

Darling of the Race Track

A Story of Thoroughbreds, Particularly the Stake Horse That Did His Bit to Improve the Breed of Men!

By Brock Mays



ATCHING anything?"

The Dancing Kid wearily tossed his weighted hook beyond the outer edge of the rolling surf, and morosely eyed his questioner.

"Rest, meditation, and solitude," he explained coldly.

The inquisitive stranger took the hint, sniffed, and walked away.

The Kid dangled a cigarette from his thin lips, vainly endeavored to gain a comfortable position on the hard boards of the Imperial Beach pier, and patiently deciphered the pictures painted by fleecy clouds, haze, and purple mountain peaks that towered to the southward.

For it was Monday, day of rest for horsemen, and at the Empressa Hipodromo the normal roar and bustle of the Tiajuana race track crowd, the continuous clack of the mutuel totalizers,

and the thrill of thundering hoofs were replaced by a vague silence. And the Kid, like other members of his clan, was seeking recreation in his own particular way.

He finally abandoned his finny quest, gathered his gear together, and strolled shoreward. Down the beach, where the surf had packed the fine white sand into resilient hardness, he discerned a mounted figure, moving rapidly toward him. He studied it professionally a moment.

"Funny action," he mused, "but lots of pep— Sweet children of Fair Play! It's an old woman!"

The horse eased up abreast a small cluster of houses and came to a stop. His rider slid to the ground, peeled off

saddle and bridle, and slapped her mount affectionately on the flank. Slowly the animal waded out into the line of gentle breakers, until at last his feet left the sand and he began to swim.

"Must be a circus around here," the Kid murmured to himself, and curiosity overcame him.

"Nice looking horse you have," he offered.

The old lady shot the Kid a swift, appraising glance; obviously she was pleased by his statement.

"Yes," she replied. "He was a stake winner once."

The horse left the water, shook himself, and showed a tendency to roll. The woman grasped him by the forelock and walked him slowly to a turfy inclosure in the rear of an unpainted bungalow.

She then seized a gunny sack hanging on the fence, and began to dry him down. The Dancing Kid promptly relieved her of the task.

"Here; let me do that," he said gruffly. As he roughly dried the right foreleg, he paused to examine a large swelling at the knee joint.

"He had a bad fall," the woman explained. "That's what put him out of racing. For a long time he seemed afraid to bear any weight on it, but it's getting much better now. The callous seems to have settled firmly around the bone."

"I noticed he favored that leg a little," the Kid remarked.

As he finished his task, the woman threw both arms around the old horse's head, and hugged him tight to her breast for a moment.

"It's sort of a foolish sentiment," she admitted, "but I'd hate to lose him. He brings back memories of happier days. Don't you, Maori?"

"Maori!" the Kid exclaimed. "You don't mean the Derby winner?"

"Yes," she replied softly. "He won the classic seven years ago. He was a great horse, but unlucky."

Astonishment held the Kid in its grip.

"Wouldn't you like some tea?" she tentatively invited.

Tea was an unknown rite to the Dancing Kid, but he accepted with alacrity.

She led the way into the house, where bright colors and dainty curtains did their best to hide the flimsy walls and cheap furniture.

"I am Mrs. Carruthers."

Deep from his lore of the race track the Kid resurrected and connected the names of the little old lady and her horse.

"Not Derby Nell?"

"Why, yes. They used to call me that."

He drew a whistle of surprise and nearly dropped his teacup.

"But—but—hell! That is—excuse me, but imagine finding you here! I'm the Dancing Kid. I work down at the race track, and, of course, I've heard of you."

The Kid's statement was technically correct. He and his pal, Surething Reilly, worked any one they could—without too much risk.

"I've been here for some time," the old lady remarked. "I like it. I used to be very lonely, but Maori has helped to keep the blues away."

"Is it true," the Kid asked diffidently, "that you have seen every Derby ever run?"

She laughed, a low, silvery tinkle.

"They took me in a Moses basket to see Aristides win in eighteen hundred and seventy-five. I don't think I was old enough to enjoy it. Since then I have seen them all, including Maori's victory. That was the last." Her voice was shadowed with regret for bygone days.

Before the eyes of the Dancing Kid flashed a vision impressed upon his youthful memory a few short years before:

Gerry Carruthers, sporting horseman, plunging gambler, and his attrac-

tive wire, the toast of a thousand lips in the world of the thoroughbreds. Maori, pride of his stable, badly injured. Then other disasters; a fire at the training stable; auction sale of a few horses; oblivion in the court of the sport of kings.

