

19. *Hobgoblin*

AGBA'S DISAPPOINTMENT was a cloud over his head. Sometimes when he rode Sham, the cloud seemed to lift and take wing for a few hours. But as he dismounted it settled on his shoulders again, enveloping him like his own black and ragged mantle.

He tried to push the cloud away with the thought that Sham was being restored to health. Here were oats and corn and hay in plenty. But whenever Titus Twickerham urged Agba to feed Sham more liberally, Agba knew the groom had but one thought in mind. He was eager to see Sham in the humble role of work horse.

And so the cloud persisted. It was there even when the Duchess of Marlborough visited the stables, bringing with her loaves of sugar for Sham, a beef kidney for Grimalkin, and a gift for Agba, too. On one occasion the Duchess invited Agba into her two-wheeled chaise to present a race calendar to him. In a voice that was more like song than talk she read to him, pointing out a few easy words such as *horse, bay, colt, post*.

She promised to order for him a new mantle woven from goat's hair. "It will be as fine as the mantle worn by the Sultan himself," she smiled.

Agba tried to repay her kindness by washing and polishing her chaise and by doing well whatever jobs Titus Twickerham asked of him.

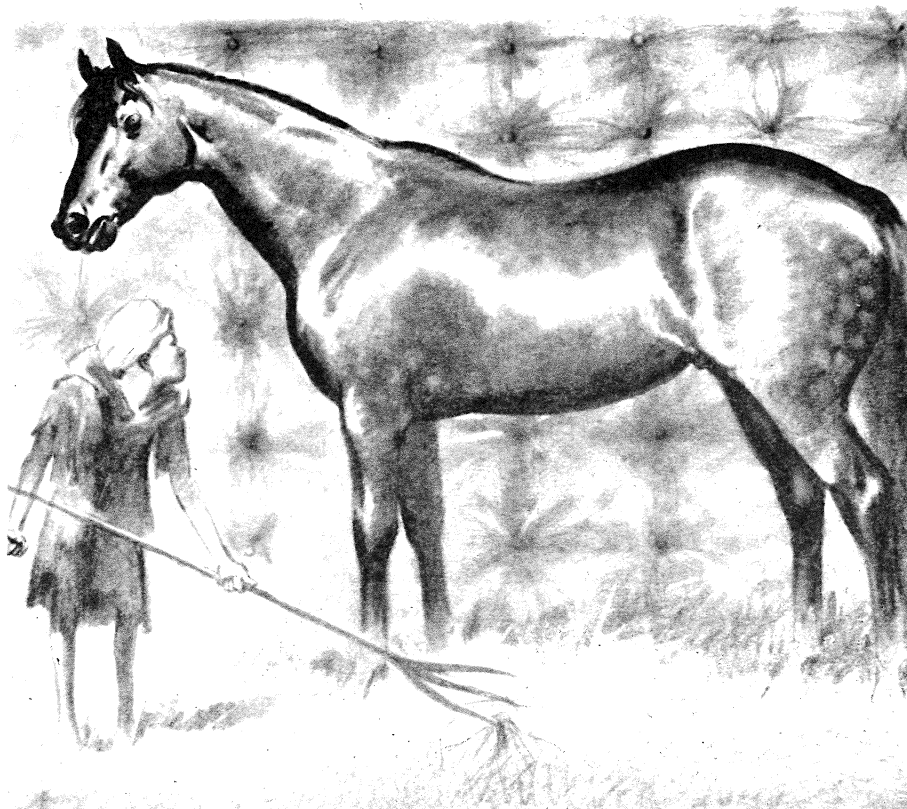
There was only one duty that Agba disliked, and he disliked it with such an intensity that the blood pounded hotly through him all the while he did it. It was the cleaning of Hobgoblin's stall.

Hobgoblin was a big, and—to Agba's way of thinking—a coarsely made stallion. He was as unlike Sham as a bull is unlike a stag. Yet Hobgoblin was king of Gog Magog, and his stall a palace. The walls were padded thickly with the fuzz of cattails covered over with leather, so that Hobgoblin would not mar the sleekness of his hide nor the perfection of his tail. The floor was laid with chalk and abundantly strewn with straw which Agba had to change three times a day. A manger of wood was not good enough for Hobgoblin. His was of marble. As for his blankets, they were emblazoned with the Earl of Godolphin's own crest. Even his fly-sheets bore the crest.

"Hobgoblin's th-th-the Earl's star o' hope, Hobgoblin is," Titus Twickerham told Agba one rainy day when they were both in his stall. "Flowing in this-here stallion's veins is the p-p-purplest blood in the k-k-kingdom."

The groom stopped to wipe out the corner of Hobgoblin's eye with a clean pocket handkerchief, then went on. "The Earl—he's g-got his heart set on Hobgoblin. Through this-here stallion he's got hopes to b-breed the best line o' horses not only in the kingdom, but in the world."

Agba preferred to listen to the drumming of the rain, but the groom's voice rose above it.



“ Right this m-minute, whilst we’re standin’ here, the Earl is lookin’ for a mare worthy of Hobgoblin. *Now*,” he said, rapping his knuckles on Agba’s head, “ now ye understand why Hobgoblin’s stall is finer th-th-than yer runt’s. Hobgoblin’s King of Gog Magog, he is! ”

After that, whenever Agba pitched the old straw out of Hobgoblin’s stall and laid in the new, his lips were set in a firm line. He hated Hobgoblin. Hated the bigness of him. Hated his powerful legs and hindquarters. Hated the fat sleekness of him. But most of all he hated Hobgoblin’s eye. It had no brilliance at all. Only a sleepy look, except when the animal was aroused. Then it showed a white ring.

“ Here is where Sham should be,” Agba thought with every thrust of his fork. “ Purple blood, indeed! Sham’s ancestors came from the stables of the Prophet himself! ”

One day, soon after the groom had explained Hobgoblin’s importance, Gog Magog seethed with excitement. The Earl of Godolphin made frequent visits to Hobgoblin’s stall. Usually his gait was dignified and his bearing stately, but this day his steps were quick and his words clipped short.

As for Titus Twickerham, he was so nervous that he could not control his stammering.

“ Y-y-y-you, Ag-g-g-ba. Y-you lay a fresh l-l-litter of st-st-straw in the new m-m-mare’s stall. And w-w-wash out the mang-g-g-ger. Then p-p-p-ut in a measure of wheat b-b-bran. The mare, Lady Roxana, arrives t-t-t-today.”

The excited pitch of Mr. Twickerham’s voice when he said “ Lady Roxana ” made Agba bite his lips. It was the very tone

he used in speaking of Hobgoblin. *Lady Roxana! Hobgoblin! Hobgoblin! Lady Roxana!* The names rankled in the boy's mind. He hated them both. Without even seeing Roxana, he knew she would be fat and sway-backed and ugly.

As Agba prepared the mare's stall, he saw the Earl and a dozen noblemen come down to the paddock. They walked about, talking in hushed, expectant voices, twirling their riding rods, taking pinches of snuff, sneezing lightly.

Suddenly a cry went up from the grooms. "'Ere she comes! 'Ere she comes! "

Agba flew out of the stall. He made field glasses of his fists. He strained his eyes down the lane. But the late afternoon sun blinded him. At first he saw nothing at all. Only the hawthorn trees and the yews, standing dark and still.

