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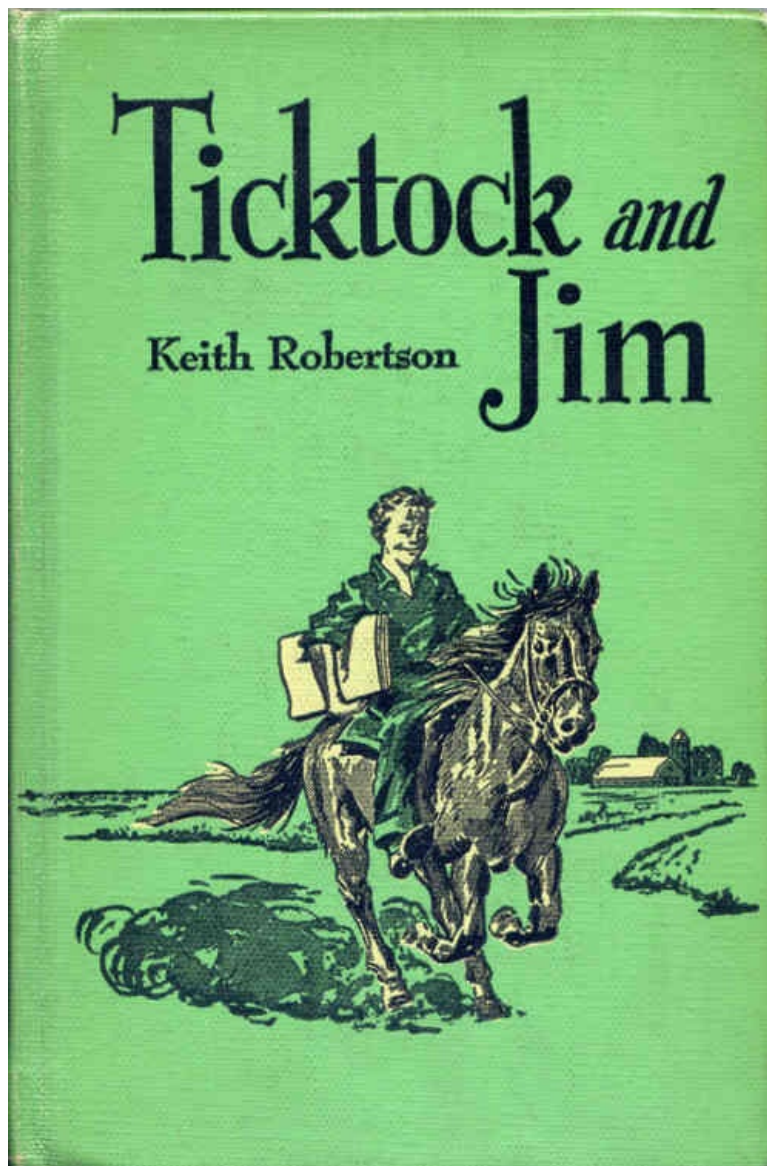
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TICKTOCK AND JIM ***



TICKTOCK *and* JIM

*By Keith Robertson
With Illustrations by Wesley Dennis*



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To CHRISTINA,
*Who at two is somewhat confused about horses
and thinks they say "Moo."*

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Ticktock and Jim

Chapter One *The Trade*

"Someone has to stay home to give Colonel Flesher that Jersey calf," said Mr. Meadows. "Since we are the only men around the place, it looks as if you're elected."

"O.K. I'll stay. I don't mind," Jim answered cheerfully, if not too accurately. He did mind very much.

"I'm sure everything will be safe with you," continued Mr. Meadows as he climbed in the car.

"Oh, I'll take care of things," said Jim nonchalantly.

He watched the car drive off. His father, mother and sister Jean were all going into town for the afternoon while he stayed at home alone. He felt rather proud that his father had called him a man, but that didn't make up for the disappointment of not going with them. He went over to sit on the edge of the front porch, where he forlornly kicked his heels against the [2] lattice work. It was a beautiful spring day with a warm sun shining, but Jim was in no mood to appreciate the wonders of nature. His small brown face looked very mournful as he sat there feeling sorry for himself. Something exciting was certain to happen in town, and he would miss it. He wondered how long the family had been gone now. Jumping up, he ran inside the house and returned with a large gold watch.

"Quarter past one," he said aloud. Doubtfully, he held the watch to his ear.

"Ticktock, ticktock," came the answer.

It seemed impossible that it was only a quarter past one; it would be almost four hours before the family returned. Although it was a form of treason to doubt that watch, Jim peered through the kitchen door to compare it with the kitchen clock. The watch was right. It promised to be a long dismal afternoon.

To pass away the time he polished the gold case with his big red bandanna. The watch was his most prized possession; his father had given it to him on his twelfth birthday, almost eight months before. He wore it only on special occasions or when he was feeling sad, like today. Carefully he unscrewed the back and looked at the shiny works. The balance wheel was going back and forth quietly and faithfully. Jim polished the inside of the back cover and reread the inscription for the hundredth time. "To James Meadows from Elizabeth, June 7, 1884." Over sixty years ago his grandmother had given that watch to his grandfather and it was still bright and shiny, and kept perfect time.

"I wish it would run a little faster this afternoon though," said Jim, as he placed the watch in his overall watch pocket.

Feeling a tiny bit more cheerful, he walked toward the orchard fence. A gentle breeze was blowing toward him, bringing the delicate scent of apple blossoms. He leaned on the fence, inhaling deeply and gazing at the riot of blossoms in the orchard. When it is spring in southern Missouri, one must have a very deep sorrow to remain downhearted long. Jim, being young and normally very healthy, was recovering his spirits rapidly. He wrinkled his short nose and after inhaling the odor of apple blossoms again, decided that he would go closer to the trees. Now that no one was about he might even break off a sprig of blossoms. Having a healthy fear of appearing a sissy, he would never think of doing such a thing if his sister Jean were present. Flowers were for girls as far as he was concerned.

He was halfway across the orchard when he remembered the bull. The big red bull was Mr. Meadows' pride and joy but Jim's pet abomination. He was afraid of it and very reasonably so, as it was a mean-tempered animal. Feeling rather panicky, Jim turned to hurry back toward the gate. It was too late. Unnoticed, the bull had slipped behind him and was now blocking the way. The big animal was standing very quietly, looking straight at Jim. There was a wicked look in the bloodshot eyes that indicated plainly that he had no intention of remaining quiet long.

With a sinking sensation in his stomach, Jim looked around frantically, trying to figure which fence was the closest. It was rather a tossup as to distance. Choosing the fence bordering the road as being the easiest to climb, he began backing cautiously toward it, keeping his eyes on the hostile bull.

As Jim made up his mind which way to move, so did the bull. He snorted several times, pawed the ground ferociously, lowered his head and charged toward the boy. The powerful feet dug into the soft ground as the big body gathered speed in a ponderous rush. Jim knew he would never make the fence in time. He was frightened, but not too frightened to think. Once the huge bull was up to top speed he couldn't change direction quickly. As the thundering feet drew dangerously close, the boy darted quickly to the right and ducked behind the nearest apple tree. The bull swerved and roared by like an avalanche.

Jim was safe for a moment, but he knew he would not have long to wait until the bull charged again. The animal had turned around and was pawing and snorting. Reluctantly Jim gave up all ideas of reaching the fence. He grabbed the lowest branch of the apple tree and swung his stocky body upward. He was just in time, for the bull rushed underneath him like an express train.

Giving a whistle of relief, the boy climbed higher. Finding what appeared to be a comfortable perch, he settled down to consider the situation. Apparently he would simply just have to sit there and hope the bull would forget him. The bull decided to play a waiting game

too. He pawed and snorted for a time and then calmed down. Although he grazed quietly, he showed no signs of leaving the vicinity. Just as Jim would begin to grow hopeful, the animal would lift his head and gaze balefully up into the tree. This began to appear very one-sided to Jim after a few minutes. While the bull could amble around at his ease, the most Jim could move was a few inches. What had appeared a comfortable seat began to grow very irksome.

He shifted around trying to find a soft spot. It was impossible. One spot was as bad as another. There was a limit as to how long one could sit comfortably in an apple tree. Now Jim grew really sorry for himself. How he wished he could have gone into town with his family. That was the most exciting event of the week. First they took the cream to the Springdale Creamery, where he could walk around inhaling the clean smell of steam and butter. It was fascinating to watch the huge revolving churns. He supposed today would be one of those times when Mr. Slemak would offer everyone a drink of cold buttermilk.

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The grocery store was fun too. Probably Jean was sampling the cookies now. When his father paid the grocery bill there was always a bag of candy for both him and Jean. He hoped Mr. Higgins wouldn't forget him just because he wasn't along. Jim sighed miserably. Instead of smelling the odor of newly ground coffee, here he was up in a tree smelling apple blossoms. The scent which was so wonderful before was getting rather tiresome now.

"What a mess!" he said to himself. He looked down at the bull, his anger mounting. "Go away, you big dope!"

That did no good either. Jim remained uncomfortably in the tree. To make matters worse, bees began to buzz around entirely too close to his head. Holding on to the tree with one hand and swatting at bees with the other was not pleasant exercise. Suddenly he remembered he hadn't closed the orchard gate behind him. If the bull did wander away, he would be perverse enough to head straight for the gate. The yard gate was open too, so the way onto the road was clear. Once he was out on the road there was no telling where the animal might stray. Now Jim was torn between hoping the bull would go away and wanting him to stay. Either way, he decided he was in a pickle. His parents would either come home to find him trapped in the apple tree or else would find the bull loose and strayed to parts unknown.

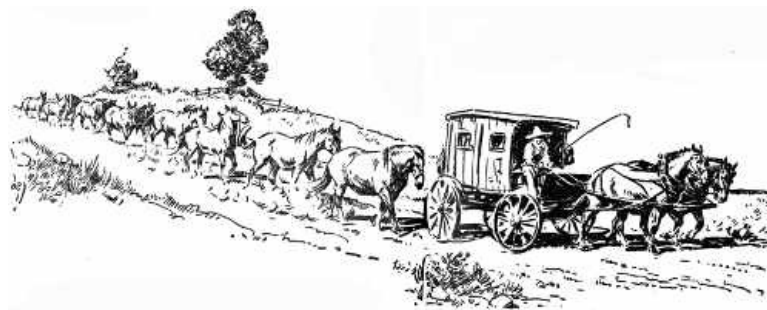
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The thought of Colonel Flesher came like a ray of light. The stock buyer was supposed to arrive about three o'clock. If the bull were still standing guard beneath the tree, the colonel could come to the rescue and all would be well. Jim shifted his perch slightly and hoped the stock buyer would arrive soon. It seemed as if he had been in the tree for hours. He reached in his pocket but his hand found nothing. With a horrible sinking feeling he realized his precious watch was gone. It must have bounced out of his pocket while he was racing for the tree. With an effort he kept back the tears. He looked back along his recent path, hoping to catch the glint of gold. There was nothing in sight but the new

green grass. If the bull had trampled on it during his mad rush, the watch was probably broken and buried in the soft earth. Completely dejected now, Jim sat in the tree and mourned. It was certainly a heartbreaking day.

He was so deep in his misery that he did not notice a strange cavalcade coming over the hill until the creaking of wagon wheels and the neighing of a horse caused him to look up in surprise. The procession, which was nearing the yard gate, was so unusual and interesting that Jim forgot his woes and stared in excited curiosity. First there was the oddest wagon he had ever seen. It was a large wagon with a sort of house built on the chassis. The house had a flat roof which stuck out in front and overhung the driver's seat, and the board sides contained two small windows. Initially Jim thought it was a ranch chuck wagon, for he had been reading Western stories; but then he changed his mind and decided it was more like a circus wagon or like the wagons he had seen in the movies used by traveling road troupes in the old days.

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Seated on the high driver's seat was an old man in a sombrero, whistling cheerfully and clucking to a team of huge black horses. The team was ambling along slowly, drawing the wagon with effortless ease. But what attracted Jim's gaze most was the procession following the wagon. Strung out behind were at least twenty horses of all sizes and colors—big gray Percherons, medium-sized brown horses, sorrels, some dark bays, light grays and a few whites. Jim looked at each horse in turn until finally he came to the last in the string—a lean little mouse-colored horse whose small body contrasted oddly with the other broad-rumped work horses.

The fascinating cavalcade drew still nearer until it reached the gate. The driver gave a slight tug on one rein and the wagon started turning. Jim was so interested and delighted that he almost lost his seat in the tree. The strange wagon and all those horses were coming in their yard! Almost doubting his eyes, he saw the vehicle progress down the lane and come to a halt, the long string of horses bunching up behind the wagon until they too finally stopped. The old man climbed down from his high perch and looked around inquisitively. Seeing no one in the yard he started toward the house.

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"There's nobody home but me," shouted Jim loudly.

The stranger turned around to look toward the orchard, and Jim got his first good view of the visitor. He was a tall stringy individual with a long gray handle-bar mustache that drooped from his upper lip and hid much of the lower part of his face. He was obviously a very old

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man, but there was nothing old about his movements nor the way his bright eyes searched in the direction from which the voice had come. He looked puzzled, for all he could see was apple blossoms.

"And where are you?" he asked.

"I'm up here in a tree," said Jim, poking his black thatched head as far through its frame of apple blossoms as he dared. "The bull won't let me climb down."

"Treed are you?" asked the man, laughing at what Jim didn't think was a funny situation. "Just how mean is that bull?"

"Dad handles him without any trouble," replied Jim. "Once in a while he has to hit him on the nose with a stick."

"Be with you in a minute." The stranger hunted around until he found a big piece of wood for a club.

The bull decided he wasn't quite so ferocious when he saw a determined man approaching with a sizable club. He gave a few disgruntled snorts and then ambled off to the far end of the orchard. Thankfully Jim climbed down from his uncomfortable haven.

"Thanks, Mister," he said with feeling. "Now I've got to find my watch."

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He hurried back along the path of his recent flight from the bull, searching the ground anxiously. About thirty feet from the tree he found his watch, lying bright and shining in the sun. He picked it up and held it to his ear. It was ticking away merrily. With a huge sigh of relief, Jim put the watch in his pocket.

"You really got me out of a mess," he said, as they walked toward the gate. "I was trapped in that tree, the orchard gate was open, and my watch was lying on the ground."

"That looks like a pretty good watch to be carrying around in your overalls."

"It's about the best watch in the world I guess," said Jim proudly. "I don't usually carry it every day."

"Now you can do me a good turn," said the stranger as they went out of the gate, fastening it this time. "I'd like to water my horses."

"Sure, bring them over to the tank."

Jim pumped more water into the big cement tank while the man led his horses over to drink. First he watered the team he was driving and then started with the string of horses behind the wagon.

"How come you've got so many horses?" asked Jim, his curiosity getting the better of his manners.

"I'm a horse trader. Not many traveling horse traders left any more. I usually have a lot more horses than these, but I sold fourteen yesterday."

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"Gee," said Jim, "it must be a lot of fun to have

so many horses.”

“It is if you like horses. It’s a lot of work too. Most people find two or three too much to take care of the way they should.”

“Do you live in that wagon?” asked Jim.

“All but about three months of the year,” replied the horse trader. “Now let me ask a question. When’s your pa going to be home?”

“About five o’clock, I ’spect,” Jim informed him. He looked at his watch. It was not quite three. He hadn’t been in that tree nearly so long as he had thought.

“Think your pa will want to trade or buy any horses?”

“I don’t think so,” replied Jim. “We’ve got two teams that are pretty good.”

The old man led the last horse to the trough for a drink. It was the small brown horse that Jim had noticed at the end of the string. It wasn’t an impressive horse at all. It was very thin, the hip bones making big bumps as if they were trying to push their way through the poor horse’s hide. There was an ugly, partially healed sore on his back, and he limped slightly on his right [14] foreleg. His coat was a shaggy lusterless gray-brown. It was hard to tell what either the tail or mane was like as both were so matted with cockleburs and bits of weed. Lastly, the little horse didn’t hold his head as he should, but kept it cocked to one side as if he were looking at something very odd and interesting. To most horse fanciers this odd position of the head would have been the crowning defect of the long list, but it was just this feature that attracted Jim. The pony seemed to be looking at him quizzically. As Jim looked closer he was certain he saw a twinkle in the horse’s eye as if the animal were trying to share some sort of joke with him.

Jim stopped pumping water and moved closer to the little horse. He was so painfully thin and that sore looked so tender that Jim felt a surge of sympathy. He wished the horse could stay there and rest. The object of Jim’s compassion lifted his muzzle from the trough, shook his head, and snorted until he had blown the water from his nostrils. Then he looked squarely at the boy and winked. This time Jim was certain the horse grinned too. It was very plain what the pony meant. He seemed to say: “Thanks for the water and your kindness. I’m rather deceiving in appearance and am in much better shape than most people would think.”

Walking around to look at the horse from the other side, Jim spied a mark on the pony’s left shoulder. It was an *H* lying on its side like this:



“That’s a brand, isn’t it?” asked the boy excitedly.

“Yep. I reckon that is the lazy-*H* brand.”

“Where did he get it?”

"Well, this is a Western mustang. The man I bought him from said a carload of cow ponies was shipped in from Texas a couple of years ago. He picked up this feller at the sale."

"A real Texas mustang," said Jim, reverently.

"He's a bit small even for a Western cow pony," said the trader, sitting down on the edge of the water tank. "In fact there's a lot of things about this horse that are different from most mustangs."

"What?"

"Well," drawled the old man, filling his pipe, "I'm in no hurry to get up on that jolting seat again. Just set here awhile and I'll tell you a little about Western horses, specially this one."

"Swell," said Jim enthusiastically. "Can I hold the horse?"

The old man passed over the halter rope and Jim sat happily on the well platform holding on to the end of the tether. The horse looked at both of them for a moment and then calmly started to crop the grass.

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"Western horses usually run pretty wild for three years or so," began the old man. "Then they're broken for riding. They break Western horses quick and rough and most of them buck every time they're saddled. A ranch horse is worked only four or five months a year and then only three or four days a week. Most of them, except the favorites, never get to know a man real well and so usually they don't show much affection." He paused to relight his corn-cob pipe. Reflectively he gazed on the glowing coal and drew on the pipe stem noisily while Jim waited impatiently.

"This little feller is different. Plenty of spirit, but about as gentle a horse as I've ever seen. Gentle, that is, if he likes you. In the five days I've had him I can tell he'd develop a real likin' for anybody that treated him at all reasonable."

"I'll bet he would," agreed Jim, looking at the horse.

"He's a good horse, but I don't know just what I'll do with him. He's not a work horse—too small for heavy work. He's really a saddle horse and people in these parts don't go much for saddle horses unless they're rich people. Then they want something fancy like a Kentucky saddle horse. But I felt sorry for this critter and I bought him."

"Felt sorry for him? Why?" asked Jim with great interest.

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"He was bein' mistreated. You can't be a horse trader for fifty years without becomin' real fond of horses. It gets you mad to see anyone treat an animal mean. So I picked up this pony mainly to get him away from the skunk that owned him. Look how thin the horse is. Why I'd bet money he hasn't had a feedin' of grain in the two years that man had him. Of course, these Westerns are tough. They run wild all winter and find feed where other breeds would starve. But this pony was turned out in a field where there wasn't enough grass. Nothing to eat except straw. That

strawstack was all the shelter he had too. You can tell from that long shaggy hair that he was out all winter. It will take a lot of curryin' and plenty of oats to get that coat in shape."

"You mean he was out in the snow and everything?" asked Jim.

"The snow isn't so bad. He's probably used to that. But when horses run loose in the winter out West, they don't have nothin' else to do but hunt for feed. This horse has been rode all winter too. See those saddle galls?" said the trader, pointing. "They're recent. A horse can't do much work on a diet of straw and then stay outside in the cold to boot. He needs a layer of fat to keep him warm."

"How did he get those saddle sores?" inquired Jim.

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"Been saddled wrong."

"They look awful sore."

"They were, but they're healing now that I'm givin' them a little attention. If nobody rides him for a while, they'll clear up all right."

"He's lame too," pointed out Jim.

"Yep, nail in his foot. The owner just pulled the nail out—nothin' else. I was sort of takin' a chance buyin' the horse at all. He might have developed lockjaw. Once a horse gets lockjaw you might as well shoot him. But I pared out the hoof, soaked his foot in a lysol solution, and worked some iodine into the puncture. I've given him a couple of treatments since and he's out of danger now. In a week you'd never know he'd stepped on a nail."

The long story of the mustang's mistreatment and ills had aroused Jim's sympathy. He looked at the horse with even greater interest than before. Several times the little horse raised his head and appeared to give the boy a good-natured nod. The fact that the pony was still gentle and apparently in high good humor after all he had been through particularly appealed to the boy.

"How much would you sell that horse for?" he asked impulsively.

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"Well, I reckon he's worth about forty dollars," said the old trader appraisingly.

"Gee," said Jim sorrowfully. "I guess he's worth that all right but I only got three bucks."

"I'm afraid three dollars would be a mite too cheap," said the man laughing. "I know he looks like three dollars now, but he'll shape up. Feed him properly and take care of him and you'd be surprised at the improvement. I haven't had time to work on his coat or tail but a few weeks would do a lot."

"How old is he?"

"Six years, I figure. He's a good sound horse. You take a good look and you'll see that he has his better points."

It was true. On closer inspection the first bad impression began to fade. The pony had a short

barrel, straight unblemished legs, and a deep chest. Aside from their extreme thinness, his hind quarters were well proportioned. Both eyes were bright, clear and alert.

"He sure looks like a good horse to me," said Jim truthfully. He knew nothing about the finer points of horses, but the little mustang appealed to him. He liked the horse and that settled the matter. Naturally he was a fine animal.

"He is a good horse. No fancy gaited animal but just a good sturdy ridin' horse. Some of these days I'll find someone who'll appreciate him and take good care of him."

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"I'd appreciate him," thought Jim enviously. "And I'd take awfully good care of him."

Apparently the horse read Jim's thoughts, for he raised his head, cocked it even farther to one side, and stared straight at the boy. It was a friendly look that clearly said, "Yes, I know, Jim; we'd be good friends."

Sorrowfully the boy watched the old trader tie the mustang to the end of the string and then climb up on his wagon. How he would like to own that horse. A real mustang with a brand. He and that pony certainly could have fun together.

The wagon turned around and started down the lane. Jim felt as sad and lonely as if his best friend were departing forever. If only he could have gone to town. Then he would not have seen the little mustang and wanted him so. He pulled out his watch. Three-thirty. Time had passed rapidly enough while he was looking at the mustang. Now it would drag again. Suddenly he looked at the watch as if he were seeing it for the first time. His grandfather's watch—his most prized possession. He couldn't possibly part with it. He raised his eyes and saw the mustang going out the gate. Headlong he ran after the wagon.

"Hey, Mister! Wait a minute please!"

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The horse trader heard the frantic cry and pulled his team to a halt. He looked down inquiringly as Jimmy rushed up beside him.

"Would you trade that mustang for my watch?" Jim asked in a rush of words, as though afraid that if he hesitated he would lose his nerve.

"Well, I might now," answered the old man. "What kind of a watch is it?"

"Here it is," said Jim, pulling out his precious watch. He stood on tiptoe to hand it up to the trader.

The old man examined the watch carefully while Jim watched nervously. The trader held the watch to his ear, removed the back and inspected the shiny works.

"Look, son," he said finally, "this is *your* watch, isn't it? Not your father's?"

"It's mine, really mine," said Jim in desperate eagerness to be believed. "It was given to me on my birthday."

"How about it? Would your father and mother be mad if you traded it for a horse?"

"I don't see why. It's my watch," protested Jim. The thought made him a little uneasy. He wondered if they would care. His resolution began to waver. Then he looked at the mustang and his doubts vanished. How he'd like to have that horse!

"Well," drawled the old man slowly, "I got my doubts about how this is goin' to set with your pa. But I know you want the horse more than you do the watch. It wouldn't be an uneven trade either. This is a good watch but not an awful expensive one."

"Then I can have the horse?" asked Jim in eager anticipation.

"If you're sure that's what you want. I hate to be the cause of any trouble though. Tell you what I'll do. I'll be back by here in about three, four months. You tell your father that. My name's Ned Evarts—Old Ned Evarts. In fifty years of horse tradin' no one has ever accused me of tellin' a lie. When I come back I'll still have the watch. If you're not satisfied with the horse, we'll trade back."

"That sounds fair," said Jim judiciously.

The trader reached inside the wagon and pulled out a bridle.

"Here's the bridle I got with the horse," he said, climbing down from the wagon. "You'll need a bridle, so I'll throw that in. Now the horse has on a rope halter. It doesn't look like much but it's sturdy. You can have that too if you want."

"Thanks, Mister," said Jim, beginning to be overwhelmed by all his new property.

"Now I'll tell you something," said the old man. "There is such a thing as an honest horse trader even if people don't think so. A trader that deals square will tell a man about any defects that he knows of inside the horse. About his wind, whether he has the heaves, and things like that. Anything that shows outside the horse, it's up to the buyer to see. If he can't tell what he's buyin', it's his tough luck."

"This horse looks all right to me," said Jim, stoutly defending his new property.

"He is," said the trader. "Since you're a young feller and haven't had much experience tradin', I'd tell you if anything was wrong. This mustang hasn't any defects we haven't already talked about. There's that saddle sore, the lame foreleg, he's pretty lean, and his coat needs a lot of work. Other than that he's sound. Now I want you to take notice of the way he holds his head. It's kinda cockeyed. Now lots of folks would look at him and figure him to be a mean horse. He isn't. That horse isn't a bit mean; he's been mistreated and he's a little worried about whom to trust. You be good to him and he'll be as gentle as can be."

"He'll like me," said Jim confidently.

"I think he will. One other thing—that mustang is a smart critter. Horses are like people; some are just naturally dumb and others are smart. I've been handling the animals so long I've kinda got a sixth sense about 'em. Now this little feller

is one of the smartest I've ever run across."

Evarts untied the mustang from the end of the string and handed the rope to Jim.

"Well, he's your horse. Good luck."

"Good-by," said Jim as the trader climbed back on the wagon. "That's a good watch too."

Jim watched the wagon, with its trailing string of horses, move off down the road. He felt a twinge of pain as he thought of his beloved watch slowly moving into the distance. Then he felt a tug on the rope he held. The horse was looking at him quizzically.

"No, I'm not sorry I traded," said Jim, as if in answer to a question. "But I'm going to miss that watch. I know what I'm going to do. I'll call you 'Ticktock' after my watch."

Chapter Two ***The Reception***

After tying Ticktock to the orchard fence, Jim stepped back and regarded his property with admiration. Ownership had caused the mustang to take on new beauty in the eyes of the boy. There were so many things to be done that Jim was uncertain where to start. He had to feed the pony, comb out his mane and tail, give him a good grooming and do something about that saddle sore. After much thought, Jim finally decided the most important and most enjoyable thing to do was to win his horse's confidence. He ran happily into the house and down the cellar stairs. There were still a few apples left, he knew from frequent trips to the barrel.

"Here you are, Ticktock," he said, returning with an apple. "It's a winesap and no worms in it either."

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Cutting the apple in half, he carefully removed the core and offered one-half in his outstretched hand. Ticktock moved forward cautiously. After a few moments of doubtful sniffing, he picked the apple delicately from the boy's outstretched palm. He ate it with obvious relish.

"Liked it, didn't you?" asked Jim, getting more pleasure than if he had eaten the apple himself.

Ticktock didn't reply. He stuck his head forward and sniffed at Jim's other hand.

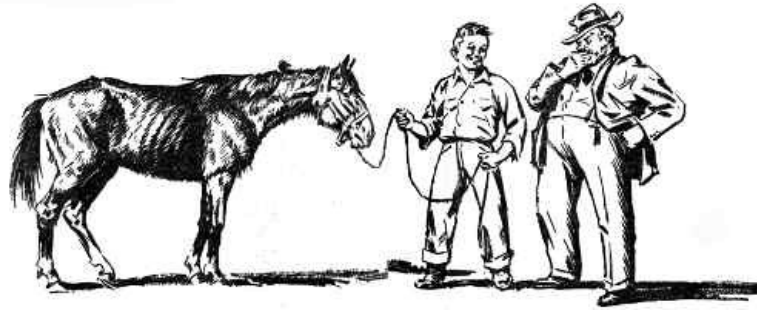
"Say, you're pretty smart," said Jim admiringly, as he gave the pony the remainder of the apple. "You know there's two halves to an apple."

By this time Jim felt confident enough to begin stroking the mustang's head. Next he gently scratched the horse's ears. He knew dogs liked their ears scratched, so why not horses? Ticktock didn't seem to mind, for he stood patiently. Jim had progressed as far as the neck when there was an interruption. Colonel Flesher drove in the yard in his little truck. The fleshy

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stock buyer climbed out of his car and walked toward the boy.

"Good afternoon, Colonel," said Jim, glad to see the visitor. Now here was a man who would appreciate the finer points of a beautiful horse. "Come see my mustang."



"Mustang, eh?" asked Colonel Flesher jovially.

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"Yep. A real Western. Isn't he a beauty?"

Colonel Flesher looked at the little horse doubtfully. He pursed his lips searching for the right thing to say. The boy's enthusiasm left no doubt as to what sort of answer was expected.

"Well, he's a bit thin yet to be called a beauty," he said, evading nicely.

"He may be a little thin," admitted Jim unwillingly, "but I'll fix that up in no time. He's a Texas ranch horse."

