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BRED IN THE BONE

Thomas Nelson Page

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Contents

[I](#)

[II](#)

[III](#)

[IV](#)

I

It was the afternoon before the closing day of the spring meeting of the old Jockey Club that so many people know. The next day was to be the greatest ever known on that course; the Spring Meeting was to go

out in a blaze of glory. As to this everybody in sight this spring afternoon was agreed; and the motley crowd that a little before sunset stood clustered within the big white-painted gate of the grounds about the Jockey Club race-stables rarely agreed as to anything. From the existence of the Deity to the effect of a blister on a windgall, through the whole range of stable-thought and horse-talk, there was no subject, speaking generally, on which that mongrel population agreed, except, of course, on one thing—the universal desirability of whiskey. On this one subject they all agreed, always.

Yet they were now all of one mind on the fact that the next day was to be the record on that course. In the first place, the prize in the great over-night event, the steeplechase set for the morrow, was the biggest ever offered by the club, and the “cracks” drawn together for the occasion were the best ever collected at a meeting on that course.

Even such noted steeplechasers as Mr. Galloper's Swallow, Colonel Snowden's Hurricane, and Tim Rickett's Carrier Pigeon, which had international reputations, were on hand for it, and had been sent “over the sticks” every morning for a week in hopes of carrying off such a prize.

There was, however, one other reason for the unwonted unanimity. Old Man Robin—“Col-onel-Theodoric-Johnston's-Robin-suh”—said it was to be the biggest day that was ever seen on that track, and in the memory of the oldest stable-boss old Robin had never admitted that any race of the present could be as great, “within a thousand miles,” as the races he used to attend “befo' de wah, when hosses ran all de way from Philidelphy to New Orleans.” Evil-minded stable-men and boys who had no minds—only evil—laid snares and trapfalls for “Colonel Theodoric Johnston's Robin, of Bull-field, suh,” as he loved to style himself, to trip him and inveigle him into admissions that something was as good now as before the war; but they had never succeeded. The gang had followed him to the gate, where he had been going off and on all the afternoon, and were at their mischief now while he was looking somewhat anxiously out up the parched and yellow dusty road.

“Well, I guess freedom 's better 'n befo' d' wah?” hazarded one of his tormentors, a hatchet-faced, yellow stable-boy with a loud, sharp voice. He burst into a strident guffaw.

“Maybe, you does,” growled Robin. He edged off, rubbing his ear. “Befo' de wah you 'd be mindin' hawgs—what you ought to be doin' now, stidder losin' races an' spilin' somebody's hosses, mekin' out you kin ride.” A shout of approving derision greeted this retort.

Old Robin was a man of note on that circuit. It was the canon of that crowd to boast one's self better than everyone else in everything, but Robin was allowed to be second only to the speaker and the superior of everyone else with a unanimity which had its precedent only after Salamis.

Robin had been head of Colonel Theodoric Johnston's stable before the war, the time on which his mind dwelt with tender memory; and this, with the consideration with which he was treated by stable-owners and racing-gentlemen who shone like luminaries on the far edge of the stable-boys' horizon, and the old man's undoubted knowledge of a horse, made him an authority in that world.

The Bullfield stable had produced some of the greatest horses of the country—horses to which the most ignorant stable-biped knew the great winners of the present traced back their descent or were close akin—and if Colonel Johnston's stable lost anything of prestige, it was not in Robin's telling of it. He was at it now as he stood at the big white gate, gazing up the road, over which hung a haze of dust. Deucalion, Old Nina, Planet, Fanny Washington, and the whole gleaming array of fliers went by in Robin's illumined speech, mixed up with Revenue, Boston, Timoleon, Sir Archy and a dozen others in a blaze of equine splendor.

“Aw, what 're you giffin us!” jeered a dusky young mulatto, clad in a ragged striped sweater, recently discharged as a stable-boy. “What wus the time then? Why 'n't you read the book?”

This was a dig at Robin, for he was “no great hand at reading,” and the crowd knew it and laughed. The old man turned on the speaker.

“Races now ain't no mo' than quarter-dashes. Let 'em try 'em in fo'-mile heats if they want to see what 's in a hoss. Dat 's the test o' wind an' bottom. *Our* hosses used to run fo'-mile heats from New York to New Orleans, an' come in with their heads up high enough to look over dis gate.”

“Why 'n't you read the books?” persisted the other, facing him.

“I can't read not much better than you ken *ride*,” retorted Robin. This was a crusher in that company, where riding stood high above any literary attainment; for the other had been a failure as a jockey.

He tried to rally.

“I 'll bet you a hundred dollars I can——”

Robin gazed at him witheringly.

“You ain' got a hunderd dollars; you ain't got a hunderd cents! You would n't 'a' been wuth a hunderd dollars in slave-times, an' I know you ain' wuth it now.”

The old man, with a final observation that he did n't want to have to go to court as a witness when folks were taken up for stealing their master's money, took out and consulted his big gold stop-watch. That was his conclusive and clinching argument. It was surprising what an influence that watch exercised. Everyone who knew Robin knew that watch had been given him before the war as a testimonial by the stewards of the Jockey Club. It had the indisputable record engraved on the case, and had been held over the greatest race-horses of the country. Robin could go up to the front door of the club and ask for the president—he possessed this exclusive privilege—and be received with an open hand and a smile, and dismissed with a jest. Had not Major McDowell met him, and introduced him to a duke as one of his oldest friends on the turf, and one who could give the duke more interesting information about the horses of the past than any other man he knew? Did not Colonel Clark always shake hands with him when they met, and compare watches? So now, when, as the throng of horse-boys and stable-attendants stood about him, Robin drew his watch and consulted it, it concluded his argument and left him the victor. The old trainer himself, however, was somewhat disturbed, and once more he gazed up the road anxiously. The ground on which he had predicted the greatness of the next day was not that the noted horses already present were entered for the race, but much more because he had received a letter from one whom he sometimes spoke of as “one of his childern,” and sometimes as “one of his young masters”—a grandson of his old master, Colonel Theodoric Johnston of Bullfield—telling him that

he was going to bring one of his horses, a colt his grandfather had given him, and try for the big steeplechase stake.

