

Alec Ramsay was on the train that had left New York City's Pennsylvania Station at 7:05 P.M. and would arrive at Roosevelt Raceway, Westbury, Long Island, by eight o'clock. This would be a half-hour before the first race of the evening, giving him time to locate Bonfire, the second son of the Black Stallion.

He wondered about this three-year-old colt, whom he had never seen. Had the Black stamped Bonfire as his own in body, head and temperament? Or had that small, quiet harness-racing mare been the more dominant in marking her son? Soon he'd know, and he looked forward eagerly to meeting Bonfire and watching him race beneath the lights in a sport Alec had known previously only at county and state fairs.

He turned away from the window, where the suburban apartment buildings were giving way to more and more areas of spacious green. He was thankful he wore only a light sport shirt, for the July day had been extremely hot and the coming night promised little relief.

The car was crowded, with every seat taken and men standing in the aisles. The stranger sitting beside him was absorbed in reading a long typewritten statement, but suddenly he looked up, caught Alec's eyes, and said, "Sometimes I think a trainer does a better job of training the owner than he does the horse."

Alec glanced at the paper, this time noting the letterhead which read, "FRED RINGO'S STABLE." Quietly he said, "That all depends on the trainer and the owner."

"Take this item," the stranger went on. "Leg lotion, two dollars and fifty cents. My wife claims my colt uses more lotion than she does. And I can't even tell her what it's for."

Alec smiled. "Leg lotion is a mild liniment they put on a horse's legs before doing him up," he said.

The man looked at Alec. "You mean you know something about horses?"

"A little."

"Then maybe you can explain a few of these other items I'm paying for. My wife says it's time I found out. But it's hard to pin Freddy Ringo down, especially on race night. What's this *foot* grease?" He grinned. "Make him go faster?"

"Not directly," Alec answered. "Although anything you do to keep a horse's feet in good condition is bound to help his speed. Foot grease is put on hoofs to keep them soft and to prevent cracks."

"How about this clay for packing feet?" the man asked, turning to his statement again.

"Pounding a hard racetrack day after day often results in a horse's feet becoming hot and wet. The clay is used overnight to help draw out the heat."

"You seem to know more than just a *little* about this game," the man said. "Do you own a harness racer too?"

"No."

The man put out his right hand. "My name is Dick Frecon," he said. "I own the three-year-old colt Lively Man. Guess you've seen him out here."

Alec shook the man's hand. "No, I haven't been here before. My name is Ramsay ... Alec Ramsay."

Frecon's heavy eyebrows bunched quickly. "What did you say your name was?" he asked. His gaze had left Alec's face, wandering to the boy's large hands, then to the broad shoulders.

"Ramsay," Alec repeated.

Frecon was studying his face. "Not the *jockey*," he said. "Not the one who was up on the Black and Satan ... and last year, Black Minx. Not *that* Alec Ramsay."

"They're our horses," Alec admitted.

"Well, what do you know!" Frecon said incredulously. "For years I've been following you and never getting closer than the nearest grandstand." He folded his statement and put it away. "And now that I've switched sports I find myself sitting next to you, *even asking if you know horses!*" Patting his pocket, he said, "Sorry about all those questions."

"You needn't be," Alec said. "If anyone has a horse in training he should know what he's paying for."

"That's what my wife says." For a moment they rode in silence, then Frecon said, "Do you mind my asking what you're doing out here?"

"There's a colt I want to see," Alec said. "He's going in the second race."

"Why, that's my colt's race too!" Frecon said, sitting up straighter in his seat. "What do you have in it?"

"I don't have anything in it," Alec said, smiling. "But the colt's name is Bonfire. He's sired by the Black."

"Oh, sure, I should have thought of that since the boys were talking about him last week. Seems he was a whirlwind last year at two, but he hasn't done much this season. He's owned by a Jimmy Creech of Coronet, Pennsylvania."

"That's right," Alec said. "Mr. Creech is an old friend of my partner, Henry Dailey. That's how his harness mare happened to be bred to the Black."

"I'd sure like to meet Henry Dailey," Frecon said, "—and the Black and Satan."

