had used no words at all, Agba would have known.

"Thou and thy horse and thy cat shall ever be dear to me," Mister Coke began in halting tones. "Thou must try to understand, lad."

Agba looked into the deep-set blue eyes of Mister Coke. His own eyes blurred.

"It is about my son-in-law, lad," Mister Coke went on. "He is confined to his bed from the morning's experience. He is very sore on the matter. It is his wish that the horse be sent away at once. And Hannah, who is my only daughter, pleads his cause."

Agba noticed, with a chill of fear, that all this while he had been tracing the wheat ear on Sham's chest.

Seeing the fright on the boy's face, Mister Coke put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Come, come, lad. I am merely selling thy horse to the good Roger Williams, keeper of the Red

Lion Inn. He loans out horses to merchant travelers whose mounts are travel-weary. Then, when the merchants are next in the vicinity, they return the mounts. Have no fear, lad, Roger Williams will use thy horse well. And I have the man's word that thou and thy cat, too, will find a good home above the stable. He will come for thee and thy creatures early tomorrow morning."

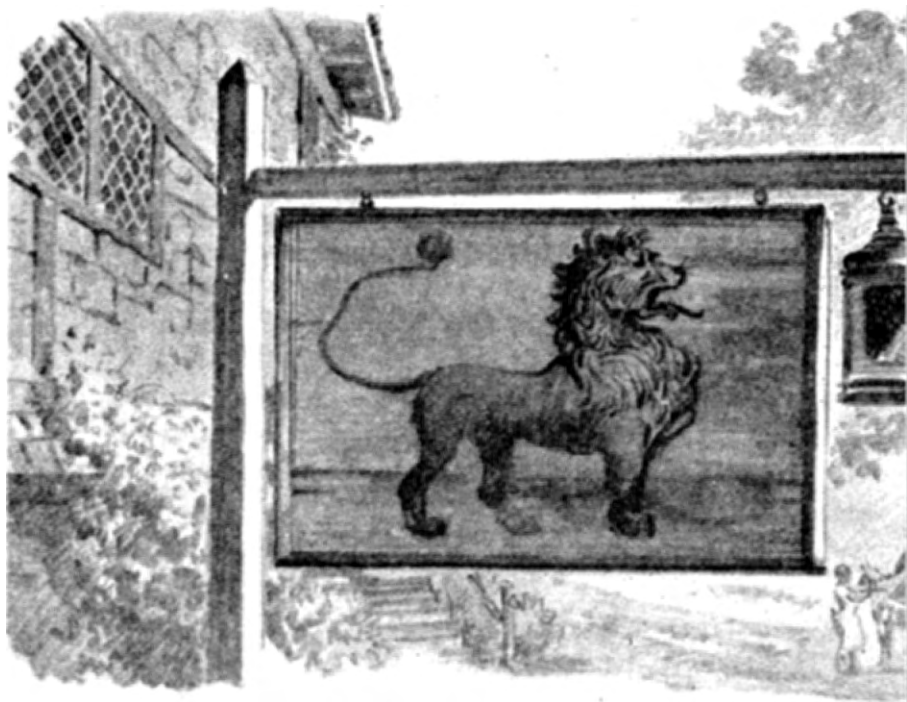
"Now," said Mister Coke as he adjusted his square-rimmed spectacles, "let us read a verse or two from the Bible. It will help to cheer our hearts. Then I will leave thee without any words of farewell."

Standing so the light would fall over his shoulder, Mister Coke let the Bible open where it would. And suddenly the years seemed to wash away and his face was wreathed in smiles.

"'The horse,'" he read, with gusto, "'rejoiceth in his strength. . . . He paweth in the valley. . . . He is not affrighted. . . . He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage. He saith among the trumpets, Ha, Ha!'"

A look that was close to a wink ventured across Jethro Coke's face as he closed the book. Then he turned, and sprightly as a boy, leaped across the mud puddle where Benjamin Biggle had fallen.

Agba thought he heard a chuckle and then words coming back to him out of the mist: "The horse saith among the trumpets, Ha, Ha!"



15. At the Sign of the Red Lion

AGBA COULD have been happy at the Red Lion if there had been only Mister Williams, the keeper of the inn, to consider. He was a mild-mannered man, with red, bushy eyebrows that traveled up and down when he spoke. And when he smiled, as he did often, they completely hid his eyes and gave him a sheep-dog look. Mister Williams was kindness itself.

It was Mistress Williams who made life hard. She was an enormous woman who went into hysterics every time she saw Agba. “*Mis-ter Williams!*” she would shriek at the top of her

lungs. "That—that varmint-in-a-hood! Get 'im outa here! 'E gives me the creeps! It's 'im or me, I tell ye!"

The truth of the matter was that Agba's deep, searching eyes, his soft, pattering footsteps, his flowing mantle and quiet ways, were so foreign to her own coarseness that she felt ill at ease in his presence.

As for Grimalkin, the poor cat could not even cross her path without sending the woman into a fit. When one night she accidentally stepped on his tail, there was such a yowling that she insisted the cat and the boy must go that instant. And so, within less than a fortnight after they had arrived, Agba and Grimalkin were turned away from the inn without so much as an oatcake or a handful of walnuts to take along.