Old Robin had arranged the whole matter for him, and was now awaiting him, for he had written that he could not get there until late in the day before the race, as he had to travel by road from the old place.

Though old Robin let no one know of his uneasiness, he was watching now with great anxiety, for the sun was sinking down the western sky toward the green bank of trees beyond the turn into the home stretch, and in an hour more the entries would be closed.

While he waited he beguiled the time with stories about his old master's stable, and about the equine "stars" that shone in the pedigree of this horse.

Colonel Johnston's fortune had gone down with the close of the war, and when his stable was broken up he had recommended his old trainer to one of his friends and had placed him with a more fortunate employer.

Robin had not seen his old master's grandson for years—not since he was a little boy, when Robin had left home—and he pictured him as a dashing and handsome young gentleman, such as he remembered his father before him. As to the horse, not Sir Archy himself had been greater. Robin talked as though he had had the handling of him ever since he was dropped; and he ran over a pedigree that made the boys about him open their wicked eyes.

Just then a stable-boy discerned out on the highway across the field a rider, coming along at a swinging trot that raised the dust and shot it in spurts before him.

"Yonder he come now!" cried the urchin, with a grimace to attract the attention of the crowd. They looked in the direction indicated, and then in' chorus began to shout. Old Robin turned and glanced indifferently down the road. The next instant he wheeled and his black hand made a clutch at the boy, who dodged behind half a dozen others as a shout of derisive laughter went up from the throng. What Robin saw was only a country lad jogging along on a big raw-boned, blazed-faced horse, whose hipbones could be seen even at that distance.

"You know dat ain't my horse!" said the old man, sharply. "You young boys is gittin' too free with you' moufs! Dat horse——"

The rest of his speech, however, was lost; for at that moment the horseman turned from the highway into the road to the race-course and came swinging on toward the gate. The gang behind old Robin broke into renewed jeers, but at the same time kept well out of his reach; for the old man's face bore a look that no one dared trifle with, and he had a heavy hand on occasion, as many of them had come to know. His eyes now were fastened on the horse that was rapidly approaching through a cloud of dust on the yellow road, and a look of wonder was growing on his brown face.

The rider pulled rein and drew up just outside the open gate, looking down on the group there in some bewilderment. Then his eyes lighted up, as the old trainer stepped out and, taking off his hat, put forth his hand.

"Uncle Robin!"

"My young master." He took the bridle just as he might have done years before had his old master ridden up to the gate.

The act impressed the gang behind him as few things could have done, and though they nudged one another, they fell back and huddled together rather farther away, and only whispered their ridicule among themselves.

The boy sprang from the saddle, and the old man took possession of the horse.

They were a strange-looking pair, horse and rider, fresh from the country, both of them dusty and travel-stained, and, as the stable-boys whispered among themselves, both "starving for the curry-comb."

The lad passed in at the gate, whipping the dust from his clothes with the switch he carried.

"Good-evening, boys."

Robin glared back fiercely to see that no insolent response was made, but there was no danger. The voice and manner were such that many a hand jerked up to a cap. Besides, the young lad, though his clothes were old and travel-stained, and his hair was long and was powdered with dust, showed a clean-cut face, a straight back, broad shoulders, and muscular legs, as he strode by with a swing which many a stable-boy remarked.

Robin led the horse away around the end of the nearest stable. No one would have known his feelings, for he kept a severe countenance, and broke out on the nearest stable-boy with fierce invective for not getting out of his way.

The horse carried his head high, and, with pointed ears, wide eyes, and dilated nostrils, inspected everything on either side.

It was only when the new-comer and Robin were out of hearing that the jeers broke out aloud, and even then several of the on-lookers, noting the breeding along with the powerful muscles and flat bone, asserted that it was "a good horse, all the same." They had eyes for a good horse.

II

As the old trainer led the horse away around the long stables, the low rumble of far-off thunder grumbled along the western horizon—Robin glanced in that direction. It might mean a change in the chances of every horse that was to run next day. The old man looked downcast; the boy's countenance cleared up. He scanned the sky long and earnestly where a dull cloud was stretching across the west; then he followed the horse among the long lines of low buildings with a quickened step.

It was not till they had reached a box-stall in an old building far off in one corner of the grounds that the old negro stopped. When he had been expecting another horse—the horse of which he had boasted to his entire acquaintance—he had engaged in advance a box in one of the big, new stables, where the descendant of the kings would be in royal and fitting company. He could not bring himself now to face, with this raw-boned, sunburnt colt, the derisive scrutiny of the men who had heard him bragging for a week of what his young master would show them when he came. Yet it was more on his young master's account than on his own that he now slunk away to this far-off corner. He remembered his old master, the king of the turf, the model of a fine gentleman, the leader of men; whose graciousness and princely hospitality were in all mouths; whose word was law; whose name no one mentioned but with respect.

He remembered his young master as he rode away to the war on one of the thoroughbreds, a matchless rider on a matchless horse. How could he now allow their grandson and son, in this rusty suit, with this rusty colt at which the stable-boys jeered, to match himself against the finest men and horses in the country? He must keep him from entering the horse.

But as the old fellow stopped before the stall and glanced at the horse he had been leading, his face changed. It took on the first look of interest it had worn since the horse had appeared on the road in a cloud of dust. He was standing now directly in front of him. His eyes opened. The deep chest, the straight, clean legs with muscles standing out on the forearms in big knots, the fine head with its broad, full brow, its wide eyes full of life and intelligence, the delicate muzzle, suddenly caught his eye. He took a step to one side, and scanned the horse from top to hoof, and his face lighted up. Another step, and he ran his hand over him, up and down, from topknot to fetlock, from crest to croup. At every touch his eyes opened wider.

"Umhm! He hard as a rock!" He was talking aloud, but to himself. "He 's got de barrel to stay, an' he leg jes as clean as a pin!"