"Then why don't you come up to the farm sometime? We're only a two-hour ride from New York."

"I sure will. I'd love to, if you're sure it's all right."

"Of course it's all right," Alec said.

The train was slowing, coming into the station at Westbury.

"I can't wish this Bonfire much luck tonight," Frecon said, "not with my colt in the same race. Who's driving him anyway? One of the big trainers?"

"No, he's being trained and driven by a young fellow named Tom Messenger. I don't know anything about him except that he comes from Coronet and is a friend of Mr. Creech, who's sick at home and can't be here."

“Then you know this Jimmy Creech?”

“No, I don’t know him, either.” Alec smiled. “I don’t know anyone,” he added, “... not even Bonfire. I’m just looking forward to meeting them.”

“Well,” Frecon said, standing up as the train stopped, “I can’t say I mind hearing about this Tom Messenger driving Bonfire. I wouldn’t like to see a son of the Black in the hands of any of the top men out here. Not with my colt in the same race and with hay at seventy dollars a ton!”

Later Alec moved with the crowd streaming through the main entrance gate of Roosevelt Raceway. It was not yet dark but the track lights were already on. Dance music came over the public-address system.

Approaching the track, he saw the large paddock to his right and turned toward it. A policeman stopped him at the gate.

“I want to see Tom Messenger,” Alec said.

“Are you an owner?”

“Yes.”

That was true. And after all, thought Alec, the policeman hadn’t asked him what horse he owned or if the horse was here.

Alec entered the paddock area where he found all the horses stabled for the evening’s program. He went down the row marked “2nd Race,” for Bonfire had post position eight in the second race. When he came to the eighth stall he saw that the boy in racing silks and the old groom beside him were busy, so he just stood quietly and looked at the colt.

Bonfire was cross-tied. He was a beautiful colt with fine racy lines and startling color. It was easy to see where he had got his name, for his coat was as red as fire, in striking contrast to the heavy black mane and tail. Alec noted the colt’s small, sensitive head and the nostrils that kept moving constantly. Bonfire was hot and blowing.

The bald-headed groom squeezed a sponge over Bonfire’s head, and the colt sought to catch the downward streams with his tongue. Alec ventured a friendly “Hello” but the man went on with his job as though he hadn’t heard.

Alec studied the rest of Bonfire, noting the long legs, chest and hindquarters which, like the head, had been inherited from the Black. But there was no doubt that Bonfire had got his neck from his dam. It was shorter and more muscular than his sire’s. Alec remembered Volo Queen well. He had taken care of her during the three months she had been at the farm.

Bonfire’s rapidly moving eyes were on him. Alec raised a hand to pat the wet forehead but suddenly the groom’s smooth, hairless skull was between him and the colt.

“What do you want?” The old man shifted a plug of tobacco from one side of his mouth to the other. “I asked you that before.”

“Sorry,” Alec said. “I didn’t hear you. I was looking at your colt.”

“I know that. Step back now. I can’t work with you in my way.”

Alec stepped out of the stall.

“What’d you say you wanted?” the old man asked again. Before Alec could answer, the man moved to the side of the colt and spoke to the boy wearing racing silks.

“What do you think, Tom? Did he hit his knee going that last trip?”

The boy bent low beside Bonfire’s left foreleg. “No, George, but I was worried he had,” he said in a husky voice. As he stood up, the loose red-and-white racing jacket made his tall, gaunt body look heavier than it was. He turned to Alec questioningly.

“I’m Alec Ramsay. I own the Black,” Alec explained. “I wanted to meet you and see this colt.”

“Oh,” the boy said, “I’ve read a lot about you. George,” turning to the old man, “this fellow owns Bonfire’s sire. He’s a race-rider.”

“That ain’t racin’,” George said disinterestedly. “You got to sit behind ’em to race. Get the sheet on him now, Tom.”

Alec smiled and rubbed the colt’s head. His name meant nothing to George. Neither did the Black, except as the sire of Bonfire. The old man was far removed from the world in which Alec and the Black lived and raced. “Jimmy Creech wrote to look you up,” he said.

George and Tom stopped working then.

