

BLACK FIRE

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On Saturday, July 15th, Aqueduct Racecourse's great stands bulged and overflowed, spilling thousands of spectators onto the track's bright green infield. Front-office officials estimated the crowd at more than one hundred thousand, the largest ever to watch a horse race in New York City. Millions more people throughout the country saw the Brooklyn Handicap on television. Those whose business it was to know reported that the number of television viewers had broken all records for an afternoon program. News film distributors, however, claimed the most stupendous audience of all. They sent prints of the race to foreign theaters and television stations throughout the world. Never had history recorded so many eyes following a horse race ... and one pair in a far-off country spoke endlessly of destruction.

Fury and wrath had transformed these normally clear eyes into blazing pits of fire. They never left Alec Ramsay and the Black during the race and they promised death.

By my oath I shall overtake him with my vengeance and destroy him!

The pair of eyes followed the boy and his giant horse to the post, showing no interest in the other two entries. They watched the stallion charge out of the starting gate with Alec Ramsay's chin almost touching the black mane.

Death to him because of what he took from me.

Heart-rending despair and agony replaced the furious storm in the eyes as Alec and the Black flashed past the stands.

A curse on him for his wings of power. But I shall overtake him and destroy him.

The Black swept into the sharp first turn and Alec shortened the reins. Shaking his head, the stallion swerved to the far outside, twisting in an attempt to free himself of the bit.

A wicked hope filled two watching eyes as Alec Ramsay and his horse almost went down. But the boy kept the black legs driving beneath him and the race went on.

Death to him for his arrogance.

Now the Black was in full flight with Alec Ramsay stretched flat against his broad back. On, on and on the stallion came, faster and faster, until it seemed that one could hear the whistling wind he created. Brighter and larger his black image grew as he swept around the final turn and bore down upon the two front runners. He caught them near the finish line and all three straining heads bobbed together. A great roar rocked Aqueduct's stands as the Black jumped with marvelous swiftness into the lead and the race ended.

The two eyes staring at the television screen in a foreign land disclosed more vengeance than ever when Alec Ramsay straightened in his saddle. The facial features, too, quivered with rage.

*Death to him for making me what I am!
Death to him before the fall of another moon!*

Sunday afternoon, following the big race, the stable area was quiet. A lone visitor walked slowly through the murky veil of heat that enveloped the day. He went along the hoof-marked dirt lanes until he came to a brightly painted green-and-red barn; there he stopped and went inside, ignoring the sign which read:

**NO VISITORS EXCEPT
ON STABLE BUSINESS**

The visitor sniffed the strong smells of hay and leather, of horses and liniment. He went on, his eyes quick to note the orderliness of the tack trunks and the hanging pails, brooms and rakes, all freshly painted like the barn. Some of the stabled horses stretched their heads over stall doors, expecting him to pat them, but he ignored them. He continued along the corridor until he was within speaking distance of an elderly man who was raking the turf.

“Good afternoon,” the visitor said politely.

Caught unprepared, the stableman jumped at the voice behind him, and then said, “Didn’t hear you. ’Afternoon, sir.”

“I’m looking for Alec Ramsay.”

“He’s on the other side. This is the Parkslope Stables here.”

“I know. The other side, you say?”

“Yes, sir. Just go around the corner. You’ll find him there. Black and white stable colors.”

“I know that, too. Thank you. Thank you very much.”

The visitor turned the corner and his steps came faster as he saw the black tack trunk with the white trim and bold lettering, “HOPEFUL FARM.” But the eagerness left his face when he saw the open door and the empty stall inside. He bit his full lower lip in disappointment. Suddenly he heard the sharp blast of a horse. Turning, the man went to a window and looked outside. Then he walked quickly toward the exit. He knew where to go now. It was in the direction of a towering shade tree, beneath which the black stallion was grazing at the end of a long shank.

At the other end of the shank Alec Ramsay was sitting lazily on the ground, saying, “I’d do it if he’d only let me.” He was chewing a blade of grass.

Henry Dailey, sitting in a canvas chair tilted against the tree trunk, asked, “If he let you do what?” He didn’t bother to remove the battered gray hat from his eyes.

“Braid his forelock.”

“Humph,” the stocky trainer grunted. “The likes of him’s got no use for braids. That’s for women an’ tame horses an’ he knows it.”