It was the first word of praise he had vouchsafed. The young owner's face lighted up. He had felt the old man's disappointment, and his heart had been sinking. It was lifted now.

"What you say he pedigree?"

"Imported Learn——"

"I know. Dat 's de blood! Imported Leamington—Fanny Wash'n' by Revenue! He 'll do. Hit 's bred in de bone!"

"Did you ever see such bone?" the boy asked, running his hand over the big knee-joint.

The old trainer made no answer. He glanced furtively around to see that no one heard the question. Then he went on feeling the horse, inch by inch. Every muscle and sinew he ran his hand over, and each moment his face cleared up more and more. "He ain' nothin' but rock!" he said, straightening up. "Walk him off dyah, son"—with a wave of his hand—"walk him."

It was as if he were speaking to a stable-boy. He had now forgotten all but the horse, but the young man understood.

He took the bridle, but the horse did not wait. At the first step he was up with him, with a long, swinging stride as springy as if he were made of rubber, keeping his muzzle close to his master's shoulder, and never tightening his rein. Now and then he threw up his head and gazed far over beyond the whitewashed fence toward a horse galloping away off on the curving track, as if there were where his interest lay.

"Straight as a plank," muttered the old trainer, with a toss of his head. "'Minds me o' Planet. Got de quarters on him.—Bring him back!" he called.

As the young man returned, the older one asked, "Can he run?"

"Run! Want to see him move!"

Without waiting for an answer, he vaulted into the saddle and began to gather up the reins. The horse lifted his head and gathered himself together, but he did not move from his tracks.

"Wait. How far is you come to-day?" demanded Robin.

"About forty miles. I took it easy." He turned the horse's head.

The old man gave an exclamation, part oath, part entreaty, and grabbed for the reins just as the boy was turning toward the track, where a whitewashed board fence stood over four feet high.

"Wait—whar you gwine! Forty mile! Whar you gwine? Wait!"

"Over into the track. That fence is nothing."

He settled himself in the saddle, and the horse threw up his head and drew himself together. But old Robin was too quick for him. He clutched the rider by the leg with one hand at the same time that he seized the bridle with the other.

"Git off him; git off him!" Without letting go the bridle, he half lifted the boy from the saddle.

"That won't hurt him, Uncle Robin. He 's used to it. That fence is nothing."

"Gi' me dis hoss dis minute. Forty mile, an' 'spec' to run to-morrow! Gi' me dis hoss dis minute, boy."

The young owner yielded with a laugh, and the old trainer took possession of the horse, and led him on, stopping every now and then to run his hand over his sinewy neck and forelegs, and grumbling to himself over the rashness of youth.

"Jes like he pa," he muttered. "Never could teach him to tek keer o' a hoss. Think all a hoss got to do is to run! Forty mile, an' want to put him at a five-foot fence when he cold as a wedge!"

When he was inside the stable his manner changed. His coat was off in an instant, and no stable-boy could have been more active. He set about grooming the horse with the enthusiasm of a boy, and the horse after the first inquisitive investigation of his new attendant, made with eye and nose, gave himself up to his care. The young owner did the same, only watching him closely to learn the art of grooming from a past-master of the craft.

It was the first time in years that Robin had played hostler; and it was the first time in his life that that horse had ever had such a grooming. Every art known to the professor of the science was applied. Every

muscle was rubbed, every sinew was soothed. And from time to time, as at touch of the iron muscles and steel sinews the old fellow's ardor increased, he would straighten up and give a loud puff of satisfaction.

"Umph! Ef I jist had about a week wid him, I 'd show 'em som'n'!" he declared. "Imported Learn——"

"He don't need any time. He can beat anything in this country," asserted the owner from his perch on a horse-bucket.

"You ain' see 'em all," said Robin, dryly, as he bent once more to his work. "An' it 's goin' to rain, too," he added, as the rumble of thunder came up louder from the westward.

"That 's what I am hoping for," said the other. "He 's used to mud. I have ridden him in it after cattle many a day. He can out-gallop any horse in the State in mud."

Robin looked at the young man keenly. He showed more shrewdness than he had given him credit for.

"Kin he jump in mud?" he demanded.

"He can jump in anything. He can fly. If you just had let me take him over those fences——"

Robin changed the subject:

"What 's his name? I got to go an' enter him."

The boy told him. The old man's countenance changed, but the other did not see it. He was busy getting a roll of bills—by no means a large one—from his pocket.

"How much is it? I have the money all right." He proudly unrolled the money, mostly dollar bills. The old negro took the roll and counted the money slowly.

"Is dis——?" he began, but stopped. After a minute's thought he went over them again.

"Heah." He took out about half the money, and handed the rest back. "Wait. I 'll tend to it." He reached for his coat. "Don't you do nuttin' to him while I 'm gone, an' don't you lef' him, not a minute." He put on his coat and went out.

His path led out from among the stables to the wing of one of the buildings where the superintendent and his staff had their offices. Here a colloquy took place between Robin and the cigar-smoking, dark-skinned clerk in charge, and then Robin left and paid a visit to another kind of official—an official on the main road, just outside the grounds, who kept an establishment which was divided into two departments. One was dignified by the word "Café" painted in black letters on the white ground of the painted pane, though on the door was the simple American word "Bar." Over the door of the other was an attempt to portray three gilded balls. The proprietor of this bifurcated establishment, a man with red hair, a low forehead, a broad chin, and brawny shoulders, a long lip and long arms, rejoiced in the name of Nicholas Crimins, though by most of his customers he was irreverently called by a diminutive of that name. The principal part of his business undoubtedly came from the side of the establishment with the short name; but it was known to the stable-fraternity that on occasion "Old Nick" would make an advance to a needy borrower who was "down on his luck" of at least fifteen per cent, of almost any article's value. Saddles, bridles, watches, pistols, scarf-pins, and all the indiscriminate belongings of a race-track population were to be found in his "store." And it was said that he had even been known to take over a stable when the owner found it necessary to leave the State on exceptionally short notice.

