

# THE SENTINEL

## 1

The gray gelding, Napoleon, was built from the ground up and butter fat. His roundness was not due to overfeeding or lack of exercise but to a most placid disposition and an ease of adapting himself to any kind of situation or way of life. He stood with one hind foot drawn in an easy, relaxed position and eyes half-closed. Only his long ears moved, and they just wobbled as if the weight of them was too much for him to bear at this particular moment. He was the picture of contentment; as peaceful as the June night which enveloped him. There was no reason for him to appear otherwise. He was perfectly happy with his life.

The grass of his paddock moved in the night breeze, giving it the soft, liquid motion of the sea. There were stars and a moon, and together they shone frostlike on the fences and roofs of the barns and main house a short distance away.

Finally the old gray roused himself to saunter about his paddock. His movements were slow and quiet. He was very particular in his choice of grass. He would stop only long enough to crop a few mouthfuls, then go on to other grasses that appealed more to his fancy and discriminating taste. But it wasn't long before he returned to his favorite haunt beneath the billowing oak tree. He closed his eyes again.

All was quiet, and as it should be. The inky silhouette of a tall, black stallion moved in the adjacent paddock to his left. Teeth clicked sharply as the stallion cut the grass low and even.

The gray's wobbling ears were keen, and by using them he followed the movements of the Black. He was well aware, too, of the whereabouts of the burly black horse in still another paddock, the one on his right. He had heard Satan snort a few moments ago.

The breeze became stronger, gently whipping his body with a shower of deep evening coolness. After the heat of day it felt very good. That there were no flies to bother him added to his enjoyment. For ideal comfort this was the way it should be. A fly-protected barn during the day, and at night the freedom of the paddocks. For several weeks now the horses had been allowed this privilege. It would continue as long as there was peace in the paddocks. All this the old gray knew very well; his vast experience told him so.

He knew why he occupied the paddock between the Black and Satan. To keep his head, to think for himself, to do what was expected of him ... these things he had learned long ago. He did his duties willingly, whether he was on the track, helping to school young and eager yearlings in their first lessons, or here in the paddock, where he was ever watchful of the actions of mature stallions. Knowing that he was wanted,

that he had a job to do, gave him a warm consciousness of virtue and well-being. He opened his eyes, took in the paddock fences, and then, as though receiving comfort and security from their great height, permitted his eyelids to drop again. This time he went fast asleep.

He awakened to the sound of a strong wind. The skies had turned black. The moon was blanketed by heavy, running clouds and the stars were mere pinpoints in the heavens, shedding no light below. The oak tree afforded the gray horse protection against the wind and he was loath to leave it. Besides, there was no reason for him to go. He need only stay here and wait out the wind. If it got worse and became a storm, he was certain that soon he would see the lights go on in the house and barn, and shortly thereafter he and the others would be taken into their stalls. He moved closer to the great trunk of the tree, and for a while just listened to the racing winds above him.

It was the wind and the blackness of the night that diverted Napoleon's attention from the movements of the tall stallion in the next paddock. For a long while the Black had trotted lightly and warily along the fence, only his eyes disclosing the excitement that burned within him. He made no sound except for the slight, hushed beat of his hoofs over the grass. He did not shrill his challenge to the burly stallion two paddocks away from him. It was not yet time. The Black was clever and able to control the savage instinct that sought release within his great body.

The wind whipped his mane, and his tail, set high, billowed behind him. He stopped again to measure the height of the fence. In spite of his long limbs he had to stretch his head to touch the top board. He moved on to the front corner of the paddock, facing the barn. Once more he tested his strength against the center boards at this particular spot. They bent as they had before. He pushed harder this time. They cracked and split. He stopped using his strength, waiting almost cunningly until deciding on his next move. The fire in his eyes was mounting.

