

OLD MARE, YOUNG MAN

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Alec Ramsay opened his eyes and stared into the darkness of his bedroom. He could not sleep. The darkness was familiar enough, but not the complete silence that lay over everything.

Long moments passed and he could *hear* the stillness. It was more than the hush, the quiet of late night. It was more than the complete absence of sound. It was a vibrant, living silence and he listened to it as one would to the soft rustle of leaves in the stir of air. He listened to it while his eyes opened again, searching the darkness—for *what?*

Suddenly he swung out of bed and went to the open east window. If he couldn't sleep, the thing to do was to get up and find out what was the matter. He put his head out the window, listening to the stillness. If he wasn't mistaken, it meant trouble. Something was going to break fast. It was the quiet before the storm, the quiet that preceded an onslaught of terrible force. Where would it come from? What would it be?

Just beyond the stallion barn were the separate paddocks and in one he saw Napoleon's white, ghostlike figure. The old gelding was standing still, probably asleep. Somewhere in the adjacent paddock was the Black.

The boy's keen eyes searched the darkness for some sign of movement. Finally they found the tall stallion, his head up and the pricked ears showing clearly against the backdrop of stars. The Black did not move. The night remained still, too still.

Alec's gaze swept across the fields to where the mares and suckling foals were grazing. He made out their dark movements but heard nothing except the silence, so heavy with its dreadful portent. If the danger was not to come from the Black would the mares be the ones to set it off?

Turning from the window, Alec went to the closet and pulled on a pair of coveralls over his pajamas. The only thing to do was to go out and look things over. Some of the new broodmares didn't get along very well together. Also, old Miz Liz was due to foal sometime soon and it just might be tonight. She'd bear watching. If Snappy, the foaling man, was on the job, Alec wouldn't have to worry about her.

Softly Alec tiptoed to the door, carrying his boots so as not to wake up his parents. Then he remembered that he would need his house key to get back in, and retraced his steps to the closet. The key should be in his brown suit. The last time he'd used it was

two weeks ago when he'd seen Henry off on the train for Pimlico racetrack. He missed having his old partner and trainer around the farm.

He found the key and something else which he had completely forgotten about—a registered letter that he'd picked up at the local post office after leaving Henry. Concerned and angered at his forgetfulness, he went to a small desk and switched on the lamp. The letter was from the insurance company. Opening it he found that as of three days ago, when final payment on the fire insurance policy had been due, all the barns and other buildings of Hopeful Farm were unprotected in case of loss or damage! Furious with himself, Alec shoved the letter into his pocket. It was inexcusable that he should have forgotten to give the premium notice to his father, allowing the policy to lapse.

He left his bedroom and went quietly down the hall, stopping only at his father's business office. There he left the letter on the big desk, knowing that he'd have a lot of explaining to do later in the morning.

Outside the house he waited a moment until his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. Again he heard the stillness and felt its warning. This was very real. This was not his imagination playing tricks with him.

Having the lapsed insurance policy heavy on his mind, he thought back to the warning he had given Snappy about smoking in the broodmare barn. Twice during the past week he'd had to speak sharply to the foaling man about it. More apprehensive than ever, Alec now started running down the road while behind him the Black snorted, breaking the deathly quiet of the night.

Going into the dimly lit broodmare barn, Alec breathed deeply the odors he loved—the hay, ammonia and feed. He smelled no tobacco smoke. He walked down the long corridor of empty box stalls, going toward the far end of the barn where he'd find Miz Liz all by herself in the biggest stall of all awaiting the birth of her colt or filly. It wouldn't be tonight, Alec decided, or Snappy would have had the place more brightly lit.

At the large foaling stall, Alec peeked over the half-door. Miz Liz stood beneath a very small overhead bulb, looking fat and tired, with her head drooped.

"Hello, old mare," Alec said softly, going into the stall. There was only a slight twitching of Miz Liz's long ears to disclose she'd heard him.