Into this odorous establishment old Robin now went and had a brief interview with the proprietor, whose surprise at the old trainer's proposition was unfeigned. As he knew Robin was not a gambler, the money-lender could set down his request to only one of two causes: either he had lost on a race that day, or he had "points" which made him willing to put up all he could raise on a horse next day. He tried him on the first.

"Had bad luck to-day? I lost a pile myself," he began insinuatingly. "Thim scoundrels 'll bate ivery horse they say a man look at. It 's a regular syn-dicate."

"Nor, I did n 't lay a dollar on a hoss to-day," declared Robin. He looked wise.

It was not that, reflected Mr. Crimins. Then it must be the other. Robin's look decided him.

"Any news!" he asked confidentially, leaning forward and dropping his husky voice. This meant, generally, had he heard of anything likely to change the chances of next day's race.

"Ur—who 's goin' to win the steep'!"

Robin looked wiser.

"Well—the' may be some surprises tomorrow. You keep your eyes open. Dese heah Yankee hosses don' always have dey own way——"

"I try to, but thim sheenies! Tell me what you know?" His voice was a cajoling whisper now. "They says Hurricane's—or is it Swallow's—!" He was looking with exaggerated interest at something in his hand, waiting in hopes that Robin would take up the sentence and complete it.

Robin chuckled, and the chuckle was worth what he wanted.

"Swallow 's too fat; Hurricane 's good, but it 's muscle an' wind an' de blood what tells in de last mile—blood an' bottom. You keep yer eye on a dark hoss. Gi' me meh money."

The loan-broker still held on to the notes, partly from force of habit, while he asked: "Who 's a-ridin' him!"

But Robin reached for the bills and got them.

"Somebody as knows how to ride," he said, oracularly. "You 'll see to-morrow."

As he turned away the lender muttered an oath of disappointment. The next moment he examined something curiously. Then he put it to his ear, and then in his pocket with a look of deep satisfaction.

"Well, I 'll make this anyhow."

When Robin came out of the shop, for the first time in twenty years he was without his big gold watch. He passed back by the secretary's office, and paid down the sum necessary to enter a horse in the next day's steeplechase. The clerk looked toward the door.

"Don't you know the sun is down?"

"De sun down! 'Tain't nothin' but de cloud. De sun 's a quarter of a hour high." Robin walked to the door.

"What time is it by your watch?"

"Hit 's edzactly seven—" His back was to the official.

"Humph!" grunted the clerk. "Don't you know——"

"—lackin' six——"

"—the sun sets at ten minutes to seven!"

"—lackin' sixteen minutes forty-two seconds and a quarter," pursued Robin, with head bent as if he were looking at a watch.

"Oh, you be hanged! Your old watch is always slow."

"My watch? Dis heah watch?" He turned, buttoning his coat carefully. "You know whar dis watch come f'om?" He pressed his hand to his side and held it there.

"Yes, I know. Give me your money. It will help swell Carrier Pigeon's pile to-morrow."

"Not unless he can fly," said Robin.

"What 's his name!" The clerk had picked up his pen.

Robin scratched his head in perplexity.

"Le' me see. I 'mos' forgit. Oh, yes." He gave the name.

"What! Call him 'J. D.'?"

"Yes, dat 'll do."

So, the horse was entered as "J. D."

As Robin stepped out of the door the first big drops of rain were just spattering down on the steps from the dark cloud that now covered all the western sky, and before he reached the stable it was pouring.

As he entered the stall the young owner was on his knees in a corner, and before him was an open portmanteau from which he was taking something that made the old man's eyes glisten: an old jacket of faded orange-yellow silk, and a blue cap—the old Bullfield colors, that had once been known on every course in the country, and had often led the field.

Robin gave an exclamation.

"Le' me see dat thing!" He seized the jacket and held it up.

"Lord, Lord! I 's glad to see it," he said. "I ain' see it for so long. It 's like home. Whar did you git dis thing, son! I 'd jest like to see it once mo' come home leadin' de field."

"Well, you shall see it doing that to-morrow," said the young fellow, boastfully, his face alight with pleasure.

"I declar' I 'd gi' my watch to see it."

He stopped short as his hand went to his side where the big gold timepiece had so long reposed, and he took it away with a sudden sense of loss. This, however, was but for a second. In a moment the old trainer was back in the past, telling his young master of the glories of the old stable—what races it had run and what stakes it had won.

The storm passed during the night, and the sun rose next morning clear and bright. One horse, at least, that was entered for the big race was well cared for. Robin had slept in his stall, and his young master had had his room. They had become great friends, and the young man had told the old trainer of his hopes. If he won he would have enough to send his sister off to school in the city, and he would go to college. Robin had entered into it heart and soul, and had given the boy all the advice he could hold.

Robin was up by light, looking after the horse; and the young owner, after waiting long enough to take another lesson in the proper handling of a horse about to run, excused himself, and, leaving the horse with the old trainer, went out, he said, "to exercise for his wind." This was a long walk; but the young rider's walk took him now, not along the track or the road, but along the steeplechase course, marked by the hurdles; and though the ground was wet and soggy on the flat, and in some places the water still stood, he appeared not to mind it in the least. So far from avoiding the pools, he plunged straight through them, walking backward and forward, testing the ground, and at every "jump" he made a particular examination.

When he returned to the stable he was as wet as a "drowned rat," but he looked well satisfied, and the old trainer, after he had talked with him a few minutes, was satisfied also.

"Dat boy 's he gran'pa's gran'chile," he muttered, well pleased with his account.

III

The crowd that assembled at the course that afternoon was enough to fill the hearts of the management with joy, if a management has hearts. When the first race was called, the stands and paddocks were already filled, and the road was crowded with vehicles as far as the eye could see. The club and club-paddock filled later, as is the way with fashionable folk; but when the second race was called, these, too, were packed, and they looked, with the gay dresses of the throng that filled every foot of space, like great banks of flowers, while the noise that floated ont sounded like the hum of a vast swarm of bees.

