"Kathy! Kathy! There's horses down there. Right down there by the river!" Pete came running, red pig-tails flying. Her old brown coat was slipping off one shoulder, her rolled stockings were drooping, and she was breathless with running and the excitement of her news. "There're right down there."

"Circus horses, Pete?" Trudie cried joyfully.

"How many?"

"Aw, she's kiddin' us, Kathy."

"Be quiet, Lorney. You mean horses down in that swamp, Pete? There couldn't be. They wouldn't keep horses that far from the rest."

Kathy, fourteen-years-old, and the eldest of the six Mallory sisters, was recognized as an authority.

"There is so!" Pete tossed her head defiantly. "Come and see for yourself, 'f you don't believe me!"

To think was to act with the Mallorys, and the little girls, chattering and arguing, romped after the excited Pete across the elaborately fenced-in field, down to swampy grounds by the river.

"See! What d'I tell you."

The outlines of a half dozen horses could be seen about a quarter of a mile on.

"Oh, let's go ride 'em. Kathy, can we go ride 'em? Nobody'd care. Kathy, can we?"

Since Pete and Lorney were already speeding across the waste, their short legs flying, Kathy nodded in a benign manner, and the others followed.

The horses were enclosed by a barbed-wire fence. The soggy marsh ground beneath them had been trampled to a slick paste, and no grass was growing anywhere. The girls surveyed the animals with an eye only to their possibilities as steeds.

"They're awful tame, looks like," ventured little Beth.

"My goodness they're dirty, Pete. Do you think you'd ought?" Kathy expressed a mother-like concern.

Pete, whose real name was Elsie, didn't answer. She carefully climbed over the fence, and approached the nearest of the beasts. The rest of the girls watched with bated breath. Even Kathy forgot her usual admonitions.

"Here, Horsey. Nice Horsey. Come on and let me ride you. Here Horsey."

The animal stood with lowered head. His eyes were bloodshot. He watched Pete suspiciously, but was submissive to her touch. The Mallorys had just moved to the country four days ago, and the girls knew very little about farm animals. But Pete had ridden her Uncle Henry's plow horses several times, and professed to be quite familiar with horses in general. She led the dirty creature over to the fence and mounted with a flourish by balancing from the barbed wire.

"Oh Pete, I want to ride. It looks awful easy." Marta regarded her sister with admiring eyes.

"This is nothin'! Wait'll I make him run." Pete dug her sharp little heels into the shaggy sides. "Git-up you. Git-up." She spoke imperiously. "Git-up." The horse made a little whimpering sound, and swayed imperceptibly.

"What's the matter with 'im, Pete? Why'nt he git-up?"

"What's the matter with you horse? Darn you, git-up." Pete punctuated her commands with two angry little kicks. The horse's head rocked back and forth pitifully.
“Pete, look at that horse. He’s awful skinny, and he’s got blood on.” Lorney pointed to the other animals. “They all look skinny.”

The girls regarded the rest of the horses.

“Somethin’s funny here. Somethin’s the matter with these critters. They must be sick. I’m gettin’ out of here.” Pete scrambled down from her sorry mount.

“Do you think they’re sick, Kathy?” questioned Marta.

“Kathy, I’m scared. Let’s go home.” Beth tugged at her sister’s dress tail.

“I don’t know. There must be something wrong. I guess we had better go home.” Kathy’s voice sounded strange, and little Beth shivered.

Twilight was settling across the country. The girls had some distance to travel home. The fields they had been exploring were a part of a large territory which served as winter quarters for the famous Blackley-Murdock circus. The circus grounds were adjacent to the newly acquired Mallory homestead.

In the gloomy half-light a mood of depression fell upon the little group. At the top of the rolling hill, they turned to observe again the motionless horses. Wordlessly they turned away, and slowly crossed the field toward the circus grounds proper.

“Hey, what’re ye doin’ around here?” A gruff voice behind them stopped the six girls in their tracks.

“I bin watchin’ you kids for quite a spell, and looks to me like you’re up to somethin’. Where you bin?” It was a tall skinny man with a sinister little black mustache. He had a large mole on his ugly hooked nose, and the girls were instinctively afraid.

“Where you bin?” he repeated.

“No where, specially, mister,” said Pete. “We live down there, in the white house.”

“We just moved in,” volunteered Lorney.

“What’s the matter with your horses, mister?” queried Marta boldly.

“Hush, Mart.” Kathy wore her usual worried look.

“Horses? What horses ar’ye talkin’ about?” The man peered fiercely into their faces. The girls withdrew a little and remained silent.

Then the man straightened up.

“You bin down by the bat-pen?”

“No, sir. No, we haven’t. We’ve only been down to see the horses you have down there by the swamp. But we didn’t hurt a thing.” Kathy spoke authoritatively.