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"That so?" asked the colonel, glad to be off the subject of the mustang's appearance. "Where'd you get him?"

"Traded a gold watch for him. I made a fine deal. He's worth a lot more than a gold watch, isn't he?"

"Well, that all depends on the watch," answered the stock buyer cautiously. "There are all sorts of watches you know, some cheap, some valuable."

"I've never seen a watch that was worth half as much as this horse," said Jim hotly, realizing that Colonel Flesher wasn't too enthusiastic about Ticktock.

"Hm-m-m, well," hedged the colonel, trying to be truthful and still not hurt the boy's feelings.

"You wait," said Jim confidently. "Wait until I get him spruced up a bit; then you'll see. He's probably the smartest horse in the whole state."

"That could be true enough," said the stock buyer, glad to find something on which they could agree. "I'd like to spend more time looking at him, son; but I'm in a big hurry. Can you tell me where the calf is that I bought from your father?"

Jim led the calf out of the barn and over to the truck. The two carried a small stock chute to the back of the truck. By dint of much pushing, pulling and coaxing, the calf was finally loaded.

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"Here's the fifteen dollars for the calf," said the colonel. "Thanks a lot for helping me."

Jim returned to his horse. Colonel Flesher's lack of approval didn't bother him in the least. He shrugged his shoulders. After all the stock buyer bought cows largely, and probably wasn't able to see Ticktock's wonderful qualities. He went out to the barn for a curry comb and brush. Now he hoped his family wouldn't be back for hours. He had visions of the mustang looking like a show horse by the time they returned.

Currying Ticktock turned out to be a much bigger job than Jim had anticipated. After the first ten minutes he sadly conceded that it would be a matter of weeks instead of hours before he could have the pony's coat sleek and glistening. He tried unsuccessfully to comb out a few strands of the matted mane and gave up. Instead he started to work on a shoulder—that looked easier. After twenty minutes of hard work, he was resting his tired arms when the family drove in the yard. Jim ran excitedly over to the car, jumping on the running board as the car stopped.

Since the driver's seat was on the side toward the orchard, Mr. Meadows saw the mustang first.

"Where did that nag come from?" he inquired.

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"Nag!" said Jim, astounded. "Why that's a real Texas cow pony with a brand and everything."

"All right," said Carl Meadows, grinning at his son. "Where did that real Texas cow pony come from?"

"I traded for him," said Jim proudly.

"You did what?"

"Traded for him."

"Traded what?" asked Jim's father.

"My gold watch. I got the horse, a halter and a bridle, all for my watch."

Mr. Meadows said nothing, but the grin vanished. Very slowly and grimly he got out of the car and walked toward the horse. Mrs. Meadows and Jean followed, all gathering in front of the mustang. Ticktock stopped grazing and looked up inquiringly at his suddenly large audience.

"You traded your grandfather's gold watch for *that*," Mr. Meadows asked finally, with a contemptuous wave of his hand toward the horse.

"Uh-uh." Jim sensed that matters were rapidly becoming difficult, so he tried to ease the situation as much as he could. "He's the smartest horse you ever saw."

"I don't know how smart the horse is," said his father, "but I'm beginning to have some doubts about you, Jim. I gave you that watch because I thought you would take care of it and appreciate it."

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"But I did appreciate it!" cried Jim in a hurt voice.

"Not enough, apparently, to prevent you from trading it off for a broken-down piece of

horseflesh.”

“He isn’t broken-down,” replied Jim, coming to the defense of Ticktock. “He’s a beautiful horse.”

“Well I’ll be—”

“Carl!” said Mrs. Meadows sharply.

“Well, it’s enough to make a man swear,” said Mr. Meadows. “Jim, who palmed this crazy-looking nag off on you? I’m going to take it back and get your watch back.”

“I don’t want to trade back,” cried Jim. “I want to keep Ticktock.”

“Who was it?” repeated his father. Mr. Meadows’ usually good-natured expression was replaced by one of angry determination. Jim knew he had best answer the question.

“A traveling horse trader named Ned Evarts,” he replied.

“A traveling horse trader!” shouted Mr. Meadows, grabbing his head in his hands in despair. “That is the last straw. There’s no telling where the rascal is now. Still, I’m so disgusted that I’ve half a mind to phone the sheriff to see if the man can be located.”

“Don’t do that, Dad,” Jim pleaded. “He asked me if I was sure it would be all right with you.”

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“Well that is about as low a piece of swindling as I’ve ever encountered,” said the older man, “taking advantage of a boy!”

“He wasn’t a swindler. Besides, he said he’d be back this fall and if I wasn’t satisfied, he’d trade back.”

“Back this fall,” scoffed his father. “Why he’ll have that watch in the first pawn shop he finds. He’s probably laughing now at how he got rid of such a broken-down old plug.”

Miserable as he was, Jim was not going to let anyone make remarks about Ticktock. “He isn’t broken-down and he isn’t old either. Only six years old.”

“Six years old!” said Mr. Meadows scornfully. “Why he’s closer to sixteen. Did you look at his teeth?”

“No.”

“Well, I’ll show you something about your valuable horse!” said Carl Meadows, advancing toward Ticktock.

The mustang had been watching and listening to the argument with interest. He couldn’t understand the words, but there was little else that he missed. The frequent looks of contempt that Carl Meadows had given him hadn’t passed unnoticed. Ticktock was a horse of considerable independence. He wanted people to like him, but if they didn’t, he wasted little time in trying to win their favor. Affection was a two-way affair with him. Mrs. Meadows and Jean were neutral and puzzled respectively, so Ticktock reserved judgment on them. But the mustang definitely did not like the tall man. When Mr. Meadows reached out confidently to open his jaws,

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Ticktock promptly took a nip at one of the outstretched hands. It wasn't a savage bite—just a moderate bite, as the mustang didn't hate the strange man. He merely didn't want to be handled by anyone who disliked him. However, the nip was enough to take the skin off one finger and draw blood.

Mr. Meadows jerked his arm back and really cursed this time. He shook the injured hand and glared with hatred at the pony.

"That settles it. That mean-tempered beast has got to go. I won't have a vicious horse on my place. The next thing you know he will kill someone."

Jim was very alarmed at the accident. He hadn't expected outright approval of his trade, but he certainly had not anticipated such violent opposition. Now the biting had climaxed the situation. He felt sorry about his father's injured hand but somehow he knew how Ticktock felt and was in sympathy with him too.

"He isn't vicious, Dad. He's just not used to you. Look here."

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Before his father could stop him, Jim stepped forward and took hold of Ticktock's muzzle. He opened the mustang's mouth easily.

"Want to see his teeth?"

"No thank you. I've felt them; that's enough." Mr. Meadows was a very tolerant man, but he was human and had a streak of stubbornness. He had taken his stand and was not going to back down. "I've said all I'm going to say about that horse. Come help me get the groceries out of the car."

All through the chores Jim and his father maintained strict silence about the mustang. Jim performed his routine work from habit, for his mind was busy with its overwhelming burden of misery. After the chores he went quietly in the house and washed for supper. During the meal he sat abjectly staring at his plate, eating scarcely anything. Mr. Meadows could not help noticing his son's misery; but Jim's father was angry and determined, so he too sat in tight-lipped silence. Mrs. Meadows maintained her stand of complete neutrality. That left only Jean, who had forgotten the argument and just wondered why everyone was so silent.

After supper Mr. Meadows went into the living room. Jim waited a few minutes and then followed, determined to make another attempt to change his father's stand. Mr. Meadows had always been very reasonable before. Jim's mother left the dishes and went in the living room also, fearing a peacemaker might be needed.

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"Look, Dad," said Jim, trying to approach the subject gradually, "there's an empty stall in the barn."

"I said the horse was not going to stay," said Mr. Meadows. "I simply will not waste feed on a useless, mean-tempered horse."

"He won't use any feed," Jim pointed out. "Just grass."

"In the winter there is snow covering the grass," said the older man dryly.

"I'll earn money this summer to feed him through the winter!" declared Jim confidently. "Besides, I already have three dollars."

He reached in his pocket to make certain he still had his precious three dollars. His hand found the fifteen that Colonel Flesher had paid for the calf. In the excitement he had forgotten to give the money to his father.

"Here's the fifteen dollars Colonel Flesher gave me for the calf."

Mr. Meadows pocketed the money. "It's a good thing he didn't come before the horse trader, or you probably would have thrown in the fifteen dollars with the watch."

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"I would not," said Jim bitterly. He was now even more hurt than before. "The money wasn't mine but the watch was. You gave it to me."

Everything seemed to mount up in Jim's mind. He had felt like shedding tears several times since his family's return, but he was no crybaby and had held them back. Now once again he began to choke up dangerously; so he started to leave the room.

Mr. Meadows began to be somewhat sorry about his last words. He realized that in his anger he had spoken rather hastily, and he saw his son was deeply hurt.

"I'm sorry, Jim," he said finally and rather awkwardly. "I shouldn't have said that. I know you would never be dishonest or trade off anything that didn't belong to you. I did give you the watch and it was your property. It's just that I attached a lot of sentiment to the watch and thought you would too."

Mrs. Meadows had been weighing the problem all evening. She hadn't been too favorably impressed by Ticktock, but she knew with a mother's instinct how precious the rawboned pony was to her son. Now that her husband was in a slightly more softened mood she decided to strike.

"Carl, come in the kitchen a few minutes," she said.

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As Jim waited anxiously, he could hear low voices coming from the kitchen. He knew his parents as well as they knew him and suspected that his mother was coming to his rescue. When his parents returned to the living room, Mrs. Meadows was looking determined and a trifle triumphant, while her husband was embarrassedly trying to look indulgent. Jim sat up expectantly.

"Your mother and I have talked over this matter," announced Mr. Meadows. "We've decided to arrive at a compromise with you. You can keep the horse this summer providing he isn't too mean and causes no trouble. But this fall he goes. I will not feed him through the winter."

"Hurrah!" shouted Jim and dashed out of the house.

When you are not quite thirteen a summer is a lifetime. The fall seemed a million years away—a tiny cloud away over on the horizon. Why school hadn't even ended for the summer as yet. Jim went up to where Ticktock stood, still tied to the orchard fence. He stroked the mustang's head and told him the good news.

"It's all set, Ticktock. You can stay. We've got the whole summer together. You're going to get fat and really like it here. Now don't mind if Dad doesn't seem to like you. He's really an awful nice Dad. It's just that grown-ups don't understand a lot of things. You sorta have to make allowances for them. We'll show everybody what a good horse you are. Only if we're going to make a good impression you can't go around biting people."

The mustang took the good news very calmly.

"Come on, old boy; I'll show you your new stall. It might rain tonight and we don't want you to catch cold."

Chapter Three

The First Victory

The next few weeks were busy ones for Jim. School took most of the day, while after school there were chores to do. Since Mr. Meadows maintained his hostile attitude toward the mustang, Jim was very careful not to shirk any of his farm work in order to spend additional time on Ticktock. In spite of the full schedule, he managed to spend an hour or two on his pony each day. He went over the pony's coat for an exhausting hour every evening and worked on the matted tail and mane. A few applications of methylene blue to the saddle sores caused them to start healing, while the remaining lameness quickly disappeared.

The first week-end Jim laboriously put in an entire new floor in Ticktock's stall. He carried fresh clay from a hill on the other side of the farm and packed it firmly over the floor of the stall. He kept the pony's quarters scrupulously clean and filled with fresh straw for bedding.

While Jim was at school, the little horse cropped busily at the spring grass and waited for his master's return. He sensed that Jim was the only member of the family who was ready to lavish affection on him. Mr. Meadows' hostility was quite open and apparent. Jim's mother, while at least neutral, was seldom seen by the horse. As for Jean, Ticktock hadn't quite made up his mind. Jim's little sister hadn't decided whether to be scornful of the horse or to like him as she did all the other animals around the farm.

Under the circumstances it was not strange that the mustang welcomed Jim home from school each afternoon, particularly since the reunion usually meant an apple. The little pony had never had anyone really love him before and he was quick to respond. Like most horses, the mustang had always wanted to be close friends

with some man. While the cow hands on the range had treated him well, no one had ever singled him out for any particular attention. He had been roped, saddled and worked. That was the beginning and end of his ranch existence. Perhaps his very gentleness had kept him from notice, as many cowboys preferred a rather wild and unmanageable horse. Ticktock didn't lack spirit. He simply didn't see any sense in bucking and kicking up a fuss.

It was three days before Jim ventured to ride his horse. He examined the saddle sores and decided they were not too tender and that he could avoid sitting on them. He put on the bridle for the first time and led Ticktock up beside a small platform by the feed shed. Gingerly he climbed on the pony's bare back. Mrs. Meadows, unobserved, watched nervously from the kitchen window. Secretly she thought the mustang looked somewhat mean-tempered, but she kept silent. Her fears were unfounded, for the pony stood calmly while Jim climbed awkwardly on his back. The horse craned his head around as if to make certain his rider was firmly seated and then stood waiting for orders.

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Jim sat puzzled for a moment. He had ridden their broad-backed farm horses many times, but this was different. He had heard somewhere you never clicked to a saddle horse—and he wanted to do things right. You said "giddap" to a work horse, but that sounded a little undignified for a Western ranch horse. Finally he just pressed with his knees, lifted the reins and said: "O.K., Ticktock, let's go." The pony seemed to understand, for he started off at a brisk walk. Once outside the yard gate, Jim gave another press of the knees and they were off at a trot. It wasn't a very comfortable trot, as jolting along bareback on a spine as prominent as Ticktock's still was, couldn't possibly be anything but painful. But Jim enjoyed every moment. As he was still being careful of the pony's tender foot, he rode him only a short distance down the road. The return trip was made at a full gallop. Ticktock was not slow, so the horse and rider made a triumphant entry into the yard.

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As Jim slid off there was no doubt in his mind that Ticktock was the fastest as well as the finest horse in the world.

After the first trial, Jim went for a daily ride, each one growing longer. He led the horse into the yard, took the bridle over to the platform, gave a shrill whistle, and Ticktock would trot up to be bridled and mounted. Then they would go dashing off down the road, chasing rustlers, carrying the mail, or acting out whatever happened to be the current daydream.

Springdale no longer held any fascination for Jim. Saturdays were too precious to be wasted in town. There were too many odd jobs to be done. He repaired Ticktock's feedbox, and built a rack for a bucket in one corner of the stall. He wasn't going to ask anyone to water his horse when he was away, and he had no intention of letting the pony be thirsty.

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The second Saturday after Ticktock's arrival, Jim was lying on the front porch resting from his labors. He munched on a cookie and gazed contentedly at his horse. Ticktock was in the front yard grazing. The regular pasture didn't

seem quite luxuriant enough to Jim. Besides he planned to ride any moment now and wanted his horse near. The orchard would have been the ideal spot but the bull was again occupying that area. The boy thought about the bull and frowned.

Jim wasn't the only one who disliked the bull, for Mrs. Meadows was very nervous concerning the big red animal. She was also home this particular Saturday. Her last words to her husband, before he and Jean left for town, had been about the mean-tempered bull.

"Carl, I wish you'd see Colonel Flesher and sell that ugly brute. When I stay home without you I'm always afraid that he'll get loose."

"I'll get rid of him this fall," Mr. Meadows had said, laughing. "He's safe enough in the orchard and I'm certain there's nothing you'll want in there today."

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Jim lay thinking about the time he had been trapped in the tree. He was still angry about that and wished he could think of some way of evening the score. Besides, that orchard would certainly make a nice private pasture for the horse. Grazing in the yard was not too satisfactory. His mother had objected at first on the grounds that Ticktock would eat or trample her flowers. They had finally compromised by agreeing that the mustang could graze on the strip between the drive and the orchard fence. As Jim disliked tethering his horse, he had to watch carefully; but it was worth it. The pony was near and each mouthful he ate was that much less lawn to be mowed.

Jim was turning over the weighty problem of whether to go for a ride now or to try arguing his mother out of another cookie, when he noticed the bull coming through the orchard gate. Either the gate had been insecurely fastened or else the latch had been broken. He jumped to his feet in alarm.

"Mother, the bull's loose!" he shouted.

His mother came through the door onto the porch just as Jim started down the steps. She made a frantic grab and caught her son by his overall suspenders. She pulled him, kicking and struggling, back to the center of the porch.

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"Where do you think you're going?" she demanded.

"Ticktock is in the yard," pointed out Jim, almost beside himself with fear for his precious horse.

"The bull won't bother a horse," Jim's mother reassured him.

"He will too!" cried Jim. "I saw a movie of a bull-fight and bulls sometimes kill horses."

"Nevertheless, you are staying right here," said Mrs. Meadows firmly. "If anybody gets hurt, it is not going to be you. Besides, Ticktock is a ranch pony. He can take care of himself."

The bull took a long curious look at the mustang who continued to graze peacefully. Ordinarily the bull stayed clear of the large work horses but the pony looked small enough to intimidate. He gave several snorts and began to paw with

his front foot. Ticktock just went on grazing, ignoring the bull completely. The big animal lowered his head and prepared to rush. Jim squirmed and struggled in another attempt to get free but his mother now had him by the arm and showed no intention of letting him go. Jim wasn't quite certain what he could do if he were free. All he could think of was that his pony was in danger.

"He's going to rush!" he shouted.

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"You couldn't stop him," said his mother. She too began to wonder about the mustang's safety.

The bull lunged forward, gathering speed as he went. His short legs worked furiously, like pistons in a racing engine. Just as he seemed certain to smash into the pony's side, Ticktock jerked his head up and made a quick wheeling movement. The bull rushed past harmlessly.

"There!" said Mrs. Meadows, with a huge sigh of relief. "Ticktock can take care of himself."

"I guess he's too smart for an old bull," said Jim with more confidence than he really felt.

The bull turned around and was pawing again. After his experience in the orchard, Jim was well acquainted with the ugly animal's tactics.

"Look out, Ticktock!" he shouted.

The mustang needed no warning. He was watching the bull with a quizzical look. He seemed amazed, as if he couldn't quite believe that a "cow critter" could possibly be stupid enough to try any tricks on a smart ranch pony like himself. He cocked his head and stood waiting as if he were saying, "I'll just wait and see if this is really true. Maybe I just imagined that bull was rushing at me."

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The bull rushed all right. He came ploughing across the yard like a freight train, the driving hooves taking huge chunks out of the smooth green sod. Ticktock calmly and neatly side-stepped. He decided this time that he hadn't been mistaken. The bull was actually trying to scare *him*. The whole thing was ridiculous. As the bull came charging back the third time the pony decided he had enough of such foolishness. He wheeled sharply when the animal was a few feet away. As the bull roared past, Ticktock lashed out sharply with both hind feet. Running the open range as a colt had taught the mustang how to use his only weapons, his feet. He had learned well, as the bull now discovered.

Ticktock planted a firm kick squarely on the fat side of the big red animal. The bull, almost knocked over by the force of the blow, gave a loud bellow of pain and surprise. Jim jumped up and down on the front porch, cheering as if at a boxing match.

"Sock him, Ticktock; let him have it!"

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By now Ticktock had his ears back and his teeth bared. He stood watching the bull, willing to give him another lesson. The bull, however, needed no more instruction. He promptly dropped all ideas regarding the little pony, moving a respectful distance away. Snorting in baffled rage and disappointment, he walked across the yard and began pawing furiously in the flower beds.

"My flowers," moaned Mrs. Meadows. "Now I know that bull is going to be sold. I could kill him with my bare hands."

"I'll chase him out," volunteered Jim.

"No you don't. You are still staying here," insisted Jim's mother.

Jim gave a whistle. "Come here, Ticktock."

The mustang trotted up to the porch. Jim climbed on confidently. He had no bridle but he was long since past the point where he needed reins to make his wishes known to the pony. He rode over to the nearest tree and broke off a substantial switch.

"Come on, boy; after the bull."

Ticktock went after the big animal. Cutting steers out of herds, chasing back strays, and all such maneuvers were old routine with him. He needed few directions; all he required was to know where Jim wanted the bull to go. They turned the animal back and, after a few tries, chased him through the orchard gate.

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Once inside, Jim gave the defeated and lumbering bull a triumphant swat with his switch. The big beast broke into a reluctant run. Shouting and waving his arms like a wild cowboy, Jim chased the vanquished bull to the far end of the orchard.

When finally there was no place farther to go, he relented. Returning, he fastened the gate securely and slid off Ticktock.

"You're the bravest and smartest horse in the world, Ticktock. I'm going to get you something for a reward."

Jim swaggered into the kitchen, trying to walk as he thought a bow-legged cowboy would.

"Ticktock is really a smart horse, isn't he, Mom?"

"He seems to be very intelligent," admitted his mother.

"We can handle that bull all right," boasted Jim. "Why we can chase him all over."

"I noticed you did," said Mrs. Meadows dryly. "I don't say he didn't deserve it this time, but don't make a practice of chasing him. That bull is

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going to be sold and there is no use running the fat off him.”

“Oh no, we won’t run him,” protested Jim. “But any time you want him handled, just call on us.”

“All right,” laughed his mother. “Now go get the apple you were planning on asking for. And you can have a cookie for yourself.”

“One down,” said Jim as he gave Ticktock his apple. “Mom’s all for you. We’ll show the others too. You wait. If only you hadn’t taken that bite at Dad.”

The mustang stopped munching long enough to grin.

Chapter Four ***New Allies***

By the time school was over for the summer, Ticktock had filled out considerably. His hip bones no longer appeared as if they were about to poke through his hide, his neck was less scrawny, and his backbone, though visible, no longer resembled the ridgepole of a tent. Jim could ride him bareback without the painful discomfort of the first few weeks. While the daily grooming had improved the pony’s coat a good deal, there were still patches that were far from satisfactory. Over all, the horse presented a rather mottled appearance. As some of the snarls in the pony’s tail proved too much for Jim’s patience, they had been removed by means of scissors. The result was rather weird—some strands were long and flowing while others were short and ragged. The mane was likewise irregular. Jim couldn’t bring himself to clip the mane short, as all the cowboys’ horses he had ever seen in the movies had long manes. So again he had clipped where he couldn’t untangle, ending up with a mane that resembled a comb with half the teeth missing. But at any rate the horse was free of burrs.

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There was no questioning the mustang’s health or vitality. He frisked about like a colt, showing that his wiry constitution hadn’t suffered permanently from his past mistreatment. Since to Jim the horse had appeared beautiful in his original state, by now he was the embodiment of all that was perfect in horseflesh. Ticktock ran to meet the boy each time he appeared, even though it might be ten times a day. It had become second nature to obey the boy’s whistle. The two were on a perfect basis of friendship and understanding.

A few days after the summer vacation began, Jim hung on the orchard fence, deep in thought. The summer was just beginning, but he hadn’t forgotten his father’s decision the night he had traded for Ticktock. Fall had to come someday and then the mustang would have to go. Mr. Meadows had shown no signs of relenting toward the pony. He ignored the mustang as much as possible and when he did have to notice the pony, his eyes contained as much dislike as

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ever.

Something had to be done, decided Jim. Perhaps he could think of some way to earn money. If he could get enough money to pay for Ticktock's feed for the winter, his father's chief objection would be overcome. Then with his mother on his side, Jim felt he might win a reprieve for his horse. He thought over the possible ways of earning money. There weren't many jobs a boy could do on a farm that brought in cash. Certainly there was plenty of work, but you did that anyway and didn't expect pay. Now a boy in town could deliver papers, cut the neighbors' lawns and run errands. Here on the farm it was different. Of course you could pick wild blackberries and huckleberries and sell them, but it would be some time before either were ripe and he couldn't afford to wait. No, things were tough. Now he knew why boys left the farm. Feeling discouraged he went into the house to see if there was something to eat that would take his mind off his troubles.

"Jimmy," said Mrs. Meadows, as her son ambled into the kitchen, "You won't get that cake I promised. I forgot to get any vanilla extract when I was in town."

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"Gee," said Jim disappointedly. Things certainly were tough. He sat thinking a few minutes.

"Look, Mom," he said brightening, "I'll just ride into town and get the extract. It won't take long."

Mrs. Meadows looked at her son's eager face for a moment and then gave her permission. "All right. But you be careful of the cars when you get in town. Motorists don't expect cowboys on mustangs to ride through the streets."

"Anything else you need at the store?"

"How are you going to carry anything? You have to have your hands free for the reins."

"I'll take a burlap bag, put the things in it and then hang it across Ticktock's back," said Jim with decision. At least if this errand didn't earn any money it would prove to his mother that Ticktock was useful. And then a cake wasn't to be sneezed at.

Jim and Ticktock jogged contentedly into town, enjoying the warm sunshine. Arriving at the town's sleepy main street, Jim looked around thoughtfully. Where would he tie Ticktock while he was in Mr. Higgins' grocery store? Hitching posts had long since vanished in Springdale. Finally he spied a fire plug. Sliding off the pony's back, he looped the reins over the plug. Perfect, he decided. He could use the fire plug to climb back up on Ticktock when he returned.

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Mrs. Meadows had made quite a list of groceries, so Jim was gone some time. Also he made no effort to hurry away from the store, as it was his first visit to town since he had acquired Ticktock. He stood by the coffee grinder and inhaled the wonderful odor of freshly ground coffee while Mr. Higgins served the two customers ahead of him. Finally he got his groceries, carefully stowing them in the burlap bag so the weight would be equally distributed between the two ends. He tied the

bag but stuck the bottle of extract in his shirt pocket for greater safety.

Carrying the bag of groceries over his shoulder, Jim returned to his steed. The town constable, his star shining brightly on his blue denim shirt, was standing by the fire plug eyeing the mustang with angry disapproval.

"This your horse?" the constable asked as Jim approached.

"Sure is," said Jim proudly.

"What do you mean tying him to a fire plug?" demanded Constable Whittaker.

"I couldn't find any other place to tie him," explained Jim reasonably.

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Robert Morgan, the younger of Springdale's two lawyers, came strolling by at this moment. He stopped to listen to the conversation and to examine Jim's horse.

"Well, you can't tie him to a fire plug," said the constable. "It's against the law."

"Where will I tie him?" asked Jim. "I'm in town on business and I've gotta leave my horse somewhere."

"I don't know where you'll tie him, but fire plugs are out. Why I could throw you in jail for this." Whittaker fingered his star, looking at Jim threateningly.

Jim began to be decidedly frightened. Desperately he tried to think of something to say.

"Don't believe you could, Whit," said Robert Morgan with a grin as he entered the argument. "I was reading the town ordinances last night. It's against the law to park a car within fifteen feet of a fire plug but I don't remember a word being mentioned about horses. You wouldn't have a leg to stand on in court."

"Do you mean this kid can tie his nag to a fire plug and get away with it?" demanded the big constable irritably.

Ticktock, in the meantime, had been watching the argument intently. He hadn't cared for the way Whittaker had glared at him during Jim's absence. The horse could sense when anyone disapproved of him and was quick to reciprocate. He had about decided he didn't like the constable before any conversation started. During the argument he kept glancing back and forth between Jim and the huge law officer. He had no idea what it was all about but he could see that Jim was becoming frightened. As it was quite plain that the constable was the cause of all the trouble, Ticktock decided it was time to go into action. He edged around until his hind quarters were close to the curb and pointed in the proper direction. After looking over his shoulder to see if Whittaker were at the proper range, Ticktock laid his ears back and a mean glint flickered in his eyes.

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"Look out!" yelled Morgan. He pulled Whittaker back just in time, as Ticktock lashed out with his left hind leg.

"You not only haven't a leg to stand on," said Morgan, roaring with laughter, "but you won't be able to sit down for a week if you argue with this boy while his horse is around!"

By this time there were a dozen onlookers present, all laughing at the embarrassed constable. The latter, however, refused to join in the merriment. He stood glaring at Ticktock.

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"You leave that horse on the main street again and I'll arrest him for being a menace to the public health and safety," the constable threatened Jim angrily.

"I don't think you can arrest a horse," pointed out the persistent Morgan, who was enjoying himself tormenting the law officer. "Besides, you can't quarter a horse in the town jail. It would be unsanitary."

At this wisecrack the bystanders became hilarious. One man was busily jotting down notes on the back of a letter.

"Nevertheless, don't let me see this horse alone on the main street," warned Whittaker. He strode off, red and angry.

"Thanks a lot, Mister," said Jim to the lawyer. He was glad the argument was over.

"Robert Morgan is the name," said the young attorney, extending his hand. "I'm happy to have been of service. Any time you need any further legal advice come to me."

"I will," promised Jim seriously. "But I'm not planning on getting into trouble if I can help it. My father wouldn't like it—and then I can't afford a lawyer."

"There are no charges," said Morgan laughing. "Just between you and me, I wouldn't tie your horse to the fire plug even if it is technically legal. I just wanted to bluff Whittaker since he was trying to scare you."

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"Tell you what," said the man who had been taking notes. "You can leave your horse in back of my newspaper office whenever you want. You ride him around there now and I'll show you where you can tie him. Then I'd like to get your name and a few details if you don't mind."

Jim rode Ticktock around to the alley to a small green plot in back of the newspaper building. The editor and Robert Morgan were waiting for him there.

"Tie him to that tree," said the editor, "and come on inside for a minute."

Jim dismounted and followed his new friends inside. He looked curiously at the presses and linotype machines. He would like to have examined the machines more carefully but the two men went directly into a small office with the label "Editor-in-Chief" written on the door.

"Have a chair," offered the editor. "My name is Arnold, Bill Arnold."

"Glad to meet you," said Jim politely. "I'm Jim Meadows."