The great race of the day was the fourth on the programme, and all minds were fastened on it, the interest in the other races being merely perfunctory.

Before the big event the paddock was thronged with those who came to see the horses. A curious crowd they were—stout men, heavy-jawed and coarse-lipped; thin men, sharp-eyed and fox-faced; small, keen men, evil-looking boys, and round-faced, jovial-looking fellows—all stamped with *horse*. Among these mingled refined-looking gentlemen and fashionably dressed ladies.

Even under their blankets the horses were a fine-looking lot.

Among the crowd was a group of which the center was a young and very pretty girl. A simple white gown became her youth and freshness, and a large white hat with a long white ostrich-feather curled over the brim, shading her piquant face, added to her charm. A few pink roses fastened in her dress were the only color about her, except the roses in her cheeks. Most of those with her were men considerably older than herself. They appeared, rather, friends of her father, Colonel Ashland, a distinguished-looking gentleman, known to turfmen as the owner of one of the best stock-farms in the country. He loved horses, but never talked of them. The young lady had just left school, and had never seen a steeplechase before, and her eagerness kept her companions in continual merriment. They were bantering her to bet, which she had as yet refused to do. All were deeply interested in the race. Indeed, two of the gentlemen with Colonel Ashland, Colonel Snowden and Mr. Galloper, had horses entered in the steeplechase; and as they examined the horses and made observations on them apt as a proverb, many of the bystanders strained their ears to catch their words, in hopes of getting a few last points on which to lay their bets.

Hurricane, a medium-sized bay, was next to the favorite; but Swallow, a big-boned sorrel, was on his form going up in the betting, and Mr. Galloper was in fine spirits. He was bantering his friend for odds that his big chestnut with the cherry colors would not beat the favorite.

Presently in the round came, led by an elderly negro, whose face wore a look portentous of mystery, a big horse covered with a sheet. A set of clean legs appeared below the sheet, and the head set on the long, muscular neck was fine enough for a model.

"What horse is that?" asked one of the gentlemen. It was the same question that many were asking as the horse walked with a long, easy swing, as quiet, yet as much at home, as if he were in his own stable-yard.

"Hello! that must be the new entry—'J. D.,'" said Colonel Snowden, pushing forward to get a good look at him.

"Whose horse is this, Robin?" enquired Colonel Ashland.

The old fellow touched his hat.

"Dis is Mr. Johnstone hoss, suh." He spoke with pride.

"Not a very distinguished name," laughed one of the others, Mr. Newby, a youngish man dressed in the latest race-course style. He wore bits and stirrups as pins and fobs, owned a few horses, and "talked horse" continually.

Old Robin sniffed disdainfully.

"Oh, it may be," said the young girl, turning her eyes on him with a little flash. She saw that the old darkey had caught the words.

"What Mr. Johnston is it, uncle?" she asked, kindly, with a step forward.

"Mr. Theod'ric Johnston, madam." He spoke with pride.

"What! *Colonel* Theodoric Johnston? Is he living still?" asked Colonel Ashland. "I thought he—How is he?"

"Oh, nor, suh! He 's dead. He died about three years ago. Dis gent'man is the gran'son—one o' my young masters. I was the fust pusson ever put him on a hoss."

"Can he ride?"

"Kin he ride! You wait an' see him," laughed the old man. "He ought to be able to ride! Ken a bud fly? Heah he now."

He turned as the young owner, brown and tanned, and hardly more than a boy, came up through the crowd. He, like his horse, had been carefully groomed, and through his sun tan he bore a look of distinction. He was dressed for the race, but wore a coat over his faded silk jacket. As he turned and found Robin talking to a lady, his cap came off instinctively. The men looked at him scrutinizingly.

"Are you Colonel Theodoric Johnston's grandson?" enquired Colonel Snowden. "He used to have some fine horses."

"Yes, sir." His eye stole to the horse that was just beside him, and the color mounted to his cheek.

"And he was a fine man. The turf lost one of its best ornaments when he retired." Colonel Ashland was the speaker.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." His cap was in his hand, his words and manner were respectful, but when he spoke he looked the other in the eyes, and his eyes, though shy, were clear and calm.

"We were just admiring your horse," said the young lady, graciously.

He turned and looked at her with the color flashing up in his tanned cheeks.

"Thank you. I am glad if he meets with your approval." He ended his formal little speech with a quaint, slow bow. "I wish he were worthier of it."

"Oh, I am sure he is," she said, politely. "At least, you have our good wishes." Her eye fell on one of her companions. "Has n't he, Mr. Newby?"

The latter only looked at the younger man and grunted.

"Well, at least you have mine," she said, with an air of bravado.

"Thank you. I 'll try to deserve them."

"Dat young lady knows a hoss," asserted old Robin, triumphantly. "Jes look at him, dyah. What bone an' muscle!" He raised the sheet and waved his dusky hand towards his charge.

"Yes, that 's what I say. Such bone and muscle!" she repeated, with pretended gravity.

"Especially the bone!" observed Mr. Newby, in a low tone.

"I shall back him," she said. She held in her hand a rose which had broken off its stem. She took it and stuck it in a loop in the sheet.

Just then the first bell sounded, and the hostlers began to get the horses ready to appear before the judges,

while the riders went off to weigh in, and the crowd began to stream back to the stands. As the group turned away, the young owner took the rose from the loop and, with a shy look around, hid it in the breast of his jacket. His eye followed the white hat till it passed out of the paddock gate.

"Do you really think that horse can win?" asked Mr. Newby of the young lady, as they strolled along. "Because I tell you he can't. I thought you were a sport. Why, look at his hocks! He won't get over the Liverpool."

"I shall back him," said she. "What is the Liverpool?"

"Here, I 'll tell you what I 'll do," said Mr. Newby. "I 'll bet you two to one he does n't win the race." He winked at the others.

"Very well. I don't approve of betting, but I 'll do it this time just to punish you."