Then all at once he could make out a blur of motion. It cleared. It became a shiny red van drawn by two dapple-grays.

The grays were clattering over the bridge now and up the hill between the yews and hawthorns. They were nearing the stables. The driver, an enormous man in red livery, was drawing rein. As the horses jammed to a stop, a lackey hopped down from his perch beside the driver and went around to the back of the van. He let down the tail gate. Then, bowing from the waist, he handed a leading string to the Earl's head groom.

"Lady Roxana, daughter of The Bald Galloway!" His voice boomed out as if he were announcing a princess at a ball.

The noblemen and all the horseboys waited tensely. Titus Twickerham looked to the Earl of Godolphin with questioning eyebrows. The Earl nodded. And so, bristling with im-

portance, the spidery figure of the groom led Lady Roxana down the ramp and into the paddock. Slowly, gently, as if he were unveiling a statue, he lifted her hood and threw off her scarlet blanket.

An awed silence fell over the little company. Then, as though the wall of a dike had given way, there was a torrent of noise. Jeweled hands broke into spontaneous applause. Every voice shouted in admiration.

The Earl of Godolphin laughed aloud. Here, at last, was the answer to his dream!



Except for her tail, which was a smoky plume, Roxana was the shininess of white marble in the sun. And she wore no housings at all, only a halter made of silken rope, and across the browband were tiny rosettes of blue satin.

Roxana pawed the springy turf. She seemed glad that the jolting, jarring ride was over. A high whinny escaped her.

Suddenly there was an answering whinny, so shrill and joyous it sent shivers racing up and down Agba's spine.

"Aha!" spoke up one of the noblemen. "Hobgoblin is already welcoming his mate."

A smile played about Agba's lips. The whinny of welcome had come from Sham, *not* from Hobgoblin.

For a full moment Roxana alerted. Her head went up; her tail went up; her ears pricked. The noblemen gasped. If Roxana had been beautiful before, she was a living statue now.

Agba's heart melted. He had intended to hate Roxana, but all the hate was washed away.

"What symmetry!" exclaimed the Duke of Bridgewater.

"She is built like a fawn!" cried Lord Villiers.

"Aye. Exquisitely made," said the Earl of Marmaduke.

Agba scarcely heard their remarks. Way down at the end of the stables he saw Sham's head thrust out. He watched Roxana toss her mane at him, like a girl tossing her curls. He heard her whinny, this time softer, fuller, than the last.

Now there were two answers. The deep, grunting neigh of Hobgoblin and the ecstatic bugling of Sham.

"Twickerham," the Earl spoke tensely, "Hobgoblin shall meet his mate. Have him brought out."

Again the paddock was bathed in stillness. It was so quiet that Agba could hear a leaf drifting lazily to earth. A goldfinch flew overhead in yellow arcs, spinning a thin thread of song.

Titus Twickerham's words rang in Agba's ears. *A mare worthy of Hobgoblin.* That overfed monster! Agba could stand the unfairness no longer. He ran to Sham's stall. He threw wide the door. Out streaked a tongue of golden fire. It was Sham, trumpeting to the skies, Sham tasting his freedom with a wild leap. He overtook Hobgoblin being led out of his stall. He whirled around and challenged the king of Gog Magog. Hobgoblin jerked his head into the air, breaking the catch of his lead rope. For one deathly still moment the two stallions faced each other. Then they charged, the noisy thudding of their bodies lost in savage screams.

The grooms were benumbed, stupefied. For seconds they were unable to move. Then they all began running at once, getting in each other's way, throwing bucketfuls of water at the furious stallions. It was useless—like trying to smother a forest fire with hearth brooms. The air crackled and ripped with the sound of flailing hooves and snorts and shrieks.

Sham was little and quick. His legs were steel rods. He danced on them, making fierce thrusts. Hobgoblin was like a great war horse beside Sham. Now he swung his lumbering body around and gave a tremendous kick with all the power of his hindquarters.

Agba saw Sham drop down on the ground to miss the blow. In a second he was up again, spinning around to face Hobgoblin, beating at him with his flinty hooves. He saw Sham



open wide his mouth and use his strong young teeth, not to bite, but to hammer with. The blows seemed no heavier than hailstones to Hobgoblin. Yet they maddened him into a wild rage. He lunged, baring his teeth, ready to sink them into Sham's neck.

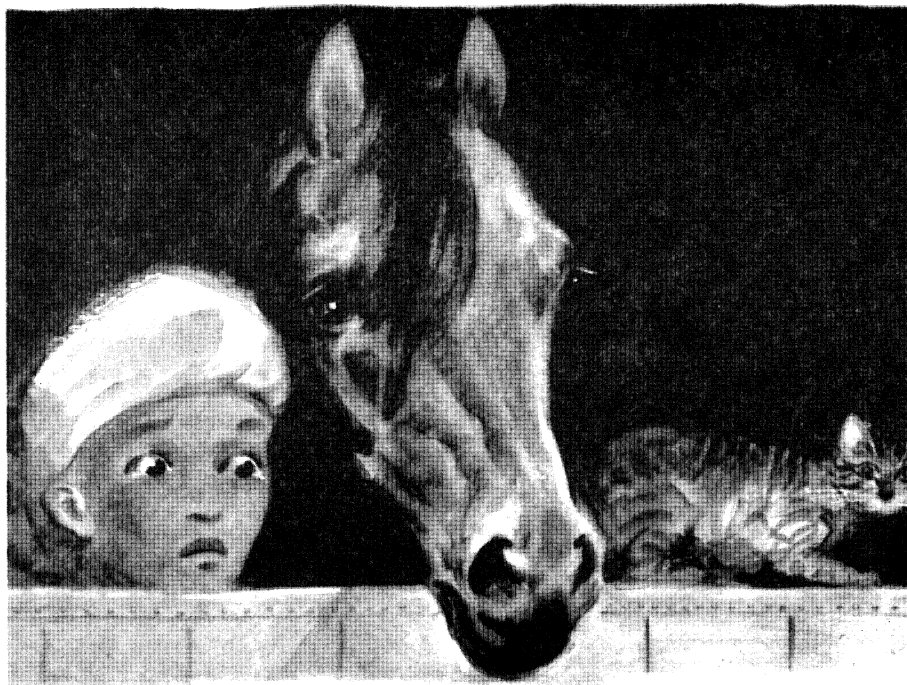
With a mighty cry, Sham tossed his head upward, catching Hobgoblin under the jaw, actually lifting him up on his hind feet. The little horse rained blow upon blow on Hobgoblin, forcing him farther and farther up on his hind legs until finally he fell over backward, thrashing and kicking.

Agba beat his fists together. The great Hobgoblin was down! The massive, heaving, hulking body was grunting in pain and defeat.

A ringing cry of victory burst from Sham. With a rush he sought Lady Roxana. He leaped about her, prancing lightly as if his legs were set on springs. He arched his magnificent neck. He plumed his tail. His eyes were bold, his body wet and shining. Sham, the fleet of foot, the pride of the Sultan's stables, was on parade before the beautiful Roxana.