Carefully he lowered himself to the ground, pressing the weight of his body against the bottom board. Then he rolled away and struck a smashing blow against it with his hind feet. It split as had the others. Still on his back, he rolled back and forth, using his great body like a pendulum against the boards. But he did not ram his weight like a blundering bruiser. Instead, with cunning and skill he maneuvered his body, using pressure against the split boards only when he knew they were most apt to give completely. Finally they broke and were swept outward as he rolled under the top board. The Black was free of his confining paddock!

He got to his feet with the speed and agility of the wildest and most savage of animals. A striking change had swept over his glistening body. No longer was he calm and cunning, but trembling and brutally eager *to kill*. Gone was his domesticity and the inner control that had kept the fire from his eyes and given the coolness to his blood. Now he was inflamed with a terrible but natural instinct to do battle with another stallion. He turned his gleaming, red eyes on Satan, two paddocks beyond;

then he hurled forth his screaming challenge, and its shrillness rose above the cry of the wind.

He was already on his way down the dirt road fronting the paddocks when the gray gelding came plunging to the fence. The stallion paid not the slightest attention to him. The gray ran with his ears back, his teeth snapping in rage between the boards because he knew the stallion's savage intent, and could do nothing to keep him from the black horse beyond. The gelding stopped when he came to the end of his enclosure. He neighed loudly and incessantly, knowing this was the only useful thing he could do. But his warnings of the disturbed peace were deadened by the force of the wind. The house and barn remained dark.

Turning from the dirt road, the tall stallion ran down the corridor between the paddocks. Every possible precaution had been taken to make the paddocks foolproof, to keep one stallion from another, to forestall just such an emergency as this. The paddock fences were strong and high, the corridor wide. Yet the Black was loose, and in spite of the fence still separating him from Satan, his fury was not to be denied. He ran with reckless speed down the corridor and back again, once hurling himself against the fence, only to be repelled. He ignored the gray gelding, who followed his every move still neighing in rage. He had eyes only for the large black horse who stood so quietly in the center of his paddock. That Satan did not move, that he uttered no scream accepting the challenge, infuriated the tall stallion even more. His nostrils were distended in recognition of the hateful scent of his rival as he finally left the corridor and approached Satan's paddock from the front.

He went to the fence screaming. Lifting his head, he touched his nose to the top board. Then he rose on hind legs to bring his forehoofs down upon it. He was terrible in his fury, but his act proved futile. Frenzied rage had replaced the cool cunning of his earlier behavior. He rose again, trying to batter down the fence, and his legs hurt from the crashing impact of his blows. The fence remained intact. He whirled while still at his utmost height, his hind legs pivoting his great body with uncanny grace and swiftness, then sending him away from the fence in long strides. It was less than a hundred feet to the barn, and there he stopped short with tossing head and mane. With no hesitation he whirled again and swept back, his strides lengthening with startling swiftness for so short a distance. He gathered his great body in front of the fence as though to jump it, but he never unleashed his spring. Instead he stopped short again, stomping the earth with both forefeet in his frenzy and frustration.

He turned to the left to run along the fence. He had passed the paddock gate when suddenly he felt the earth rise gradually beneath his running hoofs, and then descend abruptly. He went on for a short distance before stopping and going back to the elevated stretch of ground which was used in the loading and unloading of horses from vans. Now he was more quiet, more cunning. He walked up the gradual ascent to the flat summit of the grassy mound. For a moment he stood there, his wild eyes seeming to measure the distance to the fence. His added height enabled him to see

over the top board, and he screamed again at the horse beyond. There was a new note to his whistle, for now he knew the battle was close at hand. Satan, too, was aware of it; he screamed for the first time ... and his answer was as shrill, as terrible in its savagery as his challenger's.

The Black turned, leaving the mound, and went once more as far as the barn. He whirled and bolted, picking up speed with every stride. He gathered himself going up the grassy incline. At the top he rose in the air, hurling himself forward, his legs tucked well beneath him. A hoof struck the top of the fence but did not upset him. He came down and, without breaking stride, raced forward to meet Satan.

