

Alec Ramsay sat still and straight in his saddle, seemingly unaware of the thousands of eyes upon him. He wore black racing silks, and beneath his peaked cap the whiteness of his face made a startling contrast to his racing colors and the burly black horse beneath him.

They were third in the parade to the post for the running of the classic Belmont Stakes. Alec wished they had drawn an outside position instead of the number 3 slot. He didn't like being so near the rail. Henry's instructions were to hold Satan until the field approached the middle of the backstretch before making his move. It would have been easier to do this from an outside post position.

The parade had passed the clubhouse and was now opposite the grandstand. Alec didn't have to look to know that it was overflowing with people. The tumultuous roar from the stands took care of that. And he knew their eyes were upon Satan, wondering if the big three-year-old would win the Belmont Stakes, as he had won the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness, to take his place among the few great horses of the turf who had captured the Triple Crown! They wondered only because of the condition of the track. It was ankle-deep in mud after a heavy morning rain, and the early June sky was still overcast as a fine drizzle fell.

The last remaining doubters of Satan's greatness asked themselves, "But can he race in the mud? He never has, you know."

Alec's hand went to the thick, muscular neck of the colt as Satan sidestepped quickly to the middle of the track. He spoke to him, and the heavy ears swept back at the sound of his voice; then the restlessness left Satan's giant body and he was back in line as the field continued parading past the stands.

From the pushing, heaving wave of people at the rail, a man shouted, "Hey, Ramsay! You think it's a horse show?"

Alec heard the man's words, but his eyes never left the muddy track which he could see between Satan's pricked ears.

"A Good Hands class maybe?" the man called again.

Only then did Alec Ramsay become aware that he was sitting much straighter in his saddle than the other jockeys. The whiteness of his skin gave way to a sudden flush of color, but his seat remained unchanged. He couldn't have sat his horse any other way.

"Bring him home, Alec!" someone else shouted. "Bring him home like you did in the Derby an' the Preakness!"

The post parade ended when they had filed past the stands, and Alec allowed Satan to go into a slow gallop. He rose in his stirrups and leaned forward, his face pressed close to the colt's bulging neck.

Henry had said Satan could race in the mud as well as on a dry track. Henry should know, for he had been training Satan all winter and spring while Alec had spent most of his time in school. Henry said they had worked Satan in all kinds of weather and the big-boned colt didn't know the difference between a dry track and a wet one. Alec had to take Henry's word for it. He'd raced Satan only twice this year, once in the

Kentucky Derby and again in the Preakness. The track had been dry and fast for each race, and Satan had had no trouble winning by many lengths.

He took the big black colt to the outside rail and went past the two horses in front of him. He let him go far around the turn, finding reassurance in the ever-lengthening and confident strides of the colt as he galloped fetlock-deep in the mud. And Alec thrilled to the swift and thunderous movement beneath his knees. But finally he rose still higher in his stirrups and drew back on the reins until Satan had slowed to a prancing crabstep.

He turned the colt to find the others already on their way back to the starting gate, now set in front of the grandstand. He kept Satan to a slow trot, and his hand slid down the thick neck before him. High above Satan's craned head, Alec saw the many cameras set up on the top tier of the grandstand; they were trained on the field as it went to the post.

"Easy does it, Satan," he said as one of the starter's crew took hold of the bridle. Prancing, pulling a little, Satan moved inside the gate. The door behind them was closed; there was only one way out of the stall now.

For a moment, there were the heavy thuds of hoofs against stalls and the soft whisperings of jockeys to their mounts; all accompanied by the loud, shrieking clamor from the crowd, awaiting the break. Then, very abruptly, a heavy silence fell over the great stands, a silence which finally descended to the starting gate.

Only Satan's big ears moved. Restlessly they pitched forward, then came back until they were flat and heavy against his head. Alec felt the tenseness of the giant colt beneath him. Close to Satan's head he whispered to him. The break would come any second now, any second and they would be off.

"A mile and a half this time, Satan," he said softly. "It's a little longer than the others. Plenty of time for you. Easy getting away, Satan. Easy now ... wait for me."

The grilled doors clanged open; the starting bell rang. There was an outcry from more than fifty thousand voices that was quickly pommelled to deadening silence by racing, pounding hoofs.

Satan broke with the others, took two fast strides and stumbled! Alec felt his head go down, gave him more rein, then drew back, helping Satan to recover his feet. There was a sickening second of sliding, thrashing hoofs seeking foothold in the mud. Satan's strides came fast and short as he tried to control the hurtling momentum of his heavy body over the slippery track. Alec felt the straining of the great muscles beneath him. He was afraid to move lest he offset Satan's balance still more. He gave the colt his head, yet Alec's hands on the reins were ready to help Satan when he needed it.