The Kid juggled his teacup to safety on a near-by table, glared at it indignantly, and cleared his throat.

"I thought Bart Wilkins bought all your horses," he remarked.

"He did," she replied. "After the fire he took those that were left. Maori came West with the others. He's a gelding, and when Wilkins found that he couldn't be brought back to training he sold him to a livery stable. I recognized him on the street, and bought him from a huckster for seventy-five dollars."

A shrewd, uncanny thought suddenly was born in the Dancing Kid's agile brain.

"He's full of run," he said casually. "Nice action, too."

"Oh, yes! It was almost two years before I could ride him. He would hardly put his bad foot on the ground. The soft sand and swimming have helped him a lot."

"He might stand training."

"I'm afraid not. He's ten years old, and I don't believe his leg is strong enough for the pounding it would get on the track."

"Don't you ever go to the races?" The Kid's question was a thinly veiled invitation.

"No, it hardly seems like racing out here. At first I wanted so much to get away from all the old familiar scenes; I wanted to forget. But now, I'd like to go back to see the Downs and a Derby again—just once before Maori and I—make the Last Parade to the Post."

The Dancing Kid was embarrassed at the sentiment. He twirled his cap for a moment and said, with an air of detachment:

"Well, I guess I'd better be shoving

along. I'd like to come up and see you some time; maybe give Maori a good going over; his coat could stand a lot of currying."

"Please do," she urged. "Come for tea."

II

THE Dancing Kid fumbled his way out the door, eyes blurred with unexpected emotion. This fine old lady trusted him. He paused for a moment beside the bungalow and deciphered the word "dressmaking" crudely painted on a shingle.

"Of all the tough breaks," he told himself, "this is the worst I've ever seen. Derby Nell!"

Softly he went around the side of the house. Unseen, he gazed long and steadily at Maori, grazing in his inclosure.

The Kid's thin lips pursed tightly together, and sweet and full he breathed forth the silvery notes of the bugle call to the post. Instantly the horse's head was flung erect, and with a few brisk steps he pressed his chest against the wire fence, ears pricked sharply forward, nickering ecstatically toward that lilting thrill from days gone by.

The Dancing Kid slowly approached.

"Well, old fellow," he said soothingly, "I guess there might be a gallop left in you yet."

He passed his hand over the telltale hollows above the eyes, and pinched the lower lip with inquisitive fingers, finding there the unblemished firmness of youth. He threw an arm aloft in a threatening gesture, causing the thoroughbred to rear back, rolling his eyes, thus disclosing the slight red flare that denotes a thoroughbred's unimpaired stamina and vitality.

"Never was raced much," the Kid muttered. He rubbed Maori affectionately behind the ears, then quietly made his way toward the paved road and a stage to Tiajuana. For the Dancing

Kid was at heart a true expatriate, and although he followed the bangtails to the farthest reaches of the merry-go-rounds, he ever yearned for Thanksgiving Day to come that he might go "home" to winter racing on the white and green Mexican oval, and settle down among the care-free joys of Old Town.

He entered his room, finding Surething Reilly, close companion in their never-ending search for sure things, absorbed in the mysteries of the last official form chart. The Kid picked up the Stud Book, opened it with a practiced hand, and read aloud:

"'Maori, bay gelding, by Marathon-Bacchante.' Say, Surething, what sort of a sire is Marathon?"

"Pretty fair," Reilly grunted. "His get can run all day, but they never have liked anything but a fast track."

The Kid eased himself out the door and was gone before Surething's succeeding question reached his ears. He trudged to the Foreign Club, a palace of chance, and quietly signaled Overcoat O'Brien away from a table where five gentlemen of fortune were trying to outguess one another.

In a few terse sentences he explained his equine find to this cool, gray-eyed gambler, known wherever horses gallop. His nickname was earned one sweltering day in August when he stood on the block at Saratoga in an overcoat, and with frigid calm took the bets of New York plungers who sought to break him. Their dark horse had lost by a whisker, and thereafter O'Brien and an overcoat had been as inseparable as bread and butter.

As the Kid finished his tale, the gambler turned swiftly and wrote a check.

"Here's five grand," he said coolly. "Tell Derby Nell there's plenty more where that came from. Gerry Carruthers' wife—the darling of the race track—Why, damn my soul!"

The Dancing Kid quietly returned the slip of paper.

"She's playing a bum hand well," he admonished the gambler. "She'd be insulted if you or any one else offered her money. Our only hope is to bring Maori back to the races, and I'm not even sure that she'll let us do that. She's funny, that way."

"Ten years old, and a cripple, you said? Son, there isn't a chance!"