Suddenly they were together, touching each other with their noses, talking in excited little nickers. Then, manes and tails in flowing motion, they streaked to the far end of the paddock. It seemed plain to Agba that both Sham and Roxana wanted to be far away from the distasteful, groaning Hobgoblin.

Agba wanted to sing for joy. He longed to talk, to laugh, to cry. His hands flew to his throat helplessly. But it was Roxana whose voice substituted for his own. It was her whinny, high and joyful, that said all he wanted to say.



20. *Wicken Fen*

AFTER A MOMENT of stunned silence, the Earl of Godolphin led his guests away. Twickerham ran to Hobgoblin, rolled him onto his belly and helped him rise. When the horse was once more in his stall, the groom followed the Earl. He must have orders before he saw Agba.

Agba, meanwhile, had gone back to work to avoid showing his joy. Not until darkness closed in did he realize what he had done. Then the gravity of it struck him. He had acted without orders. He had allowed Sham to fight Hobgoblin. Sham might

have killed the Earl's favorite stallion, his star of hope!

The boy swallowed hard. He had hurt the kindest friend he had ever had. He was ready to take whatever punishment might come.

So it was with no surprise that, as he stood in Sham's stall, he saw coming toward him the quick, spidery legs of Titus Twickerham. They cast long, frightening shadows because of the lanthorns which the groom held in each hand.

"Agba!" he called out as soon as he was within hearing. "What I has to say can be said *over* the door."

There was not the slightest hesitation or stammering in Mister Twickerham's speech. It was as if he had wound up his words in a ball and now had only to unwind them.

"The Earl wants to be quit of ye," he pronounced. "He don't want nobody ever again to mention ye or yer horse in his presence. He can't trust himself to look at ye. Not ever. Not ever, do ye hear?"

Agba bent his head. He could understand. He thought of the wheat ear and unconsciously began tracing the swirling hairs on Sham's chest.

"Look me in the eye, ye blockhead! Take yer fingers off o' that weed. Listen sharp! All yer nag is fit for is cat's meat. Yet his lordship says ye're to saddle him immejate and follow the North Star 'til it brings ye to Upware Inn. Get a-goin' with that saddle!"

Agba went for the saddle. His hands were shaking as he laid it on Sham's withers and slid it into place. Sham stretched his neck in Mister Twickerham's direction, opened wide his

mouth, bared his teeth, and let forth a high and mighty neigh.

"Kill-devil!" the groom spat. "Laugh all ye want to now. Ye an' yer hooded turtle of a boy, and yer cat, too, is going to Wicken Fen. And there, in the dismal swampland, ye're going to end out yer days."

Agba felt a chill. The night mist was rising. It reminded him of the dank air of Newgate Jail.

"Shiverin' in yer timbers, be ye, Agba?" taunted the groom. "Ye an' yer high-soundin' book name! Now we'll see if it'll help ye to follow directions. When ye comes to Upware Inn, ye'll see letters written on the gable of it. They spell out: '*Five Miles From Anywhere. No Hurry.*'"

Titus Twickerham scratched his head. "Huh!" he exclaimed. "Maybe ye can't read any more'n you can talk. But no matter. Ye can't miss the inn if ye follow the North Star. Then ye turn right fer five miles an' ye'll come upon . . ." here the groom poked his head close to Agba's and let the words whistle through his teeth, "an' ye'll come upon Wicken Fen! And there, in the miry bog, ye'll find a ghost-like hovel waitin' just for ye."

Agba's hands had suddenly grown icy. It was all he could do to buckle Sham's girth strap. But at last he stood ready, taking nothing in his saddlebag but Sham's rub-rag and a spool toy which the Duchess had given Grimalkin.

"His lordship is far too kind to ye," muttered the groom as he opened the door of the stall. "He says fer me to fasten a lanthorn to each o' yer stirrups. Then ye won't fall into the dykes and get drownt. Though, to my mind, 'twould be good

riddance of all of ye. Then I wouldn't have to be sending ye barley and oats every fortnight like I'm ordered to."

He came so close now that his coarse hair scratched Agba's face. "Fer me," his voice rasped, "I'd sooner be buried alive as spend one night in the fen country."

Grimalkin began yowling nervously. He leaped onto Mister Twickerham's head and from there to Sham's saddle. From the height of Sham's back he looked down on the groom as much as to say, "A mounting block! That's all *you* are!"

The groom made a wry face at the cat. "Humpf," he scoffed. "Ye an' yer mute friends be nothin' but fen slodgers!"

Now Agba swung up on Sham, and together the three creatures went out into the night.



Life was hard in the fenland, even though Titus Twickerham carried out the Earl's orders. When the roads were passable, he sent barley and oats by a peasant farmer who delivered his load and drove off as fast as his horse would take him.

After he had gone Agba would light a peat fire and make barley gruel for all to share.

Sometimes Agba speared for eels and pike in a crooked stream. But he was clumsy, as he had nothing but a sharp stick for a spear. Besides, the coarse sedge grass along the streams was razor sharp, and it cut Agba's arms and legs until he had to bind them with strips from his turban. So it was not often that he and Grimalkin enjoyed the delicacy of fresh fish.

Titus Twickerham had told the truth about Wicken Fen, Agba thought in the long nights when the wind moaned and the owls hooted. It *was* dismal ground.

In winter a white wilderness of snow walled the three creatures inside their hovel. Then Agba's mind flew back to all the promises he had made Sham, and his eyes would search Sham's to catch the faintest mistrust in their purple depths.

The only answer he got was Sham's lips nibbling along his neck. "We're in this together," he said in his own way. "Fen slodgers, all three of us!" Then with a nervous foreleg he would paw the floor of the hut, as if he wanted to be out in the howling gales. Agba would lift the hoof and feel the soundness of it—the hard wall, the cushiony frog. "See!" he would tell himself. "Sham is well and strong. The power of the wheat ear cannot last." And he laughed to feel the good warm shagginess of Sham's coat and the length of his own hair.

Winter spent itself, and spring came, scattering windflowers among the spare blades of grass. Sham rolled and rolled, trying to rub off his heavy winter coat. And when he stood up, he left great bunches of his hair lying on the grass. As soon as his back was turned, thrushes and finches and starlings picked up the hair and lined their nests with it.

Another year passed. And in all that time Agba saw but one human creature beside the peasant farmer. This one called himself a wild-fowler because he trapped ducks and geese. He looked curiously out of his birdlike eyes at the three cast-aways. Then he shook his head and went his way, as if he liked his own company better.

The wild creatures of Wicken Fen, however, accepted Sham and Agba and Grimalkin. Butterflies grazed Sham's nose,



leaving the powder from their wings as a token of trust. And Agba made a friend of a hooded crow. One minute the crow was an earthy creature perched on his shoulder. The next he was an arrow piercing the sky.

Wicken Fen was not always drear. There were fair days when, just at sunset, Agba and Grimalkin would ride Sham along a grassy causeway to a watering place. It was more like flying than riding, for Sham no longer wore shoes and the sound of his hooves was muted by the grass. They seemed one creature, these three, flying into the sunset. Then they drank with the wild things, the deer and the mallards and the gulls.

One day when Agba was repairing the thatched roof of his hovel, he looked off into the distance and noticed a cloud of dust rising. It was not just a puff. It was a long, extended cloud, as if made by many horses.

