

LEVELLING WITH ELISHA

Charles E. Van Loan

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The Bald-faced Kid shivered as he roosted on the paddock fence, for the dawn was raw and cold and his overcoat was hanging in the back room of a pawnbroker's establishment some two hundred miles away. Circumstances which he had unsuccessfully endeavored to control made it a question of the overcoat or the old-fashioned silver stop watch. The choice was not a difficult one. "I can get along without the benny," reflected the Kid, "because I'm naturally warmblooded, but take away my old white kettle and I'm a soldier gone to war without his gun."

In the language of the tack rooms, the Bald-faced Kid was a hustler—a free lance of the turf, playing a lone hand against owner and bookmaker, matching his wits against secret combinations and operating upon the wheedled capital of the credulous. He was sometimes called a tout, but this he resented bitterly, explaining the difference between a tout and a hustler. "A tout will have six suckers betting on six different horses in the same race. Five of 'em have got to lose. A tout is guessing all the time, but a hustler is likely to know something. One horse a race is my motto—sometimes only one horse a day, but I've got to know something before I lead the sucker into the betting ring.... What is a sucker? Huh! He's a foolish party who bets money for a wise boy because the wise boy never has any money to bet for himself!"

Picking winners was the serious business of the Kid's life, hence the early morning hours and the careful scrutiny of the daybreak workouts.

Bitter experience had taught the Kid the error of trusting men, but up to a certain point he trusted horses. He depended upon his silver stop watch to divide the thoroughbreds into two classes—those which were short of work and those which were ready. The former he eliminated as unfit; the latter he ceased to trust, for the horse which is ready becomes a betting tool, at the mercy of the bookmaker, the owner, and the strong-armed little jockey.

"Which one are they going to bet on today," was the Kid's eternal question. "Which one is going to carry the cheeks?"

Across the track, dim in the gray light, a horse broke swiftly from a canter into the full racing stride. Something clicked in the Kid's palm.

"Got you!" he muttered.

His eye followed the horse up the back stretch into the gloom of the upper turn where the flying figure was lost in the deep shade of the trees. One shadow detached itself from the others and appeared at the head of the straightaway. The muffled thud of hoofs became audible, rising in swift crescendo as the shadow resolved itself into a gaunt bay horse with a tiny negro boy crouched motionless in the saddle. A rush, a flurry, a spatter of clods, a low-flying drift of yellow dust and the vision passed, but the Bald-faced Kid had seen enough to compensate him for the early hours and the lack of breakfast. He glanced at his watch.

"Old Elisha, under wraps and fighting for his head," was his comment. "The nigger didn't let him out any part of the way. . . . Oh, you prophet of Israel!"

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"What did that bird step the three-quarters in?" asked a voice, and the Kid turned to confront Squeaking Henry, also a hustler, and at times a competitor.

"Dunno; I didn't clock him," lied the Kid.

"That was Old Man Curry's nigger Mose," continued Squeaking Henry, so-called because of his plaintive whine, "and I was wondering if the horse wasn't Elijah. I didn't get a good look at him. Maybe it was Obadiah or Nehemiah. Did you ever hear such a lot of names in your life? They tell me Old Man Curry got 'em out of the Bible. The Kid nodded. "Bible horses are in fine company at this track," chuckled Squeaking Henry. "I Been here a week now, and darned if I can get onto the angles. I guess Old Man Curry is the only owner here who ain't in business with some bookmaker or other. Look at that King William yesterday! He was twenty pounds the best in the race and he come fifth. The jock did everyting to him but cut his throat. What are you goin' to do when they run 'em in and out like that? . . . Say, Kid, was that Elijah or was it another one of them Bible beetles? I didn't get a good look at him."

The Bald-faced Kid stole a sidelong glance at Squeaking Henry.

"Neither did I," said he. "Why don't you ask Old Man Curry which horse it was? He'd tell you. He's just foolish enough to do it."

Halfway up the back stretch a shabby, elderly man leaned against the fence, thoughtfully chewing a straw as he watched the little negro check the bay horse to a walk. He had the flowing beard of a patriarch, the mild eye of a deacon, the calm untroubled brow of a philosopher, and his rusty black frock coat lent him a certain simple dignity quite rare upon the race tracks of the Jungle Circuit. In the tail pocket of the coat was something rarer still a well-thumbed Bible, for this was Old Man Curry, famous as the owner of Isaiah, Elijah, Obadiah, Esther, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Elisha, Nehemiah, and Ruth. In his spare moments he read the Psalms of David for pleasure in their rolling cadences and the Proverbs of Solomon for profit in their wisdom, which habit alone was sufficient to earn for him a reputation for eccentricity.