The Kid's vivid dream was rapidly fading away. He clutched O'Brien pleadingly by the sleeve.

"You don't have to bother about it, Overcoat. Let me have a couple of hundred to cover expenses, and I'll see if I can't get him into shape."

Overcoat walked back to the table, picked a yellow chip from his pile, and tossed it to the Kid.

"There's five hundred. Cash it over at the desk. There's more any time you want it." He nodded in dismissal, and again turned his attention to the intricacies of stud poker.

III

A GREAT change came over the easy-going life of the Dancing Kid. His interests shifted from the swiftly moving world of the race track to a small beach cottage, a gentle old lady, and a crippled thoroughbred.

Up before daylight, each morning found the Kid on his way to Imperial Beach, and each night found him early wrapped in sleep, induced by the unaccustomed physical toil. And under his rigorous care Maori gradually came to hand; alert, coat shiny, hard of muscle, hoofs sound, well shod and polished.

One afternoon the Kid put the old horse through his final test. For two miles he sent the gelding along the beach at a spanking gait, then added another half, hard driven, full out. And at the end he was satisfied with his charge's easy breathing, speed, and readiness to run.

"Mrs. Carruthers," he said offhandedly, "I believe this old horse might win a race. S'pose you let me take him down to the track?"

The reason behind the Kid's untiring efforts with Maori came swiftly to her mind.

"Oh, Kid, I'd really rather not do that," she objected. "It's silly, but some sentiment, some unhappy memory, warns me that it would be wrong to race him."

The Kid knew the futility of bucking another person's hunch, and decided to await a more auspicious moment for urging his plea—a moment which never came.

Disillusioned, discouraged, for the first time in many weeks he sought the solace of Surething Reilly's conversation.

"Yes, sir, if she'd only let us go, that horse has a real chance to cop the Tiajuana Cup," the Kid declared. "Two miles; ten thousand added; and you admit that the farther they go the better those Marathons like it."

"Bart Wilkins's Vital has that race all won," Surething returned. "You can write your own ticket on the rest of the field. Anyway, the Indian medicine man told me it's going to rain all next week, and no Marathon ever foaled could run a lick on a soft track. What you ought to do is pick out a small cheap race, get the boys together, put down a nice bet for Derby Nell, and we'll all stage an old-fashioned shoo-in."

"She wouldn't take it," the Kid replied.

"Well, then, let the crippled horse go back into the huckster business, where he belongs."

The Dancing Kid made no retort.

"The landlady's looking hostile and hounding me for the rent," Reilly went on. "If you'd stop this dreaming and do a little hustling maybe we could get on top. As it is, I see you about as often as Man-o'-War saw Eclipse!"

"I'm broke and I'm busy," the Kid rejoined curtly.

Overcoat's stake had dwindled under the pressure of new equipment, feed, and training expenses to a few tattered

bills, and pride forbade that the Kid ask again for help.

And true to the prophecy of the medicine man, rain fell for days in gloomy sheets.

Oblivious to the many insurmountable obstacles which the whims of fate had placed in his path, the Dancing Kid continued to work Maori, hoping to find some last minute solution to his problem.

As the old gelding padded his way along the rain-soaked sand, his rider pondered upon the reasons why some horses run better in the mud—heredity, sureness of action, diseased feet that enjoy the ease of bounding along on softened clay.

A new thought flashed through the Kid's mind. Quickly he dismounted, tested the depth and firmness of the sand with his heel, and dribbled a handful of it through his fingers.

"It's not exactly like any sort of a track," he mused. "A thin cushion on top, then hard and solid underneath. He might do it! That bad knee has made him careful how he picks 'em up and puts 'em down."

Hesitating belief in his theory became a certainty under the Kid's flame of desire.

"I had a letter from my cousin today," Derby Nell informed the Kid, after the latter had rubbed down the horse and put him in his stall. "She wants me to come back home."

"Let me start Maori in the Cup tomorrow," he urged, "and you can get on Easy Street again."

"I'm sorry, Kid; after all you've done, but something warns me against it! I can't." Her voice was tinged with sincere regret. "I'm saving a little money, and next year, perhaps, I'll be able to go home."

The Dancing Kid coughed violently; days of exposure had given him a harsh cold. And silently he journeyed to his room, deep in thought. Surething Reilly bitterly resented his lack

of confidence.

The Kid tossed the whole night through in a fever, shot through with shadowy dreams of torture if he did not come immediately to the succor of Derby Nell.