“He did? Why?” Tom Messenger asked, concern in his eyes.

“Nothing special,” Alec assured him. “My partner at the farm, Henry Dailey, got a letter from him. Jimmy just mentioned that you were at Roosevelt Raceway and to look you up. I guess he figured we’d be interested in seeing Bonfire race.”

Seemingly relieved, George and Tom went on with their work.

Alec didn’t mind their abruptness. After all, he had come only to see this colt by the Black. Yet he would have liked to have asked them why Bonfire had been worked so short a time before his race. Perhaps later they’d tell him. He turned away from Bonfire and looked over the other horses in the second race. They too were breathing heavily and were covered.

George came out of the stall. “Tom, where’d I put those wire cutters I brought over from the barn? I want to fix that wheel spoke.”

“In your pocket, George.”

“Oh, yeah.” George spat tobacco juice on the ground and took the wire cutters from his pocket.

Alec waited until George had fixed the sulky wheel. Then he said, “Don’t you find that it hurts your horses to stand them in their stalls while they’re hot?”

George entered the stall and pulled Bonfire’s blanket up on his wet neck. “That’s the way it’s done,” he said abruptly.

Tom, who was again down beside the colt’s right foreleg, looked up, studying Alec for a second; then he too turned back to Bonfire.

Alec said nothing more, although such a practice was contrary to everything Henry had taught him. The rule was that you could not *stand* hot horses without doing harm to their muscles. Yet here they were doing just that.

Alec talked to Bonfire and the colt's ears pricked forward, almost touching at the tips. Occasionally George and Tom stopped their work to listen to Alec.

The sky was now dark but the great lights made Roosevelt Raceway as bright as day. The mammoth stands had filled and the crowd was waiting. Suddenly a bell in the paddock sounded, calling the horses in the first race to the post. At the end of the row Alec saw eight horses, pulling light racing sulkies, file onto the track. The drivers slid into their seats, taking up the long lines as grooms stepped away from their charges.

Alec, who had never before seen a harness race at a night track, would have liked to watch the race. But he was more interested in Bonfire, so he remained in the stall with George and Tom.

When the paddock judge came down the row, Alec stepped closer to Bonfire. He knew he would be told to leave if he was asked for his paddock pass and couldn't produce one. Suddenly a cloth was placed in his hand.

George said, "Start workin' if you want to stay here. Get his legs."

Alec bent quickly and ran the cloth down Bonfire's forelegs. The official stopped outside the stall for a moment and then walked on.

"Thanks," Alec said. He couldn't see George, who was on the other side of the colt. "I *did* want to stay."

"Get his hind legs too," George ordered.

Tom Messenger watched but said nothing.

Alec felt a lot easier about being there. He'd been surprised by the unexpected assistance from George. Perhaps his mentioning Jimmy Creech was responsible for the old man's acceptance of his interest in Bonfire.

Alec heard the sound of a car's engine and the beat of many hoofs. The mobile starting gate was in motion and the horses were coming down the stretch for the beginning of the first race. The stands were still. Slowly the car's engine mounted to a high-pitched roar, silencing the hoofs behind it. Suddenly the noise of the engine died and only the rapid beat of hoofs and the cries of the drivers could be heard from the track. The stands came to life, a swelling sea of clamor, but above all else rose the voice of the announcer as he called the positions of the horses rounding the first turn.

Tom went to the front of the stall and looked out in the direction of the stands and the track. His long, thin face was very grave for one so young, Alec noticed. And his eyes held a troubled brightness.

George went up and stood beside Tom. "Whyn't you take an aspirin?" he asked kindly.

"It wouldn't help me any now," Tom answered, turning away and going back to work on Bonfire.

George said, "Then stop thinking of this as more than what it is, just another race."

Alec couldn't see Tom but he heard him say almost in a whisper, "You know what Jimmy expects from us."

"I know what he expects all right," the old man answered. "But you and the colt can't do more'n your best. Like you been doin' at the fairs. This ain't no different except that it's night instead of day. Look at it that way an' you'll be all right."

"I just don't want to let Jimmy down, not now," the boy said in the same low voice.