"Now I 'll bet you two to one he does n't come in second—that boy won't get him over the water-jump."

"Very well—no, I don't want to take odds. I 'll bet you even. I must be a sport."

The other protested, while the rest of the party looked on with amusement.

"Oh, well, if you insist," said Mr. Newby. "What shall it be?"

"A box of the best—"

"Of the best cigars!"

"No; I don't smoke. Candy."

"Oh, you expect to win!"

"Of course. Who ever saw such bone and muscle!"

They reached their places in the box, smiling and bowing to their acquaintances about them.

As soon as they were settled, the young lady picked up a paper lying by, and began to search diligently for the name of her horse.

"Ah, here it is!" She began to read. It was a column of forecasts. "Tell me, please, what does '100 to 1' mean!"

"That the horse is selling at that."

"Selling? What does that mean?"

There was an explosion of laughter from those about her. They explained.

"Oh, what cheats men are!" she exclaimed with conviction.

"Come, I 'll let you off if you ask quarter," laughed Mr. Newby. "No horse can jump with knees as big as that."

"Never! I 'll back him to the end," she declared. "Oh, there he is now! There is his yellow jacket," she added, as the buzz grew louder about them, and glasses were levelled at the horses as they filed by spirited and springy on their way to the starting-point some furlongs down the course. No one else appeared to be looking at the big brown. But his rider was scanning the boxes till his eye rested on a big hat with a white feather; then he sat up very straight.

Two of the gentlemen came up from the paddock. Colonel Snowden had the horse that was next to the favorite. They were now talking over the chances.

"Well, what are you going to do? How do you stand?" his friends asked.

"A good chance to win. I don't know what that new horse can do, of course; but I should not think he could beat Hurricane."

"Of course he cannot," said Mr. Newby. "Ridden by a green country boy!"

"He has some good points and has a fine pedigree."

Mr. Newby raised his eyebrows. "So has his rider; but pedigrees don't count in rides."

"I never could understand why blood should count in horses and not in men," said Miss Ashland, placidly. "Oh, I hope he 'll win!" she exclaimed, turning her eager face and glancing back at the gentlemen over her shoulder.

"Well, I like that!" laughed Colonel Snowden. "With all that money on the race! I thought you were backing Hurricane?"

"Oh, but he hasn't anybody to back him," she protested. "No; I sha 'nt back Hurricane. I shall back him."

"Which? The horse or the rider?"

"The horse—no, both!" she declared, firmly. "And oh, papa," she exclaimed, glancing back at him over her shoulder, "they say he wants to win to send his sister to school and to go to college himself."

"Well, I must say you seem to have learned a good deal about him for the time you had."

She nodded brightly. "That 's what the old colored man told a friend of mine."

"If he does n't go to college till he wins with that horse," said Mr. Newby, "he is likely to find his education abbreviated."

"I shall back him, anyhow." She settled herself in her seat.

"Here, I 'll tell you what I will do. I will bet you he don't get a place," said Mr. Newby.

"How much? What is a 'place'?" she asked.

It was explained to her.

"How much—a hundred to one!"

"No; not that!"

"You 're learning," laughed her friends.

"There! they 're off. Here they come!" buzzed the crowd, as the flag at last fell, and they came up the field, a dozen in all, two in the lead, then a half-dozen together in a bunch, and two or three behind, one in the rear

of all. Old Robin's heart dropped as the cry went up: "The countryman 's left. It 's yellow-jacket!" It was too far off for him to see clearly, but the laughter about him was enough.

"That boy don't know how to ride. What did they put him in for?" they said.

A minute later, however, the tone changed. The country boy was coming up, and was holding his horse in, too. The riders were settling themselves and spreading out, getting their horses in hand for the long gallop.

In fact, the old trainer's last piece of advice to his young pupil was worthy of a Delphic track,

"Don' let 'em lef you; but don't let 'em wind you. Don't git so far behind 't folks 'll think you 's ridin' in de next race; but save him for de last half-mile. You 'll have plenty o' room den to let him out, an' de track 's mighty heavy. Watch Hurricane an' Fightin' Creek. Keep nigh 'em, but save him, an' look out for de Liverpool."

It was on this advice that the young rider was acting, and though he was in the rear at the start he did not mind it. He saw that two or three riders were trying to set the pace to kill off the other horses, and he held his horse in, picking his ground.

So they passed two or three fences, the horses in the same order, and came toward the water-jump in front of the stands. It was a temptation to rush for it, for the safest chance was in front, and the eyes of thousands were on them. Some of the riders did rush, and the leaders got over it well; but in the bunch two horses struck and went down, one going over and turning a complete somersault on the other side, the other from a false take-off falling back on the near side, with his rider almost under him, immediately in front of young Johnston's horse. Whether it was the fall of the two horses with the splash of the water in the ditch beyond, or whether it was the sudden twitch that Johnston gave his bridle to turn the brown as the horse and rider rolled almost immediately before him, or whether it was all these taken together, the brown horse swerved and refused turning entirely back, while the rest of the field swept on. The other horses and riders had scrambled to their feet, and the mind of the crowd was relieved. They broke into a great shout of laughter as the rider of the brown deliberately rode the horse back.

"You are going the wrong way!"

"He 's going to meet 'em!" they shouted, derisively.

Even the gentlemen about the young girl of the white hat in the club box who had backed the brown horse could not help joining in.

"Now, Miss Catherine, where are you?" asked Mr. Newby. "Will you allow that I can pick a horse better than you? If so, I 'll let you off."

"He pulled him out to avoid striking those other men," declared the girl, warmly. "I saw him."

"Oh, nonsense! Who ever heard of a man pulling out in a steeplechase to avoid striking another horse? I have heard of a man pulling out to avoid killing his own horse; but that boy pulled out because his horse refused. That horse had more sense than he. He knew he could n't take it. Hello! what 's he doing?" For young Johnston, his face set hard, had turned his horse and headed him again toward the jump. At that moment the other horses were rising the slope on top of which was the next jump, and the brown caught sight of them. He had appeared till now a little bewildered; but the effect was electrical. His head went up, his ears went forward; a sudden fury seemed to seize him, and he shot forward like a rocket, while the crowd on the other side of the track hooted in derision.