Alec squinted, deepening the white creases in skin as tanned as old saddle leather, while he examined the mare. He looked at her longer than was necessary, remembering Henry's description of her going to the post as a three-year-old, all sleek and shiny and fired up, so long ago. Running his hand over the mare's sagging back, Alec left the stall.

Now he thought he knew the ominous portent of the night's stillness. Miz Liz was going to foal very soon and that spelled trouble. Where was Snappy?

Alec opened the door of the small room beside the foaling stall. There were a chair and a cot, both empty. The foaling equipment was set out with the oxygen tank ready

for use if necessary. It was Snappy's job to be here *now*, watching Miz Liz. It could happen any moment.

Leaving the room, Alec stood in the corridor. Suddenly he heard the faint sound of music. He looked up at the ceiling, certain that Snappy was in Henry's vacant apartment, where he had no right to be at any time, much less tonight. With a bound Alec climbed the stairs, taking two at a jump. Reaching the apartment door, he flung it open without knocking and there was Snappy sitting in Henry's big living-room chair, his feet on the center table and a pipe in his mouth. Mixed with the pleasant aroma of burning tobacco was the hickorywood smell of smoked bacon frying on the kitchen stove!

Startled by the opening of the door, Snappy looked up and then quickly removed his long legs from the table.

Alec said, "You're sure making yourself at home while Henry's away."

The man mumbled something beneath his breath and then said, "I figured he wouldn't mind."

"You know he minds. It's his home and he likes to keep it private, the same as you would. He's told you that before."

The man banged his pipe bowl against a white saucer, knocking out the top ashes; then he relit the tobacco.

Alec went on. "Just as we've warned you before about smoking in the barn."

"This is Henry's apartment," the man said curtly, "not the barn."

"It's the same thing, and Henry doesn't smoke."

"You're not tellin' me nothin'. He's too old to have any bad habits. He ain't worth much any more, Henry ain't. Anybody can see that."

For several minutes Alec didn't answer. Knowing he'd gone too far, Snappy shifted uneasily in the chair. "I won't burn your farm down," he said. "You don't have to worry none. Just go back to sleep and forget you found me here. I'll take care of my end, all right."

Alec saw the grin on the man's thick lips but he ignored it just as he did Snappy's outspoken arrogance. Good foaling men were hard to find and Snappy was one of the best. Hopeful Farm needed such a man.

"I want you downstairs," Alec said finally, holding his temper. "Miz Liz is going to foal."

"Not right this minute she ain't. Too much rushin' and hurryin' only causes those old mares trouble. Let her be." The big man smiled, reassured of his position.

"Besides, I got this pipeful to finish."

Alec broke out all over in clammy perspiration and his hands trembled. "With some mares you can wait," he said, "but not with her. You should know better than I that it's too dangerous."

“If you’re worried, go take care of her yourself,” the man answered. “I don’t need this job. I got people wantin’ me back home, lots of people. Plenty of mares in Kentucky but not many foaling men like me.”

“Only because your father was the greatest of all teachers,” Alec said, unable to control himself any longer. “Everybody knows that. But I don’t think you ever listened to him, Snappy. If you had you wouldn’t be sitting here smoking a pipe when Miz Liz is about to foal! So you’re not good enough for our farm any longer. You’re fired, Snappy. Now get out of here and stay out!” He reached for the man’s arm.

Snappy rose and towered above Alec, the pipe smoke curling about his surprised but scornful eyes. Then his big hands tore Alec’s fingers away from his arm and he gave the boy a hard push.

Although Alec braced himself for the backward fall, his head hit the floor with terrific impact. And although he did not lose consciousness, he was barely aware of Snappy’s leaving the apartment.

Alec lay on the floor a short while, waiting for his head to clear. Then, suddenly, he heard a loud snort from below. He struggled to his feet and opened the apartment door, shouting down the stairwell to Miz Liz that she was not alone with her foal! He knew the foal had come, that he had only a few seconds more to reach the stall in time to prevent what he dreaded. Miz Liz always got to her feet soon after foaling. It wouldn’t be any different this time. That’s why Snappy should have been there, waiting.