Mister Williams walked with Agba as far as the road. There he stopped by the lanthorn that hung from the sign of the Red Lion. Even by its feeble glow Agba could see that the man was distressed.

"Y' understand, lad," he said, his eyebrows working up and down with emotion, "y' understand I got me customers to think about. Mistress Williams knows an awful lot about cookery. Why, travelers come a good long ways just to taste of 'er whortleberry pie. I got to 'umor 'er, boy. You trot along now to Jethro Coke's house. 'E'll take ye in, I've no doubt of it. As for your 'orse," he added with assurance, "I paid my good money fer 'im an' I promises to use 'im well."

This he meant to do. But Mister Williams was not the man for a spirited horse like Sham. He made quick, puppet-like motions as if his joints were controlled by strings. When he

came into Sham's stall, he had a way of lunging in. Nearly always he carried some tool—a pitchfork or a hoe or a bellows. And he held it like a spear, ready for action.

The old, plodding horses in the stable were used to Mister Williams, but Sham snorted and reared every time he came near. Then the good man would try to calm the horse by giving him a grooming. But here again the man was as awkward as a pump without a handle. He knew none of the niceties of grooming. He would rub along Sham's barrel from shoulder to hip, never realizing that near the hip the hairs grew in a little swirl. This lack of skill irritated Sham, for Agba was always careful to rub his coat the way that the hairs grew.

When it came to saddling, the innkeeper had an annoying habit of dropping the saddle on Sham's back, and then shoving it forward into place, thus pinching and pulling the hairs the wrong way. When a rider mounted, the torment increased.

It was not surprising that Sham resorted to all manner of



tricks to get rid of the pinching saddle. He sidled along walls and trees, thus squeezing his rider's leg. He twisted his body into a corkscrew. He reared. He kicked. He balked. He threw so many guests of the Red Lion that finally Mister Williams decided he must do something about it. He called in Silas Slade, a weasel-eyed man known as the best horse-breaker in all London.

"Slade," Mister Williams said, "I hain't never seen a 'orse like this 'un. It's 'is *spirit*. 'E not only unseats the clumsy fellows like me, but the best riders in the kingdom. 'E knows 'e'll be licked fer it, but it don't matter to 'im. The only 'uman bein' what can 'andle 'im is a spindlin' boy."

"*Hmph!*" snorted Slade, his eyes gleaming. "I've yet to see the beast I couldn't break. 'E's feelin' 'is oats, 'e is. We'll get the meanness out of 'im!"

The first thing Mister Slade did was to saddle Sham in his expert manner and swing up. And the next thing he knew he was being carried into the inn and a doctor was bending over him, shaking his head gravely.

When Mister Slade was poulticed and bandaged and his leg put in a splint, he called Mister Williams to his side. "I'll break the brute yet," he said between swollen lips. "See that 'e's moved into a small stall without a window. Tie 'im so 'e can't move. Give 'im no grain and only a little water."

Agba meanwhile had never left the vicinity of the Red Lion. He and Grimalkin had wandered forlornly about the countryside, sleeping in hedgerows, living on what food they could pick up in woods and fields.

One moon-white night Agba's loneliness seemed more than

he could bear. He and Grimalkin were seeking shelter in a hay-cock. They had had nothing to eat that day, and neither of them could sleep. Grimalkin was hunting little gray field mice and Agba was looking up at the moon, seeing Sham in its shadows.

The Sultan's words were drumming in his ears. "As long as the horse shall live . . . as long as the horse shall live . . . " He *must* get back to Sham!

He shook the straw from his mantle, swooped up Grimalkin, and ran silently through the night to the Red Lion.

As he reached the inn, he could see by the light in the tap-room the bustling form of Mistress Williams. Quickly he changed his plans. Instead of approaching the stables by means of the courtyard he would run around behind the brick wall that encircled the stables. If he scaled this wall, he could enter Sham's stall without being seen by Mistress Williams.

Agba felt like a thief, creeping along in the moon-dappled night, groping his way around the ivy-covered wall. Suddenly he stopped midway of the wall. Sham's stall, he figured, would be about opposite where he stood. He undid his turban, knotted one end and caught it on an iron picket that jutted over the ledge of the wall. Then, with Grimalkin clinging to his shoulder, he climbed the wall and soundlessly slid down into the stable yard.

Grimalkin was everywhere at once. The familiar smells and sounds of the stable maddened him with delight. He streaked first into one stall and then another.

Mistress Williams at the time was in the midst of preparing

porridge for tomorrow's breakfast. Suddenly she discovered that she had no salt. None at all. So she lighted a lanthorn and picked her way out to the stables where Mister Williams always kept a skipple of salt for the horses.

As she entered the stable yard, holding her lanthorn aloft, the rays of light fell upon the whirling antics of Grimalkin.



If the woman had seen a ghost, her screeching could not have been more terrible. It penetrated the inn like a bolt of lightning. Out flew Mister Williams, followed by Silas Slade on crutches, all the journeymen who had not yet gone to their beds, and a constable of the watch, brandishing his horse-pistol.