He slid down the roof, glancing around quickly for Sham. There, only a few rods away, he was cavorting and kicking his heels like a colt. The boy ran to him and led him inside the hovel, closing the door securely. As he stepped out again he almost stumbled over Grimalkin. Quickly Agba sent the cat inside, too. Then he stood before the door, barricading it with his arms. He felt no fear for himself, but a nameless fear for Sham clutched at his heart.

He squinted his eyes against the sun. Now he could make out a van drawn by a pair of horses and attended by a whole cavalcade of outriders. They were coming toward him.

He could see the van clearly now. It was shiny red. The very same van in which Roxana had arrived at Gog Mágog!

And perched on the driver's box was Titus Twickerham!

Mister Twickerham waved his hat in the air. Then he drew up with a flourish. The horsemen leaped to their feet.

"Ho th-th-there, l-l-lad," the groom stammered excitedly, as he strode toward Agba. "We have c-c-come for you and the horse." Suddenly he realized that Agba was alone. His face went white. "The horse," he asked, "he has not d-d-d—"

Sham let out a shrill whinny just then. The color came back to Mister Twickerham's face. "L-l-lad," he spoke in sugared tones, "you remember the m-m-mare they call R-R-Roxana?"

Agba nodded, his heart beating fast.

"W-w-well, my boy, one morning 'long about a year ago, I c-c-come to look at her, and b-b-bless my soul if she ain't hiding a little horse-colt by her side." Mister Twickerham came a step closer. "And," he smiled, showing the gaping space in his teeth, "that little c-c-colt was the spit image o' your horse!"

Agba looked to the other horsemen as if he could not believe the groom's words.

"'E speaks the truth," laughed one. "Don't 'e, lads?"

"Aye! That he does!"

Agba's heart warmed. If only he could see Sham's colt!

"'Course, the Earl—he hated the sight of the colt," the groom went on, "so he named him Lath because he was that skinny. And he says to me, 'Twickerham, just let *that one* grow. Don't ye bother to train him.'"

The coach horses began pawing the grass. Mister Twickerham ordered his assistants to take off their headstalls so they could graze.

“And now, Agba,” smiled the groom, “hark to this: Lath is r-r-rising two, and yesterday when the other two-year-olds was bein’ timed around the ring, Lath was watching from the p-paddock. Then what do you calculate happened?”

Agba’s eyes asked the question.

“Well, that Lath, he j-j-jumps the fence and starts racing around the ring on his own, and he catches up with the horses ahead o’ him and he overtakes ’em and he travels like a b-b-bullet until he’s ahead of ’em all! And some of the two-year-olds was m-m-months older than Lath, and couldn’t none o’ ’em catch him.”

Agba could scarcely contain his excitement. He had but one question in his mind, and the groom answered it as if it had been spoken.

“Aye, boy. By some chance his lordship sees the whole p-p-performance and his eyes p-p-pop so far out o’ his head I coulda hooked ’em with my bootjack. ‘T-T-T-Twickerham,’ he says slow-like, trying to hide his feelings, ‘Twickerham,’ he says, ‘I was wrong. M-m-maybe Agba’s little Arabian horse is the one to sire a new and noble b-b-breed of horses. Fetch him home, Twickerham! Home!’ ”

Titus Twickerham’s face stretched in a grin. “So here we are, l-l-lad, waiting to take yer stallion home in t-t-triumph. And for ye, there’s a snowy white mantle and turban what the Duchess sent along. It c-c-come all the way from Morocco.”

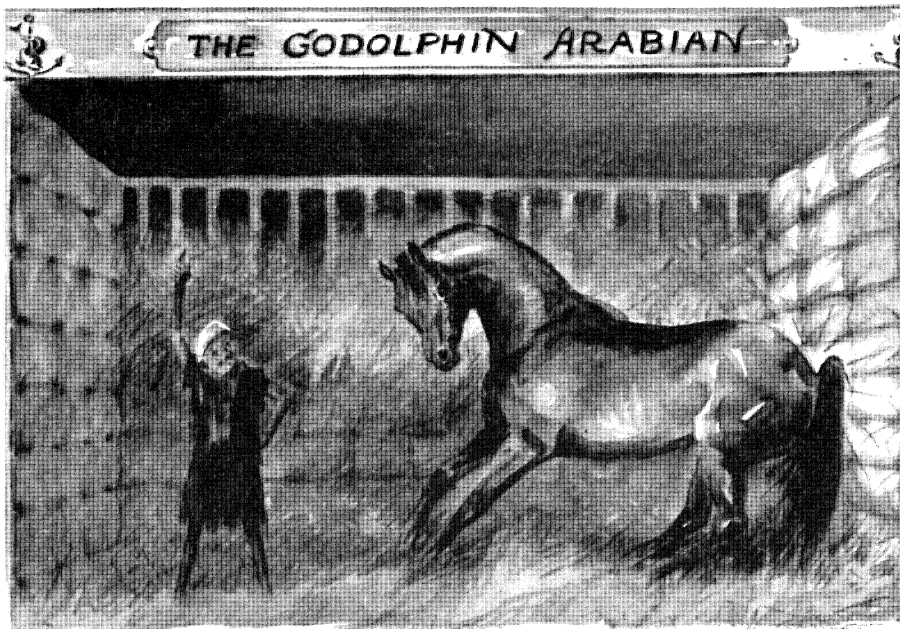
A few minutes later Sham, wearing a blanket for the first time in two years, was loaded into the shiny red van while Grimalkin sat perched on his back, a satisfied grin on his face.

Agba stood at the back of the van, looking out between the well-padded stakes. He heard the crack of the whip. He felt the floor quiver beneath his feet. He saw the splendid outriders in their red jackets move into position. He stooped down and pressed his hand against Sham's white spot.

At last Sham was being honored according to his merits!
At last things were as they ought to be!

On to Gog Magog!





21. *God's Downs*

THE EARL of Godolphin himself was waiting to welcome Sham back to Gog Magog. And he led the way not to Sham's old stall but to Hobgoblin's! Hobgoblin's name was no longer above the door. There were many letters there now. Agba studied them out.

T-H-E G-O-D-O-L-P-H-I-N A-R-A-B-I-A-N they spelled. Why, the Earl had given Sham his *own* name! A royal name! Agba wanted to wring the Earl's hand, but a horseboy could not take such liberties. And just as his mind was casting wildly about for a way to thank him, the Earl himself put out his hand.

Agba placed his palm with all its horny little callouses within the cushioned white one of the Earl. But it was the Earl's fingers that tightened in a clasp so firm it made the boy blink. They stood so for a long moment. Then the Earl cleared his throat. "Godolphin means *God's Downs*," he said, swallowing strangely. "And here, on God's Downs, your Arabian will live out his days. Come, Agba, persuade him to enter his new quarters."

Sham looked little and comical in Hobgoblin's big stall, but he accepted it as if it were his right. He rubbed his tail against the thickly padded walls and sidled along them as if he found the softness exactly to his taste.

And wonder of wonders, he saw the Lady Roxana again. They came at each other with such joyous greetings that the sound of their reunion must have carried to Wicken Fen. Roxana did not seem to notice that Sham's coat was shaggy and coarsened. And Sham seemed unaware that Roxana was no longer the delicate little filly he had known. She was a brood mare now, and her bones were well furnished.