IV

THE next day dawned more gloomy and rain-swept than its predecessors. The Kid plunged his throbbing head in a basin of cold water; his fever-dried lips spurned breakfast.

Painfully he clambered aboard a northbound stage, aching in his every joint. Derby Nell threw open the door of her little dwelling with a gesture of welcome.

"Why, Kid!" she exclaimed. "You look sick."

"Aw, I'm all right," he muttered. Then he added desperately, his pride in his boots:

"Say, Mrs. Carruthers, could you let me have a little money?"

"Of course; just a minute." She took a roll of bills from a teapot. The Kid estimated it at a glance.

"I need about sixty dollars," he said. "I'll pay you back first thing to-morrow." He shoved the money in his pocket, mumbled his thanks, and departed.

Slowly he made his way toward the highway, then, watching the bungalow cautiously, he turned and retraced his steps to the flimsy stable which sheltered Maori. The horse nickered softly as he recognized his visitor.

The Kid quickly blanketed him and led him to the road, carefully keeping in line with the stable between the rear windows of the bungalow. Then the Dancing Kid rode out on the muddy highway toward the Tiajuana race track, stopping now and then while a paroxysm of coughing shook his thin, wasted body.

In the paddock the field for the Tiajuana Cup was being saddled. A cold, driving rain swept over the stands, causing the scattered crowd of dyed-

in-the-wool enthusiasts to huddle together for comfort, and spotting the muddy course with slowly widening pools of water.

Tail and mane crudely braided, big-boned and awkward looking, Maori impatiently tossed his bridle. In a stall near by, Vital, a stake horse of the highest caliber, stood steadily, muscles lightly trembling with anticipation. Vital's owner, Bart Wilkins, stared sneeringly at the older horse.

"Does he bark?" he queried with mock concern. "You ought to save him for the dog races over at Aguascalientes."

"He was horse enough to make a lot of others like it in the Derby," the Dancing Kid growled.

"He's old enough to be your father. He ate more oats and earned less money than any nag I ever owned. Vital can spot him a mile and win under wraps. They should have arrested me for burglary when I gave him away."

"They must have known you," the Kid retorted. "He may be a dog, but we've been treating him like a horse. We don't beat him, feed him hop, tickle him with a battery, or race him every day."

Wilkins flushed scarlet and turned away. His reputation for cruelty to horses was a byword around the race track among the insiders.

The Dancing Kid smothered a fit of painful coughing, then took little, bow-legged Jockey Grosso by the arm and led him to a corner of the stall.

"Listen, Eddie," he husked. "Take him down the middle of the track where the going is solid underneath. Keep him under restraint for the first mile and a half, if he pulls your arms off. When Vital makes his move, you make yours, and race it out between you! Make no mistakes; we're betting our own money!"

Grosso nodded his understanding. The Kid boosted him into the saddle, and made his way toward the betting

ring. Surething Reilly met him at the paddock gate, program in hand.

"Say," he demanded, "how about this?" He shoved the program at the Kid. The latter fought the dizzy spots before his eyes and read:

"Maori; 115 pounds; owner, Mrs. Nell Carruthers; trainer, James C. Alderson."

"Yeah," he muttered, "that's him, all right."

"Well," said Reilly, "that horse might as well be in the barn as trying to race on a track like this, and you don't look any too good yourself. Come on, I'll take you home."

"Let me alone," the Kid responded peevishly, and staggered away to the book of Easy Money Cohen, where he added his last thirty dollars to the sixty he had borrowed from Derby Nell, and placed it all on Maori's nose at the juicy odds of one hundred to one.

V.

"THEY'RE off!"

A faint-hearted, straggling roar welled up from the sodden crowd. The horses lunged into their strides, each jockey taking a firm hold to conserve his mount during the early running. Mud and water splattered under pounding hoofs.

The Dancing Kid vainly shrugged in his water-soaked clothing for comfort and warmth, and, shaking violently with the cold, endeavored to follow the progress of the flying field through the driving rain. Down the backstretch they thundered, five of the horses closely bunched, fighting for the lead, followed by Vital, with Maori trailing by several lengths.

"Attaboy!" the Kid coughed, noting that the old horse lunged against the bit and fought for his head at every stride.

Passing the judges' stand, beginning the second mile, an undersized horse, Little Soldier, shot out from the pack and quickly opened up a lead of several lengths.

"Trying to steal it," the Kid muttered to himself as he scanned the rest of the field. Silks muddled beyond recognition, numbers obscured; jockeys bending low to protect their faces from flying clods; the strange, struggling pack thundered on.