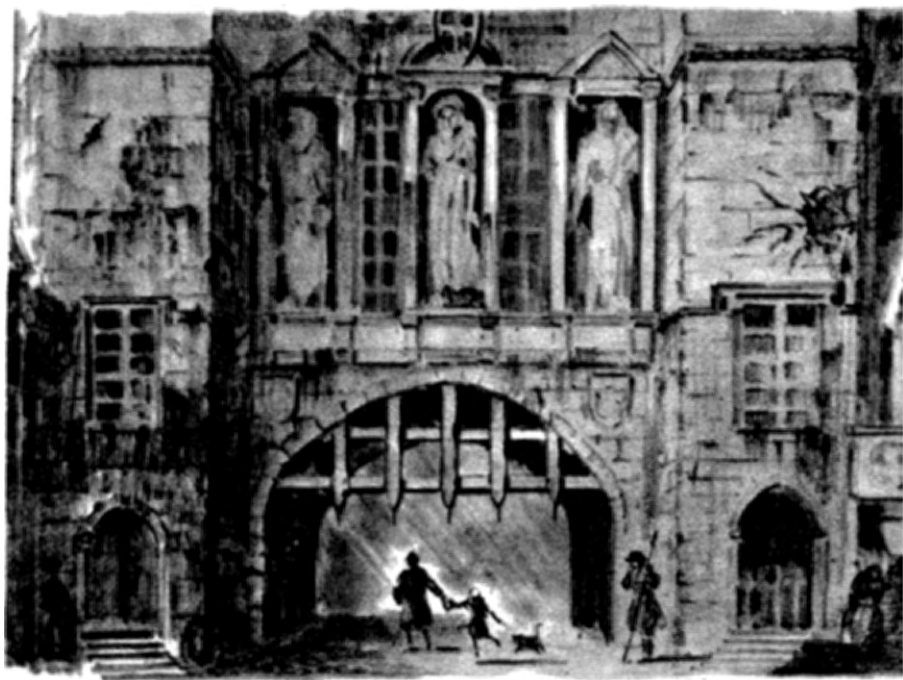
Agba was frozen with fear. He could not move. His feet seemed part of the earth on which he stood. Even Grimalkin stopped in his tracks. Then with a flying leap he found the harbor of Agba's arms.

"'E's a footpad, constable!" yelled Mistress Williams. "'A 'orsethief, 'e is! Jail 'im, I beg o' ye!"

Mister Williams' eyebrows were working up and down furiously. "The boy ain't a bad one," he pleaded to the constable. "'E comes from Morocco and 'e's gentle as a butterfly. What's more," and he shook his head and pointed to his lips, "the boy can't say a word."

The constable took a quick look at the tell-tale turban hanging over the wall. Then, over the protests of Mister Williams, he clapped a pair of wrist irons on Agba and led him away to Newgate Jail.





16. *Newgate Jail*

AFTER WALKING swiftly for twenty minutes, the constable and Agba stood before a massive stone building.

"Open up!" shouted the constable. "Open up!"

"Ho! It's you, Muggins," the sentinel bawled out. "Who's the poppet in a sack yer draggin' in? What's his crime?"

While the sentinel and the constable were engaged in loud conversation, Agba's eyes were drawn to the towers and battlements with muskets trained down on him.

The moon was washing the face of the jail with cold white rays. It made Agba feel cold, too. Then in a niche in the wall

he spied the statue of a white-robed woman. Curled at her feet was a cat so like Grimalkin that he might have sat for the image. Suddenly Agba felt warm again.

The constable laughed loudly when he saw Agba looking at the wall. "Don't nobody try to scale *this* wall," he said, his teeth showing like white fangs in the moonlight. Then he jerked Agba inside a yawning entrance where a turnkey stood, holding a torch in one hand and a great ring of keys in the other. With a whishing sound the turnkey closed the door behind them, and led the way down a narrow passage.

The stone floor of the passageway was cold and clammy. Once Agba slipped, and the constable boxed his ears sharply. Agba shook in terror. He wondered if he and Sham would ever meet again, would ever thunder across the fields again, would ever feel the wind beneath the sun.

Now the turnkey stopped before an iron-bolted door. He unlocked it with a loud jangling of keys, and motioned the constable and Agba inside.

Then he went away, carefully bolting the door behind him.

Wrist and leg irons hung everywhere on the walls and three tiny scales stood on a shelf in an open cupboard.

"This is the bread chamber," the constable announced. "The scales are to measure your bread with. You get eight ounces a day. And good enough for a horsethief!"

Soundlessly the door opened and the chief warder himself entered. He was a squat man with a tightly drawn scar on his temple. He sat down at a table, reached for a crow-quill pen and pointed it at Agba.

"Where'd ye pick it up, Muggins?"

"At the Red Lion, sir."

"Offense?"

"Horse-thievin'."

"Name?"

"That I can't say, sir. The keeper of the Red Lion says he comes from Morocco. He can't talk."

A look of doubt crossed the warder's face. "Search him!"

The big hands of the constable began at Agba's neck. They found the bag containing the amulets and Sham's pedigree. Tearing the bag from Agba's neck, the constable tossed it on the table. The amulets spilled out, making little twinkles of light. Quickly the warder scooped them into his pocket. Then he poked his fingers into the bag and pulled out the pedigree.

"Ah-ha!" he nodded, making a pretense at reading the Arabic writing. "Foul work afoot!" Fearing to show his ignorance, he tore the pedigree into little pieces and swept them to the floor.

Agba's eyes widened in horror. Sham's pedigree destroyed! But the warder was hurrying through the examination, not knowing what he had destroyed.

