## The Promise

John Steinbeck

In a mid-afternoon of spring, the little boy Jody walked martially along the brush-lined road toward his home ranch. Banging his knee against the golden lard bucket he used for school lunch, he contrived a good bass drum, while his tongue fluttered sharply against his teeth to fill in snare drums and occasional trumpets. Some time back the other members of the squad that walked so smartly from the school had turned into the various little canyons and taken the wagon roads to their own home ranches. Now Jody marched seemingly alone, with high-lifted knees and pounding feet; but behind him there was a phantom army with great flags and swords, silent but deadly.

The afternoon was green and gold with spring. Underneath the spread branches of the oaks the plants grew pale and tall, and on the hills the feed was smooth and thick. The sagebrushes shone with new silver leaves and the oaks wore hoods of golden green. Over the hills there hung such a green odor that the horses on the flats galloped madly, and then stopped, wondering; lambs, and even old sheep, jumped in the air unexpectedly and landed on stiff legs, and went on eating; young clumsy calves butted their heads together and drew back and butted again.

As the gray and silent army marched past, led by Jody, the animals stopped their feeding and their play and watched it go by. Suddenly Jody stopped. The gray army halted, bewildered and nervous. Jody went down on his knees. The army stood in long uneasy ranks for a moment, and then, with a soft sigh of sorrow, rose up in a faint gray mist and disappeared. Jody had seen the thorny crown of a horny-toad moving under the dust of the road. His grimy hand went out and grasped the spiked halo and held firmly while the little beast struggled. Then Jody turned the horny-toad over, exposing its pale gold stomach. With a gentle forefinger he stroked the throat and chest until the horny-toad relaxed, until its eyes closed and it lay languorous and asleep.

Jody opened his lunch pail and deposited the first game inside. He moved on now, his knees bent slightly, his shoulders crouched; his bare feet were wise and silent. In his right hand there was a long gray rifle. The brush along the road stirred restively under a new and unexpected population of gray tigers and gray bears. The hunting was very good, for by the time Jody reached the fork of the road where the mail box stood on a post, he had captured two more horny-toads, four little grass lizards, a blue snake, sixteen yellow-winged grasshoppers and a brown damp newt from under a rock. This assortment scrabbled unhappily against the tin of the lunch bucket.

At the road fork the rifle evaporated and the tigers and bears melted from the hillsides. Even the moist and uncomfortable creatures in the lunch pail ceased to exist, for the little red metal flag was up on the mail box, signifying that some postal matter was inside. Jody set his pail on the ground and opened the letter box. There was a Montgomery Ward catalog and a copy of the *Salinas Weekly Journal*. He slammed the box, picked up his lunch pail and trotted over the ridge and down into the cup of the ranch. Past the barn he ran, and past the used-up haystack and the bunkhouse and the cypress tree. He banged through the front screen door of the ranch calling, “Ma’am, ma’am, there’s a catalog.”

Mrs. Tiflin was in the kitchen spooning clabbered milk into a cotton bag. She put down her work and rinsed her hands under the tap. “Here in the kitchen, Jody. Here I am.”

He ran in and clattered his lunch pail on the sink. “Here it is. Can I open the catalog, ma’am?”

Mrs. Tiflin took up the spoon again and went back to her cottage cheese. “Don’t lose it, Jody. Your father will want to see it.” She scraped the last of the milk into the bag. “Oh, Jody, your father wants to see you before you go to do your chores.” She waved a cruising fly from the cheese bag.

Jody closed the new catalog in alarm. “Ma’am?”

“Why don’t you ever listen? I say your father wants to see you.”

The boy laid the catalog gently on the sink board. “Do you—is it something I did?”

Mrs. Tiflin laughed. “Always a bad conscience. What did you do?”

“Nothing, ma’am,” he said lamely. But he couldn’t remember, and besides it was impossible to know what action might later be construed as a crime.

His mother hung the full bag on a nail where it could drip into the sink. “He just said he wanted to see you when you got home. He’s somewhere down by the barn.”

Jody turned and went out the back door. Hearing his mother open the lunch pail and then gasp with rage, a memory stabbed him and he trotted away toward the barn, conscientiously not hearing the angry voice that called him from the house.