Old Man Curry clinched this general opinion by entering into no entangling alliances with brother owners, and the bookmaker did not live who could call him friend. He attended strictly to his own business, which was training horses and racing them to win, and while he did not swear, drink liquor, or smoke, he proved he was no Puritan by chewing fine-cut tobacco and betting on his horses when he thought they had a chance to win and the odds were to his liking. For the latter he claimed Scriptural precedent.

"Wasn't the children of Israel commanded to spile the Egyptians?" said he. "Wasn't thay? Well, then! The way I figger it times has changed a lot since then, but the principle's the same. There's some children of Israel making book 'round here that need to be spiled a heap worse'n Pharaoh ever did." Then, after thought: "But you got to go some to spile bad eggs." As the little negro drew near, the blackness of his visage was illuminated by a sudden flash of ivory. Elisha snorted and shook his head from side to side. Old Man Curry stepped forward and laid his hand upon the bridle.

"Well, Mose?" said he. The small rider gurgled as he slipped from the saddle:

"Nothin' to it, nothin' to it a-a-atall. 'Is 'Lisha bird, he's ready to fly. Yes, suh, he's prepaied to show all 'em otheh hawsses which way 'is track runs!"

"Went good, did he, Mose?"

"Good! He like to pull my ahms off, at's how good he went! Yes, suh, he was jus' buck-jumpin' all 'e way down 'at stretch. 'Ey kin all be in front of him tuhnnin' fo' to-morreh, an' he'll go by 'em so fas' 'ey won't know which way

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he went!"

Old Man Curry nodded. "Elisha ain't no front runner," said he. "He's like his daddy does all his running in the last quarter. He comes from behind."

"Sure does!" chirped Mose. "All I got to do is fetch him into 'e stretch, swing wide so he got plenty of room to ambulate hisse'f, boot him once in 'e slats, an' good night an' goodby! Ol' 'Lisha jus' tip his to 'em otheh haws—ses an' say: 'Scuse me, gen'elmen an' ladies, but I got mos' uhgent business down yondeh 'bout quahteh of a mile; 'em judges waitin' faw me.' 'At's whut he say, boss. Nothin' to it a—a—atall."

"Give him plenty of room, Mose."

"Sutny will. Won't git me nothin' stickin' on 'at rail. 'Em white bu'glahs don't seem to crave me nohow, no time; 'ey jus' be tickled to death to put me an' 'Lisha oveh 'e fence if we git clost 'nough to it. Yes, indeed; I 'low to give 'is hawss all 'e room whut is on a race track!"

Old Man Curry led Elisha toward his barn, the little negro trailing behind, addressing the horse in terms of endearment. "You ol' wolf, onliest way to beat you to—morreh is to saw all yo' laigs off. You as full of run as a hydrant, 'at's what you are, ain't you, 'Lisha?"

Two horsemen were standing in the door of a feed room as the queer procession passed. They interrupted a low-toned conversation to exchange significant glances. "Speak of the devil," said one, "and there he goes now. Been working that horse for the last race to—morrow."

"It won't get him anything," said the other. "You can forget that he's entered."

The first speaker was short and stout, with no personal beauty to be marred by the knife scar which ran from the lobe of his left ear to the point of his chin, a broad, red welt in the blackish stubble of his beard. This was Martin O'Connor, owner of the Sunrise racing stable, sometimes known as Grouchy O'Connor.

His companion was a smooth-faced, dapper gold-toothed blond, apparently not more than twenty-five years of age. Innocence circled his sleek towhead like a halo; good cheer radiated from him in ceaseless waves. His glance was direct and compelling and his smile invited confidences; he seemed almost too young and entirely too artless for his surroundings. The average observer would have pitied him for a lamb among wolves, and the pity would have been misplaced, for Al Engle was older than he looked by several sinful semesters and infinitely wiser than he had any honest right to be. His frank, boyish countenance was at once a cloak and an asset; it had beguiled many a man to his financial hurt. He was shrewd, intelligent, unscrupulous, and acquisitive; the dangerous head of a small clique of horse owners which was doing its bad best to remove the element of chance from the sport of kings. In his touting days he had been given the name of the Sharpshooter and in his prosperity it clung to him.

"Forget that he's entered, eh?" repeated O'Connor. "Elisha Elisha I don't seem to place that horse."

"His name used to be Silver Star," said the Sharpshooter.

"That dog?" said O'Connor, disgustedly. "Let's see; wasn't he at Butte last season?"

"Yes. Cricket Caley owned him."

"The little old jock that died last spring?"