"What else has he got on him, Muggins?"

The constable's hands suddenly found the furry warmth of Grimalkin.

"*Pfft! Miaow! Pfft!*" Grimalkin hissed and spat and scratched.

Yelling in fright and pain, the constable grabbed Grimalkin by the tail. "Into the cistern ye go!" he shouted.

Agba's bound hands flew out in a pleading gesture. They

must not take Grimalkin away! He would have no one at all to care for.

All at once the warder was on his feet, the pulse in the scar at his temple beating wildly. "Muggins," he whispered hoarsely, "I live in the shadow of the statue out there night and day. The cat at the dame's feet is supposed to be Dick Whittington's own cat!"

He wiped the perspiration from his brow and slumped into his chair. Agba felt a thin thread of hope. He watched the warder's face. He counted the pulse beats that showed in the scar. One—two—three—four—five—six . . .

"Who's Dick Whittington?" faltered the constable.

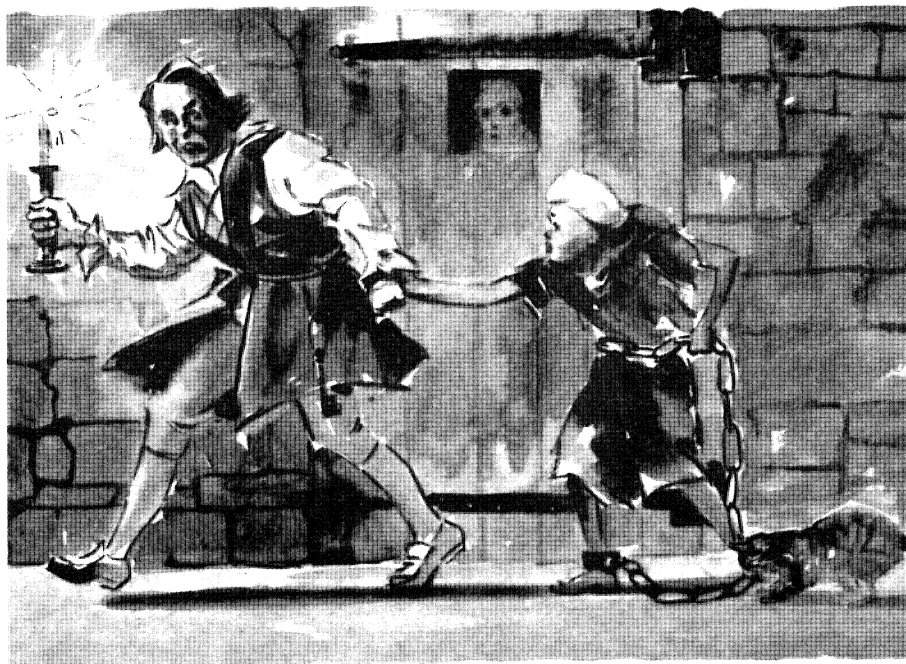
"Who's Dick Whittington!" the warder thundered. "Egad, man, he was thrice lord mayor of London. And 'twas a cat that made his fortune. 'Twas a cat he sold to the Sultan of Morocco to clean up the rats there. And 'twas the lord mayor himself who had the statue built." He glowered at the constable. "How dare ye offer to kill a cat? How dare ye? It's bad luck. Give it back to the boy, I tell ye."

Muggins' mouth fell open. Dazed, he handed the cat back to Agba.

"But," added the warder, suddenly ashamed of his fear, "the cat gets no bread. And eight ounces is too much for the boy. Six will do." Quickly he fastened a set of leg irons to Agba's ankles, and summoned a guard who stood outside the door.

"Lock him up in the Stone Hold!" he commanded.

Dragging his heavy iron chains with every step, Agba was led away to the dungeon.



17. The Visitors' Bell

THE DAYS that followed were dismal and wretched for Agba. He had nothing at all to do. Once a guard told him to clean the dungeon, but he laughed coarsely as he said it, knowing there was neither broom nor rag with which to clean.

Agba could not even move without stumbling over someone's legs or irons, and being kicked as a result. At last he crawled into a corner and sat motionless in a kind of dream, holding Grimalkin by the hour.

Days stretched out into weeks. He shared with Grimalkin

his bread and barley gruel and the cooked-out morsel of meat which the prisoners were given once a week. Grimalkin repaid Agba's generosity. The dungeon was freer of mice and rats than was the warder's own bedchamber.

On visiting days Agba heard the visitors' bell clang loudly, again and again, followed by the scraping of chains as his prison mates shuffled to the visitors' room. But no one ever came to see him. He and Grimalkin were left quite alone.

All this while the Quaker and his housekeeper, Mistress Cockburn, thought that Agba and Sham were happily located at the Red Lion. Busy though Mistress Cockburn was, she missed Agba's quiet ways, and one fair summer's day she decided to go to the Red Lion and take him a treat. She baked a goodly batch of sugar tarts and put them in a hamper along with some newly ripe peaches, the browned crust of a Cheshire cheese pudding, and a few garden carrots. Then she covered the hamper with a white linen cloth and set off for the inn.