“Well, that’s the bat-pen. What’d ye think it was? Now you kids stay away from there, d’ye understand?” The man shook Pete’s shoulder roughly.

“Why do you call it ‘bat-pen’, mister? There aren’t no bats here.” Trudie looked up at the man wonderingly.

“Aren’t any, Trudie.” Kathy corrected her sister’s grammar automatically.

“Now that’s none of you kid’s business. What I mean is, you stay ‘way from here or I’ll take ye to Mr. Murdock. Now git on home.”

“Come girls,” Kathy directed the little group homeward in her most dignified manner.

“We’ll ask Pa what’s the matter with ’em,” mused Pete.

“And why they call it a bat-pen,” added Trudie.

*****

Supper was ready in the white frame house, and the kitchen was warm and cozy. “Gingerbread!” The girls recognized the spicy odor. “Yes, gingerbread,” echoed Mother as she removed Beth’s coat. “But not until you eat your vegetables. Pete, pull your stockings up. Now hurry girls, and wash. Your father will be in in the shake of a lamb’s tail.”
The girls were barely ready, when a familiar step was heard on the back porch.

"Pa!" The children swarmed over him like bees. Laughing and scuffling, they romped till John Mallory said,

"Now you little rough-necks! Let me go clean up for supper."

They followed him to the wash bowl. Pete retrieved the soap, which had fallen to the floor, and handed it to him. She could hold back her question no longer.

"Pa, why do they call it a bat-pen? Where they keep the horses, I mean." The girls crowded anxiously around, as their father straightened up, his black eyebrows knitted together.

"Have you girls been down by Murdock's bat-pen?" His voice seemed to tremble with sternness.

"You're dripping soap on the floor, Pa." Kathy interrupted.

"Answer me, Pete."

"Why, yes, Pa. We weren't going to bother anything. What's the matter with those horses, Pa? Why can't we go down there?"

"What's the trouble, John? Supper's on the table." Mother stood smiling in the doorway.

"The bat-pen, Nora." Pa's voice was weary, and at his words Mother's smile disappeared. The man dried his hands deliberately, and led the girls to the kitchen. He sat down in his big chair, and they clustered about him. He took one of Pete's hands in his two big ones.

"Sometimes, girls," he began, "you find things in the world that you don't like to think or know about. And maybe you can't do anything about them, either. So you just have to stay way from them, or maybe try to forget." He paused, and cleared his throat. "Those horses are kept to feed Murdock's lions, Pete. Murdock buys them from the farmers 'round here, and keeps them in the bat-pen till he's ready for them.

A farmer'd rather have five dollars, than shoot his old horse, you know."

"Does Murdock shoot 'em, Pa?" The girls were round-eyed.

"No. He puts them down there to die." Lorney's breath drew in sharply. "He don't want to spend money to feed them, so they starve to death. They stand down there in the cold and the mud, till they get so stiff they can't stand up; they just naturally keel over. That's what's the matter with them, Pete. Then a keeper drags them to the lions. And nobody around can do anything about it."

"Oh, Pa." Tears were dripping off Lorney's nose. She swabbed them with her sleeve cuff. "Oh, Pa. That's awful."

"Well, its just one of those things, honey. Now don't go down there again, and try to forget it."

"Come girls, eat your suppers." Their mother's calm voice broke in on the horrible picture, and the girls sat down soberly at the table.

In the half-light of the next morning's dawn, six shadowy little figures were silhouetted about Mr. Murdock's muddy bat-pen. Some of the feed Mr. Mallory had bought "at a bargain" for the stock he was to purchase at a near date, had been taken from its storage place in the Mallory barn, and was being enthusiastically distributed among the old, broken-down horses.

"Look at 'em eat." Pete was ecstatic.

"Listen how they chomp," Lorney added in admiration.

"They sound almost like Grand-papa," giggled Trudie to Marta, her twin. The two went off into hysterical laughter, when Kathy interrupted with,

"Be still, kids. That man will be down here again. We'd better get back now, before Mother misses us."

The girls nodded.

"Good-bye, poor horseys. We'll bring you some more tomorrow, don't worry."

— 16 —
Four-year-old Beth was moved by pity from her usual grave silence.

The twins stowed the empty feed bags under their coats, and the sisters set out across the fields.

The next morning when they returned, two of the horses were gone, and a new one had been added. She was white, and there was blood on her flank where the barbed-wire had cut. Her ribs could be counted easily.

"I hope Pa's feed lasts," Pete said absently.

"What'll happen to us when he finds out? That's what I'm scared of." Kathy shook her blond head.

For two weeks it was the same, then one morning—

"Now I've got ye. Thought ye're the ones been doin' it. When I told you brats to stay out, I meant it. What d'ye mean by feedin' these brutes?" It was the skinny man with the hooked nose.