"Not since the day they met have I heard a whinny so jubilant," the Earl remarked to Agba.

Life now settled down to a pleasant pace. Sham had his own private paddock, and from it he could view everything that went on about him. Twice in the year that followed he saw his son, Lath, leave Gog Magog for the great races at Newmarket. He had no idea that Lath was the pride and toast of Newmarket, but each time he welcomed the young horse home with a deep-throated neigh.

When Roxana presented Sham with Cade, a second son, Sham sniffed noses with him and nibbled along the little fellow's high crest. It seemed almost as if he were pleased and proud at having sired him! Grimalkin sniffed him, too; then wrinkled his nose as if he much preferred his own stablemate. Besides, his bones were growing old and he liked the comfort of the Godolphin Arabian's bed.

Sham's third son was born a year after Cade. They named him Regulus, and he, like Lath and Cade, had the same high crest and the finely drawn legs of his sire.

One day when Regulus was two years old, the Earl of Godolphin summoned Agba to his house. It was the first time in all these years that Agba had ever been inside the stately brick mansion. He crossed the threshold in awe. A servant showed him to the library where, in spite of the pleasant day, the Earl was seated before a crackling fire.

"Sit down, gentle friend," the Earl said, indicating a leather hassock opposite him.

Agba was not accustomed to sitting anywhere but on the ground. Timidly he circled the hassock like a dog settling down for a nap. Then he bent forward and seated himself gingerly. When he realized that he was not going to topple off, he crossed his legs beneath him and waited for the Earl to speak.

The Earl's face looked pinched and tired. He seemed pre-occupied, as if he had forgotten Agba's presence. Absently he reached for a pair of tongs, plucked a glowing coal from the fire and lighted his pipe with a hand that was not steady.

Agba turned his eyes away. He tried to observe the room

so that he might take away a picture memory of it. But suddenly, wherever he looked, the symbols of the wheat ear and the white spot flashed before his eyes. He thought he saw them on the backs of the books that lined the walls, in the wisps of smoke the Earl blew, in the dancing flames. The signs of success and of failure! He had almost forgotten them. Now they seemed everywhere at once. Agba longed to run out of the house to see if Sham was in trouble, but the quiet and the smoke were entwining themselves about his throat, choking him. And just when he seemed unable to take another breath, the Earl spoke.

"King Charles," he began, "used to say of my father that he was never in the way, never out of the way. That," he said with a direct gaze, "is my feeling for you."

Agba's eyes were fixed on the Earl's face.

"It is right that you should know what I am about to say, Agba, for to your stallion may go the honor of improving the English race horse. Already the swiftness and the vitality of your golden Arabian are showing up in his colts. Had it not been for you, Agba, I might have discarded the purest blood of the Orient."

Agba knew that in spite of these momentous words something was wrong. He waited tensely.

"The news that I am a poor man," the Earl said at last, "may come as a shock to you. I have naught in this world but a title."

Agba's mouth fell open. His glance darted to the polished parquet floor, to the shining silver sconces with branching

lights, to the gardener trimming the hedge outside the window.

"Aye," the Earl nodded. "Vast estates require vast reservoirs of money. I am in low circumstances and my debts grow clamorous. Pastures must needs be limed and rolled and harrowed, horses shod, farriers paid. Agba," he paused, then went on falteringly, "on the very eve when we are improving the strain of the English horse, I may have to let our stables and pastures for farming purposes."

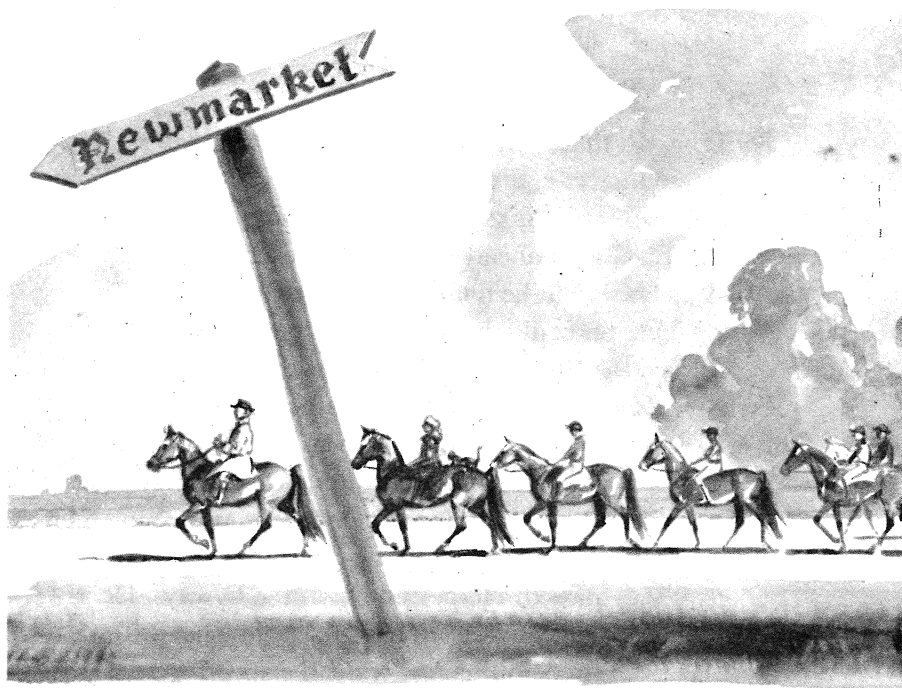
The words fell with a thud. The gold clock on the mantel tolled the hour. A log split open, sent up a shower of sparks, then fell among the ashes.

For seconds the Earl stared into the fire. Then a flicker of hope lighted his eyes. "There is a three-day race meeting at Newmarket this spring," he said, "with the Queen's Plate as the prize. Should Lath or Cade or Regulus win, there would be no need to let the property. The Queen's Plate is a purse of one thousand guineas!"

The blood quickened in Agba's veins. He almost fell off the hassock in his excitement. He waited for the Earl's next words. They came in a rush.

"It is not often," he said, "that a stallion has three great sons in one race meet. Since the Godolphin Arabian is too old to compete, I am of the opinion that he should be present at Newmarket to watch the performance of Lath and Cade and Regulus. What think you of this?"

The Earl searched Agba's face, and when he read the hope and pride there, he threw back his head and laughed deeply.



22. *The Queen's Plate*

NEWMARKET! The word set Agba on fire. Since first he had come to England he had heard horseshoers, jockeys, water boys, exercise men, saddlers, capmakers, whip-makers, the Earl, and even the Duchess, say the word as if it held ice and flame in its syllables.

Now that he knew all three of Sham's sons were to run on this famous course, Agba felt such excitement that he worked with the speed of a whirlwind. The days sped by in eager preparation for the great event. Finally came the day to start.

To Agba, on that early morning of April, the road to New-market seemed never-ending. He was in a fever of expectancy. He wanted to break ranks, as Sham was urging him to do. He wanted to plunge ahead of Titus Twickerham on Galompus, the lead horse. But he must keep the pace set.

Behind him he could hear the light hoofbeats of Sham's three sons, and the heavy cloppety-clop of the pack horses.