Carl Tiflin and Billy Buck, the ranch-hand, stood against the lower pasture fence. Each man rested one foot on the lowest bar and both elbows on the top bar. They were talking slowly and aimlessly. In the pasture half a dozen horses nibbled contentedly at the sweet grass. The mare, Nellie, stood backed up against the gate, rubbing her buttocks on the heavy post.

Jody sidled uneasily near. He dragged one foot to give an impression of great innocence and nonchalance. When he arrived beside the men he put one foot on the lowest fence rail, rested his elbows on the second bar and looked into the pasture too.

The two men glanced sideways at him.

“I wanted to see you,” Carl said in the stern tone he reserved for children and animals.

“Yes, sir,” said Jody guiltily.

“Billy, here, says you took good care of the pony before it died.”

No punishment was in the air. Jody grew bolder. “Yes, sir, I did.”

“Billy says you have a good patient hand with horses.”

Jody felt a sudden warm friendliness for the ranch-hand.

Billy put in, “He trained that pony as good as anybody I ever seen.”

Then Carl Tiflin came gradually to the point. “If you could have another horse would you work for it?”

Jody shivered. “Yes, sir.”

“Well, look here, then. Billy says the best way for you to be a good hand with horses is to raise a colt.”

“It’s the *only* good way,” Billy interrupted.

“Now, look here, Jody,” continued Carl. “Jess Taylor, up to the ridge ranch, has a fair stallion, but it’ll cost five dollars. I’ll put up the money, but you’ll have to work it out all summer. Will you do that?”

Jody felt that his insides were shriveling. “Yes, sir,” he said softly.

“And no complaining? And no forgetting when you’re told to do something?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, all right, then. Tomorrow morning you take Nellie up to the ridge ranch and get her bred. You’ll have to take care of her, too, till she throws the colt.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You better get to the chickens and the wood now.”

Jody slid away. In passing behind Billy Buck he very nearly put out his hand to touch the blue-jeaned legs. His shoulders swayed a little with maturity and importance.

He went to his work with unprecedented seriousness. This night he did not dump the can of grain to the chickens so that they had to leap over each other and struggle to get it. No, he spread the wheat so far and so carefully that the hens couldn’t find some of it at all. And in the house, after listening to his mother’s despair over boys who filled their lunch pails with slimy, suffocated reptiles, and bugs, he promised never to do it again. Indeed, Jody felt that all such foolishness was lost in the past. He was far too grown up ever to put horny-toads in his lunch pail any more. He carried in so much wood and built such a high structure with it that his mother walked in fear of an avalanche of oak. When he was done, when he had gathered eggs that had remained hidden for weeks, Jody walked down again past the cypress tree, and past the bunkhouse toward the pasture. A fat warty toad that looked out at him from under the watering trough had no emotional effect on him at all.

Carl Tiflin and Billy Buck were not in sight, but from a metallic ringing on the other side of the barn Jody knew that Billy Buck was just starting to milk a cow.

The other horses were eating toward the upper end of the pasture, but Nellie continued to rub herself nervously against the post. Jody walked slowly near, saying, “So, girl, so-o, Nellie.” The mare’s ears went back naughtily and her lips drew away from her yellow teeth. She turned her head around; her eyes were glazed and mad. Jody climbed to the top of the fence and hung his feet over and looked paternally down at the mare.

The evening hovered while he sat there. Bats and nighthawks flicked about. Billy Buck, walking toward the house carrying a full milk bucket, saw Jody and stopped. “It’s a long time to wait,” he said gently. “You’ll get awful tired waiting.”

“No, I won’t, Billy. How long will it be?”

“Nearly a year.”

“Well, I won’t get tired.”

The triangle at the house rang stridently. Jody climbed down from the fence and walked to supper beside Billy Buck. He even put out his hand and took hold of the milk bucket to help carry it.

The next morning after breakfast Carl Tiflin folded a five-dollar bill in a piece of newspaper and pinned the package in the bib pocket of Jody’s overalls. Billy Buck haltered the mare Nellie and led her out of the pasture.