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"Same one. This horse Silver Star was all he had and Cricket used to ride him himself. Rank quitter. I've seen Caley boot and kick and slash this bird until he wore himself out; he'd quit just the same. Wouldn't run a lick after he got into the stretch.

"Then one day Cricket slipped him over at a long price. Don't know how he did it. Hop, most likely. Got somebody to bet on Silver Star at 25 to 1 and took quite a little chunk of money out of the ring. That was Caley's last race; he'd been cheating the undertakers for years. Before he died he gave the horse to Old Man Curry. They'd been friends, but if a friend of mine gave me a horse like that and didn't throw in a dog collar, he couldn't run fast enough to get away from me. Curry put in an application to the Jockey Club and had the name changed from Silver Star to Elisha. Won't have anything but Bible names, the old nut!

"Curry hasn't won with him yet, and I'd hate to be hanging by the neck until he does, because if ever there was a no-account hound masquerading with a mane and tail, it's the one you just saw go by here. He won't gather anything to-morrow. Forget him."

O'Connor hesitated a moment; he was a cautious soul. "Might tell Grogan and Merritt to look after him," he suggested.

"No need to. And that bullet-headed little nigger wouldn't like anything better than a chance to holler to the judges. The horse ain't got a chance, I tell you. Wouldn't have with the best rider in the world. Forget him."

"Well just as you say, Al. Broadsword's good enough to beat him, I reckon."

"Of course he is! Forget this Elisha. Go on and figure just the same as if he wasn't in the race."

The Sharpshooter and his friends, through their betting commissioners, backed Broadsword from 4 to 1 to even money. The horse was owned by O'Connor and ridden by Jockey Grogan. Bald Eagle, Amphion, and Remorseful were supposed to be the contenders, but their riders jogged blithely to the post with Broadsword tickets in their bootlegs and riding orders of a sort to make those pasteboards valuable.

Jockey Moseby Jones, on Elisha, was overlooked when these favors were surreptitiously distributed, but his bootleg was not empty. There was a ticket in it which called for twenty-two dollars in case Elisha won a two-dollar bet at 10 to 1. It was put there by Old Man Curry just before the bugle blew.

"Bring him home in front, Mose," said the old man.

"Sutny will!" grinned the negro. "You betting much on him, boss?"

"I visited a while with the children of Israel," said Curry gravely. "Remember now—lots of room when you turn for home."

"Yes, suh. I won't git clost 'nough to 'em scound'els faw 'em do nothin' but say 'Heah he comes' an' 'Yondeh he goes.' Won't slam me into no fence; I'm comin' back by ovehland route!"

Later O'Connor, who had been bidden to forget Elisha, remembered him. Broadsword led into the stretch by four open lengths, hugging the rail. Mose trailed the bunch around the upper turn, brought Elisha smartly to the outside, kicked the bay horse in the ribs with his spurs and said:

"Whut yo' doin' heah? Go 'long about yo' business!"

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Jockey Grogan, already spending his fifty dollar ticket, heard warning yells from the rear and sat down to ride, but it was too late. Elisha, coming with a tremendous rush, was already on even terms with Broadsword. Three strides and daylight showed between them. It was all over but the shouting, and there was very little of that, for Elisha had few friends in the crowd.

"Hah!" ejaculated the presiding judge, tugging at his stubby grey moustache. "Old Man Curry put one over on the boys, or I miss my guess. Yes, sir, he beat the good thing and spilled the beans. Elisha, first; Broadsword, second; that thing of Engle's, third. Serve 'em right! Hah!"

Martin O'Connor standing on the outskirts of the betting ring, searching a limited vocabulary for language with which to garnish his emotions, felt a nudge at his elbow. It was the Sharpshooter.

"Go away from me! Don't talk to me!" sputtered O'Connor. "You make me sick! I thought you said that dog couldn't run! You're a swell prophet, you are, you you "

Al Engle smiled as he slipped his binoculars into the case. "I may not be a prophet," said he, "but I'll have one in my barn to-night."

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing, only that's too good a horse for Curry to own. I'm going to take Elisha away from him."

"Going to run him up,"

"As far as the old man will go."

"Well, look out you don't start a selling-race war."

The Sharpshooter sneered. "Curry hasn't got nerve enough to fight us," said he.

Now the "selling race" is an institution devised and created for the protection of owners against owners, the theory being to prevent the running of horses out of their proper class.

An owner, entering a selling race, must set a price upon his horse let us say five hundred dollars. Should the horse win, it must be offered for sale at that figure, the owner being given the right to protect his property in a bidding contest.