He went only a short distance before he came to a plunging stop; the cool logic that had helped him win battles with other stallions came to the fore. His eyes were still blazing with hate, his ears were flat against his head. But when he moved again it was to circle his opponent with strides that were light and cautious.

Both fear and fire shone in Satan's eyes. He did not want to fight yet he stood unflinching and ready. He was heavier than the Black, though not as tall. His bones were larger, his neck shorter and more bulging with muscle, his head heavier. Yet his great, thick body had the same fascination and swiftness of movement as the stallion who circled him. He had inherited these together with his tremendous speed from the Black, his sire. Now, keeping his bright eyes on his opponent, Satan began to move with him. He heard him scream again, and answered. He waited for the fight to be brought to him. He was ready.

Yet when the attack came, it was with the swiftness of light, and even though Satan had thought himself prepared he barely had time to rise and meet the horrible onslaught. Two raging furies, hateful to see, began a combat that would end only with the death of one!

The first light that went on was in the apartment over the broodmare barn, just past the main house. Seconds later a short, stocky man, wearing only pajamas and slippers, came running out the door. He moved ghostlike in the wind, his face as white as his disheveled hair. His bowlegs spun like wheels with his fast strides. He lost one flapping slipper. He kicked the other off without breaking his run. Only when he came to the main house did he stop, and then just for a second. Cupping large hands around his mouth, he let loose a scream in the direction of the open window on the second floor.

*"Alec! Alec! Alec!"*

The wind hurled his cries aside. He didn't know if he'd been heard and he couldn't wait to find out. He started running again, his blood hammering within his chest, but not from his exertion. His eyes were dimmed and wet, but not from the wind. He had just seen the Black clear the fence into Satan's paddock. He knew what the consequences would be.

Nearing the fence, he saw the silhouette of the attacker circling Satan. He knew he was too late, that the clash of bodies would come in seconds. His face grew even

paler, yet uncontrollable rage was there, too. His body and voice trembled as he roared, "*Away! Away, you killer!*" But he knew the Black didn't hear him, and that even if he did the command would have little effect.

He ran to the stallion barn and flung open the door, looking for any weapons he might use. A leather riding whip hung on a peg in the entryway. He took it. A pitchfork stood by the door. He grabbed this, too, and ran outside again. Reaching the paddock gate, he pulled it open wide, and charged toward the black bodies now wrapped in a deadly embrace.

He screamed at them, but his voice was just a muted whisper beneath the crashing blows of forehoofs that pounded in furious battle. Suddenly, from their great height, the stallions toppled and fell, their bodies shaking the very earth. The man sprang forward, trying to get between them with his pitchfork. But their action was too fast and terrifying, and his efforts were futile. They bounded to lightning feet and clashed again, their heads extended long and snakelike as they sought with bared teeth to tear and rend each other.

Unmindful of his own safety, the man moved forward with his puny weapons. As yet neither stallion had drawn blood. But in a matter of seconds, if he couldn't separate them, it would be too late. They were locked together, seemingly suspended in the air. Each sought the other's windpipe for the vicious hold that would mean certain death. The man's breath came in fast, hard gasps as he tried to thrust the pitchfork between them, to divert their attention to him. Even now he knew he could control Satan if he ever got the chance. But there would be no opportunity, not with the Black, *that hellion*, forcing the fight, determined on destruction!

The stallions lost their holds and came screaming down again. The Black whirled, letting fly his hind hoofs in an awful blow which, if it had landed full, would have sent Satan reeling. But the burly horse saw the hoofs coming. He shifted his great body with amazing agility, and the crashing hind legs only grazed him. Nevertheless, although he had avoided serious injury, the glancing blow sent him off balance. He stumbled and went down.

At this moment the man plunged forward, reaching the Black before he could whirl on the fallen horse. In his fury he used the leather riding whip, bringing it down hard again and again against the stallion's lathered hindquarters. A great tremor racked the Black's body as the blows landed. Suddenly he turned upon the man, all his savagery now directed at him.