She hummed a little tune as she boarded the coach, thinking how pleased the poor boy would be to taste his favorite sugar tarts. And she was thinking, too, how his somber black eyes would light up when he saw the cleanly scrubbed carrots for his beloved Sham and the Cheshire cheese nubbins for Grimalkin. As the coach jolted along, she kept peeking in under the white linen napkin to make sure that her tarts were not getting squashed nor the peaches bruised.

So busy was she, trying to think of little happenings to tell Agba, that she hardly noticed how fast the horses were traveling. And suddenly, far sooner than she had expected, the driver

was calling out, " Cow Cross Lane at the sign of the Red Lion." She alighted as quickly as she could, brushed the dust from her bonnet, shook out the folds of her skirt, and walked briskly into the great room of the inn.

" Good day, sir," she said to a busy little man with red eyebrows. "Are you the keeper of the Red Lion? "

Mister Williams' eyebrows traveled up and down, and a pleased expression came over his face.

" That I am, my good woman," he spoke in his best manner. "A vast weight you are carrying there, I mean the hamper, madam. Pray, may I help you? "

Mistress Cockburn thanked him kindly, then stated her business. " It is three calendar months," she said, " since a little hooded horseboy left the household of my employer, Jethro Coke. And to say the truth, sir, I have missed the poor boy sorely. If you judge it proper, sir, I should like to trot around to your stable and surprise him at his work."

Mister Williams opened his mouth to answer, but shut it quickly again, for his wife had risen up from behind the bar counter like a jack-in-the-box.

" You'll find the thief in Newgate Jail," she snapped. Then she took her broom and began sweeping her way toward Mistress Cockburn, who soon found herself out in Cow Cross Lane in front of the Red Lion.

She stood there, dazed, in the very center of the lane, unmindful that a coach-and-six was rattling toward her at a great pace. The driver had to turn sharply to avoid hitting her.

With much pulling and shouting he halted his horses. Then

the window of the coach was lowered, and the plumed head of an elderly but beautiful woman looked out.

"For your welfare, madam," spoke a silvery voice, "I pray you to step back out of the lane."

Mistress Cockburn came to with a start. "Begging your pardon," she said with a pretty curtsy, "but the honestest lad I know has been sent to Newgate Jail, and I am all a-twitter."

The plumed head disappeared. There was the sound of a low-voiced conference. Then the coachman, in scarlet livery, stepped down from his box and opened the door of the coach. Out stepped a gentleman. He was powdered and be-wigged like all noblemen of his day, but that was not what Mistress Cockburn noticed. What impressed Mistress Cockburn was the kindness of his gray eyes and the courtesy with which he addressed her.

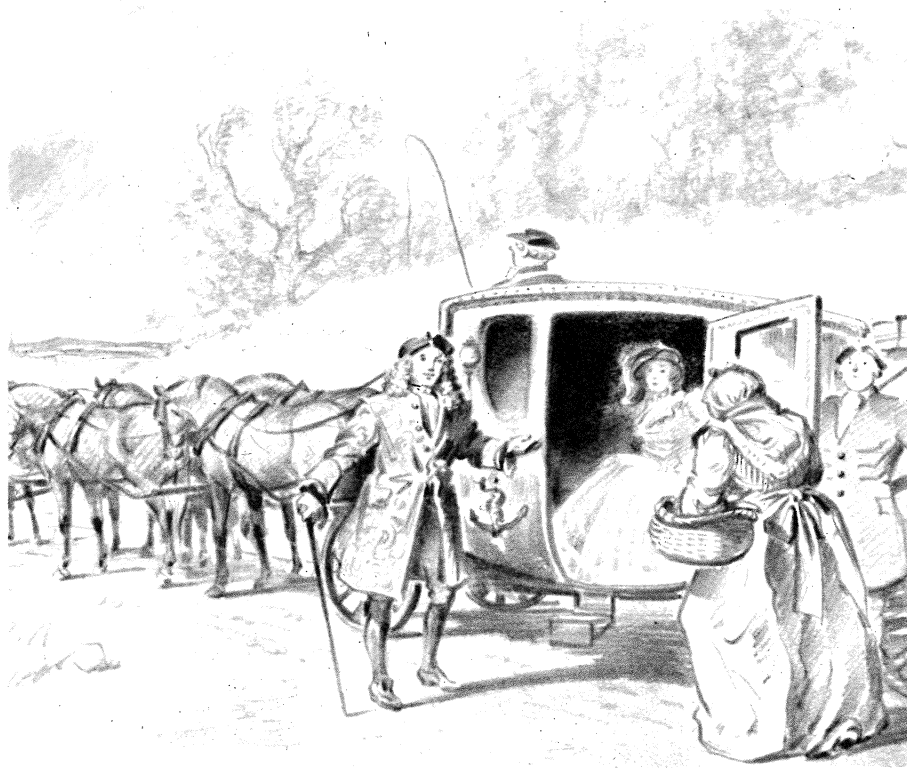
"It so happens," he was saying, "that we are on our way to Newgate now. The lady to whom you have just spoken is Her Grace, the Dowager Duchess of Marlborough."

Mistress Cockburn clapped her hand over her mouth in astonishment. Why, the Dowager Duchess of Marlborough was as much at home in Windsor Castle as the Queen herself. It was almost like meeting the Queen!

"The Duchess is my mother-in-law," the nobleman went on, "and I am the Earl of Godolphin."

Mistress Cockburn made a low curtsy, inclining her head until her nose grazed the handle of her hamper.