Trembling as with the ague, nerves torn, teeth rattling, the Dancing Kid desperately fought a haze of weakness. His eyes now discerned only weird, misshapen figures on the track. He clutched his nearest neighbor.

"Where are they?" he begged. "Keep an eye on 'em."

"Rounding the far turn," the stranger answered. "Little Soldier in front and fading fast. The last two horses are making their move—looks like Vital and that long shot, Maori. Yes; that's right."

The roar of the crowd spurred the Kid's flagging senses.

"Now?" he prayed. "Now?"

"Turning for home," the stranger explained with a curious glance at the Dancing Kid. "Vital's in front, just galloping; he's as good as in! Well, I guess I'll go cash my tickets. I've earned the money—rainy day."

"Wait a minute," the Kid pleaded. "Where's Maori?"

"Laying second. Hell! He's coming again!"

And suddenly the clouds drifted clear from the eyes of the Dancing Kid.

Down the stretch came the mighty Vital, with Maori running steadily at his flanks. The Kid's husky voice barked above the clamor of the throng.

"Oh, you Maori! Come home! Come on, baby! Come on! Come on!"

Inch by inch Maori's nostrils crept along Vital's side. Doggedly hand-riding, mud-stained and pelted beyond all recognition, Jockey Eddie Grosso urged his mount to the utmost. And in one last, desperate lunge the old horse passed under the wire, a nose in front!

The Kid made his way to the circle of the initiated about the winner.

"Nice ride, Eddie," he said. "Tell Jackson to take care of the horse, will you?"

Stolidly he accepted the silver cup, emblem of victory. He collected the purse, and neatly stowed it in an old-fashioned draw-neck poke. Tucking the trophy under his coat, he paused to cash his bet; then, skillfully avoiding his friends, he walked from the race track.

At the international boundary line sickness again nearly overcame him. Long ages he waited for the north-bound stage that took him to Palm City.

Then down the highway he plodded two weary miles to his goal, feet sloshing endlessly through a sea of mud. And finally with one last supreme effort he stumbled up to the door of a little bungalow near the sea.

The Dancing Kid awakened in a world of shining white. He blinked his eyes a moment.

"What's this?" he asked in a strange, frightened voice.

"S-s-sh-h-h," a gentle murmur admonished him. "You've been very ill with pneumonia. You're in the hospital. Eat this, please."

The Kid sipped a little steaming broth, and promptly slid back into the darkness of oblivion.

When next he awakened he recognized the figure of Overcoat O'Brien standing near his bed. The gambler's face worked queerly for a moment before he spoke.

"You're a great little fellow, Kid," the big man said huskily.

Then Derby Nell came forward to say a few trembling words of thanks. As she kissed the Kid on the forehead, he murmured:

"Darling of the race track! Maori a hundred to one! Just say hello to Kentucky for me, Mrs. Carruthers, when you go back home!"

Surething Reilly gripped his pal's hand in approbation, and asked in a puzzled tone:

"Say, Kid, who is this James C. Alderson that trained Maori?"

"Why," the Dancing Kid replied, "that's me. It's my square-shooter name, you see."

A CHILD'S LAUGH

THE melody of mocking bird
That tumbles forth on summer air,
Spreads magic joy when overheard
Not more than thy swift laughter there,
Sweet child, with ne'er a care.

Such joy, abandon, youth, delight,
Sweet privilege of thee and thine,
Thou canst not prize the gift aright,
Nor feel how precious, how divine,
While still the boon is thine.

Oh, wonderful the power to laugh,
To know such freedom of the soul,
Thy spirit's tonic thus to quaff,
To own the world, the part or whole,
And care not for thy dole.

Virginia Goff

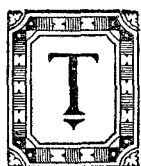


THE BOY SCORNE
THE WATER LURE

Bob Davis Recalls

A Story of the American Frontier When Even Boys Were Men

By Bob Davis



THIS is a story about as brave a boy perhaps, and brainy, as ever lived. Evidently it was the plan of destiny that he should carry out the great acts of courage and intelligence that fate had mapped for him, and then disappear. In any case all the records that might at one time have existed are obliterated, and the lips from which I heard the story forty years ago are hushed forever. The teller of the tale was the late Captain Jack Crawford, the poet

scout, who served under General Nelson A. Miles during the Indian campaigns when the far frontier of the West was sparsely settled and the tread of the buffalo wiped out the trails of the white men faring across the continent into the uncharted new lands.

As this story lacks all the elements of fiction I must account for the characters in the order of their coming into my own life, or of my coming into theirs. Have your choice.

My father was missionary among

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