"By Jove! He 'll go down if he rushes like that," cried the men in the box. But he did not. He hardly appeared to see the fence before him any more than he heard the jeers of the crowd. With high head and pointed ears, he dashed at it, taking it in his stride, and clearing it with a mighty bound.

The crowd in the stands, carried away, burst into a storm of applause, and the gentlemen about the young girl of the big white hat clapped their hands.

Old Robin, down in the paddock, was shouting and talking volubly to a crowd of strangers.

"He 's a jumper! He 's got de pedigree. Dat 's blood. You ain' see my old master's hosses befo'."

"Your old master's horses!" growled a gruff voice behind him. "You made me lose fifty dollars on yer blanked horse wid yer blanked lies. You 'll pay it back or yer won't see that watch ag'in."

Robin glanced at the angry pawnbroker, but he did not have time to argue then. The horse galloping up the long slope before the stables engrossed his attention. He simply edged away from his reviler, who went off to "hedge" his bets, if possible.

"He 's a good horse, but he 's out of the race," said one of the gentlemen who had been bantering Miss Ashland.

"Yes, but he never had a chance—a mere flash. You can't expect a common pick-up to run against a field like that."

Mr. Newby turned back to the girl, who was leaning forward watching the horse going over the hill.

"Well, Miss Catherine, ready to ask terms yet?"

"No; was n't that the water-jump!"

"Yes; but he has got to go over it again. Come, I 'll bet you twenty to one he does n't win."

"Done."

"Now I 'll bet you a hundred and twenty to one he does n't get a place."

"Done."

"Now I 'll even things up, and bet you he does n't come in——"

"Done!" said the girl, turning on him with a sudden flash. "He shall come in, if I have to go down there and ride him in myself."

An exclamation from one of the others broke in on this banter:

"Blessed if he is n't gaining on them!"

And sure enough, as the brown horse came out from beyond the hill, though he was still far to the rear of

the field, he had undoubtedly lessened the gap between them. The young girl's eyes sparkled.

"Oh, he can't keep it up. He 's riding his heart out," said one of the other gentlemen, with his glasses to his eyes. "But he 's a better horse than I thought, and if he had had a rider he might——"

"He has got to make the Liverpool, and he 'll never do it," said Mr. Newby. "There he goes now. Watch him. Jupiter! he 's over!"

"Did you see that jump? He 's got stuff in him!"

"But not enough. He 's got to go around once and a half yet."

"The blue is leading." "Red-jacket is coming up." "The green is done for," etc.

So it went, with the horses coming around the curve for the second time. The favorite and about half the others were running well, their riders beginning to take the pace they proposed to keep to the end. Several others were trailing along behind at various distances, among them the two horses that had shot out in the lead at first, and behind all but the last one, which was manifestly already beaten, the big brown horse, galloping with head still up and ears still pointed forward, bent on catching the horses ahead of him.

The field swept by the stands, most of them getting safely over the big water-jump, though several of the horses struck hard, and one of them went on his knees, pitching his rider over his head. The country horse had still to take the leap, and all eyes were on him, for it was the jump he had refused. Bets were offered that he would refuse again, or that after his killing chase he would be too winded to clear it and would go down. At any rate, they agreed the boy who was riding him was crazy, and he could never last to come in.

Old Robin ran across the track to try and stop him. He waved his arms wildly.

"Pull out. You 'll kill him! Save him for another time. Don't kill him!" he cried.

But the young rider was of a different mind. The vision of two girls was in his thoughts—one a young girl down on an old plantation, and the other a girl in white in a front box in the club. She had looked at him with kind eyes and backed him against the field. He would win or die.

The horse, too, had his life in the race. Unheeding the wild waving of the old trainer's arms, he swept by him with head still up and ears still forward, his eyes riveted on the horses galloping in front of him. Once or twice his ears were bent toward the big fence as if to gauge it, and then his eyes looked off to the horses running up the slope beyond it. When he reached the jump he rose so far from it that a cry of anxiety went up. But it changed to a wild shout of applause as he cleared everything in his stride and lighted far beyond the water. Old Robin, whose arms were high in the air with horror as he rose, dropped them, and then, jerking off his hat, he waved it wildly around his head.

"He can fly. He ain't a hoss at all; he 's a bud!" he shouted. "Let him go, son; let him go! You 'll win yet."

But horse and rider were beyond the reach of his voice, galloping up the slope.

Once more they all disappeared behind the hill, and once more the leaders came out, one ahead of the others, then two together, then two more, running along the inside of the fence toward the last jumps, where they would strike the clear track and come around the turn into the home stretch. The other horses were trailing behind the five leaders when they went over the hill. Now, as they came out again, one of the second batch was ahead of all the others and was making up lost ground after the leaders. Suddenly a cry arose: "The yellow! The orange! It 's the countryman!"

"Impossible! It is, and he is overhauling 'em!"

"If he lives over the Liverpool, he 'll get a place," said one of the gentlemen in the club box.

"But he can't do it. He must be dead," said Mr. Newby. "There goes one now. The red-jacket 's down."

"I 'm out," said Mr. Galloper. "He 's up all right."

"He 'll get over," said the girl. "Oh, I can't look! Tell me when he 's safe." She buried her face in her hands.

"There he goes. Oh!"

"Oh, is he down!" she panted.

"Jove! No—he 's over clear and clean, running like a streak," said the gentleman, with warm admiration. "He 's safe now. Only two more hurdles. It 's all clear. That boy is riding him, too."

The girl sprang to her feet.

"Give me your glasses. It is—it is! He 's safe!" she cried. She turned to Newby who stood next to her. "Ask quarter and I 'll let you off."

"He 'll never be able to stand the track. It 's fetlock-deep."

