

## The White Mare

—By Ira Rich Kent.

IN THE great towns the mid-August day slew like the pestilence; even in the hills it had been gasping hot. But the worst of it was past now. The blazing shafts came at a more comfortable angle; the trees and houses on the western side of the village street began to throw cool shadows across the deserted thoroughfare. After long, panting silences, the men in the doubtful refuge of the porch began to talk with each other again. Three or four small boys, damp from their latest swim in the tepid millpond, tossed a ball about. Rodney Evans pulled his moist, uncomfortable sleeve away from his arm with a nervous thumb and finger. "My stars!" he puffed. "That shirt wouldn't be more of a sop if I was to drop it in the pond. Wish I'd taken pattern after the boys there, and gone swimmin'." Then, after a pause for the further contemplation of his own discomfort, "Anybody seen Doctor Loring come back?"

at which she had moved for hours. She was no longer white; sweat and dust covered her with a blanket of grime. Her short, sparse mane and scrubby tail were as dirty as the rest.

"Great little mare, Nancy is," said Daggett. "It does seem queer, though, to see anybody but the doctor drivin' her. But I guess she won't have to haul this feller round much longer."

In Marseilles "the Doctor" meant Doctor Singleton, and none other; and just now his affairs were a tender subject in the village. He was going to quit! Forty years of rushing over the Marseilles hills in storm and darkness, blazing sun and winter blizzards, had not withered the doctor's boyish heart, but they had played havoc with his never too strong body. The last winter had been a hard one, with much bad weather and much sickness. It had racked him so severely that when it was over he threw up his hands in sur-

his goal ever since he had decided upon his profession—a country practice, with life outdoors, a good horse to drive, and a close hold upon a people who looked to him with personal liking and confidence. Loring knew his limitations; he was not sorry that he was unequal to specializing or a big city practice. But he did not want to be equal to this.

And so far as he could see, he was not. "I'd forgotten people in the country could be so hostile; I somehow thought they were all warm-hearted and hospitable, and made friends with you right away," Loring muttered to himself, and there was puzzled sorrow in the boyish eyes. "I liked it so much here, too." He spoke as if he had already turned away from Marseilles. "And the old doctor's such a brick. We'd have got on fine together. But I've been here four weeks since he left, and the only friends I have in town are the doctor's housekeeper and the doctor's horse!"

At that he rose and went to water the white mare and her stable mate, the chestnut. Loring loved the horses. That was one of the things he liked about Marseilles, too; it loved horses.

John Loring understood that. What he did not understand was that Marseilles loved Doctor Singleton—jealously—and looked with doubting and resentful eye at any man who would take his place. Nor did he understand that his shyness looked like stiffness and too much reserve, that he had not yet succeeded in adapting himself to men and things as he found them.

As a result, Marseilles had left him very severely alone, sending away down to Leicester for Doctor Brazier. John was called in only when Brazier could not or would not come, and then made to feel himself so much on sufferance that he could not do himself justice.

Marseilles did not mean to be unkind; it was not that sort of a town. But it was sorry and resentful—and very hot. Perhaps the heat had something to do with Loring's discouragement, too. At any rate, when he went in to supper, after he had seen that the horses had theirs, he had fully come to the decision to telegraph Doctor Singleton in the morning, and give up and go home. Perhaps he could regain his hospital appointment. He had failed here; there was no getting past that.

About ten o'clock that night Evans and Morris, with Will Daggett, still sat upon the store porch, drowsing over their talk, dreading their uncomfortable beds. There had been silence for some time when Evans finally got up, yawned, and babbled something indistinguishable.

"What d'ye say?" queried Daggett, just before he succumbed to the infection of the yawn.

"I said —" began Rodney. He paused, his stretching arms still raised above his head. "I say, there must be a fire somewhere to the north!" His voice quickened, as if some one had turned on an electric current. "It can't be more'n a dozen miles off! See?" The others sprang to their feet and gazed with him at the red glow, now growing brighter.

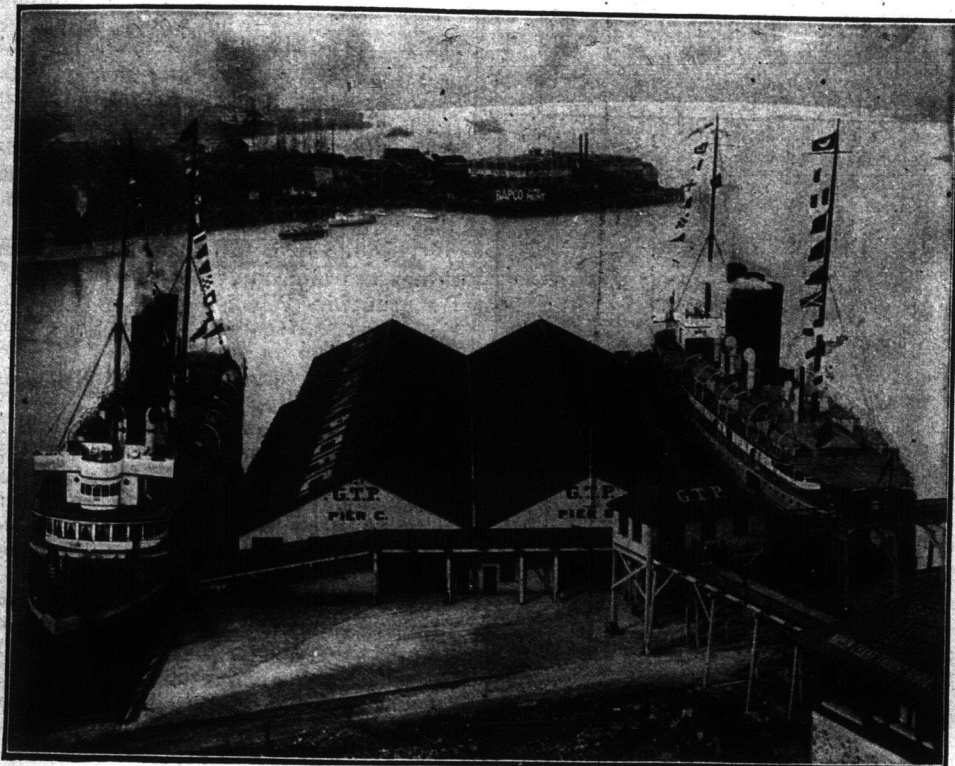
Before they had time to speak again the telephone-bell in the store—the local exchange—rang sharply. Morris hurried in. The others heard him answer the call, the indistinct sound of quick, short replies. They turned in expectant inquiry as he came back.