Satan's strides were unrhythmic as he plunged forward, but Alec knew the worst was over. The big black colt had gathered himself and his feet were firmly beneath him once more. Even now his strides were lengthening, his body leveling out.

Only then did Alec become conscious of the heaving, sleek bodies to the front and side of him. The start on the muddy track had been difficult for all the horses, but now each was in his stride and moving fast.

Satan's head was pushed forward and he was pulling. Bending low to the side of the black neck, Alec drew back on the reins. "Not yet, Satan. Not yet," he called.

Driving hindquarters rose and fell in front of them, sending mud into their faces. Satan didn't like it, but he didn't attempt to free himself from Alec's tight rein.

The three leading horses swung into the first turn, followed by Satan and the rest of the field. Alec saw the jockeys on his right starting to close in on him; they wanted to bring their mounts into the rail ahead of Satan going around the turn. Momentarily he gave Satan more rein. The colt surged forward, keeping the rail. But the others held on, pressing Satan as he sped about the turn.

The leaders were four lengths ahead as Satan came into the backstretch. Alec took a firm hold, keeping the black colt just to the fore of those running behind him.

"Make your move in the middle of the backstretch," Henry had said. "Not before then. It's only the gray you have to worry about, and he'll be back with you, bidding his time."

The gray colt was behind him, as Henry had said. Alec could see his head coming up close beside them. He gave Satan a little more rein to keep ahead of the gray.

The leaders, having spent their early speed, were dropping back, and Satan bore down upon them with giant strides. But the gray was still pressing the black colt. Together they passed the tiring horses who had set the pace. Together they swept by the half-mile pole and drove toward the far turn.

No mud flew in Alec's face now. The track ahead was clear of horses and only the racing gray, moving at Satan's hindquarters, could keep the black colt from winning the Triple Crown!

"Now, Satan!" Alec shouted into the wind.

He moved forward and the white rail went by with ever increasing speed. Alec bent low, lost in the colt's heavy, flowing mane. Nothing could stop Satan now, for he was running free, and there was a savage wildness to his action.

For only a few yards did the gray match Satan's tremendous strides. Then he fell back before the fresh onslaught of speed and power displayed by the black colt. And as Satan rounded the turn in all his fury and came down the homestretch, the eyes of the crowd were on him alone. He was all power, all beauty as he swept beneath the wire, winner by a dozen lengths and the first undefeated Triple Crown winner in turf history!

High on the roof above the stands, a man kept his camera on Satan until the black colt was brought to a stop far up the track; then, turning to another cameraman, he said, "Never in my life have I seen a horse run like that. Never."

“I have,” the other returned. “But only once. He was the Black, the sire of this colt. Alec Ramsay was up on him, too. That kid’s life is like something out of a movie,” he concluded, shaking his head.

“Why?”

“You mean you don’t know his story? Where’ve you been?”

“In Peru, shooting Inca ruins for the last five years.”

“Oh.”

“What’s the story?”

“Alec Ramsay and the Black were the lone survivors of a shipwreck, and the kid brought him home. It turned out that Henry Dailey, the old trainer, whom everyone had just about forgotten, was a neighbor of Alec Ramsay. And when Henry saw the Black he knew what the kid had hold of. They kept the Black in what’s no more than a back lot over in Flushing; then they sprung him in that big match race that was arranged for Sun Raider and Cyclone a few years back, and he whipped them both. I saw him do it. It’s the only time he raced, but I’ll never forget him.” The cameraman turned toward the track and Satan. “They could have been one and the same horse today,” he added.

“But what happened to the Black?”

“As I heard it, an Arab chieftain by the name of Abu Ishak turned up not long after the match race and proved the horse was his. So he took the Black back to Arabia.”

“And that’s the end of the Black?”

“It is, as far as I know.”

“But where does Satan come in? How did Alec Ramsay get hold of him?”

“The story goes that this Abu Ishak promised the kid he’d send him the first foal by the Black. He kept his promise. Satan is that foal.”

“What a break for the kid.”

“Yeah. He and Henry Dailey raised Satan in the same lot where they’d kept the Black. They brought him out in the Hopeful last fall. You know the rest ... he hasn’t been beaten yet.”

“From back lot to undefeated Triple Crown champion,” the other cameraman mused as he turned to the winner’s circle, where Alec Ramsay sat on Satan amidst a crowd of photographers. “He’s riding high in the big time now. No more back lots for Alec Ramsay. Lucky kid!”