"I just want to get down a few facts for the

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Gazette," said Arnold. "What is your horse's name?"

"Ticktock."

"That's an odd name," observed Arnold.

"I called him that because I traded my watch for him."

The editor seemed genuinely interested, so Jim told him about the mustang. The boy had been longing to find someone who really wanted to hear about Ticktock's merits, so he became very enthusiastic. He described how he had traded for the pony and how quickly the horse had learned. Very carefully he avoided mentioning that his father had been angry and was not going to permit him to keep Ticktock permanently.

"Thank you very much," said Arnold when he had finished taking notes. "Watch for the *Gazette* on Thursday. Ticktock will be in it. Now I think we all ought to adjourn to the café and have some ice cream and a coke."

Jim approved of that idea heartily, so the three went across the street to the café. They joined a tall lanky man who was seated in a booth drinking coffee.

"This is Doc Cornby," said Arnold. "Doc, I want you to meet a young horseman friend of mine, Jim Meadows."

"How do you do, Jim," said Dr. Cornby gravely, shaking hands.

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"Bob has just been acting as legal counsel for Jim," continued the editor. "He saved Jim's horse from the law and also the law from Jim's horse. For details read your local newspaper when it arrives on the stands Thursday."

"Doc is a good man to know," said Morgan to Jim. "He's the best as well as the only veterinary in town. If there's anything wrong with your horse, call on him."

"Oh, Ticktock's healthy," said Jim, "but I'll remember in case anything does happen."

Finishing his ice cream, Jim thanked the editor and got up to leave.

"Look," said Morgan suddenly, "Let's hire Jim to distribute the bills about the Co-op. He could take them around on his horse."

"Good idea," approved the editor. "Do you know the countryside pretty well, Jim?"

"Why sure," said Jim. "I've lived here all my life."

"Well, we will give you a dollar and a half a day. The idea is to deliver bills advertising the new Farmer's Co-operative that we are forming. We want to put a circular in the hands of every farmer within a radius of ten miles. I have a big map at my office on which we can mark out the territory. Want the job?"

"I sure do," said Jim enthusiastically.

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"You be at the office tomorrow morning at nine

or so. The circulars will be printed by then and we can get started."

Jim said nothing at home about his day's adventures, other than to mention that he had a job for the next few days. The following morning he hurried through his chores, gave Ticktock a hasty grooming, and then rushed into the house to change into clean overalls. His mother had prepared a lunch, which was ready for him, packed in a brown paper bag. Jim looked inside to make certain he would have enough. Riding all day would not ruin his appetite. There were three thick sandwiches, two pieces of cake and two apples. It would do, he decided after some consideration.

"Thanks, Mom," he said. "Ticktock and I'll be home in time for supper."

"All right, cowboy," smiled his mother. "Don't get lost now."

"Get lost!" snorted Jim indignantly. "Why even if I did, Ticktock would be able to find the way back."

He went outside in high spirits, opened the orchard gate and whistled. It was no longer an orchard in his mind but a corral which was the private domain of the mustang. Of course, the bull was often there but Jim and Ticktock ignored that animal as being beneath their notice.

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The pony trotted over to the feed shed for his bridle. As Jim put his paper lunch bag inside the burlap sack, he thought longingly how handy a saddle would be. You could tie things such as your lunch to the saddle horn or, even better, get your mother to make some canvas bags to fasten behind the cantle. The way it was now, you had to have equal weights in both ends of the burlap bag to make it lie across the mustang's back. Even then it was always sliding off. Well, decided Jim, that was one of the problems of life. He did not have a saddle, but he did have a wonderful horse—which was the important thing.

While he was debating what to put in the bag to balance his lunch, he realized suddenly that he had nothing for the horse to eat. There would be plenty of green grass and clover by the roadside, no doubt, but they would be on the move most of the time with few pauses for Ticktock to crop. Also a horse needed something solid when he was on the go all day. Feeling rather guilty, Jim went to the corn-crib and picked out six choice ears of corn. He would tell his father that night, he decided. After the remark Mr. Meadows had made about having no feed to waste on Ticktock, Jim felt rather underhanded in giving the pony any grain. He would offer to pay for the corn, now that he was earning money.

The Springdale *Gazette* was being run through the presses when Jim arrived in town. He hung around the shop watching the machinery with absorption. The inky smell and the activity of the print shop fascinated him. It must be fun to write things and then see your words appear in print. When Bill Arnold finally found a free minute and motioned for Jim to follow him into the office, the boy went with reluctance. Perhaps he could manage to be both an editor and a

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rancher when he grew older.

The editor and Jim went over the area to be covered. Arnold outlined the region on a huge county map which hung on the office wall. Jim made a rough sketch, took a huge bundle of bills and started off to work. As he jogged out of town with the bills in two bundles hanging over Ticktock's back, he again found himself longing for the convenience of a saddle.

It was pleasant riding in the warm June sun along the country roads. There were flowers by the roadside, the fields were a bright green, and the air was filled with the heady scent of the rich earth and its new blanket of growing life. Birds sang in the trees while quail scurried across the road or took off in their short plummeting flights. Jim felt like taking off his shoes and wiggling his bare toes in the fertile ground.

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It was fun delivering the bills. He and Ticktock developed a system after the first few farms. They would jog along at a comfortable easy pace until they reached the lane leading from the road. Then they would break into a mad gallop, dashing into the farmyard as if on a mission of life and death. Most of the men were in the fields working, but such tactics invariably brought at least the woman of the house out on the porch to learn the cause of the excitement. If there were any children present, they crowded around to stare at Jim and Ticktock. Jim felt proud and important, particularly if there were boys about his age. He would hand his circular to the woman with a flourish.

"Be sure to read that carefully," he told each one. "It's very important."

He was usually able to deliver the bill to someone without dismounting. After he made his short speech, he would wheel Ticktock quickly and gallop furiously out the lane, knowing that the envious eyes of the children were following him. As soon as they were well out of sight, Ticktock would lapse into a pleasant ambling walk until they reached the next farm. The mustang seemed to enjoy the game as much as his master. Each time he resumed his walk after a spectacular delivery he would turn his head around to grin at Jim as if saying, "We certainly put on a show that time, didn't we?"

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The first day passed rapidly. The second morning Jim was stiff from riding all the previous day, but the soreness soon wore off. Noon found the two near Briggs Woods, a heavily wooded area about six miles from home. Jim's route was such that the shortest way took him along the one road leading through the center of the forest. It was lonely and silent once the high trees closed behind him, but the semi-gloom appealed to the boy. He stopped beside a

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small stream in the middle of the forest to eat his lunch. As he munched his sandwiches he could see narrow trails which led back into the trees and hinted of mystery and excitement. There must be pools in the depths of the woods, decided Jim, for the air was filled with the croaking of frogs. A turtledove was giving its plaintive, mournful coo in the distance and there were rustling sounds in the underbrush that hinted of wild animals passing near by on their mysterious errands. Jim inhaled deeply of the odor of pine needles and moulding leaves. This would be a secret rendezvous belonging to him and Ticktock. When he had finished this job, they would explore the forest together until they knew it well. Somewhere, back up one of these little winding trails, they would find a perfect spot for a hidden camp.

After lingering so long in the woods, Jim was late in covering the area he had mapped out for the day. He delivered the last bill and turned Ticktock impatiently in the direction which he thought home to be. After going several miles, he not only recognized no landmarks, but the farms looked increasingly unfamiliar. He stopped and puzzled over his map. That didn't help a great deal. He made a grimace and unsuccessfully tried to figure out his bearings from the rapidly setting sun. Very crestfallen, he had to admit that he was lost.

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Knowing that he could stop in at any farmhouse and ask directions, Jim was not worried. However, he felt that to do so was to admit defeat. He and Ticktock were a self-reliant team, and it would hurt his pride to admit that they couldn't handle any situation. Also he knew these Missouri farm women. They were kind—too kind to suit his purposes. They would give him very complete directions and then insist that he have something to eat. That would be fine, for he certainly was hungry, but matters wouldn't stop there. They would promptly call his parents to keep them from worrying. That was the last thing Jim wanted. Not only had he boasted to his mother about not getting lost, but both she and his father might forbid his delivering circulars again the following day if they were afraid of his losing his way. No, there had to be a better way out.

Ticktock looked around at his rider with a question in his eyes. He was hungry too and couldn't quite understand what they were waiting for.

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"O.K., boy," said Jim suddenly. "You figure it out. Take us home." He let the reins go loose.

Ticktock set out confidently at a brisk trot. He turned right at the first corner without hesitation. He was going somewhere, there was no doubt of that. Jim hoped that it was in the right direction. After three or four miles, Jim's confidence in Ticktock was justified, for the countryside began to look familiar.

"You're the smartest horse in the world," said Jim, patting Ticktock fondly on the neck. "There's nothing we can't do. We'll really explore that woods now. At least *you* won't get lost."

Mr. Meadows was reading the *Gazette* when Jim arrived. The boy rushed in the house full of the

news of this fresh evidence of the mustang's brilliance.

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"I didn't mean to be late to help with the chores," he explained, "but after I got ready to come home I was all twisted up in my directions and was going to ask the way, but instead I just let Ticktock go and he brought us right home."

"I have to admit that nag seems to have a sense of responsibility where you are concerned," said Mr. Meadows dryly. "But where others are involved he seems to have a streak of meanness. I warn you to watch him closely, because if he causes any trouble, away he goes. Here, read this."

With these ominous words Mr. Meadows handed Jim the *Gazette*, pointing to an article on the front page. Puzzled, Jim started to read.

Law Tangles with Horse

Constable Whittaker came out second best in an encounter with a horse last Tuesday. Ticktock, a fiery mustang from the far West, was peacefully standing on Main Street while his master, Mr. Jim Meadows, was engaged in business in Higgins' grocery store. Constable Whittaker appeared on the scene and threatened to arrest the horse for being illegally parked in front of a fire plug. The horse, refusing to comment without benefit of legal counsel, stood his ground. Mr. Robert Morgan, of Springdale legal fame, learning that one of his clients was in trouble, rushed to the scene. He arrived at the same time as Mr. Meadows, the horse's owner.

A long legal discussion ensued as to whether or not it is unlawful to park a horse by a fire plug. Ticktock, becoming tired of the argument, decided to settle the issue by kicking Constable Whittaker out of town. Our worthy law officer was saved from this painful fate by the heroic efforts of Mr. Morgan, who not only wanted to protect Constable Whittaker from injury but wished to prevent the question of assault and battery from entering an already involved case. The constable threatened to arrest the horse as a menace to public safety but further thought convinced him that the doughty mustang would doubtless kick his way out of jail in short order.

The whole matter was settled out of court. The Springdale *Gazette*, with its usual public spirited policy, has placed the yard in back of the *Gazette* building at the disposal of Mr. Meadows and his horse whenever they are in town. Citizens may often see the mustang peacefully grazing there these days. Ticktock is very friendly and welcomes visitors, but they are warned to make no slurring remarks or threatening gestures toward Mr. Meadows, as the horse is quick to take offense where his master is concerned.

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Chapter Five

The Pony Express

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It took three more days to complete the delivery of circulars. On the last day, Jim had covered the remaining area by mid-afternoon and was on his way home when he noticed a farm that he had missed. It was a dilapidated old place with tumble-down fences and a few rickety unpainted buildings situated well back from the road, almost hidden in a clump of trees. The whole farm looked so neglected and run-down that Jim decided to deliver a circular there for the chief purpose of obtaining a closer look at the place.

After riding up a long, weed-choked lane, he reached the farmyard. It was a barren, grassless yard, littered with odds and ends of farm machinery and an old model-T Ford touring car with no top. Seated beneath a huge tree was a white haired old man, drinking lemonade. A pair of bright blue eyes looked quizzically at Jim from beneath shaggy white brows.

"Howdy, son," he said, the leathery old face wrinkling into a friendly smile.

"How do you do," answered Jim politely. "Here is a circular all about the new Farmer's Co-operative."

As he leaned down to hand the paper to the old man, his eyes rested longingly on the pitcher of lemonade. The look did not escape the bright blue eyes.

"Light a while and have a glass," the old man invited.

Jim promptly accepted, sliding from Ticktock's back. His host looked at the circular casually and then stuffed it in his pocket. He examined Jim and the mustang much more closely.

"Right pert-looking horse you got there, son," he observed finally.

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"Smartest horse in the country," boasted Jim. "He can do anything."

"That so?" asked the man. "Reckon he could catch that shoat over there?"

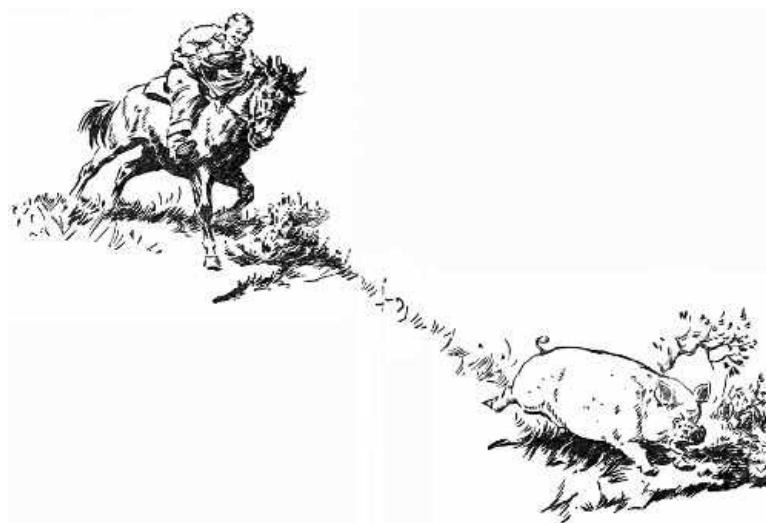
Jim looked in the direction of the pointing finger. A small black and white pig was wandering loose around the yard, stopping to root in the earth here and there.

"I reckon so," answered Jim. "I don't know why a horse would be needed to catch a pig though."

"That shows how little you know about pigs," said the old man. "That shoat is part razorback, part snake and the rest deer as near as I can figure it out. Leastwise you'd think so if you tried to catch it. Been loose three days now. Not that I mind pigs being loose around the yard—they're sort of company to an old bachelor like me. But this little thing is the orneriest critter I ever run across. Yesterday it went over there where those beehives are and knocked three of them over. Today I dropped my plug of chewin'

tobacco and hanged if that shoat didn't eat it before I could lean down. It's started killin' chickens too. Nothin' worse than a hog that kills chickens; never did know one to be cured."

"Where's its pen?" asked Jim.



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"Over there," said the old man, pointing to an open gate. "I fixed the fence so it'll hold if I can ever catch the dad-blamed pig. I guess I'm too old to catch a pig like that. Too lazy too. I retired twenty years ago and aside from a few chores, I been mighty happy doin' nothin' for years, and now this fool shoat has to come along to upset my peace of mind. If I don't catch it, I'll find it in my bed one of these nights. Already found it in the kitchen once."

"I'll chase it in for you," said Jim, finishing his lemonade. He got to his feet confidently.

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Getting the pig back into the pen was not so simple as Jim had thought. He had considerable experience with pigs but he had never encountered one as wily as this. He chased around the yard after the elusive animal until he was exhausted, without so much as getting the pig near the open gate of the pen. Panting heavily, Jim regarded the shoat, which in turn looked back at him with insolent contempt.

"Feared you might have trouble," said the old man, who had not stirred from his seat beneath the tree, but was watching with interest. "That's why I suggested the horse. Maybe you can tire out the little wretch."

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Accepting the suggestion, Jim mounted Ticktock. Around and around the yard they went after the pig. The latter showed no signs of becoming exhausted but finally grew tired of the scene. The animal headed through a gap in an old fence and started across an adjoining pasture which contained a shallow muddy pond. In the open pasture Jim and his horse had a decided advantage. While in the cluttered yard his speed had been retarded by having to duck and turn, now Ticktock could open up. The pig's short legs worked like mad but the horse was always behind him. A quick turn of the shoat would cause Ticktock to rush past, but Jim would wheel the mustang and in a few strides they would again be practically on top of the pig. The fleeing animal now began to show signs of exhaustion.

In the excitement of the twisting, turning chase, both Jim and the mustang paid little attention to where they were going but simply kept their eyes glued to the pig. After being left behind on another turn, they came rushing up on the animal, to discover suddenly that they were heading straight into the pond. The exhausted and panicky shoat began floundering in the mud. Jim realized the danger at the last moment and tried to rein in Ticktock. The mustang braced all four legs, trying to stop, but his speed was too great. He slid forward into the slippery mud like a sleigh, passing directly over the bogged-down pig. As the mustang's hind legs cleared the pig, they hit a particularly slippery spot and collapsed beneath him. The pony sat down in the shallow muddy water with a resounding smack. As Ticktock sat, Jim slid down the sloping bare back and in turn landed in the water. However, instead of sitting in the soft mud, he found himself astride the muddy and now terror-stricken pig. The animal let out one piercing squeal after another, wiggling and thrashing in the shallow water. Once the muddy water had dripped from Jim's eyes so that he could see what was happening, he grabbed the pig's ears. He firmly retained his seat astride the squealing animal.

Jim knew that it was only a matter of minutes before the struggling pig would wriggle free, since the muddy creature was almost impossible to hold. However, after all the trouble, the boy was not going to let the captive escape if there were any way of preventing it. The burlap bag which he had been using for padding on Ticktock's back had slipped off with him. Grabbing it, he quickly slipped the bag over the pig's head. A floundering muddy struggle ensued. Occasionally Jim was on top but just as often it was the pig. Finally when both were about drowned, the task was accomplished. The pig was in the bag. Covered with mud from head to foot, Jim dragged the bag to shore.

The old man, laughing uproariously, was waiting beside the pond.

"You did it, by gum!" he said, when at last he stopped laughing. "Mighty strange method though. Do you always catch pigs that way?"

"I caught him, didn't I?" said Jim a little belligerently. He didn't see much humor in the situation.

"Sure did," said the old man, still grinning. "You're all covered with mud and glory."

The pig was too heavy to carry, so the old man got a wheelbarrow in which they trundled the captured animal back to its pen.

"That watering tank is good and clean," suggested the old man. "Why don't you jump in, clothes and all and get some of that mud off?"

After enjoying himself splashing in the cool water for a few minutes, Jim emerged much cleaner and in a better frame of mind. He wiped the mud off Ticktock's hind quarters and prepared to leave.

"Thanks, son," said the old man, his eyes twinkling. "Here's two dollars—one for catching that pesky animal and one for the

entertainment.”

Jim grinned and thanked his benefactor. It had been a profitable day; although he hoped he could sneak in the house without his mother seeing his clothes.

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The money earned by delivering circulars and catching the pig proved to be only a teaser to Jim. Now that it had been demonstrated that he and Ticktock had the capacity to earn money together, his ambition knew no bounds. He worried and fretted over his inactivity. Surely there must be numerous jobs that he and his pony could undertake. He considered going from door to door in Springdale, offering his services, but it seemed a tedious method of obtaining work. Then Robert Morgan gave him a better idea.

“How’s the Farmer’s Co-operative doing?” asked Jim when he chanced to meet the young lawyer on the street.

“Splendid!” said Morgan warmly. “You did a wonderful job delivering those bills. From what I hear you must have been going at a mad gallop the entire time. How did Ticktock stand the pace?”

“We just galloped while we were being watched,” explained Jim, with a grin. “The rest of the time we went at a slow walk.”

“Smart work,” said Morgan. “We got a great deal of publicity out of that. Publicity is what you need, Jim, when you are trying to start something new. You have to create interest.”

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Jim thought over the lawyer’s words all the way home. He was turning in the lane when he found the solution to his problem. Going upstairs to the privacy of his room, he began work with a pencil and paper. After much thought and many false starts, his writing began to take form. He labored for several hours, hunting up words in the dictionary, correcting his spelling, altering and revising his sentences.

The following morning Jim bridled his mustang and departed eagerly for Springdale. Arriving at the *Gazette* building he sought out the editor. Arnold was seated in his office relaxing; his feet up on the desk, his swivel chair tipped back and a pipe between his teeth. To Jim he was the picture of editorial genius at work. Being an editor must be a fine occupation.

“I have a scoop for you, Mr. Arnold,” announced the boy.

“You have?” asked the editor, picking up his feet and a pencil from the desk at the same time. “Have you and that horse of yours started a riot or a revolution?”

“Neither,” said Jim. “Something else though. I’ve written it up for you.”

Arnold took the proffered pages, reading them carefully. Jim watched the other’s face anxiously as he read.

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“A very creditable job of reporting for a cub,” said Arnold solemnly. “There will have to be a few minor changes. For example, you shouldn’t say ‘errands run lickety-split.’ It would sound

better to use some such phrase as 'speedy messenger service.' You see, the *Gazette* is a dignified paper."

"That does sound better," agreed Jim. "Do you want the story?"

"I think we can use it," answered the editor. "What are your rates for literary services?"

"Oh, you can have this free. I need the publicity."

"Tell you what I'll do," offered Arnold. "In return for the news story, I'll run an advertisement for you. Would that be satisfactory?"

"Swell!"

"It's a deal then. I'll draw up something appropriate."

Jim rode home feeling proud and important. The recent article about himself and Ticktock, even though it had caused rather unfavorable comment from his father, had made the boy hungry for fame. When the *Gazette* arrived Jim was waiting at the mailbox. His article was on the front page carrying what seemed to Jim enormous block headlines.

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New Business In Springdale

Pony Express Incorporated formed by Jim Meadows

Mr. Jim Meadows, local young business man, has announced the formation of a new enterprise in our community—The Pony Express Incorporated. This business offers a variety of services to Springdale residents. The owners, Mr. Jim Meadows and his horse Ticktock, will drive cattle to market, provide speedy reliable messenger service, do chores for farmers absent from their homes, perform light freighting jobs (anything moved that can be carried in a burlap bag), or even baby sit providing no changing of diapers is involved.

Mr. Meadows and his horse, who were recently mentioned in this paper, are full and equal partners in the new business. The Pony Express, Inc., will use R.F.D. #2 as its address, telephone Springdale 6207. Mr. Meadows, the president, will take all telephone messages, as the horse is a silent partner. The advertisement of the Pony Express will be found on page 3 of this issue.

Springdale is fortunate to be chosen as the seat of this new enterprise. The variety of new services offered will no doubt make life richer and fuller for everyone. It is not yet known whether the Springdale Rotary Club will extend an invitation to Mr. Meadows and Ticktock to join the organization.

While the article was much changed from its original form, and the last paragraph was entirely new to Jim, there were still enough of the original words remaining to make him feel that he had appeared in print. Glowing with pride he turned to see his advertisement. It was equally satisfactory.

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Turn Your Odd Jobs over to
The Pony Express, Inc.
(Ticktock and Jim, sole owners)
Errands run, quickly and reliably
Pigs caught
Cattle herded or driven anywhere
Confidential Messenger Service
For anything that man and horse can do
CALL ON US!
Phone 6207 Ask for Jim

Jim said nothing to his parents but let them discover the article themselves. His father was first to see the paper. He read the news item and advertisement, grinning with amusement and pride.

“So you are in business now,” he said. “How did you get all this free publicity?”

“Wrote most of it myself,” answered Jim frankly.

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“I think you’ll do all right,” said Mr. Meadows. “Well, I’ll give your firm its first job. The bull seems to be in disfavor around here. How much will you charge to drive it to town?”

“Fifty cents.”

“You’re hired,” said Mr. Meadows promptly. “As a matter of fact, I think your rates are too low. I would have paid a dollar.”

“Well, I gave you a special discount,” said Jim. “When you do business with relatives they always expect discounts.”

Chapter Six ***The Saddle***

Jim set out for town with the bull haltered and trailing behind Ticktock. He would have much preferred to drive the animal to market, but he decided that discretion was better than playing cowboy. If the animal got loose in the village and caused havoc, his father would never trust him again.

The bull had learned his lesson well and plodded meekly behind the horse. Uneventfully the little cavalcade made its way into town, across the tracks, and over to the stockyards. Colonel Flesher came out of his weighing shed, which also served as his office, and greeted Jim.

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“Good morning, young man. I see the Pony Express is delivering the male.” He laughed so heartily at his own pun that his enormous stomach shook up and down.

Jim, who was very pleased that the colonel had evidently read his recent publicity, grinned politely. The bull was led onto the weighing platform and after being weighed, was put in one of the enclosures of the stockyard.

“How’s business with the Pony Express

Incorporated?" asked the stock buyer.

"Fair," answered Jim. "Of course, just starting in business this way things are apt to be a little slow."

"Have any trouble bringing that bull to town?"

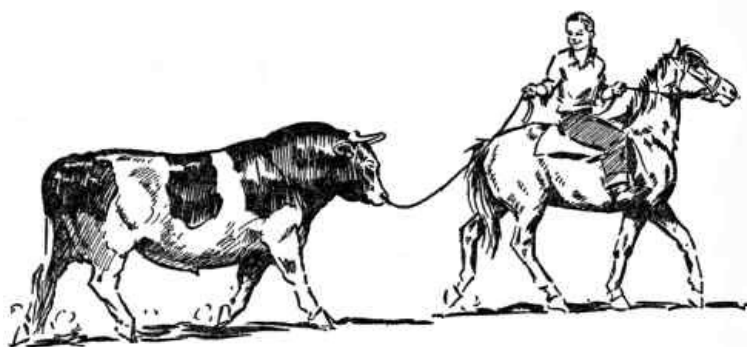
"Not a bit," answered Jim proudly. "Ticktock comes from a ranch, you know, so he really knows how to handle stock. We could drive a whole herd."

"I don't doubt it," said the colonel. "I have to admit that I was a bit off base where that horse is concerned. He has certainly improved since the first time I saw him. I think I'll have a job for you in a couple of days. There's about ten head of stock I bought from a farmer three miles south of here. You interested in driving them in for me?"

"Sure," said Jim confidently. "Any time you say. Ten head at my usual rates would be two dollars."

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"That's quite a wage for a young man," said the colonel considering. "But then there's the rising cost of living and the upkeep on your horse so I suppose that's fair. Anyhow its cheaper than trucking them in. I'll give you a call. Probably day after tomorrow."



"All right, sir. If I'm away on business my mother will take the message. She acts as my secretary," said Jim, trying to speak casually.

The telephone message came through as expected, and very much excited, Jim set out. This was a job to his liking—herding cattle like a true cowboy. He arrived at his destination, collected the ten head of cattle and started toward town. Driving the cattle along the country roads was not difficult. He kept the herd carefully to one side to avoid trouble with passing automobiles. Now and then one of the "critters" would see a tuft of grass on the opposite side of the road and try to break away. Ticktock would quickly demonstrate his prowess as a cow pony and drive the offender back into line. Altogether the trip to Springdale was accomplished without any untoward incident.

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As they started through the edge of town toward the stockyards, difficulties began to develop. At the sight of the wide inviting lawns on each side of the street, the cattle really began to be troublesome. As fast as one was chased back into the herd another would stray. Jim and his pony both began to work up a sweat. About halfway through town, the crisis came. One

stubborn old cow, taking a fancy to some lettuce in a vegetable garden, went ambling across the sidewalk with a determined glint in her eyes. As Jim turned the pony after her, a steer broke ranks and headed across a front lawn on the opposite side of the street. It was a tough spot. You couldn't chase two strays in opposite directions and herd the remaining eight cattle, all at the same time. With a sinking feeling that he was failing at his first big job, Jim considered desperately what to do.

Leaving the reins dangling on Ticktock's neck, Jim slid from the horse's back. "Keep 'em herded, Ticktock," he shouted, and started after the old cow in the vegetable garden.

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Ticktock followed his instructions remarkably well. He seemed to sense what was wanted and faithfully kept the remaining eight cows tightly bunched. Shouting and waving his arms, Jim chased the old cow from the garden before any damage was done except a few deep hoof prints in the soft earth. As he herded the straying animal back across the sidewalk toward the main herd, he looked for the stray on the opposite side of the street. Dismayed he saw the steer was already across the well-kept lawn and almost to an orderly flower garden which nestled at the side of a little white bungalow.

Just as the frisky young bull was about to plow into the little flower bed, a liver and white shape came hurtling around the corner of the bungalow, barking furiously. Ferociously, the dog went after the steer, which turned tail and fled back toward the street. Nipping at the steer's heels, the dog chased the animal across the sidewalk.

"Here, boy. Come here, old fellow," shouted Jim as invitingly as he knew how. He was deeply grateful to the dog for helping save the day, but he didn't want the barking warrior to get the whole herd excited. Then there would be serious trouble. Fortunately, the dog was well trained and stopped his barking, trotting obediently up to Jim. It was a springer spaniel with beautiful markings. Jim longed to reach down and pat his new friend's head but the cattle seemed more important at the moment. By now the herd was altogether again and Ticktock was doing a magnificent job keeping the cattle tightly bunched. The little mustang was slowly circling the herd which was now at a standstill.

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Since there was nothing available from which to climb up on the mustang's back, Jim decided to walk the remaining short distance to the stockyards. Moreover, it would be easier to keep the cattle under control with himself on one side and Ticktock on the other. He started the cattle moving once more. As they proceeded down the street, the spaniel followed. At first, Jim tried to get the dog to return to his home, fearing that the animal would start barking and stampede the cattle. But the brown and white springer seemed determined to accompany him. He turned out to be a very competent helper, trotting along on one side of the herd very quietly until one of the cattle attempted to break from the knot. Then the little dog would bark furiously and chase the offender back into place.