“Be careful now,” he warned. “Hold her up short here so she can’t bite you. She’s crazy as a coot.”

Jody took hold of the halter leather itself and started up the hill toward the ridge ranch with Nellie skittering and jerking behind him. In the pasturage along the road the wild oat heads were just clearing their scabbards. The warm morning sun shone on Jody’s back so sweetly that he was forced to take a serious stiff-legged hop now and then in spite of his maturity. On the fences the shiny blackbirds with red epaulets clicked their dry call. The meadowlarks sang like water, and the wild doves, concealed among the bursting leaves of the oaks, made a sound of restrained grieving. In the fields the rabbits sat sunning themselves, with only their forked ears showing above the grass heads.

After an hour of steady uphill walking, Jody turned into a narrow road that led up a steeper hill to the ridge ranch. He could see the red roof of the barn sticking up above the oak trees, and he could hear a dog barking unemotionally near the house.

Suddenly Nellie jerked back and nearly freed herself. From the direction of the barn Jody heard a shrill whistling scream and a splintering of wood, and then a man’s voice shouting. Nellie reared and whinnied. When Jody held to the halter rope she ran at him with bared teeth. He dropped his hold and scuttled out of the way, into the brush. The high scream came from the oaks again, and Nellie answered it. With hoofs battering the ground the stallion appeared and charged down the hill trailing a broken halter rope. His eyes glittered feverishly. His stiff, erected nostrils were red as flame. His black, sleek hide shone in the sunlight. The stallion came on so fast that he couldn’t stop when he reached the mare. Nellie’s ears went back; she whirled and kicked at him as he went by. The stallion spun around and reared. He struck the mare with his front hoof, and while she staggered under the blow, his teeth raked her neck and drew an ooze of blood.

Instantly Nellie’s mood changed. She became coquettishly feminine. She nibbled his arched neck with her lips. She edged around and rubbed her shoulder against his shoulder. Jody stood half-hidden in the brush and watched. He heard the step of a horse behind him, but before he could turn, a hand caught him by the overall straps and lifted him off the ground. Jess Taylor sat the boy behind him on the horse.

“You might have got killed,” he said. “Sundog’s a mean devil sometimes. He busted his rope and went right through a gate.”

Jody sat quietly, but in a moment he cried, “He’ll hurt her, he’ll kill her. Get him away!”

Jess chuckled. “She’ll be all right. Maybe you’d better climb off and go up to the house for a little. You could get maybe a piece of pie up there.”

But Jody shook his head. “She’s mine, and the colt’s going to be mine. I’m going to raise it up.”

Jess nodded. “Yes, that’s a good thing. Carl has good sense sometimes.”

In a little while the danger was over. Jess lifted Jody down and then caught the stallion by its broken halter rope. And he rode ahead, while Jody followed, leading Nellie.

It was only after he had unpinned and handed over the five dollars, and after he had eaten two pieces of pie, that Jody started for home again. And Nellie followed docilely after him. She was so quiet that Jody climbed on a stump and rode her most of the way home.

The five dollars his father had advanced reduced Jody to peonage for the whole late spring and summer. When the hay was cut he drove a rake. He led the horse that pulled on the Jackson-fork tackle, and when the baler came he drove the circling horse that put pressure on the bales. In addition, Carl Tiflin taught him to milk and put a cow under his care, so that a new chore was added night and morning.

The bay mare Nellie quickly grew complacent. As she walked about the yellowing hillsides or worked at easy tasks, her lips were curled in a perpetual fatuous smile. She moved slowly, with the calm importance of an empress. When she was put to a team, she pulled steadily and unemotionally. Jody went to see her every day. He studied her with critical eyes and saw no change whatever.

One afternoon Billy Buck leaned the many-tined manure fork against the barn wall. He loosened his belt and tucked in his shirt-tail and tightened the belt again. He picked one of the little straws from his hatband and put it in the corner of his mouth. Jody, who was helping Doubletree Mutt, the big serious dog, to dig out a gopher, straightened up as the ranch-hand sauntered out of the barn.

“Let’s go up and have a look at Nellie,” Billy suggested.