The Earl returned her bow. "As you mayhap know," he said, "the Duchess oft visits the prisoners to study their cases.



Since today is Visitors' Day, madam, the Duchess and I would be pleased to have your company to Newgate."

Mistress Cockburn flushed with pleasure. She was too overwhelmed to talk. So she said nothing at all, but climbed into the coach, and sat facing the beautiful Duchess.

Apparently the Duchess was in a great hurry, for the driver cracked his whip and the coach went flying down the lane and on toward the heart of London. The rattle and clatter made

by hooves and wheels was so great that there was no chance for conversation. Mistress Cockburn had all she could do to clutch her bonnet with one hand and her hamper with the other.

Meanwhile in the Stone Hold at Newgate Jail, Agba and Grimalkin were listening to the visitors' bell and to the sound of footsteps and chains leaving their dungeon. Finally the bell became quiet, the clanking of chains grew fainter and fainter, and their small world was sealed in silence.

Agba lay down on the meager litter of straw. Perhaps if he slept he would be lost in a dream, and the prison walls would fall away and he and Sham would be together again. Perhaps in his dream he would be grooming Sham, going over the wheat ear quickly, then lingering long on the white spot.

Presently Grimalkin hooked his paw over Agba's arm as if to attract his attention. The ponderous bolt was rasping along its iron groove. The door was coming open. A breath of air was flowing into the cell. It smelled of lavender mingled with the fragrance of freshly baked cakes.

For a few seconds the light from the corridor blinded Agba. Then his eyes went wide. There, standing on the threshold, was the chief warder, rubbing his hands and bowing like a reed in the wind. And behind him stood Mistress Cockburn with a nobleman and a lady. Mistress Cockburn's eyes were blacker than burnt raisins and her cheeks flamed. "It's him all right!" she exclaimed, bursting into tears. "Oh, my poor boy..."

Agba smiled at Mistress Cockburn, and such a warmth and happiness coursed through his body that he was afraid he was going to cry, too.

“As I was telling ye, yer Grace,” the warder was saying, “he can’t talk at all. The only sounds he makes is a sing-song humming, sort of like a lullaby when he and the cat beds down for the night.”

“And what,” asked the Duchess, “is the boy’s offense?”

The pulse showing in the warder’s scar was beating fast.

“As I understand it, yer Grace,” he said, “the boy climbed



over the wall into the stable yard of the Red Lion in the dead of night. Horse thievin' was his business."

Mistress Cockburn flew into a rage. "It's not so, yer Grace. The boy only wanted to see his horse which he brought all the way from Africa. And he himself wears the story of the horse in a little bag around his neck. Show it to the lady and gentlemen, Agba."

Agba's hand went to his neck. He shook his head.

The warder hesitated, then spoke. "Yer Grace, the lady says the truth. The boy *was* wearin' a bag around his neck, and the constable he . . . he . . ."

"He what?" demanded the Earl.

"Well, the papers is gone, my lord, but I'll give him the bag with the amulets in it."

He took the bag from his pocket, and with a false show of kindness tied it about the boy's neck.

"My poor boy! My poor boy!" Mistress Cockburn said over and over. Then she opened her hamper and placed a tart in Agba's hand. She gave Grimalkin a crust of Cheshire cheese cake and quickly covered the basket to hide the brightly scrubbed carrots.

Agba bit into the delicious tart. He longed to tell Mistress Cockburn—in words she had taught him from her own cookery book—how good it tasted. But all he did was to eat and smile through his tears.

"I cannot help tumbling out my thoughts," the Duchess was saying to the Earl in her tinkling, music-box voice. "My life is very near run out, and my only pleasure is doing good. Let

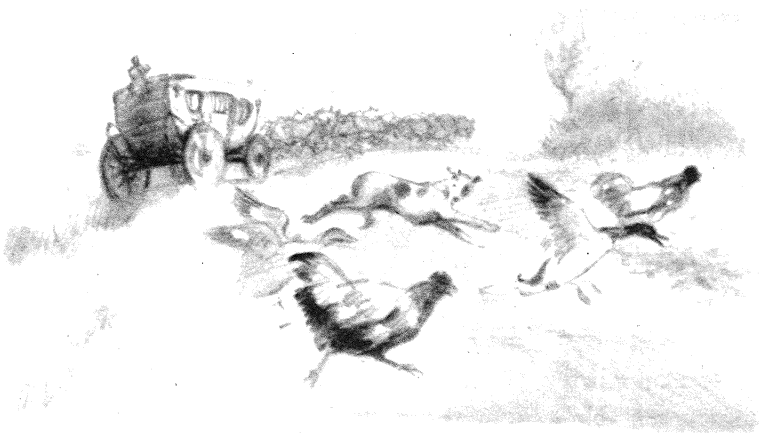
us inquire into this case, and if it prove a worthy one, why could not . . . ”

She flashed a radiant smile upon the Earl, and left her words fluttering in mid-air.

The Earl of Godolphin caught up her sentence and finished it off. “And if his case proves worthy,” he said quietly, “ I will want him to help in my stables at Gog Magog. By all that is good and holy, I promise it! ”

Agba looked up quickly. It was plain to see that he had a question to ask.

