

# FAN MAIL

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*“Dear Alec Ramsay,” the letter began, “I’ve wanted to write you a long time but was afraid you’d be too busy even to read my letter. I finally decided I just had to take a chance and write anyway. I know there’s no one else who would understand my love for a horse as much as you and I need your help very much.”*

Alec stopped reading and got off his seat on the tack trunk so the old man with him could rummage inside. “What are you looking for, Henry?” he asked.

“The X-ray plates Doc Palmer took,” the trainer said.

“The latest batch?” Alec asked.

“Yeah, those.”

“In the right-hand corner.”

Removing the stack of negatives, the old man held them up to the morning sunlight coming through the doorway of the small room. He stared at the X rays, shook his head, then climbed up on the tack trunk and held the negatives against the bare light bulb.

“You won’t find anything,” Alec said. “You never do.”

“There just might be a speck we missed.”

“There’s nothing,” Alec insisted. “The Black’s hoof healed long ago. We have the doc’s word for it. We have clean pictures and we know he’s acting right.” Mounting impatience with the old man made him add, “I don’t see why you keep looking for trouble, Henry. He was wild to run this morning. I haven’t seen him act so alive and well in months.”

“You let him get away from you,” the old man said defensively. “You were supposed to take him for a sightseeing gallop and you didn’t.”

“I couldn’t. As I say, he was wild. He felt good. He was bucking and playing all the way. You know yourself that he was still so fresh when we got back to the barn that it took the two of us to walk him.”

“I know,” the old man said, still studying the pictures.

Alec Ramsay turned back to the letter in his hand. “You want me to read this letter to you?”

“Why not? Don’t you always read your fan mail to me?”

“But sometimes you don’t listen.”

“I’ll listen. I can work at the same time.” Henry Dailey held the X-ray negatives to the light bulb again and added, “Whoever is writing needs your help. Like maybe ten others a week you hear from. He loves horses as much as you do. Or maybe it’s from a girl this time?”

Alec turned over the letter to read the signature. “No, it’s from a fellow. Someone named Steve Duncan. But you’re right so far ... he loves horses as much as I do and he’s asking for help.”

“Want me to go on?” the old man asked without taking his eyes from the negatives. “I can tell you the rest of it, almost word for word.”

“No, let me read it to you. Maybe it’ll be different this time.” But different or not, Alec decided it was good knowing people were interested enough in him and the Black to write. If the day ever came when he and Henry became too busy to read such letters, it would be time to quit racing altogether.

*“From the newspapers I know you have the Black at Hialeah Park this winter and may race him before long,”* Alec read aloud. *“I know exactly how you feel having such a wonderful horse and I wish ...”*

Henry stepped down from the tack trunk, replacing the X-ray negatives in a large manila envelope. “That fellow knows *exactly* how you feel having the Black, and he wants one *exactly* like him someday,” he said. “You’re not going to be able to help him any more than you did the others, Alec. How come people don’t understand that a truly great horse like the Black turns up just once in a lifetime, if at all?”

Alec shrugged his shoulders as he met the old man’s gaze. Henry’s face had the texture of old parchment crisscrossed with a mass of wrinkles, but his eyes and voice still held the fire and gusto of youth.

“I’d pity most of them if they ever *did* have a horse like the Black,” the old man went on. “They don’t know what it’s like having a great horse on their hands. They don’t know any of the *problems*.”

“Who’re you kidding? You wouldn’t change it for the world, Henry,” Alec said.

“Of course not. I waited all my life for him to come along. Maybe I worry about him too much like you say,” he went on. “Sometimes I think he’s going to worry me to death. Sometimes I can’t eat or sleep, just knowing I got the *big one* in my stable. That’s the way it is, but I wouldn’t wish it on anyone else.”

Turning back to the letter, Alec said, “This fellow seems to have something else in mind.”

*“... and I wish,”* he continued reading, *“that you and I could get together. I live in Miami now. My family moved here from the North last fall. It would be easy for me to get to Hialeah to see you. Would you mind if I came over soon? It’s very important and I’m sure you could help me.”*

“That’s great, just great,” the old man said. “All we need around here is a horse-struck kid with a problem. Maybe he won’t get past the barn gate.”

“That doesn’t sound like you, Henry,” Alec said. “It won’t do any harm to see him if he does come. I don’t see what’s wrong with you these days. You’re too cautious about everything.”

Henry straightened his blocklike figure, making a gallant attempt to look unconcerned at Alec’s criticism and regain his position of authority. He didn’t like the

way Alec was sizing him up. Alec was too composed while he was squirming inwardly. Maybe it was a sign of old age creeping up on him. Maybe it wasn't a case of being as old as one felt but as old as one *was*.

"I guess you're right," he said finally. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded. We'll help him all we can."

Alec smiled, trying to make it easier for his old friend. He thought he knew how the trainer felt. The Black had made up for a lot of disappointments in Henry's long life. Despite his ever-present anxiety over the Black's soundness, Henry was a happy man. Having a great horse could make anyone really enjoy life to the fullest.

"Do you want me to go on?" Alec asked, turning back to the letter.