With perfect teamwork such as this, the rest of the journey was uneventful. When they arrived

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at the stockyard Ticktock was on one side of the herd, the dog on the other, and Jim walked behind. Colonel Flesher came out of his office, watching the last stage with open-mouthed amazement.

"That certainly takes the prize," he observed when the cattle were safely penned. "You, that horse and the dog all working together like clockwork. I hope you didn't walk all the way to town."

"No, just the last half-mile. It was simple out on the country road. Going through town, I figured out this was the easy way to handle 'em."

"Well, I have to admit you did it beautifully," said the stock buyer in admiration. "I forgot to tell you, but that little road over there west of the yards comes in parallel to the railroad tracks. There are no houses or yards along that. It might be a little longer in case you have to circle town to get to it, but it would probably be less trouble in the long run."

"I'll take that next time," said Jim, who didn't care to repeat his recent experience.

"Where'd you pick up Doc Cornby's dog?" asked Colonel Flesher, paying Jim his two dollars.

"Oh, I just recruited him on the way," said Jim very off-handedly.

"Well, it's a mystery to me how you get these animals to work for you so easily," said the colonel, shaking his head. "I'll have another job for you in a few days."

Thanking the stock buyer for the money, Jim climbed back on his horse and whistled to the dog. He felt it was only fair to return the spaniel to his home after the assistance the dog had given him. Arriving at the bungalow, Jim dismounted and walked up to the door. His knock was answered by a very pleasant-faced woman.

"How do you do, Mrs. Cornby," he said politely. "I brought your dog back. He was helping me drive cattle."

"I saw what was happening from the window," said Mrs. Cornby, smiling. "It was a good thing Horace was here to help you. That steer was heading straight for my flowers. If it had ruined my prize begonias, I would never have forgiven you."

"He's certainly a smart dog. He was a big help."

"He spent the last summer on my brother's farm. Bert taught him to go after the cows each evening, so I guess he enjoys helping herd cattle."

Mrs. Cornby had solved the mystery of why the dog had helped herd so intelligently, but Jim was slightly disappointed. He would have preferred to think that animals instinctively knew what he wanted.

"If he likes to drive cattle, I'd be glad to take him along the next time I bring some in," volunteered Jim.

"Thank you very much, but I think not," said

Mrs. Cornby. "He runs away too much as it is and if anything happened to him the children would be heartbroken. I suppose you're Jim Meadows of the Pony Express that we have been reading about in the paper."

"That's right," said Jim proudly. A sudden thought struck him. The editor and Dr. Cornby were close friends. "Would you do me a favor, Mrs. Cornby? Don't let Mr. Arnold hear about the trouble I had with the cattle. He might print it in his newspaper and bad publicity like that could ruin my business. I'm going to drive cattle by a different route after this, anyhow."

Mrs. Cornby laughingly promised she would remain silent. Jim got back on his horse and headed home for lunch. He would get a smart dog like Horace some day, he decided. But first, before taking on any more liabilities, he wanted to solve the problem of keeping Ticktock permanently. Mrs. Cornby had been nice, agreeing to keep quiet about the incident. He was glad the steer hadn't ruined her begonias, though why anyone set such a store by ugly waxy-leaved plants like begonias, he didn't know. Women are hard to understand, he decided.

After two more successful and uneventful trips driving cattle to town, Colonel Flesher offered Jim an additional job.

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"How would you like to work for me Saturday afternoons and evenings at the sales barn?" asked the stock buyer with a wave of his fat hand toward the huge auction barn near the stockyards.

"That sounds swell, sir," said Jim. He had attended part of the auction one afternoon with his father and had enjoyed it immensely.

"I'll give you a dollar and a half and your supper. Since I don't suppose you'd consider a proposition that didn't include your horse, I'll throw in feed for him too," offered the colonel.

"It's a deal," said Jim, shaking hands. "When do I start?"

"Three o'clock this Saturday."

Anything and everything was sold at the colonel's Saturday sales. There were horses, sheep, cattle, goats, pigs and poultry auctioned off in the big barn. The farmers who always came to town Saturday afternoon or evening to do their shopping brought whatever they wished to sell. You could buy garden tools, tractors, chairs, setting hens or pianos. Anything that was offered was put on the block and sold to the highest bidder. There were items ranging from fifty cents to five hundred dollars.

Each sale was as fascinating as a circus to Jim. There was always a huge throng of people gathered under the big roof—men, women and children from all over the surrounding countryside. There is some form of contagious excitement at an auction. When the crowd surged forward to bid on some choice item, the tenseness and excitement of the group would grip Jim too. He would hold his breath as the colonel skillfully maneuvered the bidding higher and higher.

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Jim gained a new respect for Colonel Flesher at the auctions. He had always wondered secretly how a man could be as fat as the stock buyer unless he were lazy, but he changed his mind at the sales. The big man was going from three in the afternoon, when the sale opened, until it ended, usually about nine in the evening. It was a mystery to Jim how the colonel's voice managed to keep up its steady flow, hour after hour. He never lost his enthusiasm either. He would shout as jovially and interestedly while selling a fifty-cent used ironing board as he would over a prize cow. The auctioneer was particularly adept at keeping the crowd in a good humor. If the bidding were not progressing well, he could always manage to bring up a joke or story to get the crowd laughing.

"Now look men," he might say, while selling a used washing machine. "You can't let this washing machine go for a paltry ten dollars. No wonder the divorce rate is rising. You tell a woman you love her, and then, after you are married, you would rather let her break her back over a washboard than spend more than ten dollars. Now let's have a bid that will show chivalry is not dead. Besides, I think with a little bit of trouble you could hook an ice-cream freezer to this motor. What am I bid? Fifteen, fifteen, fifteen, sixteen, sixteen, eighteen, who'll make it twenty. Twenty dollars by the man over there who loves his wife. Twenty—twenty—going at twenty. Going, going, gone! Sold for twenty dollars."

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In the beginning Jim was baffled by the methods used in bidding. During the first few sales he jerked his head back and forth frantically trying to locate the various bidders but he seldom saw more than half of them. After a few experiences helping the colonel upon the platform, he began to solve the mystery. Some men would lift a finger while others would wink an eye or use a nod of the head. Whatever the signal, the colonel seldom missed it. He seemed to have an uncanny knack of knowing who was a likely bidder on each item, so that often it was unnecessary for a bidder to announce himself as a party to the bidding even on his initial offer. It seemed of particular importance on expensive items, such as large farm machinery, that the bidders maintain secrecy.

"They don't want the other bidders to know who their competition is," explained the colonel to Jim. "Everybody knows everybody else and about how much money he has. If a man knows who's bucking him at an auction, he knows just about how high the other fellow is willing to go. That's bad at a sale. For example, if a good milk cow was being sold and everybody knew old man Wilkins was bidding, they might get discouraged because they know he's wealthy and stubborn. On the other hand, he doesn't want people to know he's in the race as someone might run up the price just to spite him."

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Jim enjoyed his duties at the auction. He led out cows and horses to be sold, handed small items to the colonel, or even held up an occasional article for the inspection of the crowd while Colonel Flesher sold it. When there was an unusually large amount of stock to be sold, part of it was kept at the stockyard and driven over as required. Those instances were the only times

that Ticktock's services were needed. However, Jim always kept the pony tied in the stock barn during the sales. He liked the mustang close by, and Ticktock seemed to enjoy the sale as much as the boy.

There was a half-hour pause at six o'clock while the colonel and his helpers ate a quick supper. The meal usually consisted of several hot dogs or hamburgers, a piece of pie and coffee. The food was obtained at the lunch counter just outside the main entrance to the sales barn and was taken into the colonel's office to be eaten. Jim always looked forward to the brief meal. Not only did he like hot dogs and hamburgers, but also he enjoyed the conversation.

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"That big gray horse went dirt cheap, didn't it?" the sales clerk, Carl Mason, would say.

"Yeah, it was a steal," Colonel Flesher would agree. "I tried my best to get the price up on that. That tractor was way overbid though. Sold for twice what it was worth."

Jim began to have a very shrewd idea of what various articles were worth, ranging from mops to gang plows.

At Jim's fourth auction, a saddle was offered for sale. He saw it just before the sale opened, stacked in a corner with a pile of miscellaneous household articles. Climbing over two galvanized washtubs, he managed to get close enough to inspect it carefully. It was a Western saddle with a high horn and cantle. The pommel, the cantle and the leather leg protectors were all covered with fancy tooling.

The saddle had been used just enough to deepen the color of the leather to a beautiful dark brown. Nowhere was it worn, and apparently it had been well cared for, as the leather was soft and pliable to the touch, indicating that plenty of saddlesoap and elbow grease had been used by the owner. It looked just right for Ticktock. Jim gazed at the saddle with longing and admiration. He had looked at the prices of saddles in the Montgomery Ward and Sears catalogs at home and knew a saddle such as that must have cost at least a hundred dollars. Probably more, as he had never seen a saddle with tooling such as this one.

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In his mind he counted his money. He had only two dollars with him, but the total of his earnings now amounted to nineteen dollars. The saddle couldn't conceivably go for such a price as that, he decided dismally, even if it were an off day at the sale. Besides he didn't have the money with him and the sales were always for cash. Regretfully he stopped his minute inspection and went about his duties.

In spite of being resigned about the saddle, Jim made certain that he was present when it was sold. It seemed forever before it came up on the block. For the first time Jim took little interest in the bidding on various other articles offered. When the saddle was finally brought forward, he stood on the edge of the crowd, tense with excitement.

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"What am I offered for this fine saddle?" asked the colonel. "A hand-tooled saddle in fine condition. None of your Eastern foolishness

about this. It's a serviceable as well as a beautiful Western job. There's a good saddle blanket here that goes with it. What am I bid? Who'll make me an offer?"

Jim found himself criticizing the colonel's sales methods for the first time. He wished the auctioneer wouldn't praise the saddle in such glowing terms.

"Ten dollars," came the first bid from somewhere in the crowd.

"I have an offer of ten dollars. Who'll make it twelve?" boomed the colonel.

"Twelve," was the answer from another quarter of the room.

The bidding went to fourteen dollars and hung there for a moment. Jim couldn't bear the thought of that beautiful saddle going to someone else for a mere fourteen dollars. He resolutely shoved his fears about money for Ticktock's winter feed into the background.

"Fifteen dollars," he shouted in a high voice.

"I'm offered fifteen," said the colonel, glancing quickly at Jim. "Sixteen, sixteen, am I bid sixteen?" Someone gave the signal and the offer went to sixteen. The auctioneer looked over at Jim questioningly. Feeling very nervous and uncertain that he was doing the proper thing, Jim nodded. His bid stood only a moment until the ante was raised to eighteen. Again the colonel looked in his direction and Jim nodded.

"Nineteen, I've been offered nineteen; who'll make it twenty, twenty, twenty. Twenty it is. Who'll make it twenty-one?"

Colonel Flesher looked questioningly at Jim, who had to shake his head sadly. He had reached the limit of his means. The bidding went on briskly until it reached twenty-five dollars. There it hung.

"Twenty-five, twenty-five, who'll make it twenty-six? Going, going, gone. Twenty-five dollars. Sold to the Pony Express Incorporated for twenty-five dollars."

Jim opened his mouth in astonishment. For a moment he doubted what he had heard. He had stopped bidding at nineteen. He didn't think he had made any signal after that which the colonel could possibly interpret as a bid. He started to shout out a denial and then thought better. He would put the auctioneer in a bad spot if he denied the bid. He tried to think of some way out of the delicate situation. The only solution was to see Colonel Flesher as soon as he could and explain that not only had he not bid any such sum as twenty-five dollars but that he couldn't possibly pay it anyhow.

All afternoon he worried about the matter. The sale seemed to drag on forever. Finally it was time for supper. Jim collected his food at the lunch wagon and headed for the auctioneer's office. Troubled as he was, his appetite still remained.

"There's been a mistake, Colonel Flesher," Jim said as the big man entered. "I stopped bidding at nineteen dollars on that saddle."

"I know you did. My eyesight isn't failing yet."

"I thought I heard you say it was sold to the Pony Express at twenty-five dollars."

"That's right. I got to thinking how nice that saddle would be for your horse. It's worth seventy-five dollars easily. I looked over at Ticktock and he seemed interested in it too. After you finished bidding I got three separate and distinct winks from your horse. Since I understand he's a full partner of the firm I considered his bids binding and sold him the saddle."

Jim was still too troubled to worry whether the colonel was kidding him or not. He wouldn't put it past Ticktock to have winked at the auctioneer. The idea that the mustang might bid on the saddle didn't seem at all absurd to Jim.

"But I have only nineteen dollars," he protested weakly.

"Perfectly all right," said the colonel jovially. "This is one exception we'll make to the rule of cash on the barrel head. I've already paid for the saddle. I'll take it out of your wages. Now quit worrying about the matter."

Jim quit worrying. He gulped down his piece of pie, thanked the colonel, and rushed out of the sales barn. He found his newly acquired saddle and blanket. He stroked the leather fondly. It certainly was a beauty. Tenderly he carried it over to show Ticktock.

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Chapter Seven

Horace

Ticktock was becoming sleek and fat by the end of June. Decker out in his handsome new saddle he was enough to fill Jim with a reasonable pride and all the other boys with envy. Mrs. Meadows made two sturdy saddlebags of canvas which Jim had fitted out with straps and buckles at the harness-maker. The completed outfit cost him a dollar and a half, which he hated to spend from his slowly accumulating hoard of feed money, but he felt the saddlebags were a necessary part of his business equipment. He also squandered three dollars on a poncho which he felt any self-respecting cowboy should own. Besides, who could tell when it would rain and a poncho be vitally needed?

With his poncho rolled in a tight bundle behind the saddle, and his saddlebags securely in place, Jim often rode into town. Whether he was going on an errand for his mother or to work at the sales barn, he always arranged his route so that he rode through part of the residential district. The boys who lived in town and attended the Springdale School always took an infuriatingly condescending attitude toward the pupils of a tiny country school such as the one Jim attended. Their manner clearly indicated that they thought boys such as Jim were country bumpkins. Jim felt it his duty to enlighten these

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Springdale boys as to the advantages of living in the country. While he wouldn't admit that he was trying to make them jealous, he felt he should display Ticktock and his beautiful saddle as often as possible in order that his city acquaintances wouldn't get any exaggerated ideas concerning the worth of a shiny bicycle. Then he would be starting to Springdale Junior High that fall and he thought he might just as well start building up his reputation and fame. Now and then he would stop to talk with friends or even take a boy for a short canter. Other times his business would be pressing so he would gallop through the streets with a brisk clatter, fully enjoying the envious eyes that followed him.

Mr. and Mrs. Meadows had rather opposed Jim's job at the sale at first on the ground that it kept him out after dark. The sales often lasted until nine o'clock and neither of Jim's parents fancied his riding home in the dark with automobiles on the road. Jim did his best to quiet their fears by explaining that he always rode carefully along the shoulder of the highway where no car would possibly hit him. However, to end the matter he was forced to add another piece of equipment—a portable electric lantern. He purchased a little dry-cell hand lantern that he at first tied to his belt. After he acquired the saddle, the light was hung on the saddle horn. He either left the lantern turned on continuously while he was riding or flashed it on when cars approached. He objected to anything as modern as an electric lantern for a cowboy, but, giving in to progress, decided it was a very useful piece of equipment to own. The problem of cars approaching from the rear was solved by fastening a small round red reflector, such as is used on automobiles, to the rear of the cantle. He felt that added to the appearance of the saddle.

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Ticktock and his rider became so well known throughout the community that Robert Morgan, the lawyer, decided to carry out the joking suggestion that had been made in the Springdale *Gazette* when the Pony Express was first formed. Jim's name and that of his horse were duly proposed to the Rotary Club at one of its weekly luncheons. The members present, falling in with the attorney's facetious mood, voted unanimously to offer the two partners of the Pony Express an honorary membership. A few days later Jim received an important-looking letter through the mail.

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SPRINGDALE ROTARY CLUB

*Messrs. James Meadows and Ticktock
Pony Express, Incorporated
R.R.#2
Springdale, Missouri*

Gentlemen:

By a unanimous vote the Springdale Rotary Club has decided to offer you both an honorary membership (no dues are required from honorary members). It is hoped that you will accept this offer and join our ranks.

A dinner is being held Thursday evening June 23, at 7:00 P.M. at the Springdale Hotel. You are cordially invited to attend as our guest of honor. We hope to be able to

prevail upon you at that time to make a few remarks about your new enterprise, its hazards and remunerations.

Due to hotel regulations we will be unable to accommodate Ticktock at the banquet table but the Springdale Gazette has offered its usual facilities in the rear of the newspaper office.

We hope to receive your reply in the near future.

*Sincerely yours,
Robert Morgan
Chairman, Membership Committee*

Jim was quite excited about the letter but he was uncertain as to what certain portions of it meant. Particularly the word "remunerations." He took the letter to his father.

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"I'm a member of the Rotary Club, Dad," he said proudly, "but I don't understand all of this letter."

Mr. Meadows read the letter over with a smile. "You are becoming quite famous. You've been voted an honorary member and don't have to pay dues as the rest of them do. Also you are invited to a banquet next Thursday where they want you to make an after dinner speech."

"What's that 'hazards and remunerstuff'?"

"Well, they would just like you to tell them about the risks you take in your business, the profits in it, how you like it and so on," said his father. "You should write a reply to this, accepting the invitation."

"I'd like to go," said Jim, "but I don't think much of making a speech or writing a letter either."

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"Well, that is one of the penalties of rising in the world," said Mr. Meadows dryly. "You have more public responsibilities. You have to make speeches, contribute to charities and things of that nature."

Jim got a paper and pencil and after an hour's labor finally composed an answer.

Dear Mr. Morgan:

Thank you for inviting me to the Rotary Club. I will be at the hotel at 7:00 P.M. on Thursday.

I never made a speech before but I will tell you what I know about the Pony Express.

*Sincerely yours,
Jim Meadows*

The next few days found Jim wishing a dozen times that he had given some excuse and not promised to attend the dinner. He was afraid of getting up before all those men and talking and, what is worse, he had not thought of a single thing to say after two whole days' concentration. He would go over and over the matter in his mind and never get beyond: "I want to thank everybody for inviting me to join the Rotary Club and for having me at your banquet." That

sounded very impressive and polite as a starter but he couldn't stop there if they expected a speech. He began to dread Thursday night. However, he had promised, so he felt that he had to go through with it.

When Thursday came, Jim put on his best clothes. For the first time he found himself wishing he had his gold watch. That watch would look very impressive before all those business men. However, if he hadn't traded off the watch, he wouldn't have been in a position to be invited.

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He rode into town feeling very nervous. Robert Morgan and Bill Arnold met him at the newspaper office and took him over to the hotel. Jim's dismay increased when he entered the banquet room. He looked at the big horseshoe table and decided there must be at least fifty members. He had never seen such a crowd before. Fortunately, he was placed between Robert Morgan and Dr. Cornby; so he didn't feel too lost among strangers.

Never having been at a banquet before, Jim was uncertain whether the speeches came before, during or after the meal. However when the standard banquet plate of creamed chicken, peas and mashed potatoes was set before everyone, he decided there was little point worrying. He might get rid of the hollow feeling in his stomach if he ate.

After the meal there were several short speeches and reports about Rotary activities. Then Robert Morgan got to his feet.

"Gentlemen, there has been considerable fame achieved by a new business firm in our city. This company has brought a new type of service to our community. I refer to the Pony Express. While one of the members of this organization has preferred to stay in back of the print shop and eat grass rather than sit with us, Mr. James Meadows, the other partner, is here tonight and has accepted our offer of an honorary membership. We would like Mr. Meadows to tell us how he got started in his present business and something about it. What is the future of the Pony Express and does he expect competition? Gentlemen, I present Mr. Jim Meadows."

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Jim got to his feet. While the clapping was still going on, he looked about nervously. He felt his knees shaking, and his throat was so dry he was certain he could never speak. Then he began to see a few familiar faces. There was Mr. Slemak, the buttermaker, Colonel Flesher, Mr. Higgins from the grocery store and Bill Arnold. Everyone was smiling in a very friendly manner. He thought about Ticktock. Well, if everyone wanted to hear about his horse, that was one subject he could talk about.

"I want to thank everyone for inviting me to join the Rotary Club and for having me here tonight," he said, going over the opening he had rehearsed so many times. From that point on the speech was extemporaneous. Jim just talked. "The way I got started in business was that I traded my gold watch for my horse Ticktock. I guess everybody thought I got stung on the deal except me. But I didn't because I knew he was an awfully smart horse. After I got him, I decided I had to earn some money to feed him.

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There's a lot of overhead in my business—feed, a saddle, saddlebags and things like that. As for the remuner-remunera-, whatever that word is that means profits, I guess there isn't much. I'll be working all summer for Colonel Flesher to pay for my saddle. I have twenty-three dollars now in cash. That seems like a lot of money. It's more than I ever had before, but I don't know how much it will take to feed Ticktock all winter. I'll probably end up broke. There aren't many hazards in my business. I was lost once, but Ticktock found the way home. He's got horse sense. Of course when he was thin and I didn't have any saddle I used to get kinda sore behind now and then.

"I don't think I'll have much competition. In the first place, not many boys have a gold watch they can trade for a horse. Even if they did, they couldn't find as smart a horse as Ticktock. Maybe the Pony Express has a big future ahead of it once I get my saddle paid for. But whether I make much money or not, it's sure a lot of fun."

Jim sat down to loud and prolonged applause. His speech was unquestionably a huge success. When everyone had finished congratulating him on his prowess as an orator he walked back with the editor, Dr. Cornby and Robert Morgan to the newspaper office.

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"Thanks a lot for coming, Jim," said Morgan sincerely. "Your speech was the best and the frankest that club has heard in a long time."

"Jim is getting to be quite a famous business man," commented Arnold. "If he were only a little older, we'd invite him to join our Thursday night stag parties."

Jim said good-by and went out to his faithful mustang. He had had an enjoyable evening and felt rather guilty that Ticktock had such a small share in his glory. After all the horse was a full partner.

"I guess you wouldn't have enjoyed chicken and peas anyhow," he said as he mounted. "Anyway we got some very good publicity. Everybody knows about us now and we should get lots of work."

It was ten-thirty and the evening had been much more exhausting than Jim had realized. The effort of making a speech had been as tiring as a day's hard labor and Jim felt like relaxing. Ticktock knew the way home as well as he, so the boy let the mustang take charge. After a short distance the steady jog-jog of the pony's easy walk lulled him to sleep. Slumping in the saddle, he dozed.

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Everything was serene for about a quarter of a

mile, when Jim sensed something was wrong. Sleepily he opened his eyes and tried to figure out what was amiss. Finally he realized Ticktock had stopped and was standing still at the edge of the road.

"Come on, Ticktock. It's late. Let's get on home," he said in a drowsy voice.

Ticktock didn't move but stood looking down into the ditch. Jim had the greatest confidence in his horse and as he gradually became fully awake, knew that the pony must have some reason for stopping. Then he heard a whimpering sound in the dark.

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Feeling a little frightened, he slipped the loop of his lantern from the saddle horn and flashed the light into the dark ditch beside the road. There was a dog lying on its side.

"Why, it's Horace!" exclaimed Jim. "He's hurt."

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Dismounting, he climbed down the bank beside the dog and looked at him carefully. The spaniel gazed up at him and whined piteously. Cautiously, Jim began to feel the animal. The hind legs seemed sound enough but when his hands touched the forelegs the dog suddenly growled viciously and snapped at him.

"He's hurt in the front legs," Jim informed Ticktock. "I guess a car hit him and broke them."

So long as Jim did not touch the injured legs, the dog regarded him with pleading pain-filled eyes. Jim was in a quandary. He could ride back into town and inform Dr. Cornby that his dog was hurt and lying beside the road. However, the dog might be hurt internally also and minutes might be precious. By the time he reached town and then led the doctor back to find the dog it might be too late. On the other hand, how would he take the dog to town himself. The poor animal snapped at him each time he touched the injured legs and moving him might be the wrong thing to do. Jim's knowledge of first aid was very limited but he had heard that moving a broken limb was sometimes unwise. Horace decided the question by looking up once more and crying pitifully. Jim just couldn't leave him there alone in the dark.

Returning to his horse, he untied his poncho. He carefully spread it out flat beside the helpless dog. Then, talking gently and reassuringly, he gradually inched the injured spaniel over onto the center of the poncho.

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"We're going to be as gentle as we can," he told the dog. "If this hurts a little, it won't be because we mean it."

He folded the edge of the poncho under so the dog's head would be clear and pulled up the corners. By maneuvering the sides of the poncho he was able to roll the dog onto its back very gently. Then he tied the three free corners together. Leading Ticktock down into the ditch, he finally managed to lift the dog and hook the knotted corners of the poncho over the saddle horn. He mounted very carefully and with the dog suspended as comfortably as possible in his makeshift sling, started the journey back to town.

Jim was on his way to the veterinarian's home when he remembered the words at the newspaper office. Doctor Cornby was probably still there playing cards, as it was before midnight. Since the doctor's office was only two doors from the *Gazette* building, Jim directed the mustang to the main street. There were still lighted windows in the newspaper office, so his guess proved correct.

He left Ticktock at the curb and went up to the front door. He found it locked, so he banged loudly. Bill Arnold came to the door in his shirt sleeves.

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"Hello, Jim. What are you doing back?"

"Is Dr. Cornby here?" asked Jim.

"Sure, come on in. Something wrong?"

Jim followed Arnold back to the office. "Your dog's out here with his front legs broken," he announced to the startled veterinarian.

"Good heavens!" said Cornby. "Where?"

Everyone followed Jim out to his horse where Horace was still lying in his poncho sling. He was lifted down tenderly and carried into Cornby's office.

"Mary said he ran away sometime this afternoon," said the doctor, as he examined the moaning dog. "But he's done that so often I didn't think anything about it. Where'd you find him, Jim?"

"I didn't. Ticktock found him. I had gone to sleep and woke up when Ticktock stopped. I tried to get him to go on, but he wouldn't so I flashed my light over to see what was bothering him. There was Horace in the ditch with his legs hurt. How is he?"

Cornby straightened up from his brief examination of the injured spaniel. "He doesn't seem to have any internal injuries. Of course, two broken legs are enough, but they can be fixed."

"I hope I didn't hurt his legs when I eased him onto my poncho," said Jim worriedly.

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"Not a bit. You did a good job. I don't know how to thank you for finding him. My kids would never recover if they lost Horace."

"Do you mind if I use your phone?" asked Jim. "Mom will be worried about my being so late."

"I'd be glad to drive you home," offered a stranger who had been in the card game.

"Jim has a horse," said Morgan to the speaker. "He wouldn't think of riding in a modern contraption. Let alone leave Ticktock behind."

"Thanks anyhow," said Jim politely.

"It begins to look as if I am going to have to assign a reporter to follow you," said Arnold. "Wherever you and that horse go, there's news."

Chapter Eight

Exile

The account of Jim's speech before the Rotary Club and his subsequent finding of Horace by the roadside received prominent mention in the next issue of the *Springdale Gazette*. As usual, Bill Arnold gave the account of both episodes with many asides and much humor. Mr. Meadows read the paper with amusement and considerable pride. He had been very intrigued when the first account and the advertisement of the Pony Express had appeared. Now his pride in his locally famous son grew even greater. He was well aware how hard Jim had been working and saving and knew without question what the purpose was behind all the industry. With quiet satisfaction he watched his son going out to drive cattle, run errands, or work at the auction.

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Jim's father was also becoming reconciled to Ticktock. As the mustang blossomed under Jim's loving care, the older man could see that he had been rather hasty in his first judgment. Much against his will, he had to admit, at least to himself, that Ticktock was an unusually smart horse. Now that he had put on some flesh he was also a rather smart-appearing pony. In spite of all his observations, Mr. Meadows said nothing. Like most men, he hated to admit that he had been wrong. Also, he was reluctant to abandon a stand that he had definitely taken. He had said that Ticktock must go when fall came, and he hated to eat crow. In his own mind he resolved to say nothing further about the matter but instead just let events take their own natural course.

He knew Jim would never dispose of the pony until he was forced to; so if nothing was said the pony would simply remain by silent agreement. Mr. Meadows knew that he would ease his son's mind a great deal if he could tell the boy about his change of heart, but somehow he never seemed to find the right moment. After all, he decided, the worry was doing Jim no harm but merely making him work harder to earn money for feed. So the days went by and nothing was said on either side about the pony's fate. Jim could sense a little lessening of the hostility on his father's part, but he was still worried. Mr. Meadows seldom changed his mind when he made a decision and thus far Jim did not want to play his trump card about paying for Ticktock's feed. However, it was still summer, and he felt there was plenty of time.

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Jim made himself a lariat and began practicing. It was a slow process but he was determined. After about a week's exercise he was able to whirl an open loop over his head. Then he began lassoing fence posts, tree stumps, and even occasionally his sister Jean. After several trials of the latter, however, he had to abandon Jean as a target. She objected rather loudly to being roped and wouldn't play unless Jim let her take turns at lassoing him. Jean had been rather lonely all summer anyhow, as Jim spent most of his time with Ticktock instead of playing with her as in former years. Jim would give in and let her try roping him, but half a dozen unsuccessful

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attempts would usually end with Jean hitting him in the eye with the rope. Although he was very fond of his young sister, he had a great deal of contempt for women as cowboys.



