



The Changeling

A RACING STORY

By W. A. FRASER, Author of "Thoroughbreds."

WITH a last petulant bump, the car settled to rest against the freight-shed platform at Hillsbury, and Dutchy Straus, who had travelled in it with Ben Ali from Belmont, scuttled across to the little depot.

The night-operator, finger and thumb on key, raised his head impatiently at Dutchy's: "Say, where's dot Mister Raeburn—I got a hoss for him?"—answering curtly—"I guess he's in bed." Dutchy looked ruefully at the laconic operator, listening to the irritating burr of the vibrated key, and reiterated: "I got a hoss for dot Mister Raeburn."

The operator shoved the key over, and said crossly: "Raeburn's comin' in the mornin' for your damn' horse; you don't think he's goin' to sit up all night waitin' for this way-freight, do you? It gits here any old hour; she's early to-night—one o'clock."

"Is dot a saloon?" Dutchy asked ambiguously, his eye trained on a light that gleamed faintly on a nebulous horizon.

"Yes; ought to be shut up, though," jerked from the operator's lips.

Dutchy went back to the car, looked Ben Ali over, put a bunch of clean timothy-hay under his nose, and said: "Just chew dot, Ben, and stay by your lonely for a leetle while I go git me a glass of beer." He turned the lantern low, slid the heavy door closed, and took his way across the yard and down the road to the beacon-light that promised bibulous cheer.

As he disappeared in the night two men came forward from the deeper shadow of the freight-shed, and one of them in a guarded voice, said: "He's heading for a drink, Cusick—get after him and keep at the saloon while we get the horse. Are you sure he won't be staying here with Raeburn?"

"The Dutchman works in the stable of the Braund girl, and goes back as soon as he delivers Ben Ali. Burke has kept me advised. Perhaps they'll wish they had taken my offer of two thousand, eh, Finkle? When a woman gets sweet on a horse—"

"Never mind—get next the Dutchman, quick!"

When Cusick had gone Finkle whistled, and as a negro rose up from somewhere, a bulky shadow, he said: "Come on, Johnston—we'll get Ben Ali out first. Got the bags?—that's right."

The two men slipped into the car, Finkle rubbing the horse's nose and quieting him with his voice while the darky muffled each hoof in a bag. Then Ben Ali was led to the platform, that was on a level with the car floor, down its inclined approach, and behind the shed Finkle held him, while Johnston stripped the horse's clothing. The negro worked with silent celerity, the evident result of a careful plan.

"I'll hold this one to keep him quiet," Finkle whispered. "You can do the job alone. Put this fellow's halter on the other."

With the hood and blanket under his arm, Johnston skirted the shed wall till he came to a horse quietly munching oats out of a pail. The legs of this animal were swathed in cotton bandages from hoof to above his knees and hocks, and his feet were also muffled with bags. The negro adjusted the hood and blanket, exchanged the halters, and led the horse into the car, his wrapped hoofs calling but a faint remonstrance from the platform. In five minutes he was back at Finkle's side.

"Boss," he whispered, "there won't nobody never know but what they got the same hoss."

"Shut your mouth!" the white man growled. "Get that pail of oats while I blanket this fellow—I don't want him to catch cold."

When the darkey returned, Finkle said: "I'll walk on ahead—you follow. If I meet anybody, I'll stop them with a bluff talk, and you get back—take the horse round some other way, see!"

Five hundred yards down the country road they

turned across a grassed field, plodding on like voiceless shadows till they came to a small group of low trees. Here a horse and buggy waited as part of this midnight enterprise. Finkle untied the buggy horse while the negro removed the bags from the stolen animal's hoofs. Then they drove on, passing through a gate to a hard gravel road. As they turned along this the darky said: "Golly, I'm mos' glad ter git shut ob dat debbil at las'. Dat North Light hoss, he's just hoodooed—needn't tell me, boss—der ain't no hoss could go as far an' as fas' as he could some days, and den go out and run like a sick cow anudder day. Somebody put a hoodoo on him, dat's what dey did."

"Oh, go on!" Finkle growled; "he just was a bad-tempered horse—it cost me thousands to find that out."

Growling about the horse they had left in the box-car, and building castles over the great killings they would make with the one they had stolen if he was as good as Cusick had been told at Belmont, the two thieves with their loot travelled all the remaining hours of the night.

It was half an hour before Dutchy Straus tore himself away from the liberal entertainment Cusick provided at the hotel and trudged back to his car, very beery, congratulating himself upon his great luck in having met by chance such a generous stranger. Straus surveyed his charge with sleepy satisfaction. It was really a matter of clothing more than of horse, just the velvet nose, and the black blotches in the hood that were eyes showing in the way of horse-flesh; even the braided tail was hidden under the overreaching blue blanket. Beneath this the four legs gleamed grotesquely white, like the pudgy, sawdust limbs of a doll, wound interminably in cotton bandages to protect them during the journey.

Dutchy curled himself up on his straw bed, and it was after daylight when he was roused by a knock on the door. Banfield Leigh, with a stable-hand, had driven over from Raeburn's place, Clover Bar, for the horse Kathleen Braund had sent him with which to win the International Steeplechase.

Then the changeling, North Light, that was now Ben Ali, was brought forth and led away behind Leigh's buggy, still clad as he was. Straus, complimented for having delivered the horse in such good shape, knowing nothing of the exchange, took the first train back to Belmont.

Raeburn was at the stables when Leigh arrived.

"Ah!" he cried, "this is the wonderful world-beater of our friend Kathleen's finding, eh? He's a big up-standing brute. Let's have a look at him; strip him, Dick."

And presently the morning sun painted a shimmer of bronze, and peacock-blue, and burnt-gold, on the silken, red-bay coat of the thoroughbred. Raeburn put his chin to the horse's wither.

"Gad! he's a big one," he said; "sixteen-two, almost. That's the kind for getting over the timber—they walk over their jumps."

He ran his hand down the tendons of the forelegs, pinching them with finger and thumb; then he stood up, saying: "No soreness there—he never flinched. Hello! he's been fired for splint, though." He examined a hairless spot just below the horse's knee. "It won't matter—it was on the bone. Develish strange, though! Didn't Kathleen say that he'd never been raced till she got him—bought him for a hunter?"

Raeburn looked lovingly at the big, broad quarters, the strong, clean, smooth hocks, far let-down like a greyhound's; the deep chest, and the wide saucer hoofs.

"Yes, he's a well-made one. And as he won so easy at Belmont, a green horse, he may turn out to be a cracker-jack. What do you think, Dick?" Raeburn asked, a smile on his lips, turning to the little Irishman, who, all-silent, stood holding Ben Ali.

"Faith, he's big enough, and he's built like the leppers