Running down the stairs, Alec made straight for the end of the corridor, where he flipped on the bright overhead light. The foaling stall came to life with festive brilliance. In the center Miz Liz was climbing to her feet, while beside her deep in the straw lay her newly born colt.

Alec did not stay quietly outside the stall to watch mother and son become acquainted in those wondrous first moments together as he did with other mares. Instead he flung open the door and shouted! Miz Liz moved toward her colt, not to lick his coat dry *but to kill him!*

Alec reached out and slapped her hindquarters hard, throwing her off balance and distracting her attention. Startled, she hesitated before the sight of his raised hand and the sound of his urgent commands.

The mare’s eyes were wild, matching the viciousness shown by her flattened ears. Yet she fell back a step, giving Alec a chance to gather the wet colt in his arms. She came for them when the boy moved toward the door, her head outstretched and teeth bared.

Alec swung the colt away from her and felt the searing pinch of her teeth as she turned upon him in all her fury and frustration. But she had not taken hold and he jumped through the open door, slamming it behind him.

Gently he placed the newly born foal on the floor, while the stall became suddenly quiet. Left alone, Miz Liz would cause no trouble. For a moment Alec looked at her as

she stood so wearily beneath the bright light, her wet coat matted with straw and manure. She showed no further interest in him or her colt, not even when the boy spoke to her.

“Old mare, why do you make these moments, which should be the best of all, so terrible? I’m not going to let you kill him as you did another of your sons. Nor will you kill me as you did old Charley Grimm. I’m not afraid of you, old mare, just very sad for you.”

He turned to the sprawled bundle on the floor, all legs and head and eyes. A fine colt. Not black like his famous sire but chestnut with a blaze, the same as Miz Liz. A big-boned colt. Big nostrils, too. Good for scooping in the air on his way down the homestretch when he’d need it most.

Alec’s hands were slippery on the wet body. Large eyes, so inquisitive and unafraid, met his own. Finally he rose and went to the adjacent room, noting the equipment he’d need later on. Taking a soft, clean cloth he went back to the colt and began wiping him dry.

“Not the same as your mother’s tongue,” he said, “but it’ll do for the time being.”

For many minutes he watched the colt’s attempts to unlimber the long forelegs that would not do what he asked of them. It wouldn’t take long before this fellow would be the master of his gangling body.

“I hate to tell you this,” Alec said, picking up the colt once more, “but you don’t have a very smart mother. At first she doesn’t know you and won’t have you. In fact, she’d like to do away with you. But after a while, not so very long from now, she’ll come over to us very slowly and we won’t have to run away. She’ll put her old head down and sniff, and then she’ll start licking you, just as though none of this had happened at all.”

He opened the stall door, still talking to the colt. “My job will be done then and she’ll be as loving as she is mean now. But as I said she’s not very smart at the beginning. We have to keep reminding her that you’re hers and there’s no getting out of it.”

Miz Liz had moved to the corner of her stall. She stood quietly, showing no interest in them, her disheveled head hung low. Alec shifted the heavy, awkward bundle in his arms so he might watch her better. He did not move far from the door while letting the colt support some of his own weight.

“Old mare,” he called, “this is your son, and the sooner you get to know him the sooner I can clean you up and get this business over with. But I’ll not come a step closer. I know you too well.”

Without raising her head, Miz Liz suddenly plunged toward them, her nostrils flared and ears back. Alec pulled the colt outside and slammed the stall door in the mare’s face. She made no attempt to reach over it but turned and went back to the corner of her stall again.

Breathing heavily, Alec put down the colt. “Anyway, she’s getting to know you,” he said. “It shouldn’t take too much longer.”