“Excuse me,” the visitor said.

Startled, the boy and trainer turned quickly.

“You’re a quiet one now,” Henry Dailey said, lifting his hat the better to see their visitor.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” the visitor apologized.

“Not important,” Henry answered, chuckling. “We startle easy, Alec and I do. It’s *him* that’s the calm one.” He gestured with his chin in the direction of the stallion. The Black was chomping grass in short, tearing bites. “But I wouldn’t get any closer to him if you don’t want to get kicked,” he warned.

“Oh, I don’t intend to! I’m closer than I thought I’d ever be *right* now—that is, to him and you, too. I’ve always just sat in the stands and watched, never dreaming ... Well, what I mean is that after I saw that wonderful race yesterday I said to myself, ‘If it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to talk to the men who know *him* best, Alec Ramsay and Henry Dailey! So here I am. It’s perfectly all right with the policeman at the gate if you’re worrying about how I got in. He gave me this pass.’”

Henry Dailey smiled at the white paper being waved at him and let the front legs of his chair drop to the ground. “We’re not worrying,” he said. “Any friend of the Black is welcome ’round here. Besides, after yesterday it’s been much too quiet.”

The visitor nodded understandingly and then patted the folded newspapers he was carrying under his arm. “All the sports writers in the city must have followed you to the barn,” he said. “I’ve read every word they wrote.”

“They meant well,” Henry said, turning to look at the grazing horse. As the reporters had written, there wasn’t a mark on the Black to indicate he’d been in the most grueling race of his life. The heavy leaden weights put in his saddle pad by the track handicapper hadn’t broken him down. He had the growth and courage to carry such a burden. His sinews were as strong and resilient as steel wires. He was all stallion with nothing immature about him—nor had he ever been coddled. He’d run free and his muscles had been strengthened for it. His hide was tough and clean and satin-smooth, whipped by rains and wind, warmed dry by many suns. He was arrogant, yes. Yet despite his arrogance he responded to the light touch of kindness and understanding which Alec gave him.

“The tame horse doesn’t step on this earth that can run with the Black,” the visitor said. “I saw him when he first raced ... that year in Chicago.”

Alec turned to the visitor, studying him quietly before saying, “He’d been a killer of horses. It was instinct that made him fight that day. He’s come a long way since then.”

“You got him to go on,” the visitor said, admiration in his eyes and voice. “You made him race.”

“I *asked* him,” Alec corrected, turning back to his horse. “One doesn’t *make* him do anything.”

“I’d like to know more,” the visitor said, almost impatient now. “What’s he like personally? The little things, I mean, those that don’t get in the papers.”

Henry laughed. “That’s a big order when you’re talking about the most publicized race horse in the whole wide world.”

Alec Ramsay got to his feet. “Not so big, Henry. I think I know what the man means.”

Henry saw the strong blue light in Alec’s eyes. It was the look that was always there when he talked of his horse.

“He snores,” Alec said, smiling at their visitor. “Sometimes so loud we can’t sleep at all, not if we’re near him and we usually are, here at the track. At the farm it’s a lot better, because the stallion barn is a good distance from the house and we have solid oak barn doors.”

Alec turned to the Black, his hand tracing the multitude of veins that stood out beneath the velvet-soft neck.

“Yes,” the visitor said gratefully, “that’s what I meant.”

Alec went on, “He dreams, too. He’ll move his legs and sometimes even his tail while he’s sleeping. Often, too, he’ll snort. I believe he thinks he’s racing or at least running, for he dreams most of all the night following a race.”

“Last night it was awful,” Henry interrupted. “I went runnin’ into his stall thinkin’ he was dyin’ or tearin’ the place apart. Instead I found Alec tryin’ to tell him the Brooklyn was already over an’ he’d won it.”

“So that’s the way it goes with us,” Alec said. “Nothing ever dull or very quiet for long.”

“It sounds that way,” the visitor offered. “Please go on.”

Henry spoke before Alec could continue. “I’m afraid we’ll have to cut this short, Mister. It’s four-thirty and time for our horse to be fed.”