In case the animal changes hands, the original owner receives five hundred dollars, and no more. If the horse has been bid up to one thousand dollars, the racing association shares the run-up with the owner of the horse which finished second. It will readily be seen that this system discourages the practice of entering a two-thousand-dollar horse in a five-hundred-dollar selling race, but it also permits a disgruntled owner to revenge himself upon a rival. Some of the bitterest feuds in turf history have grown out of "selling-race wars."

Little Mose brought Elisha back into the ring, saluted the judges, and, dismounting, began to unsaddle. Old Man Curry came wandering down the track from the paddock gate where he had watched the race. He was chewing a straw reflectively, and the tails of his rusty black frock coat flapped in the breeze like the garment of a scarecrow. Mose, with the saddle, bridle, blanket, and weight pad in his arms, disappeared under the judges' stand where the clerk of the scales weighed him together with his tackle.

The associate judge came out on the steps of the pagoda with a programme in his hand. Mose bounced into view, handed his tackle to Shanghai, Curry's hostler, and started for the jockeys' room, singing to himself out of sheer

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lightness of heart. He knew what he would do with that twenty-two-dollar ticket. There was a crap game every night at the O'Connor stable.

"All right, judge!" called the clerk of the scales. "Shoot!"

The associate judge cleared his throat, nodded to Old Man Curry, fingered his programme and began to speak in a dull, slurring monotone, droning out the formula as prescribed for such occasions:

"Elisha winner'v this race entered to be sold four hundred dollars Any bids?"

"Five hundred!"

Old Man Curry, leaning against the top rail of the fence, started slightly and turned his eyes in the direction of the sound. The Sharpshooter flashed his gold teeth at him in a cheerful smile. Old Man Curry shrugged his shoulders and rolled the straw from one corner of his mouth to the other. The associate Judge looked at him, asking a question with his eyebrows. There was a stir in the crowd about the stand. A bidding contest is always an added attraction.

"Friend, you don't want this hoss," expostulated Old Man Curry, addressing Engle. "He ain't a race hoss; he's a trick hoss. You don't want him."

"What about you, Curry?" asked the associate judge.

"Oh, well," said the old man, slowly. "And five."

"Six hundred!"

Old Man Curry seemed annoyed. He combed his beard with his fingers.

"And five," said he.

"Seven hundred!"

Old Man Curry took time for reflection. Then he sighed deeply.

"Maybe you want him worse 'n I do, friend," said he. "And five."

"Eight hundred!"

Old Man Curry smothered an impatient ejaculation, threw away his straw and ransacked his pockets for his packet of fine-cut.

"Might as well make it a good one while we're at it," said he. "And five."

"One thousand!" said the Sharpshooter, his smile broadening. "Pretty fair price for a trick horse, eh, Curry?"

The old man paused with a generous helping of tobacco halfway to its destination. He regarded Engle with unblinking gravity.

"The words of his mouth were smoother than butter,' he quoted, 'but war was in his heart.' That's from Psalms, young man.... Now, it's this way with a trick hoss: a lot depends on whether you know the trick or not . . . One

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thousand! . . . Shucks! Now I know you want him worse 'n I do !" Old Man Curry hoisted the tails of his coat, thrust his hands into the hip pockets of his trousers, hunched his shoulders level with his ears and turned away.

"You ain't quitting, are you," demanded the Sharpshooter.

"Friend, " said Old Man Curry, "I ain't even started yet. It appears upon the face of the returns that you have bought one big, red hoss. . . . A trick hoss. To show you how I feel about it, I'm going to throw in a bridle with him.... Good-by, Elisha. The Philistines have got ye . . . for a thousand dollars."

It was dusk and Old Man Curry paced up and down under his stable awning, his hands clasped behind his back and his head bowed at a meditative angle. The Bald-faced Kid recalled him to earth by his breezy greeting, and what it lacked in reverence it made up in good will. Old Man Curry and the hustler were friends, each possessing traits which the other respected.

"Well, old-timer, you out airing your lace curtains a little?"

"Eh? What? Oh, good evening, Frank, good evening! I been walking up and down some. You know what it says in Ecclesiastes: 'In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider.' I been considering."

"Uh, huh," said the Bald-faced Kid, falling into step, "and you sure reached out and grabbed some adversity in that third race today, what? I had a finnil bet on friend Isaiah my own money, too; that's how good I thought he was. They pretty near bumped the shoes off him in the back stretch and they had him in a pocket all the way to the paddock gate, and even so, he was only beat about the length of your nose. Adversity is right!" Old Man Curry nodded. "Say," said the Kid, lowering his voice, "I just wanted to tell you that next Tuesday the Engle bunch will be levelling with Elisha."

Curry paused in his stride and eyed the youth intently.

"Who told you?" said he.