Perhaps, if he took his eyes from the striped body-jacket of Titus Twickerham and the stout rump of Galompus, the pace would not seem so slow! He tried to study the farms they passed, the tidy cottages with old men on the doorsteps and young men in the fields. He tried to count the long-necked geese in the four-storied carts they passed. He peered down the byways. He saw a shepherd and his dog driving a flock of sheep toward market. He even tried to imagine what the sheep were thinking of the passing horses.

But it was no use. New-mar-ket! New-mar-ket! The word kept dangling before him like a blade in the sun. New-mar-ket! New-mar-ket! He heard it in the rhythm of the hoofbeats, in the creak of cartwheels, in the song of the cuckoo. New-mar-ket!



They climbed a gentle rise. They passed through a toll gate. And then, suddenly, Newmarket Heath lay spread out before them. Agba gasped in dismay. It was not that Newmarket was less beautiful than he had expected. It was not that at all. He looked at the vast greenness of it. He smelled the fragrance of the turf. And instead of one racecourse, there were many. But what made a lump rise in Agba's throat was that everywhere, in all directions, exercise boys were galloping their horses. He shut his eyes, but he only saw them more clearly. The satin bodies of horses. Horses flying. Horses stretched out in the wind.

His mind raced back to what the Earl had told him only last evening. "You may walk your horse over the dips and rises," he had said kindly. "But do not gallop him. He is far more valuable than a running horse, Agba. He is the hope of Gog Magog."

And Mister Twickerham had added his own word of caution. "If I c-c-c-catches ye galloping him, I'll trounce ye w-w-w-within an inch of yer life!"

At the time, Agba had readily agreed. It would be enough happiness, he had thought, to see Lath and Cade and Regulus



run. Now he was not so sure. How he wanted Sham to run! To prove that he *was* King of the Wind!

The Earl's horses were always allowed several days in Newmarket to limber up before the day of the meeting. For Agba and Sham these days dragged. They were *in* Newmarket, but not of it. The Earl seemed too busy to pay any attention to them. His whole concern was in Lath, Cade, Regulus. He had not even told Agba where Sham was to be stationed when he watched his sons run.

Agba wished he and Sham had never come to Newmarket! He listened to the talk going on about him, sifting out the words that mattered.

"Regulus will run one heat over the Round Course on Thursday."

"Cade will run one heat over the Beacon Course on Friday."

"On Saturday, Lath will run one heat over the Caesarewitch Course for the honor and the glory of the Queen's Plate!"

After that, thought Agba, it will be over and done with. He would be *glad* to go back to Gog Magog. Then he and Sham could lose themselves for hours at a time in the upland pasture.

Monday, Tuesday passed. Wednesday came. All day the Earl and Mister Twickerham passed by Sham's tent as if they were unaware of his being there. Thursday came. Agba tried to busy himself shaking up the straw of Sham's bed, cleaning out his hooves, anointing his body with sheep's-foot oil. By mid-morning he was doing the same tasks over and over, like a dog in a treadmill cage. His neck ached from looking up expectantly at every footfall. Perhaps the Earl would ask Sham to be the

lead horse, to guide the nervous young fillies and colts to the starting post. There was still time. He might come.

The sun climbed higher and higher. The excitement all about them mounted. But Agba and Sham were isolated. No one came near them. They seemed more alone than when they were in the fen country.

Noon came. Regulus was led by Sham's stall on his way to the Round Course. Agba heard the saddling bell. He heard the winding of the trumpet. He heard the cry as if from a thousand throats, " They're away! " Then the quickening music of hoof-beats. A few brief seconds, and they began fading, growing fainter and fainter until they were gone.

Agba was glad, of course, when he heard the cries of " Regulus! Regulus! " and knew that Sham's youngest son had won the two-year-old race. All the rest of the day he told himself how very glad he was. But there was a kind of hollowness in his gladness. Sham was unnoticed. Forgotten.

When Cade won the three-year-old race on the second day, Agba went right on sewing a strap that Sham had torn from his horsecloth. This was not news. He had known it all along. Did not Cade, like Regulus, have Sham's blood flowing in his veins? Was he not sired by the King of the Wind? Did he not have the white spot on his heel? With each question Agba's needle whipped in and out of the blanket, faster, faster.

A shadow suddenly fell across his work. He looked up into the twinkling gray eyes of the Earl of Godolphin.

" Agba! " cried the Earl with a boyish grin. " A great honor is come! The King and Queen of England will attend the final

race meet tomorrow. And the Keeper of the Course has invited the Godolphin Arabian to stand at the finish post. Think on it, Agba! The King and Queen on one side. And directly opposite, the Godolphin Arabian!"

Agba was on his feet in an instant.

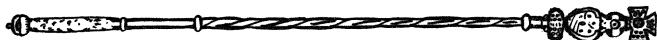
"And you, gentle Agba, will be up!" Then the Earl chuckled. "Though Twickerham insists upon two lead grooms to hold him. He does not trust Sham when the horses are off."

A group of the Earl's friends were coming toward him. The Earl lowered his voice and spoke quickly. "The amulets," he whispered, "do you still wear them about your neck?"

Agba took the silken bag from his neck and handed it to the Earl.

The Earl winked. "Hmm," he smiled. "If the amulets can prevent and cure the bite of a scorpion, they can give Lath wings."

He turned to go, then came back. "I do not need to tell you to curry the Godolphin Arabian," he smiled with his eyes. "Already his coat is the color of honey when held in a jar against the sunlight."



News of the King's and Queen's coming flew over the countryside. From Suffolk and Norfolk, from Hertford and Bedford, from nearly all the shires in England, the people came! Peers and lords and ladies in velvets and gold lace; yeomen in sturdy homespun; professors from Cambridge; gamekeepers with

partridges in their pockets; moneylenders and Quakers; maltmen and saddlers and whip-makers and aldermen and squires and maids and housewives. They came on horseback. They came in coaches. They came afoot.

They spread themselves along Devil's Dyke where, long years ago, the Britons had dug a ditch to stem invasions. Now the dyke was overgrown with the finest turf in the kingdom. The people stood on it, sat on it, waiting for the sun to mark the middle of the day.

Within Sham's tent the very air seemed to crackle with excitement. The Earl of Godolphin himself was laying a purple saddlecloth on Sham's back, and fastening gold ornaments on his bridle and breastplate. Two grooms stood ready with silken lead ropes. They were dressed in the Earl's stable colors—scarlet silk body jackets and long scarlet stockings. What a contrast Agba made! His feet and legs were bare and he wore his plain mantle. But he sat his horse with such pride that he might have worn ermine.

Now Sham was parading to the finish post. Agba kept his eyes forward. Yet he was aware of an undertone as of bees buzzing. The deep tones of men's voices. The grace notes of women. He caught wisps of talk.

"I prefers 'em lustier, stouter-limbed."

"Little as a cricket, hain't he?"

"He's the gold of the sun."

"Egad! Note the crest on him!"

"Lookit the artist, there, sketching a likeness o' 'im."

"That young man astride him—I knew him when he was just

a little mite. My poor boy! I used to bake sugar tarts for him."

Agba turned his head very slightly and from the sea of faces he picked out the plump, red-cheeked face and the shining eyes of Mistress Cockburn. A look of affectionate greeting flew between them.