Far down the corridor the door banged open and his father’s running figure emerged from the darkness. “Dad, what are you doing here?” Alec called.

His father didn’t need to answer. He opened the door leading upstairs and smoke billowed into the corridor! Only then did Alec remember with horror that Snappy had been frying bacon on Henry’s stove—and that he had forgotten to turn it off!

No longer was the night still. When Alec ran toward the stairs to help his father he heard the crackling of flames beyond the smoke. The onslaught of destruction had come and he had helped to create it.

FIERY AFTERMATH

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The smoke rose above the barn ... softly, moving, waving, drifting. Then with a deafening roar the night was shattered by the raging inferno that had spawned the smoke. Long tongues of flame reached out from second-story windows, greedily grasping and devouring adjacent treetops. Echoing the scream of the fire came the snorts and squeals of pastured horses. From farther away came the wailing siren of the village firehouse, summoning its volunteers.

Inside the barn Alec and his father came down the stairs from the second floor, their figures seeming to float through the dim, murky veil of heat.

“Get the colt, Dad,” the boy said. “We’ve done all we can up there.” There was no fright in his voice, only defeat. “I’ll take the mare.” He picked up an empty feed sack.

Mr. Ramsay nodded but his eyes were glazed and staring as if he didn’t understand at all. Yet he went to the colt and picked him up carefully, steadying him on his feet. Then he turned to Alec and the glassiness left his eyes. “You’d better be careful of her, son.”

He watched Alec step inside the stall, talking to Miz Liz as if nothing at all were happening upstairs. His voice was so soft that Mr. Ramsay could catch a word only now and then, but by watching the frightened mare he knew she was listening to Alec. He moved along the corridor, the colt heavy in his arms.

Alec snapped the lead shank onto Miz Liz’s halter and wrapped the sack about her head so she could not see. “Come,” he whispered, starting her toward the door. With the roar above and the heat in her flared nostrils, Miz Liz was no longer vicious, only terribly afraid. Neither he nor the colt had anything to fear from her now, thought Alec. But what a price to pay for their acceptance!

Suddenly the ceiling directly above them exploded and slender bits of flame fell at Alec's feet, igniting the straw. He and the mare leaped as one through the stall door and into the corridor.

Now the very air was alive with tiny particles of heat that stung Alec's face. He pulled down the mare's head, shielding it as best he could with his own body. Only once did he look up, and he saw a raging canopy of fire directly above them. He hurried Miz Liz along the corridor faster, for in her new terror she was inclined to hang back. More and more falling tongues of flame were coming down now and Alec began twisting as he ran in an effort to avoid them. Miz Liz screamed and bolted forward in pain. Fortunately the exit was just ahead and they followed Mr. Ramsay and the colt through it and out into the coolness of the night air.

They stayed at a run until Alec could no longer feel the heat upon his back, and then he slowed Miz Liz. He removed the blindfold and she stood trembling beside him for a few minutes; finally she whinnied. He rubbed her muzzle, knowing that her soft utterance wasn't for him or for joy at the fresh, clean air in her nostrils. No, it was for her son, who had been placed on the grass beside the road and was now the center of her attention.

Mr. Ramsay was looking back at the fire. "Oh, Alec," he said in a forlorn wail.

But Alec did not turn and look back. There was nothing anyone could do. Nobody could save a barn full of hay and straw once it started to go. The small water pump and hose which some of the hired men already had hooked up to the adjacent field pond were of little use. So was the fire engine which he could hear coming down the country road. All the pastured horses were safe, but the barn which he and Henry and his father had had built with such pride would be completely destroyed. He did not want to look upon the horror of its burning. Instead he watched the start of a new life. There were new trials to be watched, too, for the colt was attempting once again to make his forelegs behave. There, there, he had them in place. Eager and strong in his confidence he pulled up his hind legs until they too were where they should be. Then he stood in all his freshly won glory, his eyes bright and seeking, his sharp-ribbed body teetering on stilted legs.