"Is there much more?" Henry asked with mounting impatience. He tried to meet the youth's gaze and failed miserably. Finding himself stooped over, his arms hanging down like an ape's, he straightened quickly. "Sure, go ahead," he said brusquely.

Alec continued reading. "*I realize you must hear from many fans who would like to meet you. So I must convince you that this letter is different from the others.*"

Henry groaned and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Once again he was ill at ease because Alec was looking at him. He knew the youth could penetrate any thought he might want to keep to himself, and what he was thinking now made him seem like an utter fool. Why in the world should he be disturbed by a letter from a youngster that was no different from hundreds of others Alec had received? Or was his uneasiness caused by a strong feeling that this letter was going to prove different?

"Well, you know what I mean, Alec," he said finally. "All these kids seem to think their particular problem is more important than anyone else's. It gets kind of annoying, especially when we have so much work to do."

"Okay, Henry," Alec said, starting to fold the letter and put it away. "I'll finish it later."

"Finish it now if you like," Henry said. "But let's get some work done too."

Alec rose from the trunk. "What do you want done?" he asked.

"I want to check his foot again," Henry said. "Get me the small tongs."

While Alec searched the trunk for the pair of tongs, Henry studied him. It was really quite remarkable that Alec was essentially the same kid he was years ago when they'd first met. This, despite the fact that he was now one of the nation's top jockeys. There were few riders around who could match his skill on the racetrack.

He studied the youth as he bent over the tack trunk. Alec still weighed only about one hundred and ten pounds and most of the weight was in his arms and chest, making him look like sort of a husky bulldog—except for his face, of course. Alec had a thin, good-looking face, unlined and set off by prominent, even teeth that flashed whenever he smiled, which was a good bit of the time. His hair was cut short and it was more red than ever due to the long time he'd spent in the sun. There were a few strands of hay hanging from his white T-shirt, and his blue Levi's looked much too hot for Florida weather. Few would have taken him for the successful young rider he was.

When Alec turned to him, the tongs in hand, Henry said, "Take some of that hay off your shirt and out of your hair. You look like you just rolled out of a stall."

"I did," Alec said, smiling. "I find I'm spending most of my time there."

"No need to be untidy, even if you are tending a horse," the old man answered. But he knew that if Alec was untidy, it was not through inclination but rather that sometimes he was too impatient to take time to clean up. Alec was always in a hurry, always working at new ideas.

"Come on," Henry said, starting for the door.

It was late morning and the quiet around the stable area was almost tangible. But within an hour or two the barns would come to life again and shortly thereafter the cries of the afternoon racing crowd would be heard beyond Hialeah's towering Royal palms and Australian pines.

Outside the tack room, Henry stopped to remove the floppy straw hat he wore constantly to shield his head and face from the hot Florida sun. He brushed a bared arm across his forehead to remove the perspiration, then glanced skyward toward the south where the clouds were darkest and held some promise of rain to cool things off.

Alec said, "If the heat bothers you, just remember there are eighteen inches of snow in New York City alone."

"I know. I saw it on TV this morning. New York could have been Nome, Alaska, the way it looked up there. Cars and buses buried in snow. Airports shut down. It looked real ghostlike."

"And cold," Alec said. "Real cold, two degrees above zero. It's the sixteenth day below freezing they've had."

"The snow and cold I could take, maybe. But not the gales. High winds seem to go right through me these years."

"Then it wasn't such a bad idea spending the winter here?"

"Not so bad."

Alec smiled. Henry might be the bright-eyed, hard-eyed trainer of old but his friends at the northern tracks would hardly approve of his clothes. At least they weren't in keeping with the Henry they'd known. In addition to the floppy straw hat, he wore a gay red cotton shirt and gray-flecked pants. His gray hair was close-cropped, too, in keeping with his Florida attire. Altogether it made him look younger than he was. He'd sweated off some weight too, now being more portly than fat.

Alec noted a slight, sickly pallor beneath Henry's heavy leathery tan. It was enough to cause him some concern, for his old friend had not been sleeping well.

"You feel all right today?" he asked cautiously.

"Sure. Why not?"

"I thought you might want to rest a while. I can finish up." Alec started to say more, shrugged his shoulders and clamped his lips together. He'd started enough things today without getting into any further arguments with Henry.

“Don’t you worry none about me, Alec,” the trainer said. “I’m fine. I don’t need as much sleep as I used to. Besides, race track people are known to be tough and long-lived. You know that as well as I do. It’s all the fresh air we get.”

“You sound as if you’re trying to convince yourself of your good health,” Alec said quietly.

The trainer didn’t answer. He walked down the shed row with a smoothness and certainty to his gait that were surprising in a man so heavily built. Just ahead was a stall with a large gold star over the door which Hialeah Park had furnished to indicate the domicile of a champion. Sticking his head out of the stall was the Black Stallion, his powerful shoulders shoved against the webbing across the doorway.

“There’s the old boy now,” Henry said.

*Old boy nothing*, Alec thought. The Black acted as young and fractious as any colt. If one didn’t know this horse, he’d have to be mighty careful how he approached him. The Black inspected friends and visitors alike as if he were a bird of prey, ready to swoop down on them from great heights. The tall stallion whinnied and shook his head in greeting, the muscles rippling beneath his black sable coat.