Now there was a crash of drums and a flourish of trumpets as the Light Dragoons on matched horses swept into the race grounds. They were clearing a path for the royal party. The crowds fell back like thistles before the wind. Then shouts went up on all sides. "Long live the King! Long live the King!"

The coaches wheeled to a stop. Escorts rushed forward, followed by the Mayor of Newmarket and all the aldermen and squires. They bowed low before His Royal Majesty, George II, King of Great Britain and Ireland. The King was little in stature, but he strutted to the stand, his purple bodycoat flaring out behind him like the tail of a peacock.

Queen Caroline, tall as a pikestaff, swept along behind him. Her gown was corded and hooped with pearls and she wore ropes of pearls about her neck, and her bonnet was bedecked with purple plumes.

Mincing along behind her came the princesses, Amelia and



Caroline and Mary and Louisa, miniatures of their splendid mother. They were followed by lords and ladies in great number.

The cheering had scarcely died away when the entries for the race were led past the royal stand. Each of the horses was hooded and blanketed in the vivid colors of his own stable—red, yellow, purple, gray, orange.

Agba was dazzled by the sight. It was as if some sky giant had opened a jewel-bag and tossed rubies, amethysts, sapphires, and moonstones onto the grass.

Quickly he spotted the scarlet sheet that enveloped Lath, though he could see only two pricked ears and the whisk of his tail.

Over in the royal stand the heads of the lords and ladies were bobbing this way and that, adjusting their field glasses. They seemed more interested in making out the crests on the blankets than in the quality of the legs and feet beneath them.

Agba's eyes gathered in the whole spectacle. He was glad that he had come. He had wanted so terribly to see Sham run. But now he knew that it was better this way. How could Sham compete with the youngsters of the turf? Especially when one of them was his own son?

Sham was alerted, waiting for a signal from Agba. Yet he stood still, obedient to Agba's wishes. It was better so. Defeat would have broken his heart. Now he was forever unbeaten. In his own mind and in Agba's he was still the wind beneath the sun. Neither horse nor gazelle could outrun him.

The saddle bell ended Agba's thoughts. His eyes flew to the starter who was unfurling his red flag, sending his assistant a

dozen yards down the track. He watched the trumpeter blowing on his trumpet, his face rounder than a goatsack.

Now the horses were parading to the starting post. They were drawing up in a line. Nervous as grasshoppers. Dancing. Side-stepping. Rearing. Starting and being led back. Starting again. And again. And again.

The moment came. The starter dropped his red flag. "They're away!"

Not for one second did Agba need to hunt for Lath in that flying stream of horseflesh. He did not even look for the scarlet and white stripes of the jockey's body-coat. His eyes were fixed on the littlest horse, the littlest horse that got away to a bad start!

The field was far out in front. The big horses were whipping down the steep slope to Devil's Dyke, skimming along the running gap, leaping up the opposite bank and across a long flat stretch. They were beginning to bunch, making narrow gaps. Lath was coming up from behind. He began filling in the gaps. He went through them. He was a blob of watercolor, trickling along the green turf between the other colors.

For a brief second the horses were hidden by a clump of hawthorn trees. Agba's knees tightened. He felt Sham quiver beneath him, saw white flecks of sweat come out on his neck. It was well the grooms were there to hold them both!

The horses were coming around the trees now. The golden blob was still flowing between the other colors. It was flowing beyond them, flowing free!

In full stride, Lath was galloping down the dip and up

the rise to the ending post. He was flying past it, leaving the "lusty" horses behind.

"The *little* horse wins!"

"Lath, an easy winner!"

"Lath, son of Godolphin Arabian, wins!"

People of all ages and all ranks clapped their hands and cheered in wild notes of triumph.

Agba never knew how he and Sham reached the royal stand. But suddenly, there they were. And the Earl of Godolphin was there, too.

"I am pleased to give," Queen Caroline was saying in her sincere, straightforward manner, "I am pleased to give and bestow upon the Earl of Godolphin, the Queen's Plate."

Everyone could see it was not a plate that she held in her hands at all. It was a purse. But only Agba and the Earl knew how much that purse would mean to the future of the horse in England. The Earl looked right between the plumes in the Queen's bonnet and found Agba's eyes for an instant. Then he fell to his knees and kissed the Queen's hand.

A hush fell over the heath. The Queen's words pinged sharp and clear, like the pearls that suddenly broke from her necklace and fell upon the floor of the stand. No one stooped to recover them, for the Queen was speaking.

"And what," she asked, as she fixed one of her own purple plumes in Sham's headstall, "what is the pedigree of this proud sire of three winning horses?"

Agba leaned forward in his saddle.

There was a pause while the Earl found the right words.



"Your Majesty," he spoke slowly, thoughtfully, "his pedigree has been . . . has been lost. But perhaps it was so intended. His pedigree is written in his sons."

How the country people cheered! An unknown stallion wearing the royal purple! It was a fairy tale come true.

The princesses clapped their hands, too. Even the King seemed pleased. He puffed out his chest and nodded to the Queen that the answer was good.

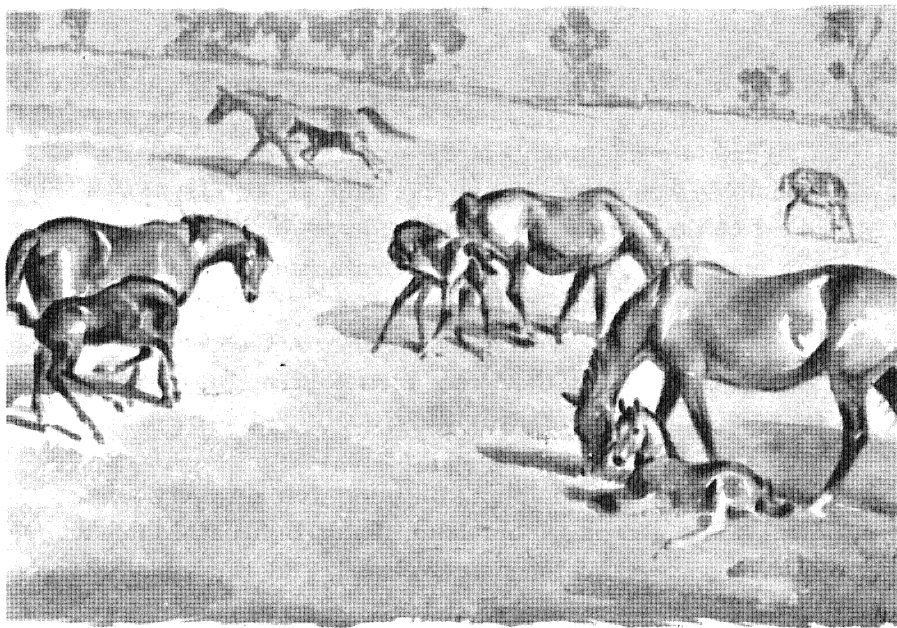
Agba swallowed. He felt a tear begin to trickle down his cheek. Quickly, before anyone noticed, he raised his hand to brush it away. His hand stopped. Why, he was growing a beard! He was a man! Suddenly his mind flew back to Morocco. *My name is Agba. Ba means father. I will be a father to you, Sham, and when I am grown I will ride you before the multitudes. And they will bow before you, and you will be King of the Wind. I promise it.*

He had kept his word!