Ticktock watched all this practice with good-natured scorn. He had seen experts twirling a lariat and had no illusions about Jim's ability. A number of times when Jim would fail miserably in a cast at a fence post, Ticktock would open his jaws and give an unmistakable horse laugh. However, he was an indulgent horse and realized Jim was young. So, when Jim got to the stage of attempting to lasso from horseback, Ticktock patronizingly coöperated.

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A dummy was constructed of bags wrapped around a pole set in a heavy wooden base. This fake man was set up in the drive and Jim would dash past madly, astride Ticktock, whirling his lariat. About one cast in four his noose would encircle the dummy. Then the end of the lariat would be wrapped around the saddle horn and the horse and rider would drag their victim triumphantly down the drive.

Practicing one thing for too long a period grew tiresome, especially when the average of success was as low as it was with Jim's roping endeavors. So he would alternate with teaching Ticktock to jump. First a long two-by-four was laid on two bricks about six inches from the ground. Jim would ride up to the improvised bar at a full gallop, part of the time swerving away or stopping, and other times urging his horse over the bar. Ticktock caught on to the new game in a surprisingly short time. He was prepared to jump or swerve at the slightest sign from his master. The bar kept creeping higher and higher until Jim was certain his mustang could sail over any ordinary fence.

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Jim was feeling particularly jaunty and complacent one morning, for he had made three perfect casts in a row during his roping practice. After the third cast he jumped off his horse, freed the dummy from the noose, and carelessly set the apparatus upright very near a small evergreen tree bordering the drive. Remounting, he went all the way to the front gate for his next approach. He came down the lane at a full gallop swinging an exceptionally large noose. As he tore past the dummy, he swung wildly. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the loop encircle the dummy. Jim wrapped the end of his lariat around the saddle horn and braced himself as if he had just roped a huge steer. It was well he did, for unfortunately the noose caught the evergreen also. There was a terrific tug on the lariat and before the horse and rider could stop, half the branches on the little evergreen had been ripped off and were being dragged down

the lane with the dummy.

Jim stopped the pony and wheeled to gaze in dismay at the havoc he had wrought. It was a sorry-looking tree with the upper half naked and torn. While Jim was considering what to do next, he discovered that he wasn't the only one staring at the tree. His mother was standing on the front porch, hands on hips, looking at the evergreen. Her face boded no good for the cowboy and his horse. Mrs. Meadows was very proud of her lawn and flowers. The trim little evergreen had been one of her pet trees.

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"Young man, what do you think you are doing with that rope of yours?" she demanded sternly.

"Lassoing," said Jim humbly.

"So I see. Well, there will be no more lassoing around here if you have to practice on my trees."

"I didn't mean to," explained Jim. "I was roping the dummy."

"And the tree got in the way," said Mrs. Meadows, nodding her head. "Do you have any idea how much it would cost to replace that tree?"

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"How much?" asked Jim hoping that it would be some such sum as three or four dollars. He would then offer to pay for a new tree and settle the matter. After all, it couldn't be much, as there were evergreens all over the hills.

"About twenty-five dollars; that's a golden cypress."

Jim's heart sank. He couldn't afford such a sum as that, so instead of being able to offer casually to replace the damage he was forced to mumble, "I'm sorry."

"That doesn't replace the tree," said his mother sternly. "From now on there will be no more roping around here. I want you to take a book over to Mrs. Alsop. When you come back you can go down and help your father in the garden. Perhaps if you are kept busy enough you won't be into any mischief."

Feeling very contrite, Jim took the book and went riding off to the Alsop's. He completed his errand and turned back toward home. His spirits began to rise on the way back. His mother didn't harbor a grudge long and luckily his father hadn't witnessed the incident. He would rush down to the garden as soon as he returned and work like mad to correct the bad impression he had made.

Mr. Meadows was busy in the garden picking watermelons. They had an exceptionally large patch that year, and melons were bringing high prices in Springdale. He carefully picked the largest and ripest and stacked them near the fence. He rapidly collected a huge pile, all he could possibly haul to town in one trip of the car. He had just about completed his selection of all the ripe melons when Jim came tearing down the lane.

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Most of the fences were barbed wire around the farm and too dangerous, in Jim's opinion, to jump unless there were some vital reason. However, the garden was bordered by a

relatively low board fence. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to ride Ticktock directly to the garden and thus show how anxious he was to help his father.

Unable to see what was on the other side, Jim came sailing grandly over the fence. It was a beautiful jump with a very inglorious landing. Ticktock came down squarely on the center of the pile of watermelons. Fortunately the mustang recovered his balance and didn't break a leg. As it was, the result was bad enough. Broken watermelons were scattered far and wide, the luscious juice dripping over the ground.

"You wild Indian!" shouted Mr. Meadows. "Look what you've done!"

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Jim could only stare in consternation. There must have been at least a dozen melons broken and no telling how many cracked. Numbed, he got down from his horse.

"Gee, I didn't know they were there, Dad."

"Obviously. You've ruined half my morning's work with that crazy horse of yours," said his father, the old animosity toward the mustang coming back in his anger.

"Ticktock just jumped where I told him to," explained Jim, who was anxious above all else to remove any blame from his horse. "It was my fault."

Ticktock was very calm. He turned around to survey the damage and became interested in the broken melons. He had never looked at a melon closely before and was intrigued. He bent his head down and took a nibble at some of the ripe red pulp. It tasted delicious. Curious as to just how a melon was made, he reached out with a forefoot and pawed one of the remaining unbroken ones. It cracked readily, exposing the red interior. Very pleased with himself, Ticktock took another big nibble.

"Will you look at that!" shouted the now enraged Mr. Meadows. "Not satisfied with breaking half the pile, that fool horse has to crack another melon and eat it."

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Jim hadn't been watching his horse too closely, but now he grabbed Ticktock's reins to prevent further damage.

"I'll pick some more," he offered. "I came down here to help you."

"You're certainly a big help," said his father. "Get that horse out of my sight. I'll do better without you. There's been enough of this irresponsible jumping and chasing around here. You should never have taught him to jump in the first place. How are you going to keep him any place when he can jump fences?"

Sadly Jim led his pony out of the garden gate. It had certainly been a disastrous day. He left the mustang tied to the orchard fence and went into the house.

"Now what's the matter?" asked Mrs. Meadows, looking at her son's face as he entered.

"I jumped over the garden fence and landed on

the watermelons Dad was picking.”

Jim’s mother was still irked about her tree; so she was not too sympathetic.

“You are entirely too wild with that horse of yours,” she said sternly. “It’s time you stopped being so heedless.”

Jim considered this additional rebuke for a while in silence. Everybody was angry with him and no one cared for Ticktock, he decided. They just weren’t wanted any more. The only solution was to go away. He had no idea of running away permanently, but he felt he had to get away from his troubles.

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“Can I have some sandwiches?” he asked. “I want to make a trip and get away from it all.”

“I guess so,” said Mrs. Meadows, trying not to smile at her son’s doleful countenance. “When do you expect to come back from this trip?”

“What do you have for supper?”

“Steak for one thing and apple pie for another.”

“I guess my nerves will be steady enough by supertime,” said Jim judiciously.

After he packed his lunch in his saddlebags, Jim rode off down the road. He decided to carry out his long delayed project of exploring Briggs Woods. He had been so busy recently that he had forgotten his resolve.

The quiet gloom of the woods just fitted Jim’s mood of black despondency. After he reached the center of the forested area, he turned up one of the little trails that led invitingly into the tangled depths. He followed the first one for some distance. It was slow going, winding in and out between the trees, trying to keep branches from slapping him in the face. Finally the path just faded and disappeared, leaving him nowhere. The second and third attempts were equally unsuccessful. Feeling that the job of exploring was vastly overrated, Jim decided to abandon the false trails. He struck off through the woods, following roughly the course of a stream. He had no fears about returning, putting complete trust in Ticktock’s ability to find the way home.

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Deep in the woods he turned from the main stream and followed a tiny brook up an incline. Suddenly, to his delight, he came out in a small natural clearing. There was bright sunshine on the deep grass, while the little stream trickled away merrily at one end of the clearing. The open area which was almost flat was several acres in extent. Tall trees grew on every side, giving perfect seclusion.

“What a swell hideaway,” Jim said to his horse excitedly. “There’s plenty of pasture and water for you and no one could ever find us.”

He began to make plans immediately for his secret camp. He would bring over his roping dummy and his jumping bar. At one end of the clearing he could build a brush hut. As he planned, his ideas grew larger. He would make a big brush hut, big enough for Ticktock. In front of it he would build a fireplace where he could cook. Then, if no one at home wanted him and

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Ticktock, they would come here to live. He could cut some of the hay for the winter. Perhaps he would also buy some grain and store it. As for himself, he would trap and hunt for food. Now and then he would mysteriously appear in town with valuable furs to sell. He would buy candy and cakes and other delicacies and then disappear as mysteriously. People would wonder where he lived and perhaps try to follow him, but if anyone came too near the hide-out he would think up some plan to scare them. Soon they would say the woods were haunted.

Jim ate his lunch full of all these plans, while Ticktock unconcernedly cropped the grass. As the afternoon wore on, Jim decided to wait at least another day before he became a lonely woodsman. He would eat one more supper at home since there was apple pie. He rode home and went in to supper with an air of secrecy.

There was no crisis at home that evening; so Jim further delayed his plan of moving. However, the following day he did take his jumping bar and his roping dummy to the new hide-out. He also took a hatchet and spent the better part of several days building a brush hut which looked very impressive, even though the brush roof did leak. In front of it he built his fireplace. He thought about buying some weiners in town and holding a weiner roast, but somehow the idea didn't seem too much fun alone.

Ticktock and he seemed to be partially forgiven at home; so Jim stayed on. There was no use becoming an exile if you didn't have to, he concluded sensibly. Still, it seemed a pity to waste such a perfect hideaway. He used it for roping practice and for jumping, but it seemed there should be something more dramatic that he could do.

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It was hard to keep the secret of the hide-out to himself; so Jim began to hint darkly to Jean about his lonely spot. At first that young lady begged to be let in on the secret. She wanted to accompany him to his hidden headquarters and teased and begged for several days. That suited Jim exactly, and he went about acting mysterious and important. However, Jean was not quite so guileless as her brother thought. Although she was only ten, she knew a little about handling men, her brother in particular. She dropped her attitude of pleading and began to scoff openly.

"You are just making up the whole thing," she said derisively. "You haven't got a secret hangout any more than I have."

Several days of complete indifference had its effect on Jim. He felt he had to prove his story. He felt a bit guilty about neglecting Jean all summer anyhow; so he planned a grand picnic. Riding to town, he bought some weiners, marshmallows and cookies. The rest of his supplies he secured at home and got permission from his parents for the excursion.

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With Jean mounted behind him, he rode to Briggs Woods. He felt that revealing the general area of his hangout was not giving away too much of his secret. Once in the woods, however, he insisted on blindfolding his sister, extracting a solemn promise not to peek. She submitted to having a large red bandanna tied over her eyes,

even enjoying the mystery. Jim then made his way to the hide-out, making several unnecessary circles to confuse his companion. When they arrived in the middle of the clearing he whisked off the bandage.

Jean looked around at the little clearing expectantly. There was nothing very exciting.

"Why it's nothing but a big open space!" she exclaimed.

"But look what nice pasture there is for Ticktock, with water and everything," explained Jim, a trifle annoyed at the poor impression his headquarters made.

"Well, that's nice enough," admitted Jean who wasn't much interested in such details. She wanted something smaller and much more secret.

"There's my hut and fireplace," said Jim pointing.

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"I like that," said his sister finally, feeling she had to say something complimentary since her brother had gone to such trouble to bring her on the picnic.

They played for a time and then gathered dry wood for a fire. After they had roasted the weiners and marshmallows, and stuffed themselves with cookies, Jim stretched out lazily on the grass. This was the life. He began to daydream that he was a cowboy who was hiding his sister from dangerous kidnappers.

Jean, although she had enjoyed the day immensely, felt that there was still something being kept from her. In her mind a hide-out couldn't be two acres of open pasture, even though it was concealed in the middle of a wood. She suspected there was more to the place than Jim had shown her.

"I think I'll walk around a little," she said casually.

"O.K., but don't go outside of shouting distance," warned her brother in a superior tone. "It's awful easy to get lost unless you know the woods like Ticktock and I do."

One side of the clearing was bounded by a rocky hill which sloped up abruptly. Jean chose this side to explore. She started climbing upward through the rocks. After approximately half an hour went by, Jim decided it was time that he had some word from his sister. He was about to shout when he heard her calling him.

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"Jim, guess where I am," she shouted

"I don't know; where are you?"

"I'm in your hide-out, smarty!"

Completely puzzled Jim started toward the hillside. He looked up at the steep rocky slope in bewilderment.

"I can't see you," he said finally.

"Here I am," came her voice from almost over his head.

Jim looked up as his sister appeared from behind a short stunted tree about fifteen feet up the face of what was almost a cliff.

"It's really a wonderful cave," said Jean.

"Huh?" exclaimed Jim in complete astonishment.

"Don't look so surprised because I found it. I knew there was more to your hideaway than just a big field."

Jim found a narrow ledge that made an easy path up to the tree. When he pulled the stumpy pine tree to one side there was the narrow entrance to the cave. It was a dark opening about two feet wide and four feet high.

"As long as you found it you might as well see the inside," said Jim, trying to talk casually. "I'll run down and get the flash light."

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He didn't quite keep the excitement out of his voice, and Jean looked after him with growing suspicion. When he returned they made their way inside excitedly.

"How big is it?" asked Jean as she followed her brother through the opening.

"Why—uh—just medium," answered Jim, trying to flash his light around quickly in order to answer the question correctly.

There was only one room to the cave, but it was spacious and dry. The ceiling arched above their heads at least twelve feet. Along one of the stone walls there was a natural ledge at just the right height for a bed or a seat.

"This will make a swell place," said Jim incautiously.

"I don't think you have ever been in here before," accused Jean. "Have you?"

"Well, not exactly," hedged Jim not wanting to tell an outright lie.

"Is there another cave?" asked Jean.

"Not that I know of. All there was to my hide-out I showed you. The trick is in finding your way here. You don't seem to realize how important a pasture is to a secret headquarters. A cowboy has to have some place for his horse to graze. What good would a cave do? You couldn't keep a horse in a cave."

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"I'd rather play pirate or robbers," decided Jean. "Then a cave would be perfect. You wouldn't need a pasture or a horse either."

As they resaddled Ticktock and prepared to leave, Jean continued her argument.

"I think the hide-out should be half mine since I discovered the cave," she maintained.

Jim pondered the question thoroughly. Jean's demands did seem fair, for the cave certainly added tremendously to the hide-out. Still, if the emergency arose and he had to return to his original plan of disappearing with Ticktock, he didn't want Jean to know his whereabouts. A woman could never keep a secret, and she would certainly tell her parents. No, unfair as it

seemed, he would have to keep his headquarters to himself.

Protesting bitterly, Jean was blindfolded. "It isn't fair," she stormed.

Jim was firm, however, so they rode off toward home. Since Jean felt her brother was being very unjust, she decided she no longer had to keep her promise not to peek. While Jim was busy keeping the branches from hitting them in the face, she took cautious peeps from beneath the handkerchief.

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Chapter Nine ***The Lost Horse***

Business took a midsummer slump, and Jim found time hanging heavy on his hands. There were few calls for his services from the general public, and even Colonel Flesher had no cattle to be driven to market. Jim tried to persuade the stock buyer that it would be cheaper to drive hogs to town than to truck them. While the colonel had much confidence in his young assistant, he wisely concluded that driving hogs was beyond even Jim and Ticktock.

Jim still went to town almost daily, partly to exercise his mustang and partly because he liked to hang around the newspaper office. He helped wherever possible, but probably hindered more than he helped, as he had so many questions. The linotype machine fascinated him, and he begged Bill Arnold to let him learn how to operate it.

"If I do," said the editor jokingly, "the first thing I know you'll have that horse in here helping you. I'm afraid his feet would be too heavy for the keys."

"I need something to do," urged Jim. "There's a fierce depression in my line of business."

"Your overhead is low though," pointed out Arnold. "That cayuse of yours is getting his feed from my back yard."

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"Operating expenses may be low right now, but there is a long winter ahead," said Jim with a worried frown. His cash was accumulating too slowly to suit him.

One day Arnold came out of his office waving a slip of paper. "Here's a fine opportunity for you and that wonderful horse to show your stuff."

"A big job?" asked Jim excitedly.

"Do you happen to know Mr. Hernstadt?" asked the editor.

"I know where his farm is," said Jim. "He has all those big fat work horses." Any horse that didn't resemble Ticktock in size and build was an object of contempt to Jim.

"Well, those big fat horses are very valuable Percherons. Hernstadt is one of the finest

breeders in the Middle West. Anyhow, his prize mare got out of the pasture somehow and is lost."

"Work horses must be dumb," said Jim with conviction. "You could never lose Ticktock."

"Young man, will you quit bragging about that mustang long enough to listen to what I am telling you?"

"I'm sorry," said Jim, who really wasn't at all.

"This mare strayed away two days ago, and Hernstadt has looked all over for her. Now he is advertising, offering a reward of twenty-five dollars for her return."

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"Twenty-five dollars!" exclaimed Jim. "How I'd like to find that horse!"

"This is scarcely ethical," said Arnold. "The paper isn't delivered until tomorrow; so I'm giving you a twenty-four-hour advantage over my other subscribers."

"I wouldn't give you away for anything. When I find the horse, I'll wait until the paper is out before I take it back to Mr. Hernstadt."

"Rather confident, aren't you?" asked Arnold laughing.

"Well, it couldn't very well be stolen; a big horse like that would be too easy to trace. She's just strayed, and Ticktock and I will find her." Jim got up decisively. "If I can take a look at your big map, I'll be on my way to locate that dumb horse that got lost."

After carefully studying the map, Jim drew a little sketch. He put Mr. Hernstadt's farm in the middle and then drew in all the roads in the surrounding territory. He mounted Ticktock and galloped importantly out of town. It was only midmorning, and he explored the country roads and lanes for several hours before hunger drove him home.

"I have to be gone all afternoon on a very important mission," he announced as he was eating lunch.

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Mr. and Mrs. Meadows just smiled and asked no questions. They were used to Jim's acting mysterious and important. Jean, however, followed him out into the yard. Her curiosity was definitely aroused.

"Where are you going?" she teased. "I won't tell on you."

"I gave a cowboy's word not to tell," said Jim saddling Ticktock.

"Well, I think you're mean," said Jean. "You aren't good to me at all any more."

Jim considered this a moment as he cinched up the saddle. He still felt a little guilty about the matter of the hideaway. After all, Jean wouldn't be going anywhere to tell anyone. The secret would be safe.

"There's a big reward going to be offered tomorrow for a lost horse," he said finally. "I'm going to find him before anyone knows about the

reward.”

“What kind of a horse?”

“A prize Percheron mare of Mr. Hernstadt’s.”

“If you find her, how are you going to catch her?” asked Jean, who was a practical young lady.

“Why, Ticktock could catch any slow old Percheron,” said Jim scornfully. Actually he hadn’t thought about what he would do after locating the missing horse.

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“I don’t mean catch up *with* her. How are you going to put a halter on her if she’s the kind of horse that runs away?”

“Well,” drawled Jim, who had just had an idea. “I’ve been doing a lot of practicing with my lariat. I think I could lasso a slow-moving horse.”

While his admiring and envious sister gazed after him, Jim rode away. All afternoon he jogged back and forth, up and down the hills, carefully covering the territory of his map. The sun was hot and the country roads were dusty.

What had begun as an adventurous hunt, turned out to be a tedious job. At sundown he turned toward home. He was very tired and so was Ticktock. Most of the roads were now crossed off the map. Only a few were left unexplored.

That night Jim lay in bed considering the problem. The mail would be delivered at about eleven the next morning and then everyone would be on the lookout for the missing mare. He would have to work fast.

At breakfast the next morning Jim asked to be excused from the remaining chores.

“What is this mysterious mission?” asked Mr. Meadows good-naturedly.

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“Jean can tell you,” said Jim who was deep in thought as to the possible whereabouts of the stray. They would know as soon as the paper arrived anyhow.

“Mr. Hernstadt lost one of his Percherons. There is going to be a reward in the morning paper and Jim is going to find her before anyone else knows about it,” said Jean importantly. It never occurred to her to doubt her brother’s abilities or success. After all, he had said he would find the horse so find the horse he would.

“Oh, he is, is he?” asked Mr. Meadows. “How?”

“He has a map,” said Jean who considered that a final answer. “After he finds her he is going to catch her with Ticktock and then rope her. All he has to do then is collect the reward.”

“I hope it’s as simple as it sounds,” said Mr. Meadows. “Anyhow, I think I can do the rest of the chores myself while you’re off performing this little task.”

Jim also hoped it was as simple as it sounded. As he rode off he wished he hadn’t spoken so confidently either to the editor or to Jean. He was on the spot now. He had to find the horse. He urged Ticktock to a faster pace.

Noon found the boy and his horse covered with a blanket of dust and discouragement. The allotted territory was exhausted and there was still no horse. Of course, the Percheron could have strayed farther than Jim had expected. He considered enlarging his area. That idea didn't seem too promising, as by now everyone in the countryside would know about the reward. Feeling rather low in spirits and very hot, he turned toward Briggs Woods. He had already explored the road through the woods and all the open trails, but at least it was cool there and Ticktock could have a drink of water.

Once in the cool cover of the forest, Jim turned toward his hideaway. He would take a rest there and eat his lunch. He was picking his way moodily through the trees when Ticktock suddenly decided to go off toward the left. Somewhat annoyed, Jim pulled the mustang back in the direction of the hideout. A few minutes later the pony again veered off to the left. This time he put his nose in the air and neighed.

"What is it, boy?" asked Jim.

Ticktock stood still and neighed a second time. This time there was an answer from the depths of the woods. Excitedly Jim urged the pony forward, giving him his head. Ticktock threaded his way through the trees confidently. After a short distance Jim suddenly saw through the woods the figure of a big gray horse.

"Hurrah! Ticktock, you found her!" he shouted.

He uncoiled his lasso as he approached. He was going to make good his boasts after all. Triumphantly he started to swing his rope. He made two circles around his head and the rope caught on the limb of a tree and fell in a tangle about his shoulders. He straightened out the lariat and tried again. This time the noose caught on a limb and refused to come loose. Feeling very uncowboylike, Jim dismounted, climbed the tree, and freed his lasso.

Half an hour later Jim was still trying. Either the rope would catch on a branch or the horse would move away just as he cast. He couldn't use a very large noose due to the crowding branches, and somehow a limb always protected the mare's head or she moved just in time to make the small noose whiz by harmlessly. Being hit on the head a number of times by a rope wasn't making the Percheron any more approachable either. She was definitely getting tired of the game and fast becoming skittish.

Ticktock watched his master's endeavors patiently for a long time. He was used to Jim's games and at first thought this was another form of roping practice. Gradually, however, he began to realize that Jim was really trying to rope the mare for some purpose. He could sense the disappointment after each unsuccessful try. Also, Ticktock was getting tired of going through trees after the mare. He had been going steadily all morning and felt like stopping. So he decided to end all this nonsense. While Jim was resting after a particularly strenuous cast, Ticktock took charge. He gave a soft neigh and then waited. The mare neighed back.

Ticktock turned his head around and gave a long

look at his rider. There was no mistaking his meaning. "You've had your chance, now let me try," he seemed to say. Very slowly and patiently he made his way toward the mare. Jim sat quietly in the saddle. Finally Ticktock stopped and stood waiting. After a few more exchanges of nickers, the mare walked over to the mustang and the two horses began to rub noses. Gradually Ticktock edged around until they were side by side. Jim reached over and slipped one end of his rope around the mare's neck. The chase was ended.

He led the mare back to the hideaway and tied her to a tree. He took off Ticktock's saddle and the pony rolled gratefully in the tall grass. Jim sat down to eat his lunch, feeling very satisfied and happy. Ticktock was certainly a smart horse; he knew how to do everything. Now they could go back home in triumph. That seemed even more important than the reward. There was no question about it; his horse had saved the day.



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As he thought about how creditable Ticktock's part had been, Jim began to grow dissatisfied with his own performance. He had fallen down on the roping. He couldn't very well go back and tell how he had finally caught the horse. There wasn't anything very dashing about that. Something had to be done.

He got up, saddled Ticktock, and led the mare out to the middle of the clearing. Very gently he undid the rope from her neck, talking soothingly all the time. While the mare contentedly cropped the grass, Jim backed Ticktock away a few feet. He swung his lariat quietly and slowly. He leaned forward and when the mare looked up he cast. The noose dropped squarely over her head.

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With a sigh of relief, Jim rode up to the mare. He tied a knot so the noose would not choke the Percheron and then rode off through the trees, leading his valuable captive.

Home was only slightly out of his way to the Hernstadt farm and Jim could not resist the temptation to display the mare. Trying to appear very casual and unexcited, he rode up the lane. His father had just come in from the field when he arrived; so the entire family came out to meet him. It was a very satisfactory entrance.

"Where did you find her?" asked Mr. Meadows who was plainly amazed.

"Over in Briggs Woods. Ticktock found her and I roped her," said Jim very calmly, but with a twinge of conscience.

"You and that horse continually dumfound me," said Mr. Meadows.

Jim went inside and telephoned Mr. Hernstadt that his missing horse had been found. The pleased owner offered to come over after the mare but Jim insisted on delivering her. Before he left he called the editor.

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"You can take that ad out of the paper," he told Arnold with a pardonable amount of pride in his voice. "I am on my way to take the mare home right now."

Arnold insisted on knowing a few details which Jim gave him with pretended reluctance. After all, as Mr. Morgan had said, what a business needs is publicity. Besides it would look nice in the paper about his roping the runaway horse. That would really make the other boys' eyes bug out.

When Jim delivered the horse that afternoon, Mr. Hernstadt handed him twenty-five dollars gladly. He listened to the account of how the horse had been found.

"The man that helped me take care of the horses left a few months ago to run a farm of his own," the horse breeder explained. "I've been so busy that I didn't notice the fence needed repairing in one corner. That's how she got out. Now that you have found the horse you don't suppose you could find me a good man to help take care of her and the other horses?"

"Well," said Jim considering the matter seriously, "the Pony Express does all sorts of things. I'll see what I can do."

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Chapter Ten

Ticktock Disappears

With the twenty-five dollars reward money added to his previous earnings, Jim now had over fifty dollars. Fifty dollars was more money than he had ever seen before and seemed like the largest sum in the world. It must be adequate, he felt, to cover the cost of Ticktock's feed for the winter. Mr. Meadows had not brought up the subject, and Jim was content to keep the unannounced truce. His father seemed to be over his anger about the watermelons. Jim reasoned that if the matter of Ticktock's board was never mentioned, he would be foolish to call attention to it. It was simple arithmetic—he would be fifty dollars wealthier if he let sleeping dogs lie. If Mr. Meadows did raise the question, Jim was prepared. If necessary, he figured he could even pay for Ticktock's keep elsewhere, although it would have broken his heart to have the mustang where he could not be seen and ridden daily. Still, such a course would be better than having to give up the pony in the fall as his father had threatened.

All over fifty dollars Jim felt he was free to spend. As he earned money from odd jobs, he began using it to stock his hideaway. He bought cans of pork and beans, sausages, corned beef, vegetables, fruits, soups, condensed milk, and even one can of Boston brown bread. Anything that came in cans or packages that seemed safe from spoilage was carefully stowed away in the cave. He was frugal about the process, preferring to take quietly those items that were in plentiful supply at home rather than spend his hard-earned money.

For quite a while now, Jim had been allowed to take food from the pantry for his picnics and all-day trips without asking for specific permission, provided there was plenty on hand of what he needed. In case of doubt, it was understood that he ask his mother. It was the same with anything that his mother had piled on the left-hand side of the attic. Both he and Jean could take anything they wished from the accumulation there.

Now, therefore, to the supplies which he bought with his own money, he added from the family cupboard sugar, coffee, tea, salt, pepper and a small quantity of flour. These he put carefully in jars that he picked up. In the same manner he slowly accumulated a set of battered pots and pans, two plates, and a few odd knives and forks, as well as an old blanket and a torn quilt from the attic.

The only difference between what he did this time and what he had done before was that he didn't say a word to his mother about it all. Since always before he had talked over his plans with her, he now had a guilty feeling.

"I'll keep a list of everything," he said to himself, "and show it to Mother later on."

It was so much more exciting to act mysteriously and in secret. It made the cave a real hide-out, something that belonged to him alone.

The quilt and blanket were the last items he needed to complete his preparations. Since he couldn't very well ride out of the yard with them without causing questions, he slipped out one evening and hid them a respectable distance down the road. The next morning when he had finished his work, he saddled Ticktock and rode off to recover them. As he stopped to pick up his bedding, he was congratulating himself on how secretly he had managed everything. He looked under the little bush where he had left them the previous evening but the quilt and blanket were gone. With a puzzled frown on his tanned face, he tried to figure out the mystery. There was little traffic on the road past the farm and no reason why anyone would be prompted to stop at this spot and discover his bedding. Very annoyed, he looked up and down the road to see if there was any other bush he could possibly have confused with this one.

"Looking for your blankets?" asked a teasing voice.

Jim looked up, and there was his sister Jean sitting on the opposite side of the road. She held his missing loot in her arms.

"What are you doing here?" Jim demanded, very crestfallen at being caught.

"What are you doing with these?" asked Jean promptly.