Instantly Jody fell into step with him. Doubletree Mutt watched them over his shoulder; then he dug furiously, growled, sounded little sharp yelps to indicate that the gopher was practically caught. When he looked over his shoulder again, and saw that neither Jody nor Billy was interested, he climbed reluctantly out of the hole and followed them up the hill.

The wild oats were ripening. Every head bent sharply under its load of grain, and the grass was dry enough so that it made a swishing sound as Jody and Billy stepped through it. Halfway up the hill they could see Nellie and the iron-gray gelding, Pete, nibbling the heads from the wild oats. When they approached, Nellie looked at them and backed her ears and bobbed her head up and down rebelliously. Billy walked to her and put his hand under her mane and patted her neck, until her ears came forward again and she nibbled delicately at his shirt.

Jody asked, “Do you think she’s really going to have a colt?”

Billy rolled the lids back from the mare’s eyes with his thumb and forefinger. He felt the lower lip and fingered the black, leathery teats. “I wouldn’t be surprised,” he said.

“Well, she isn’t changed at all. It’s three months gone.”

Billy rubbed the mare’s flat forehead with his knuckle while she grunted with pleasure. “I told you you’d get tired waiting. It’ll be five months more before you can even see a sign, and it’ll be at least eight months more before she throws the colt, about next January.”

Jody sighed deeply. “It’s a long time, isn’t it?”

“And then it’ll be about two years more before you can ride.”

Jody cried out in despair, “I’ll be grown up.”

“Yep, you’ll be an old man,” said Billy.

“What color do you think the colt’ll be?”

“Why, you can’t ever tell. The stud is black and the dam is bay. Colt might be black or bay or gray or dappled. You can’t tell. Sometimes a black dam might have a white colt.”

“Well, I hope it’s black, and a stallion.”

“If it’s a stallion, we’ll have to geld it. Your father wouldn’t let you have a stallion.”

“Maybe he would,” Jody said. “I could train him not to be mean.”

Billy pursed his lips, and the little straw that had been in the corner of his mouth rolled down to the center. “You can’t ever trust a stallion,” he said critically. “They’re mostly fighting and making trouble. Sometimes when they’re feeling funny they won’t work. They make the mares uneasy and kick hell out of the geldings. Your father wouldn’t let you keep a stallion.”

Nellie sauntered away, nibbling the drying grass. Jody skinned the grain from a grass stem and threw the handful into the air, so that each pointed, feathered seed sailed out like a dart. “Tell me how it’ll be, Billy. Is it like when the cows have calves?”

“Just about. Mares are a little more sensitive. Sometimes you have to be there to help the mare. And sometimes if it’s wrong you have to—” he paused.

“Have to what, Billy?”

“Have to tear the colt to pieces to get it out, or the mare’ll die.”

“But it won’t be that way this time, will it, Billy?”

“Oh, no, Nellie’s thrown good colts.”

“Can I be there, Billy? Will you be certain to call me? It’s my colt.”

“Sure, I’ll call you. Of course I will.”

“Tell me how it’ll be.”

“Why, you’ve seen the cows calving. It’s almost the same. The mare starts groaning and stretching, and then, if it’s a good right birth, the head and forefeet come out, and the front hoofs kick a hole just the way the calves do. And the colt starts to breathe. It’s good to be there, ’cause if its feet aren’t right maybe he can’t break the sac, and then he might smother.”

Jody whipped his leg with a bunch of grass. “We’ll have to be there, then, won’t we?”

“Oh, we’ll be there, all right.”

They turned and walked slowly down the hill toward the barn. Jody was tortured with a thing he had to say, although he didn’t want to. “Billy,” he began miserably, “Billy, you won’t let anything happen to the colt, will you?”

And Billy knew he was thinking of the red pony, Gabilan, and of how it died of strangles. Billy knew he had been infallible before that, and now he was capable of failure. The knowledge made Billy much less sure of himself than he had been. “I can’t tell,” he said roughly. “All sorts of things might happen, and they wouldn’t be my fault. I can’t do everything.” He felt badly about his lost prestige, and so he said, meanly, “I’ll do everything I know, but I won’t promise anything. Nellie’s a good mare. She’s thrown good colts before. She ought to this time.” And he walked away from Jody and went into the saddle-room beside the barn, for his feelings were hurt.