With pitchfork extended the man fell back. He shouted futile commands as the stallion plunged toward him and then stopped before the steel prongs of the fork. The man knew his life was in great danger, yet he stole a second to glance at Satan, who was climbing to his feet. If only Satan would go through the open gate of the paddock! If only he could keep the Black away and get out himself! He backed toward the gate shouting, "*Out, Satan! Out!*" But the words barely left his lips before

the Black came at him again, and he raised the pitchfork in his defense. He struck hard, viciously, and the stallion fell back.

The man saw Satan moving toward the gate. Then he saw Alec, running past the horse. He shouted the boy's name and waited for him, without lowering his pitchfork.

Alec came to a stop. He stood still until he was certain the Black's wild eyes were on him, then he walked forward, his bare feet making no sound.

Still pale with rage and terror, the man cried, "Take the whip, Alec! Use it on him if you have to!"

Without taking his eyes off the Black, Alec said, "If I did, he'd kill me, Henry. The same as he would have killed you." He continued walking forward, talking to the stallion in a soft, low voice, and never raising it or his hand in a gesture of any kind. Only once did he interrupt his murmurings with a soft-spoken command. When he got close to the Black, he put his hand on the lathered halter. The stallion trembled, and for a moment his eyes gleamed brighter than ever. Alec gave the low command again, but the stallion drew back his head in an abrupt gesture of defiance.

Keeping his hand on the halter, Alec moved along with the stallion until he came to a stop. The boy waited patiently, his eyes never leaving those of his horse, his murmurings never ceasing. With a motion of his head, he indicated to Henry that he was to leave.

Alec turned the Black toward the upper end of the paddock, diverting his attention from Satan and Henry. With his free hand he tried to soothe the tossing head, and finally he got the stallion to take a few steps up the paddock. Then the Black stopped again, trying to turn his head.

Alec held him close, and waited for a while before leading him forward once more. Satan and Henry had left the paddock. It was a little easier now. The Black followed Alec for a moment before stopping again, this time to utter his short, piercing blast. Alec stood quietly beside him, the wind billowing his pajamas. He knew that in a little while the Black would calm down, and he would be able to take him into the barn. But right now he must go on as he was doing, talking to him, soothing him, and waiting.

He walked him again, and as he did, he tried to understand the reason for the Black's sudden, vicious attack on Satan. For many months his horse had been all a well-mannered stallion should be. Why, then, had he reverted to the role of a killer tonight? And what were he and Henry going to do about it?

## **REVOLT!**

Alec stood outside the heavy oak door of the Black's stall. He heard him rustling his straw, and through the iron-barred window watched him move restlessly about. The fierce light had left the stallion's eyes, and Alec knew that in a few minutes it would seem as if he had never shown rage, as if his fury had never been aroused. Yet within him that savage, natural instinct to kill would live, smoldering and waiting for some spark to set it aflame again. It would never die.

Alec turned from the Black to watch Henry in his never-ending walk up and down the long corridor, his voice still raised in furious tirade against the stallion. As with the Black, it would take a little while for Henry to quiet down, thought Alec. He'd be able to talk to him sensibly then. But not now. Now he could only listen, and wait.

Henry came down the corridor. "He would have killed Satan! In another minute he'd have done it!" He turned on his heel quickly with only a glance at Alec. Again he walked up the corridor, his bare grass-stained feet making no sound. "He would have killed me, too! Just like that!" He snapped his large, rugged fingers.

Henry passed Napoleon's stall. The old gray had his large head down as though he were assuming all blame for the night attack and thought that Henry's loud denunciation was meant for him alone. Satan was in a stall at the far end of the barn, and only there did Henry come to a stop, to speak softly. There was no doubt of his love for Satan. It was in his eyes and voice for anyone to see. He had raised Satan from a colt. He had trained him carefully and wisely, making him a perfect racing machine, a great champion.