For the first time in his life, he was glad he could not talk. Words would have spoiled everything. They were shells that cracked and blew away in the wind. He and Sham were alike. That was why they understood each other so deeply.

The Godolphin Arabian stood very still, his regal head lifted. An east wind was rising. He stretched out his nostrils to gather in the scent. It was laden with the fragrance of wind-flowers. Of what was he thinking? Was he re-running the race of Lath? Was he rejoicing in the royal purple? Was he drawing a wood cart in the streets of Paris? Or just winging across the grassy downs in the shafts of the sun?





Father of the Turf

THE GODOLPHIN ARABIAN lived to a plentiful age. And when he died, at the age of twenty-nine, his body was buried at Gog Magog in a passage leading to his stable. Over his grave a tablet of solid granite was laid. There was no inscription on it. None at all. For the Earl of Godolphin did not need words carved on stone to remind him of the fire and spirit of the golden stallion from Morocco. He had only to look out upon his own meadows to see the living image of Sham in his colts and grandcolts. There were light bays and dark bays and chestnuts. But regardless of color, they all wore the high crest of the Godolphin Arabian.

“ These are my knights of the wonderful crest,” the Earl of Godolphin would say when visitors came to Gog Magog. “ The blood of the Godolphin Arabian courses in their veins. You can trace it in the height of their crest. And you can trace it, too, in the underlying gold of their coats.”

At Newmarket, however, men were not concerned with color or crest. What they were interested in was speed and stamina. And it was exactly these qualities that the descendants of the Godolphin Arabian inherited.

The names of Godolphin’s offspring were on every tongue: Lath, Cade, Regulus, Babraham, Blank, Buffcoat, Match’em, Molly Longlegs, Whistlejacket, Weasel, Old England, Silverlocks, Dormouse.

Eclipse, Sham’s great-grandson, was the pride of the kingdom. In his whole career he never ran except to win! He won eleven plates at Newmarket. *Eclipse first; the rest nowhere*, roared the crowds at Newmarket when Eclipse came sailing past the winning post.

It is a curious fact that today, two centuries later, the name of the Godolphin Arabian is found in the pedigree of almost every superior Thoroughbred. His blood reigns. To him goes the title: Father of the Turf.

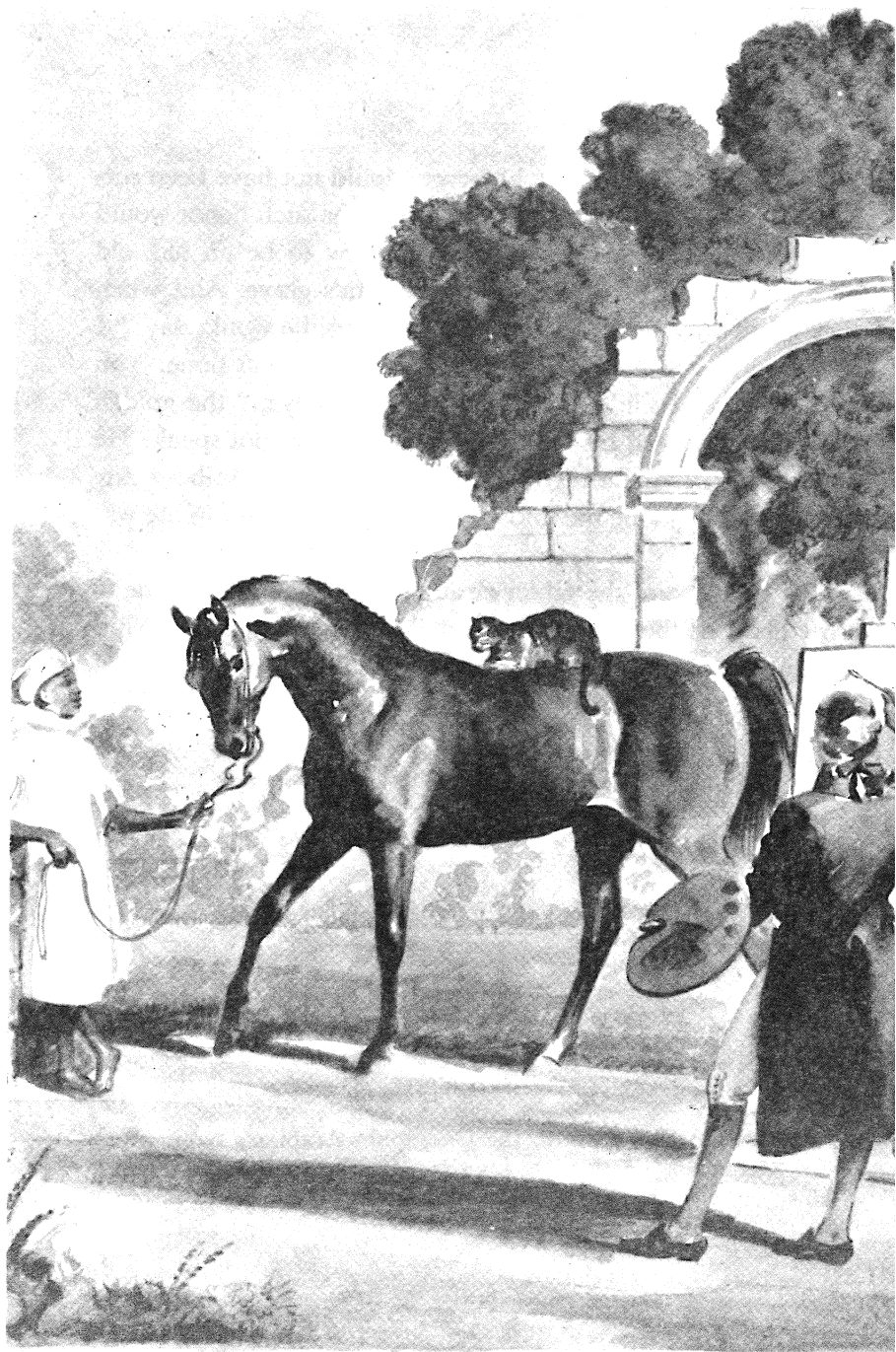
Would not the carter of Paris and the King’s cook and the mistress of the Red Lion have laughed in scorn at the idea of Sham’s attaining such fame? How they would have held their sides had anyone predicted that Man o’ War, the greatest racer of his time, would owe his vitality to the fiery little horse from Morocco!

The Earl of Godolphin, however, would not have been surprised in the least. Perhaps he felt that some such honor would come to his horse. For when the Earl grew to be an old, old man he liked to take his visitors to Sham's grave. And when they asked why the tablet bore no marking, he would say, "I shall trouble you with a very short answer. It *needs* none. You see," he would smile, a faraway look in his eye, "the golden bay was tended all his life by a boy who could not speak. He left for Morocco the night that his horse died. Without any words at all he made me understand that his mission in life was fulfilled.

"So I have kept the tablet clean. It is for you and for me to write here our thoughts and tributes to the King of the Wind and the slim brown horseboy who loved him."



After the Earl's death, the Godolphin Arabian's name and the year of his death were inscribed on the tombstone. Time, however, is erasing the letters, as if in respect to the Earl's wishes.



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