"Oh, I was just going to use them somewhere!" said Jim in confusion. He tried to think fast. "I thought I might go fishing and want a soft place to lean back on while I fished."

"Funny you'd go to all this trouble just to take some blankets with you fishing," observed Jean with mockery in her voice. "You forgot your fish pole too."

"Well, it's none of your business," replied Jim lamely.

"Yes, it is," said Jean. "You were taking them to the hideaway and the hideaway is part mine."

"Don't be silly. Whatever gave you the idea I was taking them there?"

"Oh, I've been watching things," said Jean calmly. "Let's see, you've got sugar, coffee, plates, cups and two jars of peaches. Of course, I don't know what you might have bought in town. Where else would you take all that stuff except to the cave?"

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"Well, all right, the stuff was for the cave. Now what good does it do you to know?"

"None, unless I know where the cave is. But you're going to show me now."

"Like fun I am."

"Either you spill the beans or I'll squeal." Jean had read enough comic strips that she could talk like a thug, and this was an occasion when she felt she had to act tough.

"You promised not to tell when I took you to the hideaway," objected Jim.

"Yes, but I didn't promise not to tell about all this stuff you've been stealing."

"It isn't really stealing," protested Jim.

"It looks like stealing to me," said Jean with infuriating calmness. "You took a bunch of junk but you didn't ask."

Jim felt trapped. He still didn't consider his recent activities thievery, but that wasn't the important part. If Jean talked, his parents would ask embarrassing questions about what he had done with the articles. They would know he had a secret headquarters, which spoiled half the mystery. It was better that Jean knew, than everyone. Thus far she had kept very quiet about what she already knew.

"Tell you what I'll do. I'll take you there on your birthday," he offered finally.

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Jean considered thoughtfully. "That's three weeks away."

"Yes, but I'm awful busy now. Besides, wouldn't it be a nice birthday present—making you a full partner in the hideaway. I've got a lot of things there I bought at the grocery store and you can have half of them." Jim hoped she would forget about the matter in three weeks. He didn't expect it, but it was a possibility.

"All right, on my birthday."

"O.K. Give me the blankets and remember, don't tell anyone."

"Oh, I won't, now that everything is going to be half mine!" said Jean with decision. "What are you going to do with all the stuff anyway?"

That question rather stumped Jim. He hadn't gone into the reason behind all his activity in stocking the cave. He had long ago forgotten his idea of going there to live the life of a hermit. In the thrill of secretly gathering a hoard of food and utensils he hadn't given much thought as to the purpose of it all.

"Well, I hadn't thought about that too much," he admitted frankly. "It's just fun to have the stuff in the cave. I can pretend I'm an outlaw hiding out. Maybe Mother will let me camp out all night sometime."

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"Well, we could pretend we were shipwrecked on an island or that we were in a war and surrounded by enemies, and lots of things," suggested Jean.

"Good ideas," said Jim. "Well, I better be going. I'll take you there on your birthday." He rode off feeling that Jean might not be such a bad partner to share his hide-out. She was resourceful and she had imagination. Also, there was still three weeks in which he could enjoy the secret in solitary splendor.

Jean watched her brother disappear down the road. She had earned a victory, but three weeks was a long time. She walked back to the house with a very thoughtful look on her determined young face. She had been doing much thinking and observing, and she wasn't going to stop and wait calmly for her birthday.

Jim delivered his blankets to the cave. After gloating over his very respectable pile of provisions, he made himself a pot of coffee. It was a lot of trouble, and he didn't care too much for coffee, particularly with a lot of grounds, as his somehow always managed to have. Still it was fun. He washed the pot in the stream, scouring it carefully with sand before replacing it in the cave.

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On his way back home he made a detour to go by the railroad tracks. It was about time for the morning freight to pass by, and he enjoyed watching the long train labor slowly up a hill which was about a mile from the farm. Arriving at a good point of vantage near a stream at the foot of the hill, he dismounted to sit by the roadside. Ticktock grazed contentedly while Jim chewed on a long stem of grass.

In a few minutes the train came whistling around the bend at full speed, trying for a head start up the hill. Jim counted the cars as they appeared, his largest total was fifty-seven and he had hoped this freight would break the record, for the engine slowed and began laboring the moment it hit the upgrade. As the sixteenth car appeared around the curve, he forgot about counting. A figure was running along the top of the boxcars toward the engine, looking frantically over his shoulder every few minutes. About ten cars later Jim saw the cause of the

excitement. A second man was pursuing the first, but the latter did not seem particularly worried.

"Railroad cop," thought Jim. "He's trying to catch that hobo."

The first man apparently realized that he didn't have too far to run before he reached the engine. He stopped in his flight and began clambering down the side of one of the freight cars. The train had slowed considerably now that it was part way up the hill. The man looked down at the ground and then up at the car tops where his pursuer was hidden from view. Then he jumped. The leap occurred almost at the point where the tracks crossed the trestle over the stream. Jim could not tell if the man landed on the ground or in the water. In either case, he must be badly shaken up, for although the train had lost much of its speed it was still traveling at a respectable rate.

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It was several hundred yards to the trestle, so, deciding that it would be quicker to ride than to walk, Jim dashed for his horse. Unfortunately, Ticktock had strayed up the road looking for choice bunches of clover. By the time Jim had run to his horse, mounted, and then ridden over to the trestle, several minutes had elapsed. Pulling Ticktock to a dust-raising stop that would have done credit to a Western movie, Jim slid to the ground. There was no mangled corpse in sight. He rushed to the edge of the bank bordering the stream and peered down. Still there was nothing to be seen. As there were a number of bushes, weeds and stunted trees on the steep banks, whoever had jumped might be lying unconscious behind some clump. There was nothing to do but make a search.

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Jim climbed up and down the sloping sides of the stream covering the area where anyone might possibly have fallen. When his efforts turned out to be fruitless, he decided there could be only one other solution. If the man had landed in the stream, there was sufficient water to carry him along to the shallows on the other side of the bridge. Although the water was only a few feet deep, an injured or unconscious man could drown. Working his way downstream under the bridge, Jim reached the shallows about a hundred yards on the other side of the tracks without finding any body. Puzzled, he decided to give up the search. Perhaps he had just imagined someone had jumped. As he was slowly making his way back, he heard the sound of rapid hoofbeats. Panic-stricken, he rushed as fast as he could along the slanting banks. He clambered to the top and looked around for

Ticktock. The mustang was gone.

He looked up the road and there disappearing in the distance was his beloved horse. Hunched over the pony's back, urging him to greater speed, was the figure of a man.

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"Come back, you dirty horse thief!" screamed Jim at the top of his lungs, with rage and panic in his voice.

He continued to shout uselessly as the figure of the horse and rider grew smaller in the distance. Finally a curve in the road hid them from view. Heartbroken, Jim sat down by the side of the road. He buried his face in his hands and his body shook with sobs. It was a disaster much worse than any he could possibly have imagined. His beloved mustang had been stolen. He sat by the roadside for a long time before he looked up. The cheery sunshine of a few minutes earlier had suddenly become hard and bitter. The bright world had turned ugly, drab and cruel.

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Finally he got to his feet and started plodding dejectedly down the road. It was a long desolate walk. Each step seemed to take him farther from Ticktock. His parents saw him when he finally came forlornly up the lane. With his slow pace and sorrowful face, he was a heartbreaking sight.

"What's the matter, Jimmy?" asked his mother, running to meet him.

"Someone stole Ticktock," he said with a quavering voice.

"Stole Ticktock?" asked Mr. Meadows incredulously. "How did it happen?"

"I saw a man jump off a freight," said Jim slowly. "I thought maybe he was hurt. While I was hunting for him, he stole Ticktock. He must have been hiding behind some bush."

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"Why the dirty rat," said Mr. Meadows, his rage mounting as he listened to the details. While he had threatened to get rid of the horse a few months earlier, now the idea that anyone would steal his son's mustang made him furious. "I'm going in to call the sheriff. That horse is so well known the thief won't be able to get far. We'll get Ticktock back, Jim."

Two days went by, and they didn't get Ticktock back.

The sheriff passed the alarm to surrounding towns, while the Springdale *Gazette* carried big headlines warning everyone to be on the lookout. It forgot its usual joking tone about Jim and his horse and seriously asked everyone to cooperate in the search. Bill Arnold even had a front-page editorial on the subject.

Jim sat at the telephone waiting for news, but there was no joyous message. He was grief-stricken and refused to be consoled.

"Don't feel so bad," said Mrs. Meadows comfortingly. "You have money enough to buy another horse."

"I don't want another horse. I want Ticktock," said Jim.

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While he was deep in misery, Jim did not lose hope. Somehow he felt that Ticktock would escape from the thief and return. He was confident that no matter how far the mustang might be ridden he would discover the way back home. The third day following the theft was Saturday. The family tried to persuade Jim to go to town to take his mind off his loss, but he was firm in insisting on staying home. A message was sent to Colonel Flesher that he would not be in for work for the sale. Ticktock might possibly return, Jim felt, and he wanted to be home to greet him.

Jim sat sadly on the front porch after the family left for town, looking up and down the road hoping to see the mustang. Three days was a long time. A man could ride a horse a great distance in that length of time. Still Jim kept gazing at the road hopefully. Suddenly he jumped up and rubbed his eyes. He had been searching so long that he thought he was now dreaming. He looked again and still saw the same wonderful sight. Ticktock was jogging contentedly down the road toward home.

Jim ran to the gate to meet his horse. He threw his arms around the pony's neck and hugged him through sheer joy.

"You came back, boy, you came back!" he cried happily.

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Ticktock closed one eye and winked. He wasn't a demonstrative horse.

As Jim started to lead his prodigal pony into the yard, he noticed for the first time that Ticktock wore no bridle.

"So you had to slip your bridle to get away," he said. "Well, you did a good job. We'll get another old bridle. I'll bet you're tired and hungry. You must have come a long way; so I'll take the saddle off and let you rest."

When the saddle was removed, there was very little perspiration beneath the blanket. The hair was scarcely ruffled. Jim stood back and looked at Ticktock in puzzlement.

"You don't look as if you had come so far," he observed. "In fact, you look as if you had just been groomed."

He opened one of the saddlebags. He usually carried a curry comb and brush with him so that he could use them in odd moments. The implements were still there, but it was hard to tell if they had been used. Whatever the thief had used, Ticktock had obviously been groomed only a short time before. The pony didn't look tired either, but acted quite fresh and frisky.

Noticing that the other saddlebag bulged suspiciously, Jim opened it. There, folded neatly, was the missing bridle.

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"Now why would anyone fold up a bridle and put it in the saddlebag?" asked Jim.

Ticktock didn't answer but just nuzzled his master contentedly.

"If someone wasn't going to ride you for a while," said Jim musingly to his pony, "he would take off your saddle as well as your bridle. If he

was going to ride you in a few minutes, he either wouldn't take off the bridle at all or at most hang it on a tree limb or the saddle horn. But that bridle was carefully put away in the saddlebag. There's something fishy here. I don't believe that thief is so far from here."

The more Jim thought about the matter, the more puzzled he became. But no matter what the solution, he was very angry with whoever had stolen his horse. According to all the books he had read and movies he had seen, a horse thief was considered three degrees lower than a murderer. Jim agreed with the Western idea. Turning over such thoughts in his mind, he finally came to a decision. He saddled Ticktock, put on the bridle and then went into the house. He opened the closet to his father's room and carefully got out a twenty-two rifle. He had been forbidden to touch his father's firearms, but he felt this case was different. There was a heavy deer gun in the closet too, but that looked too forbidding. He found five twenty-two long shells in his father's bureau, which he carefully stuck in his pocket. It was a single shot rifle, and he knew how to load it.

Going back downstairs, he found a pencil and paper and wrote a short note that he left lying on the kitchen table.

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Dear Dad and Mom:

Ticktock came back and is all right. I have gone to look for that low-down horse thief. If I catch him alive, I hope they hang him.

Jim

Very grim-faced, Jim mounted and rode off in the direction from which Ticktock had come. He had no idea where he was going to hunt for the thief, but to hunt anywhere was a form of action. He jogged along, so overjoyed to be back on his horse once more that he paid little attention to where the pony was heading. Suddenly he realized that he was entering Briggs Wood. At the proper point Ticktock turned off the road toward the hideaway.

"Well, we might as well go there as anywhere else," said Jim cheerfully. He really didn't have much hope of locating the thief anyhow.

At the clearing, Jim dismounted to stretch his legs. He sat down contentedly on a big rock by his fireplace.

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"Well, here we are, back together again at the old hangout, Ticktock," he observed happily to the pony.

He tossed a rock into the ashes of the fireplace. Nothing could keep him and his mustang down. Then he noticed that the disturbed ashes were smoking slightly. Alarmed, he poked in the fireplace with a stick. There was no doubt that a fire had been built there recently. Clutching his gun, he looked around at the trees.

"Someone has been here in our hide-out," he confided softly to Ticktock.

The pony was not grazing as usual but looking around inquiringly. Frowning fiercely, Jim tried

to feel as brave as he looked. Cautiously he peered inside the brush hut. It was empty; so he began to make a slow circuit of the clearing, staying well back in the trees. He was approaching the lower end near the stream, trying to move silently over the rocky ground when he stumbled over something projecting from a low bush. He spun around with his rifle ready, completely forgetting that he had never loaded the gun. There was a stir in the bush and then a man's face peered out. Two sleep-clouded eyes looked at Jim and his rifle. The eyes opened wide and lost their sleepiness.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot! I give up," said a frightened voice.

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Chapter Eleven

The Conspirators

It was difficult to say which of the two was the more frightened, the man in the bushes or Jim. The only difference was that Jim held a rifle. He didn't know quite what to do with it as all his training had been to the effect that he should never point the muzzle of a gun at anyone. So he waved the gun around uncertainly, first pointing it at the man and then away. The erratic maneuvers of the gun muzzle served to terrify the stranger even more.

"Don't shoot!" he repeated, his frightened eyes going back and forth as they followed the end of the waving gun barrel with a horrified fascination.

The man presented a very odd sight. He was short, but with abnormally broad shoulders and powerful arms. His heavily muscled body was stripped to the waist, and he wore nothing but a pair of faded khaki trousers. This garment was crumpled and dirty with several jagged tears in the legs. He was both barefooted and bareheaded. His brown weathered face and arms had numerous partially healed scratches and cuts. At first Jim received an impression of villainous ferocity caused by the man's mangled face. Then as he calmed down he saw the stranger had an ugly but rather pleasant countenance. Also, that powerful chest looked rather gaunt, for the ribs were beginning to show. Jim looked at his captive in uncertainty, unable to decide whether to feel angry, terrified, or sorry for the man.

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"Did you steal my horse?" he asked finally, when he found his voice. He tried to sound stern, but his voice insisted on quavering.

"No, sir!" denied the stranger, who was more frightened because Jim was obviously excited than he would have been had the boy been calm and steady. "I borrowed a horse a couple of days ago but I took good care of him and turned him loose so he could go home."

Jim thought this over for a minute. The evidence of the bridle and Ticktock's recent grooming pointed to the truth of the statement.

"Why'd you borrow him?" he asked. "I went down to the railroad tracks to see if you were hurt, and you ran off with my horse."

"I was scared," said the man frankly. "I didn't see you were a boy. A railroad cop had just chased me off that freight. I thought maybe they had rangers in this state like they have in Texas and one was after me for bumming a ride. I just lost my head and ran."

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"How did you get here?" Jim was very annoyed at anyone's finding his hideaway.

"After I got on the horse I just rode away as fast as I could. When I came to this woods I slowed down and let that little horse walk along. All of a sudden he turned off the road and came here. It looked as good a spot as any, so I stayed."

The explanation was very logical. For once Jim wished that Ticktock would refrain from displaying his intelligence to others. It was all right to be smart, but to take a stranger to the secret hideaway was another matter.

"We'll go back to the clearing," he said firmly, motioning with his gun.

"Yes, sir," the captive moved forward promptly. Jim marched behind the man, his nervousness gone. His brown hands held the gun steadily, and there was a serious frown on his normally cheerful face. He couldn't quite figure out the situation. The stranger seemed perfectly frank and straightforward in his manner and didn't look like a horse thief should. According to Jim's conceptions, a horse thief should be a sullen, villainous man with a mustache and a long scar on his cheek. This man was a good-natured, honest-appearing person.

When they arrived at the clearing, Ticktock was standing near the brush hut. The man walked up to him and began patting him on the neck.

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"How are you, old fellow?" he asked in a soft persuasive tone. Ticktock seemed to like the man. He looked over and winked at Jim as if he were putting the stamp of approval on the stranger.

"Nice horse you got here, son," said the man.

"He sure is," agreed Jim. He always warmed toward anyone who appreciated the mustang. Yes, this whole thing certainly was a puzzle.

"Why did you let him loose?" he asked.

"You don't think I'm a horse thief, do you?" asked the other indignantly. "I could see that someone was taking awful good care of this pony and must like him. So I turned him loose."

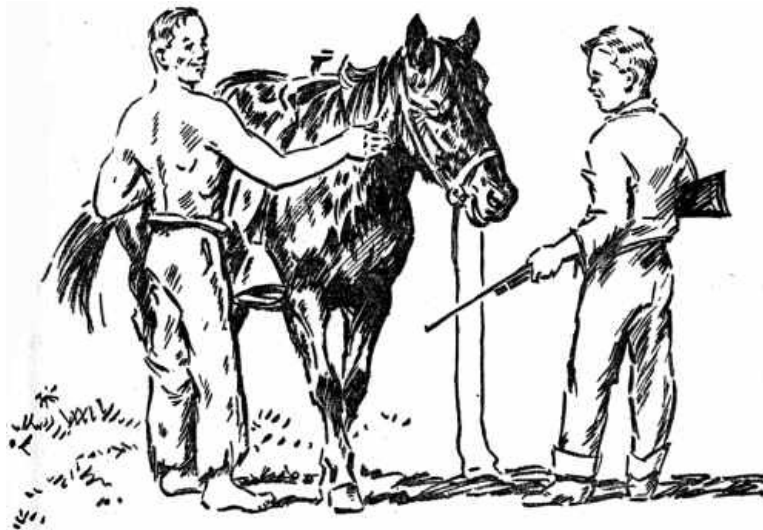
"Look here," said Jim, "I can't figure this out. Why should you be so scared just because you were riding on a freight? Lots of people do that."

"In some states they put them in a chain gang or jail too, when they catch them."

"That would explain your running off with Ticktock," said Jim, reasoning out loud, "but it doesn't account for your staying here in the woods. You look peaked and hungry to me. Why don't you go some place where you can get

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something to eat? And where are your clothes?"



"I washed my clothes," said the other nervously. "They're hanging over there in the bush."

Jim's eyes followed in the direction of the pointed finger. There was a shirt, undershirt and two socks hanging on a limb. They had obviously been washed, although it was rather a poor job, since there had been no soap and only the cold water of the stream.

"That doesn't answer the other questions," said Jim stubbornly. "I think you are hiding for some other reason."

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The man looked at Jim long and searchingly. Apparently he was reassured by the appearance of the boy's frank face and steady brown eyes.

"I think I'll tell you the truth," he said at last. "I think you'll understand."

"Go ahead."

"Look, I'm kind of weak from lack of something to eat. Why don't we sit down, because this is a long story? And how about pointing that rifle just a little bit in the other direction? It makes me nervous."

"All right," agreed Jim, sitting down on a log, "but I'm keeping this gun handy."

As Jim placed the rifle across his knees, he suddenly realized that he had forgotten to load it. There was a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach and a big lump suddenly came up in his throat, threatening to choke him. He couldn't very well reach in his pocket, extract a shell, open the breech, and load the gun. Nervous as he was, he knew he would be slow reloading it. He knew how, but had never had much practice and it might take a long time. The other man was too close to permit such a maneuver. There was nothing to do but try not to change expression and stick it out.

"You were right," said the captive, commencing his story and apparently noticing nothing wrong in Jim's expression or behavior. "The law is after me. I'm wanted for killing a man."

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"A murderer," said Jim involuntarily. He gulped. Matters were getting worse by the minute.

"I'm no murderer," said the man with indignant sincerity. "But I'm sure in the worst mess that ever happened to any man. The police are after me, I'm starving, and I don't have any place to go. All of it's an accident too."

The man's tone was full of so much woe that Jim felt a wave of sympathy sweep over him. Somehow he couldn't help liking the man and believing in him. He didn't look like a murderer.

"How did it happen?" Jim asked.

"I'm a horse trainer—one of the best in the country," said the other proudly. "I've handled all kinds of horses, from big work teams to race horses. The last few years I've been training race horses. I was working for Mr. Medway and we had his horses at Churchill Downs just outside Louisville. Last Monday—it seems like a year—I was walking along outside the stables when I saw a jockey named Willie Fry in one of the stalls. I don't suppose you know much about the things people do to horses now and then at race tracks, but this jockey was doping a horse. You can dope a horse several ways—you can give him something to make him slow and dopey so he can't run well or you can give him a shot to make him all hopped up."

"What's that?" asked Jim, so interested that he forgot about the unloaded rifle.

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"It's just like a man taking snow-cocaine, any kind of dope. It makes him think he can do anything. Well, the same thing happens to a horse. A horse that's hopped up can run much better than he would normally. It's bad on his heart, bad all over for that matter. He's apt to strain himself and be ruined. Sometimes a horse can run so hard he may go blind."

"Was he giving a horse that kind of dope?" asked Jim, full of indignation.

"No, this was the night before the race and he was doping a horse to make him sick and slow. Judges can usually tell a horse that's hopped up, but it's hard to tell when a horse has been given something to make him sick or is just naturally not up to form. Well, I hate to see a horse doped or mistreated in any way. What made me even madder was that Willie was doping *my* horse. Redwing was the horse, and she was a sure bet to win the next day. I had most of the money I'd saved all summer on that race."

"Why didn't he want her to win?" asked Jim, puzzled.

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"Well, there could have been several reasons. One—he was riding a horse that was the second favorite, but he knew as well as I did that he didn't have a chance against Redwing. Then he could have been paid by the bookies—they are the men that take bets on the race—to fix it so the favorite couldn't win. That way they could clean up, not only on not having to pay off on any money on Redwing, but by putting money up themselves on Willie's horse. Anyhow, I was really mad. I jumped on Willie and he started to fight. He pulled a knife on me and so I grabbed a bottle that was handy. I hit him over the head, and he dropped like a sack. Blood started running down his face. I was really scared. I felt his pulse and couldn't feel a thing. So I lit out of

there and I've been hiding ever since."

"Why didn't you go to the police and tell them what happened?" asked Jim.

"I was too scared to think straight and then there were a couple of things against me. No one saw Willie doping the horse, or the fight, so it would have been just my word about what happened. Then the worst thing was that Willie and I had been in a fight the day before over a girl. I warned him to stay away from the girl I was going to marry. The police would play that up big and I wouldn't have a chance."

"You sure are in a tough spot," sympathized Jim. "It's even worse that you ran away."

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"I know it is," said the man mournfully. "That's why I was so scared when I was on that train and when you came hunting for me. I figured that everyone had seen the newspapers and was searching for me."

"What were you planning on doing, just staying here?" asked Jim.

"Well, when I first got here I thought that brush hut and fireplace had been built by some hunters. The place didn't seem much used, and it wasn't hunting season; so I thought I'd stay until things sort of quieted down. That is, if I could figure out some way to eat. Then about noon today I noticed those jumping bars for a horse. That and the way that little horse brought me here made me think that someone was using the place for something. So I decided I'd better move on. I turned the horse loose and figured I'd leave when it was night. I didn't think whoever owned the horse would be back inside of an hour. I was wrong. You showed up and caught me asleep."

"Haven't you had anything to eat since I saw you jump off the train?" asked Jim solicitously.

"I had two sandwiches that I had in my pocket," said the man. "I picked them up the night before in a diner near a freight yard. But that's all. I sure am hungry."

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"I think maybe I could get you something to eat," said Jim, considering.

"I knew you would believe the truth when you heard it," said the stranger. "You're not going to turn me over to the law?"

"I believe you. I don't blame you a bit," said Jim. "Since I'm going to trust you, I may as well put this gun down. I am pretty relieved anyhow, because I forgot to load it."

The man stared at Jim in amazement. "Captured by a boy with an unloaded rifle! I'm certainly a desperate criminal."

Jim grinned. "I think you better stay right here for a while," he said, taking charge. "I can feed you here and you are better hidden than at any place I can think of."

"You found me," pointed out the late captive dubiously.

"Well naturally," said Jim scornfully. "This is my secret headquarters. No one else knows about it

though. Besides, you haven't seen half of it yet. If you'll promise never to tell, I'll show you everything."

"You have the sacred word of Timothy Dinwiddie," said the man solemnly.

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"Follow me."

Jim led the way to the hidden cave. He paused just outside the entrance.

"Don't let anybody ever see you enter here." He pushed back the bush covering the cave mouth. "I keep a flash light hanging here just inside the door."

Timothy followed the boy inside. He stood with mouth open as he followed the flash-light beam around the walls. There were several rows of cans—baked beans, vegetables, shoestring potatoes, chow mein, corned beef and everything possible to preserve.

"Food! Beautiful, beautiful food!" said Timothy in rapture. "This is the most wonderful sight I've seen since a horse I picked won the Kentucky Derby about ten years ago."

"Pick out what you want," said Jim, very proud of his stock of provisions. He was gratified that they were proving so handy.

In a few minutes the two had a fire going. Baked beans were warming in a pot while some weiners were simmering in a frying pan. The coffee began to boil while Jim was opening a can of peaches. Timothy sniffed the appetizing odors hungrily and put more wood in the fireplace. He finally decided everything was warm enough and dished out a huge portion. Jim wasn't hungry, but the enjoyment he received from watching Timothy devour the food more than repaid him for all the trouble and expense he had undergone in collecting his stock. After finishing the first helping, Timothy filled his plate again. He ate everything down to the last bean. Then he and Jim had a cup of coffee together.

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"That was certainly the finest banquet I ever ate," said Timothy leaning back in satisfaction. "You really got a well-stocked kitchen here. And that cave is about the trickiest hiding place I ever laid eyes on."

"It is pretty good," said Jim glowing with pride. "I just laid in that food in case I might need it sometime."

"I'm certainly glad you did. It saved me from starvation."

"I get to town quite often," observed Jim. "You look the stock over, and anything you need or that gets low I'll pick up at the grocery store."

"Look, Jim," said Timothy, reaching in his pocket. "I got about thirty dollars. You better take twenty to buy groceries."

"I don't want your money," protested Jim. When he decided to be friends with anyone he made no reservations. "You may need it."

"You are the one that needs it. You can't feed a hungry man like me for nothing." Timothy shoved the twenty-dollar bill in Jim's shirt

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pocket. "When you go to town, would you buy any Louisville paper you can find for the last week. I'd like to know what they are saying about me."

"I know I can get the recent ones," said Jim. "I'll be back tomorrow afternoon. Right now I better get home before my folks, because I left a note saying I was hunting for the man that stole Ticktock."

Jim rode home bursting with excitement. He wished there was someone to whom he could tell his exciting tale, but such a course was out of the question. Others might not realize, as he did, that Timothy was the victim of a bad break. Anyone who would try to dope a horse deserved to be hit on the head, he decided. He had to guard the secret of Timothy very closely, because if the police found him they might hang him. He guessed that's what they did with murderers.

The family had not returned when Jim arrived. He destroyed his note and then began grooming Ticktock. He was busily at work when the Meadows' car drove in the lane. Feeling full of mystery and importance, he hailed his parents.

"Ticktock came back!"

"So I see," said Mr. Meadows. "How'd it happen?"

"He just came trotting up the road. Got loose I guess." The explanation seemed so tame compared to the story he could have told, but he held himself sternly in check.

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The family gathered around to welcome the mustang back. Mrs. Meadows was very relieved, as she had worried over her son's evident grief. Jean was overjoyed. She was becoming almost as fond of the pony as was Jim. In the general excitement, everyone talked at once and neither the father nor mother noticed anything unusual in Jim's behavior. Jean, however, wasn't to be deceived. She sensed that her brother was acting a little too mysterious and self-satisfied to know as little as he did. She said nothing, but watched him narrowly.

On Monday Jim made some excuse and went to town early. At the local store, which sold newspapers, he was able to get Louisville papers from the preceding Friday through Monday. He was very conscious of his exciting new rôle of helping a hunted man and played the part with all his usual intensity. Afraid that it might look suspicious to hunt through the papers while in town, he stuffed them in one of the saddlebags without even a glance. While walking down the street he met Constable Whittaker, to whom he gave a very cordial greeting. He grinned to himself. Constable Whittaker represented the only forces of law and order Jim had ever known. Being a conspirator who was outwitting Whittaker was rare fun.

After buying a few groceries at the store, Jim completed his errands by purchasing a quart of ice cream and some cigarettes. They were to be a surprise for Timothy. He didn't know if the fugitive smoked, but he suspected that he did. He was rather nervous while buying the cigarettes, as he knew they were not supposed

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to be sold to anyone under twenty-one. However, he had occasionally purchased them for his father.

"They are for a client of mine," he said casually to the druggist, who didn't think of doubting Jim's motives.

The ice cream was carefully packed so that it was still in good condition when Jim arrived at the hide-out.

"You certainly are the answer to a man's prayer," said Timothy, dividing the ice cream into two equal portions. "Ice cream and cigarettes! I really was craving a smoke. You put those ravens in the Bible to shame, Jim. Imagine a bird delivering a quart of ice cream! I prefer a boy with a horse. It's not so fancy, but it's a good deal more satisfying to the stomach."

