

Night hung black and heavy about the old barn. An iron gate creaked a short distance away and a few minutes later the short figure of a man slid alongside the barn. As he moved cautiously forward his fat, gloved hand felt the wood. The man stopped as he neared the door and his hand dug into his right coat pocket. Fumbling, he searched for something. Not finding it, he uttered an oath and reached awkwardly across to his left-hand pocket. He pulled the empty sleeve from the pocket and reached inside, withdrawing a long hypodermic needle. His dark-skinned face creased into folds of fatty tissue as he smiled. Moving forward once again, he did not bother to replace the empty coat sleeve and it hung limply at his side in the still air.

The prowler reached the door. Carefully he opened it and slid inside. His eyes, already accustomed to the darkness, made out the stalls on the other side of the barn. As he moved toward them, his thumb slipped to the back of the hypodermic needle.

The hard ring of a horse's hoofs against the floor came from one of the stalls. Then a long and slender neck that arched to a small, savagely beautiful head peered over the door. Thin-skinned nostrils quivered as black ears pitched forward. The prowler, halfway to the stall door, had stopped. The horse shook his long black mane and a powerful foreleg struck the door.

A board creaked as the man moved closer. Baring his teeth, the horse whistled the shrill, loud scream of a wild stallion. As the whistle resounded through the barn, the prowler moved forward. He would have to work fast. Mincing steps carried his round body to the stall door with amazing speed. He opened it, but fell back as the black stallion struck at him.

Gripping the hypodermic firmly, the prowler advanced again, more cautiously this time. He stopped and his fat face twitched nervously. The giant horse rose on his hind legs, mouth open and teeth bared. As he came down, the man lunged at him, but the horse's foreleg caught him in the groin. The attacker turned gray beneath his bronze skin. Staggering back, he attempted to close the stall door behind him. The stallion, halfway through the door, rose again on his hind legs as the man stumbled and fell to the floor. Thrashing hoofs pawed the air above him. The hypodermic dropped from his hand as the giant form began to descend. The man rolled fast, avoiding the stallion's hoofs by inches. Climbing to his feet, he ran frantically for the barn door.

Outside, he heard voices coming from the direction of the gate and, turning, stumbled off into the night, the empty coat sleeve waving slightly at his side.

A few minutes later a young boy, carrying a flashlight, ran up to the barn door. Following him was a bowlegged man who moved with jerky strides.

"Something must be wrong, Henry," the youth shouted. "The door's open!"

Henry grabbed the flashlight. "Yeah, I'll go in, Alec. Y'stay here, just in case ..."

Impatiently, Alec waited while Henry entered the barn. A hand swept nervously across his pug nose as he pinched his nostrils. There was a worried expression on his freckled face. If anything had happened to the Black! Then he heard the short neigh and the sound of the stallion's hoofs against the floor. His tense body relaxed.

Everything was probably all right. Looking around the yard, his gaze swept to the open field. It was getting light and already he could make out the high white fence at the north end. There was no one around. He tightened the belt holding up his corduroys and then pushed a hand through his red, tousled hair.

Turning on the lights, Henry appeared in the doorway. He beckoned Alec inside.

The Black was in his stall. He whistled softly when he saw Alec and shook his black mane, which mounted high, then fell low, like a crest.

“Find anything, Henry?”

“He was out of his stall. Someone’s been here ... there’s been a fight of some kind. He’s sweated.” Henry ran a gnarled hand over the stallion’s body as it glistened in the bright light.

The Black moved nervously around his stall and didn’t quiet until Alec’s hand rested on the thin-skinned nostrils. “He seems to be okay though, Henry.”

“Yep.” Henry was quiet. In his hand he studied a long glass object wrapped in his handkerchief.

“What is it?” Alec asked.

“A hypo.”

“You mean a hypodermic needle?” Alec asked incredulously. “You found it here?”

“Yep ... on the floor.”

“What’s it mean, Henry?” Alec moved away from the Black to get a closer view of the glass tube.

“Looks as if someone intended to use it on the Black.”

“Y’mean ...” Alec’s heart thumped hard. “Henry, are you *sure* it hasn’t been used?”

“It’s filled. We’ll get the stuff analyzed today by the police and find out what it is. Maybe it’ll give us a clue of some kind.” He wrapped the needle in the handkerchief and said, “Also, there might be some fingerprints....”

Alec moved over to the Black again. The stallion lowered his head and, rubbing it, Alec asked, “But why would anyone want to harm him, Henry?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Alec.” Then Henry added, “... perhaps better.”

“What do you mean?”

Henry moved over to Alec and placed a long arm on the stall door. “Well, here’s how I figure it out. The Black is a valuable horse since he beat out Sun Raider and Cyclone last June. There’s no doubt that he’s the fastest thing to set foot on any track here or abroad. Now to my way of thinkin’ there’s a good many reasons why somebody would want to steal the Black. He couldn’t be raced but he could be used for stud ... that horse could do much to improve the bloodline of the American thoroughbred....”

“But, Henry,” Alec interrupted, “he isn’t a registered thoroughbred. There are no papers ... we know so little about where he came from or anything. If they won’t let us race him any more because no one knows who his sire and dam were, I don’t see how anyone could use him for stud either and get away with it.”

“Some folks might be able to get around it,” Henry answered. “But let me finish. Now whether or not anyone could get around the lack of registration papers for the Black is beside the point. Nobody tried to steal the Black ... they tried to kill him; or at least that’s what I think we’ll find when we’ve had this stuff analyzed.” His gaze shifted to the hypodermic needle, then back to Alec. “Why would anyone want to kill the Black?”