Jody traveled often to the brush line behind the house. A rusty iron pipe ran a thin stream of spring water into an old green tub. Where the water spilled over and sank into the ground there was a patch of perpetually green grass. Even when the hills were brown and baked in the summer that little patch was green. The water whined softly into the trough all the year round. This place had grown to be a center-point for Jody. When he had been punished the cool green grass and the singing water soothed him. When he had been mean the biting acid of meanness left him at the brush line. When he sat in the grass and listened to the purling stream, the barriers set up in his mind by the stern day went down to ruin.

On the other hand, the black cypress tree by the bunkhouse was as repulsive as the water-tub was dear; for to this tree all the pigs came, sooner or later, to be slaughtered. Pig killing was fascinating, with the screaming and the blood, but it made Jody’s heart beat so fast that it hurt him. After the pigs were scalded in the big iron tripod kettle and their skins were scraped and white, Jody had to go to the water-tub to sit in the grass until his heart grew quiet. The water-tub and the black cypress were opposites and enemies.

When Billy left him and walked angrily away, Jody turned up toward the house. He thought of Nellie as he walked, and of the little colt. Then suddenly he saw that he was under the black cypress, under the very singletree where the pigs were hung. He brushed his dry-grass hair off his forehead and hurried on. It seemed to him an unlucky thing to be thinking of his colt in the very slaughter place, especially after what Billy had said. To counteract any evil result of that bad conjunction he walked quickly past the ranch house, through the chicken yard, through the vegetable patch, until he came at last to the brush line.

He sat down in the green grass. The trilling water sounded in his ears. He looked over the farm buildings and across at the round hills, rich and yellow with grain. He could see Nellie feeding on the slope. As usual the water place eliminated time and distance. Jody saw a black, long-legged colt, butting against Nellie’s flanks, demanding milk. And then he saw himself breaking a large colt to halter. All in a few moments the colt grew to be a magnificent animal, deep of chest, with a neck as high and arched as a sea-horse’s neck, with a tail that tongued and rippled like black flame. This horse was terrible to everyone but Jody. In the schoolyard the boys begged rides, and Jody smilingly agreed. But no sooner were they mounted than the black demon pitched them off. Why, that was his name, Black Demon! For a moment the trilling water and the grass and the sunshine came back, and then...

Sometimes in the night the ranch people, safe in their beds, heard a roar of hoofs go by. They said, “It’s Jody, on Demon. He’s helping out the sheriff again.” And then...

The golden dust filled the air in the arena at the Salinas Rodeo. The announcer called the roping contests. When Jody rode the black horse to the starting chute the other contestants shrugged and gave up first place, for it was well known that Jody and Demon could rope and throw and tie a steer a great deal quicker than any roping team of two men could. Jody was not a boy any more, and Demon was not a horse. The two together were one glorious individual. And then...

The President wrote a letter and asked them to help catch a bandit in Washington. Jody settled himself comfortably in the grass. The little stream of water whined into the mossy tub.

The year passed slowly on. Time after time Jody gave up his colt for lost. No change had taken place in Nellie. Carl Tiflin still drove her to a light cart, and she pulled on a hay rake and worked the Jackson-fork tackle when the hay was being put into the barn.

The summer passed, and the warm bright autumn. And then the frantic morning winds began to twist along the ground, and a chill came into the air, and the poison oak turned red. One morning in September, when he had finished his breakfast, Jody’s mother called him into the kitchen. She was pouring boiling water into a bucket full of dry midlings and stirring the materials to a steaming paste.

“Yes, ma’am?” Jody asked.

“Watch how I do it. You’ll have to do it after this every other morning.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Why, it’s warm mash for Nellie. It’ll keep her in good shape.”

Jody rubbed his forehead with a knuckle. “Is she all right?” he asked timidly.

Mrs. Tiflin put down the kettle and stirred the mash with a wooden paddle. “Of course she’s all right, only you’ve got to take better care of her from now on. Here, take this breakfast out to her!”