But at that moment the horses turned into the track, and the real race began. Newby's prophecy went to the winds. As was seen, the leaders were riding against each other. They had dropped out of account all the other horses. They had not even seen the brown. The first thing they knew was the shout from the crowd ahead of them, blown down to them hoarsely as the big brown horse wheeled into the stretch behind them. He was ahead of the other horses and was making hotly after the four horses in the lead. He was running now with neck outstretched; but he was running, and he was surely closing up the gap. The blood of generations of four-mile winners was flaming in his veins. It was even possible that he might get a place. The crowd began to be excited. They packed against the fences, straining their necks.

How he was running! One by one he picked them up.

"He 's past the fourth horse, and is up with the third!"

The crowd began to shout, to yell, to scream. The countryman, not content with a place, was bent on winning the race. He was gaining, too.

The two leaders, being well separated, were easing up, Hurricane, the bay, in front, the black, the favorite, next, with the third well to the rear. The trainers were down at the fence, screaming and waving their arms.

They saw the danger that the riders had forgot.

"Come on! Come on!" they shouted.

Old Robin was away down the track, waving like mad. Suddenly the rider of the second horse saw his error.

The rush of a horse closing up on him caught his ear. He looked around to see a big brown horse with a white blaze in the forehead, that he had not seen since the start, right at his quarter, about to slip between him and the fence. He had just time to draw in to the fence, and for a moment there was danger of the two horses coming down together.

At the sight old Robin gave a cry.

"Look at him! Runnin' my hoss in de fence! Cut him down! Cut him down!"

But the brown's rider pulled his horse around, came by on the outside, and drew up to the flank of the first horse. He was gaining so fast that the crowd burst into shouts, some cheering on the leader, some the great brown which had made such a race.

The boxes were a babel. Everyone was on his feet.

"The yellow 's gaining!"

"No; the blue 's safe."

"Orange may get it," said Colonel Ashland. "He 's the best horse, and well ridden."

He was up to the bay's flank. Whip and spur were going as the leader saw his danger.

Old Robin was like a madman.

"Come on! Come on!" he shouted. "Give him de whip—cut him in two—lift him! Look at him—my hoss! Come on, son! Oh, ef my ol' master was jest heah!"

A great roar ran along the fences and over the paddock and stands as the two horses shot in together.

"Oh, he has won, he has won!" cried the girl in the big hat, springing up on a chair in ecstasy.

"No; it 's the blue by a neck," said her father. "I congratulate you, Snowden. But that 's a great horse. It 's well that it was not a furlong farther."

"I think so," said the owner of the winner, hurrying away.

"They have cheated him. I am sure he won," asserted the young lady.

They laughed at her enthusiasm.

"Newby," said one of the gentlemen, "you 'd better get Miss Catherine to pick your horses for you." Newby winced.

"Oh, it 's easy!" said the girl, nonchalantly, "Bone and muscle—and a green country boy—with a pedigree."

IV

As Johnston was leading his horse away, the gentleman who had fallen at the water-jump came up to him.

"I want to thank you," he said. "I saw you pull him around."

"I was afraid I 'd strike you," said the other, simply.

Just then two gentlemen pushed through the crowd. One was Mr. Newby.

"Are you the owner of this horse!" he asked the young man.

"Yes, sir." He spoke with pride.

"Dat he is de owner," put in old Robin, who had the bridle, "an' he owns a good hoss! He got de ambition."

"Want to sell him?"

"Um-um-hm—d' n' know. I came on to sell him."

"Don't you sell him. Don't you never sell him," urged the old trainer. "Keep him, an' le' me handle him for you. You 'll git mo' 'n second money next time."

"I 'll give you a thousand dollars for him. What do you say?"

Old Robin gave an exclamation.

"A thousand dollars! For dis hoss!"

The gentleman's friend broke in:

"Oh, come, Newby, don't rob the boy. He 'll give you two thousand," he laughed.

They were examining the horse as he walked along under his blanket.

"Two thousand?" The boy was hesitating. It was a great sum to him.

"No; but I 'll split the difference," said Mr. Newby: "I 'll give you fifteen hundred for him if he is as good as I think him when I look him over. What 's his name?"

"Jefferson Davis."

"Oh, the devil! I 'll change his name pretty quickly."

"No, you won't," said the boy.

"Won't I? I 'll show you when I get him," he muttered. "Well, what do you say?"

"Will you promise not to change his name?"

The other laughed.

"Not much! When I buy him he 's my horse."

"He 'll never be your horse."

"What?"

"He 's not for sale." He turned away.

"Oh, nonsense! Here; wait——"

"I would not sell him to you, sir, at any price. Good-morning." He moved on.

"You 've lost a good horse," said his friend.

"Oh, I 'll get him yet!"

"I don't think so," said Colonel Ashland, who, with his daughter on his arm, had come up to congratulate the young rider.

"I wish I might have won for you," said the young man to Miss Ashland. His cap was in his hand and he made the same quaint bow that he had made before.

"I think you did win; at least, you ought to have had it. My father says he is a great horse."

At the words the color mounted to his sunburned cheeks. "Thank you," he said, and looked suddenly deep into her eyes.

She put out her hand to pet the horse, and he turned and rested his head against her. She gave an exclamation of delight.

"Oh! father, look."

"We know our friends," said young Johnston.

"Dat we does. She 's de on'ies one as bet on him," asserted old Robin. "Dat young lady knows a good hoss."

"Who is that boy?" asked Mr. Newby, as the horse was led away.

"A green country boy with a pedigree," said a low voice at his shoulder.

"Where does he come from!"

"Virginia," said Colonel Ashland. "And his name is Theodoric Johnston. It 's bred in the bone."

Next morning as young Johnston rode his horse out of the stable gate, old Robin walked at his side. Just in front of the pawn-shop Robin pulled out his watch and examined it carefully.

"I don' mind but one thing," he said. "I did n't have dis yisterday to hol' de time on him. But nem mind: wait tell nex' season."

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