"Mister, you can't keep these horses here like this. You just can't do it. It isn't fair," Pete pleaded.

"Why'n't you shoot 'em when you get 'em, 'f you have to feed 'em to the lions. You don't have to starve 'em to death, do you Mister?"

"That's the way the cats like 'em, and that's the way its gonna be."

"You're cruel, you darned old man. I hate you. I hate you." Lorney screamed and flung herself on him, kicking and clawing. He seized the child by the shoulders and shook her till she was nearly senseless. Beth thought she was dying.

"Stop that, stop that, you!" Kathy shouted hysterically.

The man gave Lorney a final shake, and spat venomously on the ground.

"Clear out of here. If it wasn't for the performance tonight, I'd take you to Murdock right now. And if I catch you once more—"

The girls were already stumbling across the rolling hill.

That night's event was the one big-hearted gesture Mr. Murdock made all year long. Before the final settling down for winter quarters he presented the year's last performance for half-price.

"Folks for miles around'll be there," John Mallory told the girls at supper, but they declined to go. Shortly after Mr. and Mrs. Mallory left the house that night, six forms crept silently out the back door.

The crowd was gay that night, and the show was good.

"I wish the girls had come," Nora Mallory sighed several times.

Her wish was granted in the midst of the spectacular dog and pony show. She sat transfixed and watched her six daughters start their own parade around the big ring. She clutched her throat.

"John, look, look," she moaned.

The line was headed by Pete, who was pounding vigorously on the back of a skillet with a big iron spoon. She was followed by her five sisters, leading four of the most pitiable horses imaginable. Little Beth was balanced on the back of the dirtiest of the sorry animals.

"These are Mr. Murdock's horses, too," the sisters were shouting. "These are the ones he starves to death."

"He feeds them to the lions!" the twins yelled. Pete shouted lustily, but there were tears in her eyes. "These are Mr. Murdock's horses, too!" They all chanted.

Then Murdock's men seized them bodily, and dragged beasts and children outside.

Within ten minutes, the Mallorys, florid Mr. Murdock, and the hooked-nose individual were gathered in the Mallory kitchen.

"I never heard of such a—, such an outrage. An outrage, that's what it is!" Mr. Murdock was finishing. "Those brats of yours have been bothering us for a long
time. Been feedin' the hosses, Mr. Marston here says. I won't have it! Why I ought to sue. . ."

"Is that true, Kathy?" Nora Mallory asked.

"Yes, Mother. We gave them Pa's new feed. Ma, we just had to do something!" John Mallory interrupted his oldest daugh-
ter,

"Murdock, get off my land, or by Heaven I'll . . ."

"Pa, you're hurtin'!" Everyone stared at Lorney. Her father's big hands were grasping her shoulders in his vehemence. Mrs. Mallory stepped over and pulled Lorney's dress off the thin shoulders. Large ugly bruises marked them.

"It was him!" Pete explained tacitly, pointing a stubby finger at the man with the hooked-nose. "He shook her this morning."

Nora Mallory's eyes glittered. She led Lorney up to Mr. Murdock, and stared relentlessly into his fat face.

"God have pity on your many sins, sir. I never shall. Goodnight." She opened the door to the snowy night, and watched the two men stumble their way down the steps. Then she turned to her family.

"You shouldn't have done it, girls. But don't forget it. After you've grown up, remember it. And never be afraid to fight against something you know is wrong, even if you're sure you can't win . . ." Her black eyes pierced through their little souls to their very boots, the girls thought. They stood transfixed. Then Nora smiled gently. "Now let's go to bed."

Two days later, the country had tactfully and wisely forgotten the whole incident at the circus. After all, Murdock gave a name to the county, and Murdock's business was Murdock's business. And the Mallory sisters' crusade was definitely over. They had been forbidden any more of their father's feed. Nora and John had been kind, but firm; they must never go to the bat-pen again.

They went for one last time.

"I've just got to," Pete had said, so they slipped out on some little pretense.

The horses were standing huddled together in snow water two or three inches deep. The girls pressed against the wire fence, aching to help them. The horses shifted slightly, and made eager little moans of recognition.

"If there was just somethin'," sobbed Trudie.

It was then the old white horse gave a shrill scream, wild and high, and almost human, and crumpled to her knees. The other horses rocked back and forth in the growing darkness.

"She's dying. Oh Kathy, she's dying," Lorney whispered agonizingly.

"Yes," said Kathy.

The horse lay in the icy water on her side. Her eyes rolled wildly. Her breath came in little gasping whinnies. Her bony legs twitched, twice . . .

Lorney walked off a little ways, retch-
ed, and vomited quietly. Beth sobbed in Marta's arms.

"We didn't help a bit. And there's nothing we can do," Pete said stonily.

"No dear." said Kathy, "Nothing."

The six sisters mutely turned away, and walked through the snowy fields in the darkness.