“He’s a terrific eater,” Alec added. “Three meals a day he takes. Six quarts of oats, four whole and two crushed. Maybe thirty pounds of hay, too, special from the farm—timothy and a little clover thrown in for dessert. And sometimes I give him a salad for good measure—lettuce with a little endive, romaine and leaves of the chicory plant. He likes it a lot.”

The visitor nodded eagerly, hoping Alec would go on, but Henry was already on his feet and bringing the session to a close.

“Here’s what you want to remember even if you forget all the rest he’s told you,” the trainer said quietly. “Him and his horse have woven a spell around each other that no one in this business can understand, much less break. Just as wonderful as Alec’s love for the Black is his love for Alec. It’s as simple as that and it’s the only reason we’re here talkin’ about a great race horse. If it wasn’t for Alec the Black would be unraceable. Now he gets mad only when Alec leaves without him.

“On the other hand,” Henry went on, even more seriously than before, “Alec wouldn’t be the rider he is without the Black. On other horses I can fault him. But not on the Black. Alec grows there an’ he knows it. So does his horse. They’re for each

other and each other alone. You're not goin' to see the likes of it again, Mister. Mark my words. Neither you nor me nor anyone else."

"Just one more thing, please," the visitor called after Henry. "What do you think was their best race?"

Henry stopped and turned. "I always like the last one best, and yesterday's was a thumper."

"It was reported in the newspapers," the visitor went on, doggedly following Alec and Henry into the barn, "that you're planning to ship the Black to Europe for racing there. Is that true?"

"It depends on what paper you read," and Henry chuckled. "Some say we're goin', others say not. Actually what I told the reporters was that we're interested. It's a possibility but that's all. There are many good reasons why it would be wise to go and just as many good ones for stayin' home."

They had reached the Black's stall and Henry said, "We have work to do now, Mister, but we want to thank you for comin' around. Always glad to see old friends of the Black."

"Thank *you*," the visitor said, "and I do hope you decide to take him to Europe. It would make exciting reading, *very* exciting."

"It could at that," Henry agreed, going into the stall. He stood in the corner, ankle-deep in the straw bedding, watching Alec wipe the Black with a soft cloth. "It's nice havin' such people come around," he told the boy. "I mean people who think more of a horse than just what they see on the track."

"Yes," Alec answered, without a pause in his work, "it is. But did you notice his eyes, Henry? They were clear as crystal. Sometimes I thought I could even see myself in them."

"No," Henry replied, "I didn't notice. I guess I got eyes only for horses."

BLACK GOLD

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The famous trainer and rider stood quietly together in the stall, the Black snorting and pushing his soft nose against Alec's neck.

"Henry," Alec asked his friend, "how serious were you ... are you ... about taking him to Europe?"

"So-so," the trainer answered.

"How serious is that?"

"He couldn't go without you," Henry said quietly.

"No."

"And you want to get back to the farm."

They said nothing more but each knew what the other was thinking.

He's at his best. It's a pity to take him home now.

Henry said, "Whether we go to Europe or not isn't important. What we got to decide is, do we keep him like he is or do we let him down?"

"He loves to race," Alec said, "even yesterday with all that weight on his back."

"After yesterday," Henry said glumly, "the handicappers will put more lead on him than ever. One of these Saturdays they might break him down."

"Even in Europe?"

"I imagine so. It might be a little better for us over there but not enough to warrant the trip unless we got some other good reason for goin'."

They left the stall and went into the tack room.

"Then I guess the answer is to go home," Alec said, throwing a brush into the trunk. "I'll feed him."

Henry picked up a horse magazine and thumbed through it. "Here's a funny one, Alec. Listen to this: *Three yearlings arrived at New York International Airport from Spain on Wednesday. They are owned by Angel Rafael González and are the first consignment of horses from abroad to be received by John Hudson, agent. They are to be sold at the Saratoga (N.Y.) Sales.*"

Henry glanced at Alec to see if the boy was listening and then read the concluding sentence: "*The yearlings will be at John Hudson's farm on Long Island until shortly before the Sales.*"

Alec kept on with his packing. "What's so funny about that, Henry? More yearlings from abroad are being sent over here every year."

"I know," Henry said patiently. "Foreign breeders are after the same money we are. They're providin' a lot of competition, too, because many American farms need new bloodlines and buyers have found a good source in England and France. But you didn't get my point. These three yearlings are from *Spain*."