The Earl of Godolphin chuckled deep down in his throat. “ Be eased of your fears,” he said. “ We will go at once to the Red Lion to buy your horse. He will be welcome at Gog Magog. And the cat, too. There is room for all.”





18. The Green Hills of Gog Magog

THAT SAME fair summer's day, Sham was lying in his stall at the Red Lion. He no longer needed to be shackled. No one feared him anymore. He was too weak to kick and charge.

For weeks he had lived in a kind of daze, willing to lie on his bed of straw and let the world go on about him. Over the half door of his stall he could hear the rattle of pewter cups in the inn and listen to the comings and goings of horses and journeymen. He caught the mingled smell of dust and sweat when the horses came in. He caught the rain smells and heard

the first drops beat out a mournful medley on the roof over his head. He snuffed the winds. But he was no longer a part of the smells and the sounds.

Mister Williams shook his head sadly every time he passed Sham's stall. "That there 'orse, 'e's got a gnawin' pull inside 'im. 'E's missin' that boy."

On this summer's afternoon the sound made by Mistress Williams banging her pots and pans was suddenly muffled by the thunder of hooves and the rumble of wheels.

Lying half-awake, half-asleep, Sham heard the other horses in their stalls neigh a greeting to the newcomers. He heard the high, scrabbling voice of Mistress Williams. Then a silence broken by many footsteps and the low laughter of a gentlewoman.

The next thing he knew the door of his stall was thrown open, a feather-light creature was by his side, and a boy's slim brown fingers were stroking his neck.

Sham touched Agba's cheek with his feelers, as if to make sure of him. Then an excited whicker escaped him. He lipped the boy. He swiped his cheek with a great pink tongue. He tasted the warm, salty tears. Then he neighed his happiness to the whole wide world.

Thrusting his forefeet in front of him, he struggled to his feet. Lying down was no way to greet friends! He shuddered the straw from his coat as if to apologize for his lack of grooming.

A change came over him. He snorted at the half-circle of people about him, at the handsome gentleman in wine-colored

velvet, at the lady in silk and gold lace, at the innkeeper and his wife standing at a respectful distance.

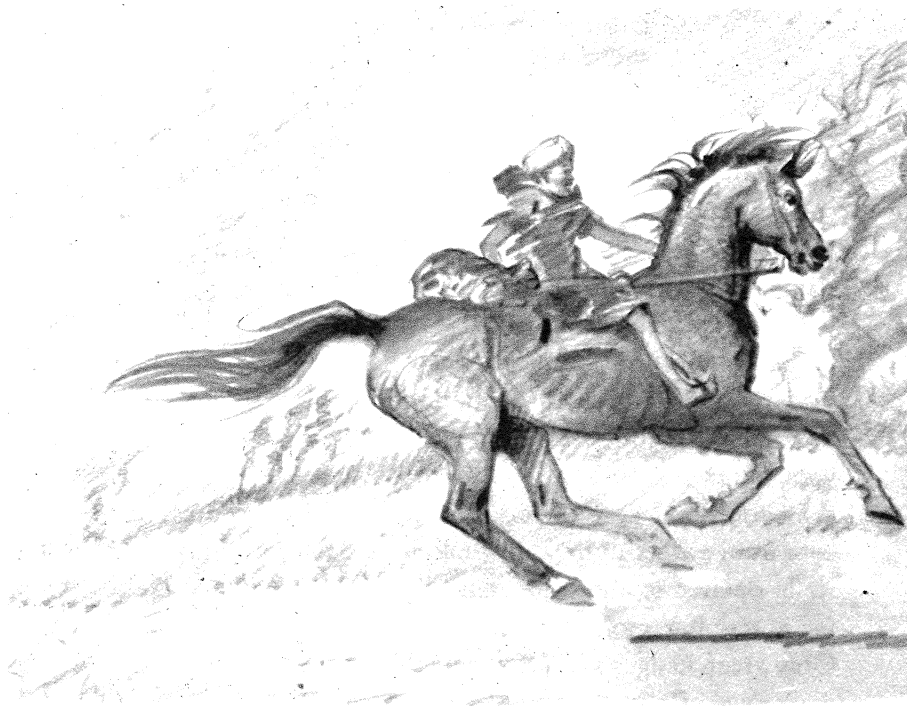
His eyes came back to Agba. "Let us be off!" he seemed to say. "Somewhere. *Anywhere!*"

The Earl of Godolphin laughed in agreement. Then he exchanged a few quiet words with Mister Williams and the arrangements to buy Sham were quickly made. In no time at all Agba and Grimalkin were mounted on Sham, while a gathering of all the chance droppers-in at the Red Lion gawped curiously at the coach-and-six, and at the hooded boy and the tiger cat who sat a well-mannered bay horse.

Mister Williams' eyebrows were traveling up and down at a great rate. "Split my windpipe!" he said to a journeyman who had once been tossed off by Sham, "it hain't the same beast, I tell ye! 'E hain't stubborn nor vicious at all. 'E and the boy are all of one color, and all of one mind. They can't wait to go! D'you know," he exclaimed, slapping the man on the back, "that 'orse—'e's got *brains!*"

The Earl leaned his head out of the coach window. "We will lead the way up to Gog Magog," he called to Agba. "Our pace will be slow to accommodate the weakened condition of your mount." And he smiled a little smile of encouragement.