"Never you mind," said the Kid, airily.

"I'm a kind of a private information bureau and detective agency 'round this track, and my hours are from twelve to twelve, twice a day. I shake hands with the night watchman when he comes on duty and I'm here to give the milkman the high sign in the morning. They tell me things they've seen and heard. I've got a drag with the bartenders and the waiters in the track cafe and the telegraph operator is my pal.

"Now Engle has had Elisha for two weeks. He's started him three times and Elisha hasn't been in the money once. People are saying that when Engle bought the horse he didn't buy the prescription that goes with him.... Don't interrupt me; everybody knows you never had a hop horse in your barn.... It's my notion that Elisha can win any time they get ready to cut him loose for the kopecs. Engle has been cheating with him to get a price and using the change of owners for an alibi. They'll get their price the next time out and clean up a barrel of money. You can gamble on this tip. It's straight as gospel."

"That's pretty straight, son." Old Man Curry squared his shoulders and looked over the Kid's head toward the track, where the empty grand stand loomed dark against the evening sky. "Next Tuesday!" said he. "Just about what I thought . . . but tell me, son why did you bring this to me?"

The Bald-faced Kid laughed harshly.

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"Well, maybe it's because you're the only man round here that calls me Frank it's my name and I like to hear it once in a while. Maybe it's because you staked me once when I was broke and didn't take my right eye for security. Maybe it's because I figure we can both get something out of it for ourselves. If Engle is going to cut a melon, we might as well have a knife in it too."

"Ah!" said Old Man Curry, and he paced the entire length of the barn before he spoke again.

"Well, you see, son, it's this way about cutting a melon. You want to be sure it ain't green . . . or rotten."

" Huh? "

Old Man Curry placed his hand on the Kid's shoulder.

"My boy," said he, kindly, "you make a living by by sort of advising folks what to bet on, don't you? If they're kind of halting between two opinions, as the Book says, you sort of help 'em out, eh?"

The Bald-faced Kid grinned broadly.

"I guess that's about the size of it," said he.

"Well, if you've got any reg'lar customers, don't invite 'em to have a slice of Engle's melon next Tuesday. It might disagree with 'em."

"But I don't see how you're going to get away from Elisha! He's fit and ready and right on edge. You can throw out his last three races. He's good enough to win without any framing."

"I know he is, son. Didn't I train him? Now you've told me something that I've been trying to find out, and I've told you something you never could find out. Don't ask me any more. . . . No use talking, Frank, Solomon was a great man. Some time I hope to have a race hoss fit to be named after him. I've never seen one yet."

"Where does Solomon get in on this proposition?" demanded the youth.

Old Man Curry chuckled

"You don't read him," he said. "Solomon wrote a lot of advice that hossmen can use. For instance: 'A prudent man foreseeth the evil and hideth himself, but the simple pass on and are punished.' I've told you this Engle melon ain't as ripe as they think it is. You be prudent and don't ask me how I know."

"If the frame-up goes wrong what 'll win?" asked the kid.

"Well," said the old man, "my hoss Elijah's in that same race, but it's a little far for him. I ain't going to bet anything. Sometimes it comes handy to know these things."

"You spoke an armful then!" said the Kid. Well, I've got to be going. I'll keep this under my hat."

"So do, son," said Old Man Curry. "So do. Good night."

The Bald-faced Kid reflected aloud as he departed.

"And some people think that old fellow don't know the right way of the track!" he murmured. "Gee! I'd give something to be in with what he's got up his sleeve!"

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Old Man Curry was still tramping up and down when little Mose returned from his nightly foray upon—the crap games of the neighbourhood. The boy approached silently and with lagging gait, sure signs that fortune had not been kind to him. When the dice behaved well it was his habit to return with songs and improvised dance steps.

"Talk 'bout luck!" said he, morosely. "You know 'at flat-foot Swede whut swipes faw Mist' O'Conneh? Hungry Hanson, 'ey calls him. Well, he goes crazy 'ith 'e heat an' flang 'em bones jus' like he's got 'em ejicated. Done tossed out nine straight licks, boss. Seems to me 'at's mo' luck 'an a Swede ought to have!"

"Mose," said Old Man Curry suddenly, "Job was no hossman."

"I neveh 'cused him of it," replied Mose sulkily.

"A hossman wouldn't have wanted his adversary to write a book. If he'd said make a book, now . . . but the best way to get square with an adversary is to have him start a hoss in the same race with you, Mose."

"I'll take yo' word faw it, boss," said Mose. "When you go talkin' 'bout Job an' Sol'mun an' 'em Bible folks, you got me ridin' on a track I don't know nothin' 'bout. Nothin' a—a—atall."