Alec waited, never moving from the Black's door while Henry resumed his pacing. The overhead lights were harsh and cruel to his old friend. They emphasized the deep lines in Henry's face and his dropped jowls. They made his disheveled hair look whiter and thinner.

A few more trips up and down the corridor, and then Henry's pace slowed. There were longer lapses between his sentences. Alec knew that it wouldn't be long now before they'd be able to discuss intelligently the Black's vicious attack on Satan, the reasons for it, and the precautionary measures that must be taken to prevent its happening again. Finally, Henry came to a stop before him.

"You've said nothing, Alec, nothing at all! Don't you realize what he did? What could have happened to Satan?"

"And to *you*," Alec added. "Yes, I know, Henry."

Henry's jaw came out, his unshaven face bristling with stiff, gray hair. "Then why do you take it so calmly, just as though you didn't care?"

"I do care, I'm not calm. But shouting's not going to help us work it out."

"It helps *me*!" Henry bellowed. He turned fiercely and went up and down the corridor again. When he came back he said bitterly, "Okay, Alec, let's have it your way, then. You want to sit down nice-like and talk it all over quietly as if we're just havin' a little trouble with an unruly yearling." His jaw quivered while he paused for

breath. When he spoke again, all his anger and fury had returned. “Get smart, Alec! This is no yearling we’re dealin’ with. Get smart before he kills all of us!”

Alec’s mouth tightened, and white showed at his cheekbones. He kept quiet. He had to understand Henry, just as he did the Black. He had to remember never to force an issue with either of them. Trying to push them around, battling their wills, would get him nowhere. Ask them nicely and he had a chance.

Henry had turned to the Black’s window, and was watching the tall stallion. “It’s not as if this fight was something that just flared up in a moment,” the trainer said. “This took time, a lot of time, a lot of planning. It took cunning to break down the fence, and then find a way into Satan’s paddock. His attack was no sudden, natural urge to fight another stallion, but the methodical, vicious, premeditated scheme of a *murderer!*”

For a moment the barn was quiet and they could hear the wind blowing outside.

Alec said, “Where’d we get the Black, Henry?”

The trainer’s small, boring eyes left the stallion. “You’re being silly. What do you mean where’d we get him?”

“Just that, Henry. We got him in Arabia. He was foaled and raised in the Great Desert, the Rub’ al Khali.”

“*I know all that.*”

“I thought maybe you’d forgotten,” Alec said.

“Forgotten?” Henry sought an explanation in Alec’s eyes. “Forgotten that he was desert born? What do you take me for, Alec?” He raised his voice a pitch higher. “Do you think that excuses him for *this*? Wasn’t Satan desert born, too?”

“Satan came to us as a weanling,” Alec said quietly. “He had a chance. The Black was a mature stallion, never fully broken, never handled. And, Henry, he had roamed the desert *free* for a long while. Have you forgotten that?”

“I tell you I haven’t forgotten anything,” the old man said. Some of the harshness was gone from his voice. “I know further that he’s your horse completely, that no other person in this world can do as much with him. But Alec ...”

“Do you remember my telling you what happened the first time I ever saw him,” Alec interrupted, “the day they were loading him on board my ship when it stopped at that Arabian port on the Red Sea?”

Henry shook his head in disgust. “Alec, if you’re going to bother tellin’ me the whole story of the Black again, you’d better just save your breath an’ I’ll save you some time. I know he was stolen from the Arab sheik, Abu Ishak, and put aboard your ship. I knew it went down off the west coast of Spain and you and the Black were the only survivors. An’ if he hadn’t pulled you to that reef of an island somewhere out there you wouldn’t be around now to be talkin’ this way.” Henry paused for breath. “I know, too, that if you hadn’t found food for him on the island, he wouldn’t be any more yours than he’s mine or anyone else’s. A hungry animal is a tame animal. I’ve

seen it happen before. Sure, I'll admit he loves you now, but never forget that your finding something for him to eat when he was starving made it all possible."