If the road to the hills of Gog Magog had been the road to the garden of heaven, the three silent creatures could not have been happier. It seemed as if the green meadows and the woodlands and clear streams had been created for them alone. The sun warmed their backs. The wind blew for their pleasure. They sucked it deep into their lungs. It washed them free.



Agba was almost sorry when the driver of the coach pulled to a stop before a gate surmounted by the crest of a dolphin. He wished the ride could go on forever.

The Duchess, however, seemed glad the journey was over.

"I declare, my lad," she sighed, leaning her head wearily against the gilded frame of the coach window, "you and your mount and your kitling appear fresher than when you started."

Now the gate was opened by two men in livery, and the coach-and-six led the way over a bridge and up a gentle hill between yews and hawthorn trees to the stables of the Earl of Godolphin.

Agba could not believe his eyes. It was the stable, not the house, that crowned the hill, and there was a stream encircling the hill where mares and their foals were drinking. He jumped to his bare feet. The turf was soft and springy. The green grass tickled up between his toes. He touched Sham's white spot with his toe. The white spot! The white spot! Here, at last, Sham could fulfill the promise it held.

Grimalkin, who had settled into the saddle in great dignity, now cuffed Agba with his paw, as much as to say, "Mind your manners, the Earl is headed this way."

Agba stood at attention, but he could not keep his shining eyes from gathering in the whole scene: the long range of box stalls opened to the south sun, the shady paddock, the park for a training ground. Why, there were no walls anywhere! Only green hedges afar off, where the meadows came to an end. And rows of elm trees brushing the clouds. And willows trailing their fingers in the stream.

An exercise boy came into the yard with a string of running horses. Their haunches gleamed in the sun.

Agba drew a quick breath. Soon Sham's coat would be sleek and shining, too. Soon Sham would be the wind beneath the sun. Soon he would be showing his gratitude to the Earl—winning races, bringing honor to Gog Magog.

Agba's thoughts were cut short. A spidery man with a waggish air about him was presenting himself to the Earl of Godolphin.

"A very g-g-good morning, your lordship," he stuttered. And as he bowed he took an appraising look at the underfed horse,

the strangely dressed boy, and the tiger cat sitting the horse with a superior grin.

The Earl of Godolphin followed his glance.

"Twickerham," he said, "I have brought you a new horse-boy, and this is his little bay stallion. Ill luck has dogged their footsteps. They have traveled a hard road and a long one. From henceforward they will be in your charge."

For only an instant a cloud darkened the groom's face. "Very g-good, your lordship," he said.

The Earl dismissed the coach and turned to Agba. "I once read a novel laid in Morocco," he said. "The characters had curious names, curious to me, of course. There was El Hayanie and Hamed O Bryhim and one was Agba. Since I have to call you by some name I shall choose the shortest one: Agba. I desire you to give me your opinion of this name by the strength of your handclasp."

With his head groom standing by in open-mouthed amazement, the Earl of Godolphin, son of the Lord Treasurer of England, held out his hand to Agba. The small brown hand and the long-fingered white one met, and there was such a wringing clasp between them that the Earl's face broke into a great smile. Agba smiled, too. If only the Earl knew! He had chosen the name that was already the boy's own.

"Agba," he said, "you will be in the care of my head groom, Mister Titus Twickerham. He is breeder and trainer for the Gog Magog stables. I hope and pray that you will be happy."

Agba bowed first to the Earl and then to the groom, blinking hard to keep away the tears of happiness.

The Earl of Godolphin now cleared his throat and fingered his neck cloth a trifle uneasily. "Twickerham," he hesitated, "what think you of the merits of the stallion?"

The groom searched the Earl's face, trying to read his feelings there. Seeing only an open countenance, he rocked back and forth on his heels in importance. Then he approached Sham's head. Instantly Sham nosed the sky. Mister Twickerham reached for the bridle. He tried to force Sham's head



down, but it was only with Agba's help that he could look into the horse's mouth. He tried to lift a hoof, but Sham's legs were pillars driven into the earth. Yet with only a feather touch, Agba lifted a foot as easily as if it were Grimalkin's paw.

Red of face, Titus Twickerham stepped back. He measured the horse with his eyes. From withers to hoof. From withers to tail. Again and again he measured. He noted the scars on the horse's knees. Then he pursed his lips.

"Your l-lordship," he began, "this-here beast would be the laughing stock at the race-c-c-course. He's not lusty enough to endure the distances. With the b-best care in the kingdom he'd still be a broken-kneed cob. *And!*" here Mister Twickerham pointed a thin forefinger, while his face gave out the faintest suggestion of a sneer, "if your lordship will k-kindly note the height of the crest, he will see 'tis almost a deformity.

"To *my* mind," he concluded, enjoying the importance of the moment, "this ain't a running horse, and d-d-don't let nobody tell your lordship that he'd make a good sire, either. Colts with him for a father would be violent tempered and weedy as c-c-cattails."

The Earl of Godolphin did not change expression. For long seconds he stood perfectly still. "If this be true," he said at last, "feed him until he loses his gaunt look. Then we'll see what's to be done with him. Perhaps he can work the machine that pumps water into the fish pond."

Agba looked at the Earl aghast. Was Sham, the pride of the Sultan's royal stables, never to have a chance to prove himself? Was he always to be a work horse?