It was Tuesday afternoon and little Mose was struggling into his riding boots. The other jockeys dressed in the jockeys' room at the paddock inclosure, but Mose found it pleasanter to don the silks in the tack room of Old Man Curry's barn, which also served him as a sleeping apartment. The old man sat on the edge of Mose's cot, speaking earnestly and slapping th" said he.

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"The big thing is to get him away from the post. I want Elijah out there in front when you turn for home. With his early speed, he ought to be leading into the stretch. Elisha will come from behind; Engle is smart enough for that. He'll have to pass you somewhere, because Elijah will begin to peter out after he's gone half a mile. Pull in as close to Elisha as you can, but not so close that Merritt can claim a foul, and — you know the rest."

Mose nodded soberly. "Sutny do, boss. But I neveh knowed 'at ol' 'Lisha — "

"That 'll do," said Old Man Curry sternly. "There's lots of things you don't know, Mose."

"Yes, suh," said the little negro, subsiding. "Quite a many."

Later the Bald-faced Kid came to Old Man Curry in the paddock

"Elisha looks awful good," said he, "and they're commencing to set in the checks. He opened at 4 to 1, went up to 6, and they've hammered him down to 2 to 1 now. I hear they're playing the bulk of their money in the pool rooms all over the coast.... Elisha looks as if he could win, eh?"

Old Man Curry combed his beard.

"You can't always tell by the looks of a melon what's inside it, my son."

"Engle is telling everybody that the horse ain't quite ready," persisted the hustler "Of course they don't want everybody betting on him and spoiling the price."

"He's doing 'em a kindly act without knowing it," said Old Man Curry. "That's 'bout the only way he'll ever do one, Frank, unbeknownst like."

"You're not betting on this one?" asked the

"Not a thin dime's worth. It's too far for him."

"I give it up." The Kid shook his head, hopelessly. "You're too many for me."

The presiding judge came out on the platform in front of the stand and watched the horses dance along the rail on their way to the post, coats glistening, eyes flashing, nostrils flaring — one of the prettiest sights the turf offers to its patrons. "Merritt on Elisha again," said the judge. "Merritt. Hm—m—m. That young man is entirely too strong in the arms to suit me. It struck me the last three times he rode this horse. But somebody is betting on Elisha to—day. That may make a difference, and if it does, we may have to ask Mr. Sharpshooter Engle a few questions."

"Leave it to him to answer 'em," said the associate judge. "It's the best thing he does. That fellow is like a hickory nut — smooth on the outside, but hard, awfully hard, to get anything out of . . . Old Man Curry is in this race with Elijah. Little far for him, isn't it?"

In the very top row of the grand stand Grouchy Martin O'Connor waited for Al Engle. Just as the horses reached the post, the Sharpshooter slipped in, breathless and fumbling at the catch of his binocular case. "He was 6 to 5 when I came through the betting ring," said Engle. "Well, any old price is a good price. He'll roll home. "

"He better. He owes me something," growled O'Connor. "This is where he pays you."

"I hope so. "

"I saw Old Man Curry out in the paddock," and Engle smiled at the recollection. "What do you think the old coot said to me?"

"What do I care what an old nut says?"

"Nobody cares, of course, but this was kind of funny. After the horses started for the post he came up to me, solemn as a judge, and says he: 'Remember, I told you this was a trick horse.' Just like that. They ought to have a look at his head. He's got an attic for rent, sure."

"Must have. But what does he mean by that trick—horse stuff? He pulled it on you a couple of times when you ran Elisha up on him."

"Darned if I know. I guess that's just his vey of kidding. . . . Hello! They're off!"

"Yes, and that thing of Curry's got away flying."

LEVELLING WITH ELISHA

"He'll quit about the time he hits the head of the stretch," said Engle. "He gets his mail there . . . Merritt has got Elisha in on the rail, taking it easy, as I told him to. Believe me, that baby is some stretch runner!"

"It cost me enough to find it out!" said O'Connor shortly.

Engle peered through his binoculars.

"Unless he breaks a leg, or something" — here O'Connor hastily knocked wood — "we'll clean up," said Engle, critically. "Elisha is fighting for his head — wants to run. I don't care where he is, turning for home. He'll run over that bunch in the last quarter."

"Yes, but look at that Elijah go!" muttered O'Connor.

"Let him go!" said Engle, with a trace of irritation. "He'll come back; he always does. Bet you fifty he's last!"

"Got you!" snapped O'Connor. "You may not know any more about this one than you did about Elisha last month!"

The dots of color skimmed around the upper turn, one of them so far ahead that it seemed lonely. This was Elijah, burning his early speed, jack-rabbing ten lengths in front of his field, but beginning to notice his exertions and feel the swift pace.