“Hey, Henry, I don’t see how anyone could be that cruel...” Then a vivid picture flashed before Alec; that of the small Arabian port where they had docked on his way home from visiting Uncle Ralph in India and where he had first seen the Black. Again he was looking down from the deck of the old freighter, *Drake*, and beholding a sight that made his body tremble with anger: The glistening black horse, too big to be pure Arabian, high on his hind legs; forelegs striking furiously in the air; white lather running from his body. And around his savage head was tied a scarf, covering his eyes. Two ropes led from the halter and four natives were attempting to pull him toward the ship. Standing behind the stallion was a dark-skinned man wearing a white turban. In his hand he held a hard whip, which he raised menacingly. Then he let the whip fall on the Black’s hindquarters and the stallion screamed. It was unlike anything Alec had ever heard before; it rose to a high-pitched whistle, the cry of a wild, unbroken stallion! He bolted, and if Alec had ever seen hate expressed by a horse, he had seen it then. The stallion struck one of the men holding the rope; he went down and lay in a still, lifeless heap. Eventually they had gotten the giant horse on the ship and in his stall.

Alec looked at Henry and realized the old man knew what he had been thinking. “You believe it might have been the man on the boat? Is that what you mean, Henry?”

“Could be, Alec.”

“But the storm, shipwreck ... he was drowned. I saw him go down with my own eyes.”

“And his name wasn’t listed among the survivors?” Henry asked.

“No ... there were only a few, as you know.”

“The last you saw of him was when he fell overboard ... that right, Alec?”

“He didn’t exactly fall, Henry. He jumped for an already filled lifeboat and missed ... he didn’t have a life jacket and there was such a sea that I couldn’t see him after that. A few minutes later the *Drake* cracked up and I was in the water, too. I saw the Black and the rope on his halter and grabbed it. The next thing I knew I was on the island. You know the rest...”

“And after they found you ... and during your trip home ... you heard nothin’ to indicate that the Black’s owner was alive?”

“No, Henry ... nothing. One lifeboat containing ten people was found, that’s all, and he wasn’t among them. I’m sure he couldn’t have lived in that heavy sea. Another thing, Henry, I don’t think for a moment that he was the owner of the Black.”

“Y’mean you think he had stolen him?”

“Yes. For one thing, he acted as though he had ... always kept to himself. Then he was too cruel to the Black. If he owned him, he wouldn’t have done the things that he did.”

“Can’t tell, Alec. I’ve seen some purty hard horse owners in my time. Still, maybe you’re right ... he’s a lot of horse and even without seein’ him run some people would pay a mighty handsome price for him.”

As Henry walked across the room, his foot struck a small metallic object. He stooped and picked it up. “What’s this?”

“Looks like a gold neck chain ... but what’s that disc in the center, Henry?”

Henry walked over underneath the light and took a closer look at the disc. “Seems to be a bird of some kind,” he muttered. He handed the chain to Alec. “Make it out?” he asked.

A large bird carved in white ivory was embossed upon a gold disc which hung from the chain. Its long, powerful wings were outstretched in flight. Alec noticed the beak, hooked at the point, and long claws on short, strong legs. Two tiny red stones had been used for eyes. “I’m sure it’s a falcon, Henry. My Uncle Ralph had a couple when I was in India and I’ve seen others ... although never any white ones like this. They’re usually a dusky color.”

Henry was silent for a few minutes. He took the chain from Alec and rolled it in his hands. “Cinch that this wasn’t made in the States, Alec,” he said.

“Guess not ... the work is too fine. Henry, this may mean ...”

“... that I may be right. That the guy on the ship is still alive and wants to kill the Black for some reason.”

“Or, Henry, that someone else from Arabia or somewhere in the Middle East wants to kill him.”

“Yeah.” Henry walked over to the Black and placed a hand on the flaring nose.

The sun had risen well above the trees at the east end of the field when Alec left the barn and headed for the gate and home. His feet dragged along the graveled driveway. He hadn’t wanted to leave, but Henry had talked him into it, knowing that this was the week before final exams. Exams! School! What did they matter now! Someone had attempted to kill the Black, his horse. And whoever it was might return to try again.

Henry had assured him that he would guard the stallion until Alec returned later in the day. The police would be notified, for he would stop in at the station on his way to school. Alec was sure his father would see to it that a policeman stayed near the barn at night, and Alec had every intention of sleeping in the barn with the Black. They’d change the locks on the iron gate and barn door. Summer vacation would follow next week’s exams, then he’d spend the next three months, night and day, with his horse.

He reached the high iron gate. The lock wasn’t broken and Alec doubted that anyone had scaled the fence with all that barbed wire running around the top. Obviously, the intruder had had a key or picked the lock. Still, perhaps Tony had left it open when he and old Napoleon, his gray, sway-backed horse, who shared the barn

with the Black, had gone to the market to load the wagon with vegetables for the day's business. There was a good chance, too, that the prowler, knowing what time Tony left each morning, had slipped inside after Tony had driven Napoleon through the gate without his being aware of it. He'd have to speak to Tony tonight.

Alec closed the gate behind him, locked it, and headed for the large brown house across the street. He walked slowly in spite of the fact that he knew it was getting late and he'd have to hurry if he was going to stop in at the police station and still make his first class.

Someone cruel and vicious wanted to put an end to the Black. Why? What motive could he possibly have? True, Alec knew little of the stallion's past. Perhaps, as Henry had suggested, the answer lay there ... somewhere in Arabia.