"Anything about the fire?" "It's John Culver's house. His wife's burnt bad. He telephoned from Farnsworth's." Morris was breathing hard. "He wants a doctor—the quickest one I can get. What'll I do, Rodney—get Brazier? I hate to send this young cub on the hill. Quick, Rodney, what'll I do."

Evans's mind worked faster than the others. He had not "taken to" John Loring, but he could go straight to the main issue.

"We want the man that can get there first. It's about the same distance to travel, but Brazier's horses can't go with the white mare. She'll beat any of 'em by half an hour. Send for Brazier if you want, but start young Loring first. Speed's what we want. You call Loring. I'll go help hitch up." The big man ran off up the road, pounding hard in the thick dust.

As he ran, he saw a lantern flash at the top of the hill and heard the barn door slide shrilly back. When he came



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Morris, the storekeeper, brought his chair down on all four legs and stared up the road as if to reassure himself of the accuracy of the statement he was about to make. "No, he hain't gone by. He's probably drivin' round by South Leicester so's to make folks think he's keepin' busy. Old Nancy'll be sort of done up, I'm afraid."

The boys stopped their play and ran up to the porch. "Old Nancy's comin'!" one of them cried. "I heard her go over the bridge by Carey's."

"I heard it, too," insisted another. "Just one heroomp, wa'n't it, Albert? That's the way she always hits it, don't she, Albert?"

"Yes, sir," declared Morris, still gazing up the road, upon which no moving thing was yet visible. "Yes, sir, she's comin' now, just as fast as she went and just as fast as she's been goin' all afternoon. That mare don't know but just one gait—except the one she keeps for hurry calls at night."

While the storekeeper was talking there had appeared round a bend in the broad road a quarter-mile away what seemed to be nothing more than a puff of dust, hurried by the wind. In a moment, however, a swiftly moving horse, in front of a light buggy with a single occupant, could be distinguished. The rattle of slightly loose hubs and spokes shrunk from their sockets by the heat was a much louder sound than the rapid fall of the horse's feet in the dust. Within the minute the team swung past, the driver nodding curtly, and sped on up the hill toward Doctor Singleton's house.

"Swung" seemed the right word with which to describe the motion of the mare. There was an odd rhythm to her swinging hoofs, and the watchers felt, as Morris had said, that this was the pace

render—not on his own account, but because he feared he might fail at a crisis.

"It isn't fair to the people, Rodney," he said, when Evans expressed the general dismay at his intention. "Suppose I should be tied up with rheumatism and somebody up on the mountain should break a leg. I've got to have help. I'll get a fine young fellow to take the practice while I can still help him a little."

That had been in April. John Loring, the new doctor, fresh from medical school and hospital service, arrived early in June. Doctor Singleton looked him over as Nancy sped them home from the railway station, and decided that Crawshaw had sent him a good man—when the edges were rubbed down a bit and he had fitted into the place.

The doctor took him about on his trips for several weeks, showed him the roads and where everybody lived, introduced him to everybody, and told him all about them. Then when he had said a good many kindly words behind Loring's back, and given him such advice as seemed worth while, he discovered himself—the wise, wise old man—an uncontrollable longing for a holiday, and departed for St. Leon forthwith, leaving John Loring to make his own place in Marseilles.

As the white mare came to a halt on the barn floor, Loring had arrived at the conclusion that there was no place in Marseilles for him to make.

When he had unharnessed and sponged off the mare and put her in her stall to cool off, he sat down uncomfortably on a salt-box in the doorway, still in his hot, brown duster, and stared gloomily down upon the village.

It was a bitter discouragement that enveloped the young physician. Things were turning out so differently from the way he had planned them. This had been

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panting up, the white mare stood full harnessed, and Loring was backing her into the shafts.

Evans had not breath enough to speak, but his practised hands fastened tug and holdback and girth quickly. The mare pawed the floor and stretched out her lean neck, settling the bit in her mouth. Rodney buckled the reins and tossed them over to Loring. "Got—your—case?" he puffed. "She's burnt bad! You understand? And you know the road?"

John Loring nodded, then remembered the darkness. "Yes—and thank you for coming to help."

Rodney slapped the white mare's flank. "We think a lot of Sarah Culver," he said. "Hurry!" And with that word in his ears, John Loring and the white mare were gone.

That first mad rush down the hill made Loring gasp. As they flashed past the store, he heard some one shout, "Go it, Nancy!" but a moment later another, standing lamp in hand, in a doorway, cried, "Good luck, doctor!" Then he was out on the dark road, with only the stars and the lantern swung from the rear axle for light. "Somebody thought of the man, anyway," the idea came to him pleasantly. "But they know you're the main thing in this, Nancy."

He made no attempt to guide the mare, except to make the turns as they came. She knew the peculiarities of the road