Jim produced the papers and together they went over each page of all four editions. They made a hasty search first and then examined each article thoroughly. Even the financial pages were searched. There was not a single mention of Timothy Dinwiddie or his victim, Willie Fry.

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"That's funny," said Timothy, scratching his head. "It happened on Monday. You'd think there would still be some mention of the business on Thursday. I might not be so important as I thought, but Willie Fry was a well-known jockey."

"Maybe they're keeping quiet on purpose," suggested Jim, who had read his share of mystery stories.

"What do you mean by that?" inquired Timothy nervously.

"Sometimes the police keep very quiet in order not to let a criminal know they are hot on his trail," Jim said ominously.

"I hope that's not what's happened," Timothy said fervently. He looked apprehensively around at the woods.

"Well, I'll go to the newspaper office. The editor and I are pals. He may have the old papers. I'll think up some story and get the missing ones from Monday on," said Jim. "I can't go tomorrow, as it might look suspicious to be going to town too often. But Wednesday I'll get them. I'll bring you some fresh eggs and milk too. Also, we got a lot of melons if you want one."

"Boy, oh boy," said Timothy, shaking his head. "You think of everything. I'm glad you're not a cop."

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Chapter Twelve

Jean's Ride

The rest of the week went by without further news. Jim was unable to get the Tuesday

morning paper, the one most likely to contain news of the murder. They searched all the others, but with no success. Timothy and he were still completely in the dark as to what efforts the police were making. They could only make guesses.

Jim was enjoying himself however. He was playing an important part in a serious and exciting game. He kept Timothy well supplied with food, reveling in his mysterious errands. While at home, time hung very heavily on his hands. He felt that he should be doing something. He was bothered about Jean. He was not going to underestimate her again, and he knew she was watching him carefully. Also, her birthday was approaching. She mentioned the matter several times; so he knew she had not forgotten the promise he had made. While he supposed Timothy could hide elsewhere on that day, it would be difficult to remove all traces of his recent occupancy. Also, part of the safety of the hide-out would be destroyed once Jean knew the way.

Before it had been merely a matter of personal pride that kept Jim from telling Jean. Now it was a serious matter—a man's life was involved.

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To cover up his nervousness and unrest, Jim began teaching Ticktock a few new tricks. He had long since taught the mustang to stand quietly in one spot when his reins were dangling, not to crop grass while a rider was in the saddle, and various other accomplishments of a good riding horse. Now he tried a new idea. He enlisted the aid of his sister for the instruction.

Jim would go a few feet away from his sister and the horse, then Jean would say, "Ticktock, go to Jim." When the mustang did as he was told, he would receive a piece of sugar or apple as a reward. The process would then be reversed and the pony told to go to Jean. They gradually lengthened the distance until finally Jean was some distance down the road. Ticktock caught on rapidly, trotting back and forth between the two carrying out his orders. In a few days he was thoroughly schooled.

Jim then began instructing Jean in riding. Much of his information had been picked up only recently from Timothy, who had a vast store of knowledge about horses and riding in general. The horse trainer had once worked in a riding academy and had given riding lessons. Jim was an apt pupil and followed his new teacher's advice religiously. He seldom had to be told twice. He learned the proper way to sit in the saddle, how to hold the reins correctly and various do's and don'ts of riding. For the first time he heard of the art of posting.

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All this information was passed on to Jean. Jim spoke in such an authoritative manner that Jean knew he was not inventing his technical terms or making up his riding lore. There had been a noticeable improvement in his riding lately which she hadn't failed to see. As a detective, Jean put her brother to shame. She missed nothing. Aware that Jim had not been visiting anyone she knew who was a riding expert, she said nothing but continued to observe. She hadn't missed the frequent trips to town and other rides in the direction of Briggs Woods. As

for the milk and eggs that disappeared, she had noted that bit of information down too. When Jim slipped away with a watermelon, she definitely decided something very mysterious was taking place.

Jean considered the theory that someone was giving her brother riding instruction and information for which he was paying in food. But why was he so mysterious about it all. If he was openly taking lessons from someone, he would be certain to talk about it, even boast somewhat. No, there was more to the matter than was covered by such a simple explanation. She was just as decisive as her brother and even though only ten, when she made up her mind, she acted. So she devised a plan.

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Jean had long since gotten over her timidity concerning Ticktock and had ridden him occasionally before. Now she applied herself and obediently followed Jim's instructions. She began riding Ticktock daily around the farm. Mr. Meadows was somewhat opposed to the idea, as he thought his daughter was too young to be riding Ticktock. Although small for a mustang and called a ranch pony, Ticktock was far from being any Shetland pony. Any fall from his back would be a long distance for such a small girl. Although he no longer had any worries about Jim and Ticktock, Mr. Meadows still considered the mustang to be rather high-spirited and apt to be vicious with anyone who didn't know him too well. In spite of the parental disapproval, Jean spent more time each day learning to ride on the little horse.

Friday Jim had to help his father all day. At noon Jean asked to ride Ticktock; so Jim saddled the horse and then went back to the field with his father. After several hours of intermittent riding around the yard, Jean decided that the time had come for action. Casually she went into the house to find her mother.

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"I think I'll ride down the road a way," she announced.

"Be careful," warned her mother, who did not share her husband's fears about Ticktock.

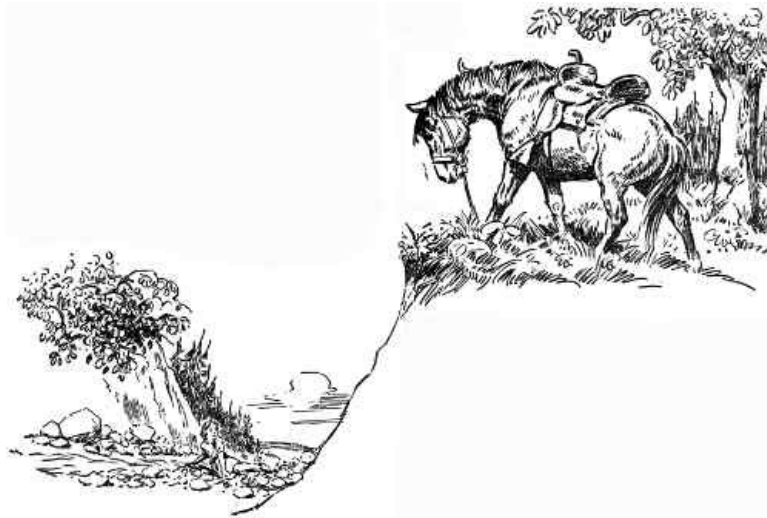
"Sure. I may be gone a little while so don't worry."

As soon as she was out of sight of the house, Jean urged the mustang to a faster pace and headed toward the woods. She knew the trail to the hide-out began somewhere near the middle of the forest. It was very gloomy in the heavy shade, but that just added to the excitement for her. Resolutely she rode on.

Had Jean allowed Ticktock to have his head once they were in the forest, he would have undoubtedly taken her straight to the hideaway, as he had Timothy. The way was old and familiar to him now. But Jean insisted on directing the little horse. While she had taken quite a few peeks on her blindfolded trip to the hide-out, she hadn't seen quite enough. Jim had circled and doubled back, which misled her too. The woods were confusing, one trail or stream looking like another. She knew they had roughly followed a stream for a distance, so she chose one and boldly plunged into the woods.

It was difficult riding, trying to duck branches or push them out of the way. Jean couldn't tell too well where she was going, and after some distance she began to be discouraged and tired. She was determined, however. Any trouble was acceptable if she could only show up her brother and find the hideaway. She was certain that if she found the place she would also solve the mystery of why he was now taking away perishable food.

Seeing nothing that looked familiar, Jean stopped for a few minutes to rest and get her bearings. As she did so, she saw a tree loaded with persimmons on the opposite bank of the stream. She dismounted and picked a spot to cross. It was a tiny rivulet, but it had deep steep banks from the spring floods. She walked upstream until she found a spot where she could cross. Returning to the tree, she began climbing. She was reaching out for a particularly large persimmon when she lost her balance and fell. She landed on her back with a breath-taking thump and then tumbled on down the bank of the stream. Her right foot hit a rock at the bottom and doubled under her. There was a wrench and a horribly sharp pain. Her scream of anguish brought Ticktock to the bank. He peered down at the huddled heap at the bottom.



Jean lay moaning and crying for some minutes. The pain subsided a little, so she sat up and dried her tears. She wanted nothing now but to get back to Ticktock and go home. Cautiously she tried standing. The slightest weight on her foot brought a yell of pain. She got back on her knees and tried crawling up the bank. It was too steep, the soft ground caving in and letting her slide back down to the bottom. If she had had the use of both legs, she might have managed to scramble up to the top, but it was impossible in her crippled state. Discouraged and frightened, she gave up and began to cry.

No one could find her, she was certain. Ticktock couldn't get down to where she was and she couldn't climb to him. She was tired, dirty, and her ankle hurt. She looked at the injured member, which was swelling rapidly. It was nearly twice as large as her left ankle. The sight frightened her even more. Perhaps it was broken, and she would just have to stay there and slowly starve.

Ticktock looked down solicitously. He knew something was wrong but didn't quite know

what to do about it. He stepped closer to the bank to see better, but it began to crumble. He moved back out of danger and waited patiently. After Jean had cried herself out, she began to think calmly once more. At least it was comforting to have Ticktock standing by, even though she couldn't use him.

Jean was a resourceful little girl who didn't give up too easily. She considered all possible ways out of her predicament and finally had an idea. She would send Ticktock for help.

"Ticktock, go to Jim!" she ordered, sitting up. "Go on home to Jim!"

Ticktock hesitated. He didn't want to leave Jean, as he knew she was in trouble. Also, he had been taught to stand still while his reins were dangling. He stirred indecisively.

"Go on, go home to Jim," repeated Jean commandingly.

It was an order; so the mustang decided to obey. He started off. He went a few paces and then looked around mournfully over his shoulder, hoping his instructions would be changed. Jean simply repeated her words. Reluctantly he went back through the woods and headed for home. He began trotting down the road. Repeatedly he stepped on his reins and jerked his head down savagely. Finally one sharp jerk broke them and he went rapidly down the road with his broken reins trailing behind him on the ground.

Mrs. Meadows became alarmed about four-thirty at her daughter's long absence. Finally she could stand the worry no longer. She went to the big dinner bell in the back yard and rang it vigorously. It was used to summon her husband from the fields, and she knew he would come running at once on hearing the bell ring at this unexpected hour of the day.

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Mr. Meadows and Jim left their work and headed for the house immediately. Jim's mother had just finished explaining when Ticktock appeared over the hill, riderless.

The little mustang was covered with sweat and dust. The farther he went from Jean the more the pony realized something was decidedly amiss. His only thought was to hurry home to Jim. Jim was his god and could solve all things. He dashed into the yard and obediently slid to a halt in front of the boy. He had carried out instructions.

Mr. Meadows looked at the lather-covered mustang with his broken reins.

"If that horse has thrown Jean and hurt her, I'll kill him."

Worried as he was, Jim did not fail to rise to the defense of his beloved horse. "He wouldn't throw Jean. Maybe she fell off and he came back for me."

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"Well, I'm going to get the car and go back along the way he came," announced Carl Meadows decisively.

Jim tied a hasty knot in the reins and climbed up on Ticktock's back.

"Take me to Jean," he said. "Go to Jean."

Ticktock was not indecisive this time. He turned around and started back rapidly down the road. Mrs. Meadows and her husband got in the car and started slowly after him, scanning the ditches on both sides. They passed Jim and went on up the road. He shouted at them as they went by.

"You better wait at the corner and follow me. Ticktock will take us to her."

It was soon evident where the pony was heading. When the woods appeared in view, Jim was certain of at least part of what had happened. Jean had tried to find the hide-out. He felt positive about that. A thousand ideas crowded into his mind. If she let Ticktock have his head, he would have taken her to the clearing too. And Timothy was hiding there. Hearing a horse approaching, he would naturally assume it to be Jim. And then suddenly, if Jean appeared, what would have happened? He was positive that Timothy would not have harmed his sister. Perhaps he might have detained her though, afraid that she would spread an alarm. In that case, what would he do? He would have to lead his parents to the hide-out and betray Timothy.

There were other explanations too. Jean might have suddenly seen Timothy and become alarmed. If she rode off rapidly through the trees, it would have been the easiest thing in the world to have been knocked off by a low branch. In that case she might be hurt badly. Everything looked black. Jean might be hurt; Timothy might be turned over to the police; he might be taken for aiding a criminal; and lastly Ticktock was once again in Mr. Meadows' bad graces.

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So certain was Jim that Jean had gone to the hide-out that he tried to pull Ticktock back onto the road when the little horse started off through the woods before reaching the usual trail. The mustang, who knew exactly what he was doing, was stubborn and insisted in turning off the road.

"O.K., Ticktock," said Jim finally. "You usually know where you're going."

Jim waited for his parents to arrive in the car. They climbed out and rather dubiously followed Jim into the woods. Every few yards they would shout Jean's name. When they had penetrated about half a mile into the forest, they heard a weak answer. Jean had heard them. Ticktock kept going forward confidently until he paused on top of the bank above the injured girl.

Jean was a sorry-looking little girl. Her face was streaked with tears and dirt while her clothes were torn, wet and muddy. But she was very happy to be at last out of her predicament. She had been lonely and frightened, waiting alone in the woods after Ticktock had gone.

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"I tried to climb the persimmon tree and fell down here," she explained. "I couldn't get up; so I sent Ticktock for help."

Jim listened to the vindication of his faith in Ticktock in silence. He was very relieved to find Jean and know that she wasn't too badly hurt.

They were still too close to his hide-out to suit him though, and he wouldn't feel safe until they were clear of the woods. Also, this was scarcely the time to point out how intelligently Ticktock had acted. His parents were still too absorbed in Jean and the extent of her injuries.

Ticktock led the way back to the road while Mr. Meadows carried Jean in his arms. When the little party reached the car, the others drove off, leaving Jim to follow home alone.

Jim let the little pony take his time on the road back. He felt much relieved but still uneasy. He wondered what Jean would say if they asked her what she was doing in the woods. He felt rather guilty about her mishap. After all, it was mainly his fault.

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If he had shown her the way that first day, she would never have gone off on her trip of exploration. It had been rather mean of him, considering that she had found the cave, which was the most valuable feature of the secret rendezvous. So if her leg were broken, he supposed that he was really responsible.

The doctor was at the house by the time Jim arrived. He was busy with Jean; so Jim rubbed Ticktock down and put him in the orchard.

"You're a hero, old boy," he said fondly. "You got me out of a pretty ticklish mess by being so smart."

"Just sprained badly," the doctor was saying as Jim entered the house. "She'd better stay in bed a day or two. That's the only way I know of to keep active children from moving around."

Jean had her dinner in bed, rather enjoying being in the limelight. After he had eaten, Jim got a chance to talk to his sister alone.

"I suppose you were looking for the hide-out," he said hesitantly.

Jean nodded her head. "I haven't told anybody though."

"Good girl," said Jim with a thankful sigh. "It was mean of me not to show you before. As soon as you can get around I'll take you there, even if it isn't your birthday."

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"I haven't said anything about the milk and eggs you took either," said Jean calmly. "What are you feeding?"

Jim looked at his sister with hesitation. She certainly had shown that she could keep a secret. She deserved to be in on the excitement, he decided. Perhaps that would make up in some part for his having indirectly caused her accident.

"Look, Jean," he said, lowering his voice. "I'll tell you the whole story...."

Chapter Thirteen

The Mystery Is Solved

The next morning Jim rode to Springdale for newspapers and supplies for Timothy. Purchases were becoming rather difficult of late. Perhaps it was merely his fancy, but he felt that the man in the store was beginning to look at him curiously when he made his daily purchase of several newspapers. As for cigarettes, Jim had bought what he felt was his limit without exciting suspicion. He would have to think of some new solution for Timothy's tobacco problem. The last quart of milk purchased had brought forth a comment from the clerk.

"Haven't you got any cows on that farm?"

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"Oh, sure," replied Jim, with what he considered magnificent nonchalance. "This is for a customer. I run errands of all sorts you know. Don't need a good rural delivery boy, do you?"

Feeling that he had allayed suspicion for the moment, Jim rode off toward the hide-out. While the intrigue he was carrying on with Timothy was the most exciting adventure in which he had ever taken part, he had to face facts. Avoiding questions was bound to become increasingly more difficult. Also, the end of summer vacation was not too far distant. Going to school, doing his chores at home, and continuing the operation of the Pony Express was going to make a very stiff schedule without the added labor of having to administer to the wants of Timothy. Cold weather would add further complications. How would Timothy heat the cave? Also, there was the matter of money. While he was still operating on the original twenty dollars that Timothy had given him, sooner or later the money would be exhausted. Jim didn't begrudge using some of his own money to provide for his new friend, but if the proceeds of the Pony Express were all used up for food, in time it would grow irksome. He could see long years stretching ahead of him during which he would have to continue the responsibility which he had assumed. The law didn't forget quickly; there was no way of knowing when Timothy would come out of hiding. Unquestionably what was now a thrilling escapade would develop into a burdensome chore as time passed.

Occupied with such worrisome thoughts, he arrived at the hide-out. Timothy met him and was so cheerful that Jim soon forgot his forebodings. He told the story of Jean's mishap, and they both agreed that their secret had come perilously close to being discovered.

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"I had to tell Jean everything," explained Jim. "It was only fair, and she can be trusted."

"You can't keep a secret from a woman anyhow," said Timothy sagely. "Once they suspect anything is being kept from them, you haven't got a chance."

Together the two began their usual search through the papers for news about Willie Fry or his assailant. There was nothing to be found; so Timothy turned to the sport section to read the racing news. Suddenly he let out a startled shout.

"What's the matter?" asked Jim.

"Look here!" said Timothy excitedly. "Fireball won the fourth at Havre de Grace and was

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ridden by Willie Fry!"

Jim examined the paper. Timothy was correct; Willie Fry had ridden in the fourth race.

"There aren't two jockeys named Willie Fry are there?" he asked.

"Never heard of any other except the rat I socked," said Timothy. "I don't get this."

"Maybe you didn't kill him after all. Maybe you just knocked him out. He probably came to and didn't even notify the police. That's why we haven't noticed anything in the papers."

"Well, he didn't have any pulse when I felt his wrist," said Timothy wonderingly.

"I think you need some lessons on how to feel pulses," suggested Jim dryly. "You were probably so excited that you couldn't find his." He began to look casually over the remainder of the sporting news.

"Look! Here's a little article about Willie Fry," he said. "Listen! 'Willie Fry, well-known jockey, was married yesterday to Miss Alvina Morgan, of Baltimore, Md. Miss Morgan is well known to racing circles, as she has accompanied the Roudcroft Stables string as cook to tracks throughout the country. In addition to serving delicious food to the Roudcroft personnel, Miss Morgan is famous for always having a welcome cup of coffee for any jockey, trainer or trackman. Track people will be happy to hear that the new Mrs. Fry will continue at her old post in the trailer which serves as her kitchen. Coffee will still be on tap."

"Willie celebrated his wedding day by winning the fourth race at Havre de Grace, riding Fireball. This was the first race ridden by Willie since he was struck down by an unknown assailant at Churchill Downs several weeks ago."

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"See," said Jim, as he finished reading. "You just knocked him out. He's probably just as anxious as you are to forget the whole thing. If he told who hit him, you'd tell about his doping a horse."

Timothy wasn't listening, however, but was staring incredulously at Jim. "Let me see the paper," he said finally in a strained voice.

"Alvina married to Willie! I'd never have believed it." Timothy shook his head as if stunned. Slowly his disbelief turned to indignation. "Why two weeks ago she was engaged to me! I spent a month's wages on a diamond ring for her. And now she marries Willie Fry!

"I guess I'm glad Willie Fry is all right," went on Timothy calming down. "Just sort of shakes your faith in human nature, though, a thing like this does. Kind of a jolt to be sweet on a gal and have her turn around two weeks after you're gone and marry your worst enemy. Well, they can have each other for my money. I wish them all the unhappiness in the world. 'Spose I'm lucky to find out about Alvina in time. Just doesn't seem possible though that a woman who can bake an apple pie like Alvina does would turn

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out to be so fickle.”

“Well, it sure makes things simpler,” said Jim happily. He could not be bothered by such trivial matters as a broken heart. “Now I suppose you’ll go get your old job back as trainer?”

“Not on your life!” said Timothy with great feeling. “I may not be hunted by the law anymore, but my career at the tracks is ruined.”

“Why?” asked Jim, completely baffled.

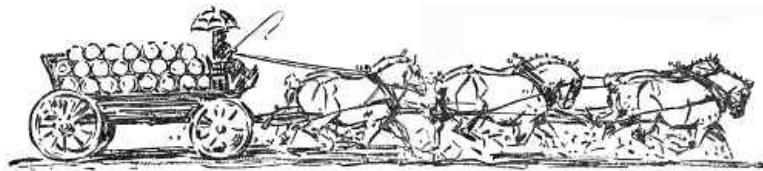
“Why I’d be the laughingstock of every track in the country. Willie has probably concocted some story about how he scared me away and now he’s stolen my girl. Everyone in the racing business knew I was engaged to Alvina. No siree, I can’t go back to the tracks now.”

“What’ll you do then?” asked Jim solicitously.

“Well, maybe I can get a job taking care of horses at some riding stable or breeding farm,” said Timothy. “Somebody ought to need a good horse handler.”

“I know where I can get you a job right around here,” said Jim, as a sudden thought struck him. “It would be handling big Percherons though. Do you know anything about them?”

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“Sure. I once handled a whole stable of them. One of the big trucking firms in Milwaukee used to have some beautiful teams. They used them for some of their deliveries as sort of advertising. You get six big prancing Percherons pulling a wagon and it’s a beautiful sight.”

“Mr. Hernstadt raises Percherons, and he’s looking for a good man,” said Jim. “I found one of his horses that had strayed; so I’m in good with him. We’ll go see him and I’ll recommend you.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” said Timothy. “I look pretty ragged, though, to be applying for a job.”

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“I’ll ride in town and buy you a new shirt and overalls,” volunteered Jim. “Then we’ll go see Mr. Hernstadt.”

Jim was back with the new clothes in slightly over an hour. After Timothy had changed, they both mounted Ticktock and rode into town, where Timothy had his hair cut. After eating lunch they set out for the Hernstadt farm.

“I certainly owe you a lot,” said Timothy as they approached their destination. “Whether I get the job or not, you certainly have gone to a lot of trouble for me. A guy that helps you when you’re in trouble is a real friend.”

“I knew you weren’t a real crook,” said Jim, embarrassed by Timothy’s gratitude. “The minute Ticktock liked you, I figured you could be trusted.”

"I owe this little horse plenty too," said Timothy. "After he has carried double for so far, I'm not sure he's going to like me anymore though."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hernstadt," said Jim when they arrived. "This is Timothy Dinwiddie, a friend of mine. He's a very good horse trainer. I remembered that you asked me to find you a good man to handle horses; so I brought him over to see you. The Pony Express always gets its man."

"Glad to meet you," said Mr. Hernstadt, shaking hands with Timothy. "What experience have you had?"

In a few minutes the two men were deep in horse talk, much of it far too technical for Jim. It was apparent to the horse breeder, after a short conversation, that Timothy definitely knew horses. The three of them made a tour of the stables, Mr. Hernstadt explaining the various duties of the job. Jim walked through the immaculate barns with their modern equipment, his eyes wide with interest. Every convenience he saw he wanted for Ticktock's stall. They finally ended their tour at a small shed that contained a forge, an anvil and complete blacksmithing equipment.

"It's rather difficult to find a good blacksmith these days," explained Mr. Hernstadt. "Everyone uses tractors, and there isn't enough business to keep a good blacksmith going. I had so much trouble finding a man who really knew how to shoe a horse that I bought this equipment to do it myself. Ever shoe a horse?"

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"Many a time," said Timothy confidently. "You haven't shown me anything yet, Mr. Hernstadt, that I can't handle."

"I believe you. If you want to try the job for a month, I'll be glad to have you. There are nice quarters over that harness shed where you can live. Come on and I'll show you."

The details of salary and duties were settled and Timothy declared his intention of going to work immediately. He was very enthusiastic about his new job, liking his employer, and admiring the horses and all the modern equipment. Feeling very satisfied at the way matters had turned out, Jim prepared to leave.

"What do I owe the Pony Express for finding me a good man to handle horses?" Mr. Hernstadt asked Jim.

"Nothing at all," answered Jim. "This comes under the heading of good will. Employment service is a little out of our line. I was just doing this as a favor to a friend."

"Well, thank you very much," said the farmer laughing.

"I'd like to do something for the Pony Express though," said Timothy. "I owe the firm a lot. If it's all right with you Mr. Hernstadt, when I get the time I'd like to use the blacksmith shop to shoe Ticktock."

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"Certainly, any time you like," agreed Mr. Hernstadt cordially.

"Bring him over in about two weeks," said

Timothy. "By then I'll know my way around and be able to find the time. He needs reshoeing."

"Thanks," replied Jim. "I've been wondering where I was going to get him shod."

"I'll float his teeth too," said Timothy. "I was looking at them one day and they could stand it."

"What does 'floating his teeth' mean?" Jim inquired.

"Those back teeth are called grinders," explained Timothy. "They grind up the grain and after a while they get sharp edges and points. Ticktock's aren't so bad, as apparently he hasn't had too much grain. Anyhow, unless you file away those sharp edges, the horse can't chew the way he should. When the teeth get really bad a horse gets out of condition and sometimes has colic. Filing down the teeth is called floating."

"You weren't wrong when you said he knew horses," said Mr. Hernstadt to Jim.

As soon as Jim reached home, he told his sister about the happy ending to Timothy's story. She was very pleased that the trainer was no longer a fugitive from justice, but her pleasure seemed overshadowed by her worry about Timothy's broken heart.

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"Don't be silly," said Jim, who couldn't understand her concern. "Why should he worry about a woman when he's got twenty-three horses?"

Later that evening Jim sat contentedly in the living room reading a book about the West in the days of the pioneers. He was deeply engrossed in a running battle between a wagon train and the Indians when the clock struck nine.

"Your bedtime, Jim," said Mr. Meadows.

Jim was feeling too happy and satisfied with the world in general to put up his usual fight against bed. He stood up obediently, and with his nose still buried in the book, started to walk toward the stairs.

"Jim," said Mr. Meadows, embarrassedly clearing his throat, "there's something I wanted to say."

"Yes, Dad," said Jim looking up in surprise at his father's rather red face.

"It's about that horse of yours," said Mr. Meadows lamely. "I guess I was wrong about Ticktock. He's a pretty smart horse, the way he led us to where your sister was. I think we can find room and feed enough to keep him permanently."

"Thanks, Dad," said Jim. "That's wonderful!"

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His world was very full of happiness. Knowing how difficult it was for his father to make such a speech as he had just heard, he was deeply appreciative. Jim, like his father, was unable to act very demonstrative, so having expressed his thanks, he hurried upstairs to bed. They understood each other, he and his father. Although they didn't say much, each knew how the other felt.

Jim dropped off to sleep with a contented smile on his face. Ticktock was his forever, Timothy was safe now, and the hide-out was still undiscovered. It was a very satisfactory world.

Chapter Fourteen

The Fire

Ticktock also went to sleep that night with a contented grin on his face. As a reward for having carried double for so many miles, and in general celebration of the happy state of affairs, Jim had given him two apples and an extra large portion of oats. It was a moderately cool night with few flies to bother him; so the mustang dozed off while still munching on his last mouthful of oats. He stood swaying dreamily on his feet, while visions of sugar cubes, dew-drenched clover, and whole bins full of oats floated through his brain. In the midst of his dream, the sweet odor of clover slowly changed to a smell that was foreign and unpleasant. The mustang stirred uneasily and shook his head in annoyance but the disturbing odor persisted. Sleepily he opened his eyes and then snorted in sudden alarm. The foreign smell was unmistakably smoke!

Mr. Meadows had completed the building of a new brooder house during the day. The scraps of lumber, together with other refuse, had been dumped in the incinerator and burned. The fire had been inspected just before dark when everything had appeared to be burned with the exception of a few small smoking embers. Unfortunately, the inspection had not been thorough enough for there were a number of pieces of tar paper roofing in the back of the incinerator. They smoldered harmlessly for several hours until the night breeze shifted. Suddenly they burst into flame and burned as only tar paper can burn. A shower of sparks went up into the night.

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Straw collects in every barnyard and the Meadows' yard was no exception. There had been no rain for over a week; so the wisps of straw lying around were ripe for burning. The wind had deposited a small pile of loose straw against a lean-to which was built onto one end of the barn. A spark landed in this pile and in a few minutes the straw was burning merrily while the wind whipped the flames against the dry boards of the lean-to, filling the interior with smoke. Since this shed joined one end of the barn, smoke began to filter through the cracks into Ticktock's stall. The fire was just catching the shed when the horse had awakened with his start of alarm.

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Ticktock had been around many campfires with Jim, but he had always been free to move a respectful distance away and to stand clear of the smoke. This was a different situation, which was not at all to his liking. As the smoke grew thicker he decided something was amiss. He snorted and jerked his head as the acrid fumes began to tickle his nostrils and smart his eyes.