"Lijah," remarked little Mose, looking back over his shoulder, "if eveh you finds a race track whut's got a short home stretch in it, you'll be 'notheh Roseben. Sutny will. Onliest trouble 'ith you, 'Lijah, 'em stretches built too long faw you. Put 'e judges' stand up heah whah we is now, an' yo' neveh lose a race! . . . Uh, huh! Heah come 'Lisha now; 'em otheh jocks lettin' him th'ough on 'e rail . . . Come on, honey blossom ! We's waitin' faw you. Come on!"

Said the presiding judge: "That thing in front is quitting to nothing . . . and here comes Elisha through on the rail . . . Yes, he's a real race horse to-day. Better see Engle about this. Have to teach him that he can't run his horses in and out at this track!"

Said Al Engle: "What did I tell you? Running over horses, ain't he? He'll have that Elijah grabbed in a few more jumps . . . Take it easy, Merritt! Don't win too far with him!"

Martin O'Connor heaved a great sigh of relief. Like all cautious souls, he never ceased to worry until the last doubt was dispelled. The weary, staggering Elijah was the only barrier between Elisha and the goal. O'Connor's practiced eye saw no menace in that floundering front runner; no danger in a shaft already spent. "He wins! He wins easy!" breathed Martin.

"Just rolls home, I tell you!" said the Sharpshooter, putting away his binoculars. "I knew he would."

By leaps and bounds the stretch— running Elisha overhauled his former stable companion. Poor, tired Elijah was rocking in his gait, losing ground almost as fast as Elisha was gaining it; his race was behind him; he could do no more.

Mose, keeping watch out of the tail of his eye, saw the bay head bobbing close behind. Now it was at Elijah's heels; the next stride would bring it level with the saddle . . . The next stride.

All that anyone ever saw was that Jockey Moseby Jones leaned slightly toward the flying Elisha as Merritt drew alongside, and very few spectators saw this much. Who cares to watch a loser when the winner is in sight? Old Man Curry, waiting at the paddock gate, saw the movement and immediately began to search his pockets for tobacco.

Jockey Merritt, strong of arm but weak of principle, was first to realize that something had happened. Elisha's speed checked with such suddenness that the rider narrowly escaped pitching out of the saddle . . . Had the horse stumbled . . . or been frightened! . . . What in the world was it? . . . Merritt recovered his balance and quite instinctively drove the spurs home; the only response was a grunt from Elisha. The long racing stride shortened to a choppy one. The horse was not tired, nor was he quitting in the general acceptance of the term; he was merely stopping to a walk with all possible speed. Merritt was seized with panic. He drew his whip and began slashing savagely. Elisha answered this by waving his tail high in the air, a protest and a flag of truce — but run he would not. His pace grew slower and slower and at the paddock gate he was on even terms with the drooping Elijah. "What ails that horse?" demanded the presiding judge. "He won't run a lick!! Acts as if he's taken a sulky streak all at once!"

"Yes," said the associate. "The Bible horses are having a contest to see which one of 'em can quit the fastest . . . Queer-looking race, judge. And they bet on Elisha this time, too."

"I'm glad of it!" exploded the other "It serves 'em right. I like to see a frame up go wrong once in a while!"

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Side by side Elijah and Elisha fell back toward the field, little Mose grinning from ear to ear, but industriously hand riding his mount; Jockey Merritt cursing wildly and plying rawhide and steel with all his strength. The other horses, coming on with a closing rush, enveloped the pair, passed them and continued on toward the wire.

Only one remark of Martin O'Connor's is fit for quotation. It came when his vocabulary was bare of vituperation, abusive epithet, and profanity.

"You can slip me fifty, Engle. That darned trick horse of yours was last!"

An inquisitive soul is an itching thing and the gathering of information was the Bald-faced Kid's ruling passion. He called at Old Man Curry's stable that evening with a bit of news which he hoped to use as the key to a secret.

"Greetings!" said he at the tack-room door. "Thought you'd like to know that Engle has sold Elisha. Pete Lawrence bought him for three hundred dollars. Engle says that's two-ninety-five more than he'd bring at a soap works."

Old Man Curry had been reading by the light of the tack-room lantern; he pushed his glasses back on his forehead and smiled at his informant.

"Oh, Elisha!" said he. "Yes, if you look in the second stall to the right, you'll find him. He's been straying among the publicans and sinners, but he's home again now where he belongs. I asked Pete to go over and buy him for me."

"Good work!" said the Kid, seating himself. "There's quite a mass meeting over at Engle's barn."

"So?" said Old Man Curry.