By twisting his neck he could see bright tongues of flame through the cracks in the wall and he was inspired with fresh terror. The smoke grew thicker until it interfered with his breathing. He moved around as much as he was able in his confined stall, growing more frightened each minute. He decided it was time to leave.

The pony tried backing out of his stall, but he came to the end of his halter rope in a few feet. He pulled until his neck ached but still the rope held. Then he moved forward until there was a small amount of slack in the tether. He gave a violent toss of his head. There was a painful wrench as the rope snapped taut. This method was no more successful than the first, but there seemed no other course but to try again. The smoke was growing thicker and there was no time to lose. The frightened pony gave several more violent tugs until finally, after one particularly desperate yank, the rope snapped. As he backed from the stall, Ticktock could hear the uneasy stirrings of the other horses and cattle, who although farther from the fire than he, were now awake and becoming frightened too.

Freeing himself from the halter rope was only half the battle, for he still had to get out of the barn. The door which was almost directly back of his stall was the usual double barn door. The stock had been put in the barn because it had looked very much like rain. However, the upper halves of the doors had been left open, so that it wouldn't become too hot inside. Ticktock stuck his muzzle over the lower half to breathe gratefully the fresh night air. A few deep breaths restored his energy enough and calmed him sufficiently for him to consider the remainder of his problem. There was not room enough to try to jump over the closed part of the door. After surveying the situation appraisingly, the little mustang turned around until his back feet were pointing toward the opening. His motto had always been, "When in doubt—kick." With no hesitation he went into action. Kicking was one of his major accomplishments; so three hefty blows were enough to break the door open. If a horse can give a sigh of relief, he gave one when he bolted into the open barnyard. Perhaps it was just a huge gulp of fresh air but it sounded like a sigh of relief.

Once outside, Ticktock could see the burning shed clearly. He trotted to the other side of the yard where he was in safety and then turned to look over the situation again. It was only a matter of time until the barn proper was on fire, trapping all the animals in it. He could hear the movements of these animals who were rapidly growing frantic. Although he personally was out of danger, Ticktock knew that something terrible was happening. His own feelings when he had been in the barn were still fresh enough in his mind to make him nervous. He thought the matter over. That blazing shed was wrong. It didn't fit into the proper scheme of things around the farm. When anything was wrong, Ticktock had only one thought—to go to Jim. Jim could solve everything. The mustang trotted toward the fence separating the barnyard from the grounds around the house. It was a formidably high board fence, higher than any he had ever tried. Doubtfully he trotted back across the yard, knowing the sensible thing to do was

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to keep away from the fire and forget that high fence. The noise made by the trapped animals grew louder and more panicky. There was a feeling of terrible urgency that told him he should go to Jim. Dismissing his doubts, he started running toward the fence.

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The little horse made a magnificent leap, but the fence was too high for him. His front legs cleared but his hind legs were a few sickening inches short. His hooves hit the top of the boards with a resounding thud that threw him off balance. He got over the fence but landed wrong. He felt a terrible pain in his right foreleg as it crumpled beneath him. The night was split with the heartbreaking scream of a horse in agony.

Jim sat bolt upright in bed at Ticktock's first scream, alarmed and confused. When the terrible piercing sound was repeated, he leaped out of bed and tore down the hall, shouting as he went.

"Dad! Mom! The horses! Something's happened to one of them!" He did not say "Ticktock," as the idea that the shrieking horse could be his beloved pony was too terrible to admit, even to himself. He was filled with hideous misgivings, though, as he raced down the stairs. When he opened the front door he saw the fire.

"Fire! Fire!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. Mr. Meadows did not need the second alarm, as Jim's first shout had been enough to jerk him out of bed. He had pulled on his trousers and shoes and was starting down the stairs when he heard the word "fire."

Barefooted and in his pajamas, Jim raced toward the barn. Halfway there he saw Ticktock. The little mustang was lying helplessly on his side, screaming and kicking in terror and pain. Forgetting the fire, Jim raced toward the stricken horse. He felt a sickening sense of calamity as he approached Ticktock. He dreaded going nearer, yet he had to know what was wrong. Then in the wavering light from the fire, he saw his worst fears realized; Ticktock's leg was hanging limp and useless, broken between the fetlock and the knee.

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Few people ever have to face sudden stark tragedy. There is usually some warning or preparation that makes the shock more bearable. Jim was not so fortunate. Out of a happy sleep he had awakened to this. There was no bottom to the depths of his despair. This was a tragedy beyond his most horrible dreams. A terrible numbing agony swept over him, leaving him nauseated, blinded and stricken. There was a huge leaden mass where his heart and stomach had been. He shed no tears but threw himself in a hopeless heap on the ground beside the horse. Not knowing what he was doing, he took Ticktock's head in his lap and began to stroke the mustang's forehead. He mumbled softly and unintelligibly to the trembling, terror-stricken horse.

Mrs. Meadows, who had dressed by this time, came out into the yard carrying Jim's shoes, shirt and trousers. She had turned on the yard light; so she saw the horse and boy immediately. There was no need to ask what was wrong. The crumpled leg was only too evident. Tears of sympathy and grief started to her eyes, both for the little horse and for her son. She glanced hesitantly toward the fire, feeling she should rush to her husband's aid, but she knew what sickening grief was shaking her son. She had to comfort him, if only for a moment. Saying nothing, she walked over to put her hand on his shoulder. Jim looked up at her dumbly as if struggling for recognition. Slowly he brought his mind out of its numbness.

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"Broken," he said in a hopeless, tired voice. "Broken."

"I know."

"The fire," he said slowly. "I ought to help."

"No, you stay—" she started to say and then thought better. His help was needed and anything that would take his mind off Ticktock would help. "Yes, Jim, there are other horses that are trapped in the barn. You'd better help."

"You help carry water," she warned him as he pulled on his clothes over his pajamas. "Stay out of the barn unless your father tells you that you can go in."

Jean came out to drop beside Ticktock in sorrow almost as great as Jim's. While the girl comforted the pony, Jim and his mother rushed off to help Mr. Meadows. With misgivings, Jim's father permitted him to go into the smoke-filled barn, for help was needed desperately. The terrorized animals were threshing about in their stalls so violently that it was dangerous work to get near them in the smoky interior to untie them. Choking and blinded, Jim led out one cow, only to plunge back in again after another. Mr. Meadows was racing in and out of the barn like a madman, leading out the huge work horses. Mrs. Meadows ran back and forth from the watering tank to the fire carrying water while anxiously trying to keep tabs on both her husband and son to see that neither was gone too long, perhaps lost and overcome by the smoke. Finally all the stock was safely out in the yard and the two, coughing and sputtering, turned to help Mrs. Meadows fight the still growing fire.

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They carried water until they were at the point of exhaustion and the big water tank was almost empty. Mr. Meadows was the only one strong enough to throw water onto the roof of the lean-to, which by this time was burning fiercely. He scorched his face and arms while his hair and eyebrows became singed and frizzled. With his face blackened with soot, he continued to fight the fire with the water that Jim and his mother pantingly lugged to the scene. At last they began to make headway and the boards no longer blazed but smoldered. The lean-to was almost destroyed, while one end of the barn was badly scorched and charred. When finally there were no more bright blazes but only embers, Mrs. Meadows turned to her son.

"Go on back to your horse. We'll finish here."

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Jim returned to his stricken mustang. During the fire, excitement had replaced much of his grief, but now it returned with all its former force. Dejectedly he sat down beside Jean to stroke the horse's quivering head. He was still dumbly patting Ticktock's neck when Mr. Meadows came to stand beside him some minutes later. Jim looked up at his blackened, begrimed father.

"He broke his halter rope and kicked down the door," said the older man. "Why he jumped the fence into the yard we'll never know. I guess horses can do a lot more thinking than we realize. He may have wanted to warn us. If that was his idea, he succeeded, although he had to break his leg to do it. I suppose it's small consolation, son, but your pony saved the barn and all the other stock."

Ticktock had calmed down somewhat now that Jim was stroking his head again. He was still trembling, but he no longer tried to struggle futilely to his feet. The pain, while not the first horrible jabbing agony, was still present. He rolled his eyes in fright and only Jim's comforting hand kept him from writhing about on the ground. Mr. Meadows knelt down, examining the leg carefully. He straightened up with a grim expression on his face.

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"It's broken, son," he said. "I suppose you know that. It's pretty high; so there isn't a chance. You better go in the house and let me put him out of his pain."

"No!" cried Jim, coming suddenly out of his stupor. "You can't shoot him."

"I don't want to," said his father gently. "But it's the only thing we can do. The only thing that's fair to Ticktock."

"Call Dr. Cornby," said Jim with a faint glimmer of hope in his voice. "Maybe he can fix it."

"If the break were lower, there might be some possibility of saving him," said Mr. Meadows. "I hate to disappoint you Jim, but Dr. Cornby won't be able to do anything."

"We can see," said Jim with pleading insistence.

"I'll go call the veterinarian," said Mrs. Meadows. She went inside to the telephone.

In a few minutes Jim's mother was back. "There was no answer at Dr. Cornby's home, Jim. It's

eleven-thirty; so I suppose he will be home before too long. In the meantime I have no idea where to reach him."

"What day is it?" asked Jim with apparent irrelevance.

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"Thursday, why?"

"He's at the Springdale *Gazette* office as usual," said Jim whose mind was functioning again with its old sharpness. "Call him there and tell him how important it is."

Dr. Cornby was very surprised when he was called to the telephone. He listened carefully for a few minutes.

"Where is the leg broken?" he asked after Mrs. Meadows had explained what had happened.

"About four inches below the knee," replied Jim's mother.

"That makes it tough," he said. "Not much chance with the break there."

"That's what Carl said, but Dr. Cornby, you have to come out to see the horse," said Mrs. Meadows desperately. "Jim is absolutely heartbroken. Even if you can't do a thing, it will make him feel better. That's really why I want you to come, for Jim as much as the horse. I want him to know that everything possible is being done."

"Certainly, Mrs. Meadows," said Cornby. "I'll be right out. I owe that boy of yours a good turn anyhow. Keep the horse as quiet as possible in the meantime."

"What's happened?" asked the editor when Cornby hung up the receiver.

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"There was a fire out at the Meadows' place. That mustang kicked his way out of the barn, jumped a fence, and woke up the family. The trouble is he broke his leg in the process."

"That kid'll never get over this," said Arnold sympathetically. "Any chance of setting the horse's leg?"

"I don't know," said Cornby, shaking his gray head slowly. "Depends on what the break is like. It's pretty high, which is bad. However, I've got to see what I can do."

The two men went to the veterinarian's office, where the doctor got his bag. After he had all his instruments carefully stowed, he pulled out a heavy sack from the closet.

"What's in that?" asked Arnold.

"Quick-setting plaster," replied Cornby. "I hope we can use it. Otherwise it's this." He pulled a forty-five from his desk drawer, examined it, inserted a clip and stuck it in his pocket.

"Look," said Arnold, "how about that new-fangled splint you used on your dog? Wouldn't something like that work?"

"Maybe, maybe not. That was a Stader splint, and it has been a godsend for small animals and for men, too, for that matter. On horses, as yet,

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it's use is no more certain to effect a cure than a plaster cast."

"Why not?" asked the editor as they got in the car.

"There's the same difficulty as with all methods of setting a horse's leg. There's simply too much weight for such small legs. There's experimentation going on all the time at colleges and veterinarian schools. Every now and then you read an article that someone has discovered a new method of repairing broken bones in horses, but the fact remains that in most cases the horse is through. A plaster cast is still the most widely used, and only in isolated cases is it successful. I hope this is one of them."

Chapter Fifteen

A Long Night

Jim was still sitting on the ground beside Ticktock when Dr. Cornby and the editor arrived. The veterinarian wasted no time, but after a short greeting to the family, immediately went to work. Using a flash light, he made a careful examination of the broken leg. Jim watched every move with painful anxiety. Hopefully he looked at Dr. Cornby's face as the latter stood up from his inspection.

"Can you fix it?" he asked. There was desperate pleading in his voice.

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"I don't know, Jim. It's a clean break, no jagged edges, so we can try. You can usually set a leg, but whether it will be successful is always a gamble. Ticktock and you will play a much more important part in this than I will. You have a much tougher job ahead of you than I have."

"I'm willing to do anything," answered Jim promptly.

The veterinarian looked around appraisingly and then issued instructions. A long lighting cord was found and stretched from the nearest socket to furnish illumination at the pony's side. The accident had occurred beneath one of the large trees in the yard. Thoughtfully Dr. Cornby looked up at a big limb almost directly overhead.

"If we had equipment, the best thing would be to move him out to his stall in the barn, but we'd need a tow truck or a derrick to do it. However, there is always the possibility of doing still more damage by moving him and, also, the sooner we set the leg the better. We are lucky in that we can raise him right here, but if we do, he's going to be here a long time. Now can you rig up some sort of padded frame like the side of a stall so Ticktock can lean against it and rest?"

"Certainly," replied Mr. Meadows. "We can do anything that's necessary."

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"O.K.," said the veterinarian. "Mrs. Meadows, you are going to have a horse cluttering up your back yard for some time." She only smiled to

show her lack of concern, so he continued. "First, I need a good strong block and tackle."

The block and tackle was securely fastened to the limb overhead and then Dr. Cornby produced a wide canvas bellyband to go under Ticktock's body, a breeching and a breast strap. He worked rapidly with only an occasional comment.

"Got to put him out to keep him quiet," he said, producing a jug of liquid and a complicated appearing apparatus with a long tube. "This is chloral hydrate which I am going to administer intravenously in the jugular vein. Just as simple as giving plasma to a person."

Ticktock gave a start of pain and terror as the vein was pierced but in a few minutes his nervous trembling had ceased, his legs relaxed, and his head drooped heavily in Jim's lap.

"I'll have to raise him to get at that leg," said the doctor.

By dint of much pulling, pushing and lifting, the wide bellyband was shoved beneath the mustang's body and the ends hooked to the block and tackle. Slowly and carefully the limp horse was raised. When the inert body was clear of the ground, they readjusted its position and then secured the breast strap and breech band in place to keep Ticktock from sliding out of the sling. The injured animal was then raised until his feet dangled clear of the ground by a few inches. A final adjustment was made so that his hind feet were slightly lower than his fore feet. With his head hanging limply downward, poor Ticktock certainly presented a forlorn and pitiful sight.

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In the meantime, Bill Arnold had been preparing the material for a plaster cast. Dr. Cornby worked rapidly and soon had the leg set and padded ready for it.

"I wish I had a fluoroscope or some means of taking an X ray to see if I have that bone in exact apposition," he said as he worked. "I have to go by touch entirely, but I think I've got it right."

After the plaster cast had been applied and was hardening, the veterinarian sat down to relax for a few minutes. He lighted his pipe and drew in the smoke gratefully. Jim gave a big sigh of relief and looked hopefully at Dr. Cornby. He had been afraid to utter a sound while the doctor had been working, but now he felt he could talk.

"He's going to be all right now, isn't he, Doctor?" he asked anxiously.

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"I wish I could say yes definitely, but I can't, Jim. The battle has only begun. Only the simple part is over. I'm not going to kid you but tell you just what can and does happen in most cases."

"O.K.," said Jim grimly.

"A horse has one of the most sensitive nervous systems of all animals, which is the one thing that makes matters so difficult when they have an accident. They are particularly susceptible to any pain, which makes them writhe around, kick and do everything they shouldn't when they

have a broken bone. On the other hand, you can't keep them quiet by keeping them under dope because their nervous system just won't stand it for any length of time. That's why a race horse seldom recovers from a broken leg—he's such a nervous animal he won't keep still."

"Ticktock's not nervous," said Jim promptly.

"No, he's a rather calm little pony, but on the other hand, he's no placid cow. I've seen times when he acted pretty spirited; so it won't be beer and skittles keeping him quiet. And you've got to do it. Now you notice how sloping a horse's leg is. It's difficult to keep a plaster cast in place—if the break were above the knee it would be next to impossible. The muscles in the leg are very powerful and if the horse starts moving, the contraction of those muscles is enough to pull the bones out of apposition, by that I mean out of line, and then he's done for."

"I'll keep him quiet," said Jim with determination. "I'll stay right here beside Ticktock all the time."

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"It'll be a long vigil," said Dr. Cornby smiling sympathetically. "He's going to be in that sling at least six weeks. Of course, the first two weeks are the most important. After that the bone has begun to knit and won't pull apart so easily. Now the next thing is to keep him happy and eating. I don't know how to tell you to do this. You know the horse and will have to figure it out for yourself. I've known some horses that would absolutely refuse to eat anything when they were in pain. In one case I tried feeding a horse through a tube to keep him alive. Now Ticktock shouldn't be in pain after this, but he'll be nervous being in that sling. You've got to keep him calm and happy enough to eat."

Jim was not discouraged by this ominous warning. He felt confident that he could keep the mustang quiet and contented. Ticktock would eat for him.

"Now there's one more problem," said Dr. Cornby. "We'll lower him in a few minutes so that some of his weight is resting on his feet. I think the way we have him set most of it will be on his hind feet. Each day we'll put more weight on his feet until finally the sling will just be there to keep him from lying down and for him to use when he wants to rest. Now some horses never lie down to sleep. I've had farmers tell me that some of their horses have stood as long as a couple of years without lying down other than to roll when they were in the pasture. Still there's danger when you force a horse to stand for six weeks in a sling that he might get laminitis, or founder."

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"What's that?" asked Arnold.

"It's the same thing that happens when a horse is overworked, allowed to drink all the water he wants and then stand. The blood vessels in the feet are injured. The blood from the arteries passes through tiny blood vessels, called capillaries, into the veins and back to the heart. These little blood vessels are permanently damaged and the coffin joint, inside the hoof, suffers and drops out of position. The sole of the foot also drops. You can help mild cases of founder, but the horse is never up to much

except very light work. Even if he recovers he is usually lame until his blood warms up."

"What can we do to prevent it?" asked Mr. Meadows while Jim listened anxiously.

"Well, building that padded barricade will give him a chance to lean against it and rest. Also, it helps to groom the horse and massage his legs. Don't touch the broken leg at all for a few days though. Beyond that there isn't much that can be done but hope for the best."

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The veterinarian waited until Ticktock awoke, and then lowered him until his feet touched the ground lightly. At first the pony was very groggy and dopey, but as his head cleared he started to struggle. He could not understand why he was hanging in the air and was unable to walk.

"There, there, old boy. You're all right now," said Jim consolingly, patting the mustang on the head.

There was nothing further that Dr. Cornby could do. As it was after three o'clock in the morning, he and the editor prepared to leave. As Dr. Cornby wearily packed his bag, Jim awkwardly tried to express his thanks. He was so grateful that he could find no words adequate to convey the depth of his feeling.

"I know how you feel, Jim," said Dr. Cornby. "Just forget about it and save all your energies for the days ahead. You're going to need all you've got."

Jim firmly refused to leave his pony's side, insisting that he was going to sit up the remainder of the night beside the injured animal. "He might want some water," he said, "or he might get scared and start kicking."

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"All right," said Mr. Meadows who had volunteered to spend the night on watch beside Ticktock. "We'll bring out some blankets and fix up a place where you can lie down if you want to."

Dawn found Jim leaning back against the tree asleep with a blanket around his shoulders. Ticktock dozed quietly in his sling, apparently comfortable and contented. Mrs. Meadows

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discovered them still in deep slumber when she came out to call Jim for breakfast. She looked down fondly at her son's drawn, tired face, hating to awaken him. Reaching down, she shook his shoulder gently.

"Jim, Jim," she said softly. "Come in and have some breakfast."

Jim was ravenous. He looked at Ticktock, who still slept peacefully; so he decided to go in to breakfast. However, as he started toward the house the mustang awoke and stirred restively. No amount of persuasion could have made Jim leave then, so his breakfast was served in the yard. He sat under the big tree hungrily devouring bacon and eggs, sleepy and tired, but happy. He then fed Ticktock, lovingly holding a bucket for the horse to eat and drink. He refused to go more than a few feet from the mustang, chasing away every fly and fussing over Ticktock as if he were a tiny baby. Jean brought apples and choice bits of clover to offer. The pony, instead of refusing to eat, accepted everything until Mr. Meadows became alarmed over Ticktock's large appetite.

"Remember, he's not going to get any exercise for a long time," he warned. "You'll overfeed him if you don't watch out." Mr. Meadows sunk two posts near Ticktock and between them nailed boards which were padded to allow the mustang to rest against the structure comfortably.

The news traveled fast through the countryside and all morning there was a string of visitors. Some came out of sympathy for Jim and others out of pure curiosity. A horse with his leg in a plaster cast was quite an attraction, particularly a famous horse like Ticktock. Jean sternly kept all visitors at a respectful distance, afraid they would alarm the pony. Shortly after noon Timothy came riding down the lane astride a huge Percheron.

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"Just heard about the accident," he said to Jim. "It was certainly tough luck. I thought I'd come see if there was anything I could do."

He examined the injured leg with great interest. "Nice job—sure hope it works." He wasted no further words on condolence but promptly took charge of the situation.

"While it's good weather we better get things rigged up for rain," he said with authority. "We'll fix him a regular stall right here. Roof to shade him and a manger. It would be just as well not to have too much of the yard in plain view—something might scare him."

Together Timothy and Jim stretched a big canvas tarpaulin over Ticktock and pegged the sides securely to the ground. They made a small manger out of boxes and placed it where it was convenient for the mustang. Then they spread straw on the ground around his feet and in a short time had him appearing very comfortable in a tentlike stall. Timothy finished matters by giving the little horse a thorough grooming. The trainer's expert touch and soothing voice kept the pony quiet and contented and for the first time since the accident Jim was able to leave his side without a feeling of alarm.

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"I'll come over about eight and spend the night

with him," said Timothy firmly. "You've already had one tough night and need some sleep."

So Timothy stayed beside the injured horse the second night while Jim slept in his own bed with the soundness that comes of exhaustion.

Chapter Sixteen ***The Convalescence***

For two weeks Jim and Timothy alternated nights beside Ticktock. After several days the mustang seemed resigned to remaining in one spot but grew very spoiled. Unless someone were beside him, he wanted to move about. Dr. Cornby came out daily to inspect Ticktock and check on progress. Timothy proved invaluable, for each day he gave the horse a thorough massage and grooming. His long experience with race horses enabled him to keep the mustang's muscles in trim in spite of his lack of exercise. Each time Timothy finished his daily stint of several hours rubbing and massaging, Jim gave mental thanks that he had made the right decision that first day when he had met Timothy at the hideaway.

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During the day, Jean often spelled Jim in his vigil beside the pony. School started during Ticktock's last week in the sling, but the question of whether Jim should go to school was not even raised—he stayed beside his horse. When the day finally arrived to take Ticktock from the sling, there was a large audience. Timothy, of course, was present, having brought Mr. Hernstadt with him. Bill Arnold, the editor, was there to report the big event for the *Springdale Gazette*. Dr. Cornby brought two colleagues from neighboring towns who watched with professional interest. Altogether there was a very attentive gallery as the veterinarian removed the cast and gave the signal for Mr. Meadows to lower away slowly.

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Ticktock gradually had been allowed to put more weight on his feet for several weeks so at first when the sling was removed he noticed no difference. Jim stood at his head, talking soothingly but watching anxiously. Then he led Ticktock forward for a few tentative steps. The mustang walked somewhat uncertainly, due to his long period of inaction, but he did not seem to be limping or favoring his injured leg.

"I believe we've done it," said Dr. Cornby jubilantly. "He seems to be good as new, Jim!"

Jim threw his arms around his horse's neck and hugged him in ecstasy. "You're all right now, Ticktock. You're all well again."

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"I'd just lead him around for a few minutes a day at first, Jim. Don't let him run at all for six weeks and aside from when you're exercising him, keep him in the stall. You should wait at least three months before you ride him."

Jim led his horse out to the barn where he had his stall prepared. He wanted to be alone with the pony for a few minutes. Tears of happiness were welling up in his eyes—tears that he preferred no one see.

The following week Jim started to school. Ticktock progressed rapidly and six weeks later was grazing contentedly in the orchard. He wondered impatiently why Jim had not ridden him for so long, but otherwise he was content. One day Mr. Meadows had just taken a reassuring look at the mustang and was crossing the yard toward the house when Ticktock raised his head and, looking down the road, whinnied. Mr. Meadows followed the horse's gaze with idle curiosity at first, and then stared in frank puzzlement. Coming up the road was an odd-looking wagon followed by a long string of horses. Had Jim been home, or Ticktock able to talk they could have told Mr. Meadows that the old man on the driver's seat was Ned Evarts, the horse trader, but as it was, the farmer had to figure out the mystery by himself. The strange procession came on up the road and turned without hesitation into the lane. Mr. Meadows stared curiously at the sombreroed driver and the odd assortment of horses. Due to the initial resentment at Jim's having traded the gold watch for Ticktock, the horse trader and his unusual cavalcade had never been discussed much by Jim and his father. It was only as the wagon stopped and the driver climbed down that Mr. Meadows began to suspect the identity of his visitor.

"My name's Evarts," said the old man, introducing himself. "Are you Meadows?"

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"That's right," said Carl Meadows, shaking hands with Evarts.

"Last spring I swapped your son a horse. Still got him?"

"Sure have. He's over there in the orchard," replied Jim's father.

"Yep, that's him all right," said the horse trader, shading his eyes from the sun with one hand while he looked at Ticktock. "He's lookin' much better than when I saw him last."

"He's been getting good care," said Carl Meadows, grinning. "In fact he's practically been fed with a spoon lately."

"When I traded with your boy I was a bit doubtful about the deal, as he gave me a gold watch for the horse," said Evarts. "I asked him if he was sure it was all right, and he reckoned it was. Some days later I happened to take the watch apart again and I noticed that engravin' on the back. While I ain't doubtin' that the watch belonged to your son, I figured you might set a big store by it, seein' it's been in the family so long. Anyhow I held onto it and if you're a mind to trade back, I still have the watch."

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"I've been wrong on so many counts concerning that horse it's getting kinda monotonous," said Mr. Meadows almost to himself.

"What's that?" asked Evarts.

"Nothing. No, I wouldn't consider trading back," said Mr. Meadows stoutly. "I was a bit mad at the time, but Jim sure knew what he was doing. Now I wouldn't swap that mustang for your whole string. I'd like to buy the watch though."

"How about forty-five dollars?"

"Fair enough. I'll buy it."

"Made money on that horse after all," said the old man, grinning as he pocketed his money.

"I'm glad you did, because that mustang is just about the most valuable horse in the country. Also the most famous in the state."

"What's he done?"

"Well, for one thing he's just recovered from a broken leg. Had the cannon bone broken and you'd never know it now."

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"Well, I'll be hanged," said Evarts in amazement, as he walked toward the orchard fence. "How'd he break it?"

"The barn caught on fire one night and he broke out. He jumped the fence and broke his leg when he landed. That's what woke us. Must have saved me a thousand dollars worth of stock. I had the barn insured against fire but not the stock. That's just one of the reasons why we wouldn't part with him."

"Well, I'm sure pleased you're satisfied with him. As I said, I was a bit worried at the time, tradin' with a boy."

"I've quit worrying about Jim getting beat in a trade," said Mr. Meadows proudly. "He's quite a businessman. I guess he made at least seventy-five dollars with that horse during the summer."

Mr. Meadows was still recounting Ticktock's exploits when Jim returned from school.

"Hi, Mr. Evarts!" he shouted as he came through the gate. "How do you like the looks of my horse?"

"Wonderful. He looks like he'd found horse heaven."

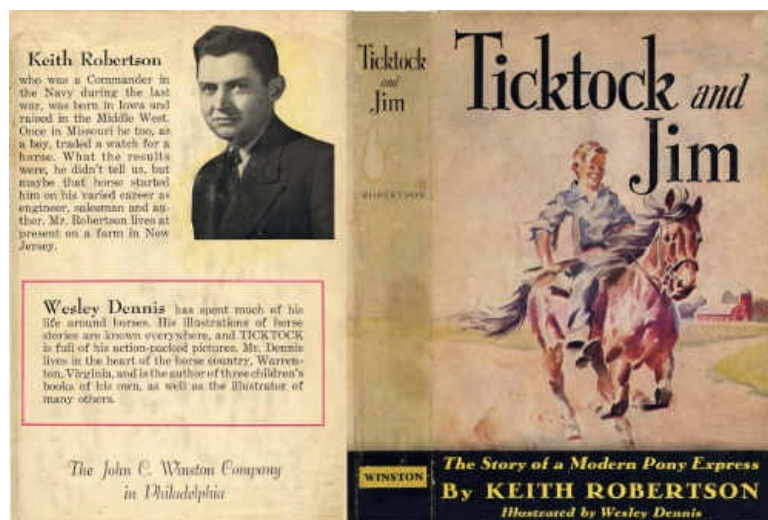
"Don't mention that watch," warned Mr.

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Meadows as Jim approached. "I'll surprise him on his birthday. Not very often you can give the same present twice. Probably end up with an elephant this time."

Ticktock came trotting up to the fence to welcome his master. He stuck his nose over the top wire, begging for some tidbit. Surprisingly enough it was Mr. Meadows who reached in his pocket and produced a sugar cube. He held it in his outstretched palm. Ticktock could see plainly enough that it was sugar, but he hesitated. Mr. Meadows had long since forgotten his old hostility but the mustang remembered. However, he wasn't the horse to hold a grudge; so he looked inquiringly at Jim. Jim grinned and nodded his head.

Ticktock reached out to take the sugar.



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