"Yes indeed! They've got Jock Merritt up on the carpet and they haven't decided yet whether to hang him to a rafter or boil him in oil. Some of 'em think he pulled Elisha to-day. Merritt is giving 'em a powerful argument. Says he never rode a harder finish in his life, but that the horse took a sudden notion to quit and did it. Didn't seem to be tired or anything but just stopped running. O'Connor gets the floor once in a while and rips and raves about that 'trick-horse thing.' He thinks you know something. Engle says you don't and never did, but that Elisha is a dog, same as he said at first. Wouldn't surprise me none if they got into a free-for-all fight over there because they're all losers and all sore. Jock Merritt is sorer'n anybody; he bet some of his own money and he thinks they ought to give it back to him . . . Now, just between friends, what happened to that horse to-day, You told me he wouldn't win, but at the head of the stretch he looked like a 1 to 10 chance. I thought he'd walk in. Then all at once he quit running. He wasn't pulled, but something stopped him and stopped him quick. What was it?"

Old Man Curry stroked his beard and regarded the Bald-faced Kid with a tolerant expression.

"Well, now," said he at length, "seeing as how you know so much, I'm going to tell you something more 'bout that 'Lisha hoss. He used to have another name once."

"Silver Star," nodded the Kid. "I looked him up in the form charts."

Old Man Curry nodded.

"Eddie Caley — him they called the Cricket — owned the hoss in the first place. Raised him from a yearling. Now understand, I ain't excusing the Cricket for what he done, and I ain't blaming him neither. He was sick most of the time, and a sick man gets his notions sort of twisted like. Maybe he figured the race track owed him something for taking away his health. I don't know. He wasn't no hand to talk.

"Anyhow, he had this one hoss and always the one idea in his head — to slip him over at such a long price that he could clean up enough to quit on. Caley was doing his own training and riding. I kept an eye on the hoss, and it seemed to me Silver Star worked good enough to win, but every time he got in a race he'd quit at the head of the stretch. That struck me as sort of queer because he come from stretch-running stock. His daddy was a great one to win from behind. Well, six or seven times Silver Star quit that way, and from the head of the stretch home the Cricket would lay into him, whip and spur both. Wouldn't make the slightest difference to the hoss, but everybody could see that Caley was doing his best to make him run. Folks got kind of sorry for him, sick that way, only one hoss and him such a dog.

"Then one day Caley came to me and wanted the loan of some money. He said the price had got long enough to suit him, but that he didn't have anything to bet. Happened I had the bank roll handy and I let him have two hundred. I can see the little feller now, with the red patches on his cheeks and his eyes kind of shining with fever.

"This is the biggest cinch that ever came off on a race track!" he says to me, coughing every few words. 'Don't let the price scare you. Don't let anything scare you. He'll be a good hoss to-day. Win something for yourself.'

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"It's this way 'bout me: I've heard that kind of talk before. When I bet, it's got to be on my own hoss. I thought two hundred was plenty to lose. Silver Star was 25 and 30 to 1 over the ring and a friend of Caley's unloaded the two hundred in little driblets so's nobody would get suspicious and cut the price too far. The Cricket got out of a sick bed to ride the race and Silver Star came from behind and won by seven lengths. Could have made it seventeen easy as not. I reckon everyody was glad to see Caley win — everybody but the bookmakers, but they hadn't any right to kick, seeing as he beat a red-hot favorite

"Caley went to bed that night and didn't get up any more. I used to read to him when he couldn't sleep. Maybe that's how he come to give me the hoss, along with a little secret 'bout him."

Old Man Chrry paused, tantalizingly, and rumaged in his pockets for his fine-cut. The Bald-faced Kid squirmed on his chair.

"It was a trick that nobody but a jockey would ever have thought of, son. Caley taught the colt to stop whenever a certain word was hollered in his ear. Dinged it into him, morning after morning, until Silver Star got so's he'd quit as soon as he heard it, like a buggy hoss stops when you say 'Whoa' to him. Best part of the trick, though, was that all the whipping and spurring in the world couldn't get him to running again. Caley taught him that for his own protection. It gave him an alibi with the judges. Couldn't they see he was riding the hoss as hard as he knew how? I don't say it was exackly honest, but — "

"Oho!" interrupted the Bald-faced Kid, "now I know why you had a front runner in that race! Between friends, old-timer, what was it Mose hollered at Elisha when he came alongside?"

"Well," said Old Man Curry, "that's the secret of it, my son, and it's this way 'bout a secret: you can't let too many folks in on it. I reckon it was a word spoken in due season, as Solomon says. Elisha, he won't hear it again unless he changes owners."