Jody seized the bucket and ran, down past the bunkhouse, past the barn, with the heavy bucket banging against his knees. He found Nellie playing with the water in the trough, pushing waves and tossing her head so that the water slopped out on the ground.

Jody climbed the fence and set the bucket of steaming mash beside her. Then he stepped back to look at her. And she was changed. Her stomach was swollen. When she moved, her feet touched the ground gently. She buried her nose in the bucket and gobbled the hot breakfast. And when she had finished and had pushed the bucket around the ground with her nose a little, she stepped quietly over to Jody and rubbed her cheek against him.

Billy Buck came out of the saddle-room and walked over. “Starts fast when it starts, doesn’t it?”

“Did it come all at once?”

“Oh, no, you just stopped looking for a while.” He pulled her head around toward Jody. “She’s goin’ to be nice, too. See how nice her eyes are! Some mares get mean, but when they turn nice, they just love everything.” Nellie slipped her head under Billy’s arm and rubbed her neck up and down between his arm and his side. “You better treat her awful nice now,” Billy said.

“How long will it be?” Jody demanded breathlessly.

The man counted in whispers on his fingers. “About three months,” he said aloud. “You can’t tell exactly. Sometimes it’s eleven months to the day, but it might be two weeks early, or a month late, without hurting anything.”

Jody looked hard at the ground. “Billy,” he began nervously, “Billy, you’ll call me when it’s getting born, won’t you? You’ll let me be there, won’t you?”

Billy bit the tip of Nellie’s ear with his front teeth. “Carl says he wants you to start right at the start. That’s the only way to learn. Nobody can tell you anything. Like my old man did with me about the saddle blanket. He was a government packer when I was your size, and I helped him some. One day I left a wrinkle in my saddle blanket and made a saddle-sore. My old man didn’t give me hell at all. But the next morning he saddled me up with a forty-pound stock saddle. I had to lead my horse and carry that saddle over a whole damn mountain in the sun. It darn near killed me, but I never left no wrinkles in a blanket again. I couldn’t. I never in my life since then put on a blanket but I felt that saddle on my back.”

Jody reached up a hand and took hold of Nellie’s mane. “You’ll tell me what to do about everything, won’t you? I guess you know everything about horses, don’t you?”

Billy laughed. “Why I’m half horse myself, you see,” he said. “My ma died when I was born, and being my old man was a government packer in the mountains, and no cows around most of the time, why he just gave me mostly mare’s milk.” He continued seriously, “And horses know that. Don’t you know it, Nellie?”

The mare turned her head and looked full into his eyes for a moment, and this is a thing horses practically never do. Billy was proud and sure of himself now. He boasted a little. “I’ll see you get a good colt. I’ll start you right. And if you do like I say, you’ll have the best horse in the county.”

That made Jody feel warm and proud, too; so proud that when he went back to the house he bowed his legs and swayed his shoulders as horsemen do. And he whispered, “Whoa, you Black Demon, you! Steady down there and keep your feet on the ground.”

The winter fell sharply. A few preliminary gusty showers, and then a strong steady rain. The hills lost their straw color and blackened under the water, and the winter streams scrambled noisily down the canyons. The mushrooms and puff-balls popped up and the new grass started before Christmas.

But this year Christmas was not the central day to Jody. Some undetermined time in January had become the axis day around which the months swung. When the rains fell, he put Nellie in a box stall and fed her warm food every morning and curried her and brushed her.

The mare was swelling so greatly that Jody became alarmed. “She’ll pop wide open,” he said to Billy.

Billy laid his strong square hand against Nellie’s swollen abdomen. “Feel here,” he said quietly. “You can feel it move. I guess it would surprise you if there were twin colts.”

“You don’t think so?” Jody cried. “You don’t think it will be twins, do you, Billy?”

“No, I don’t, but it does happen, sometimes.”

During the first two weeks of January it rained steadily. Jody spent most of his time, when he wasn’t in school, in the box stall with Nellie. Twenty times a day he put his hand on her stomach to feel the colt move. Nellie became more and more gentle and friendly to him. She rubbed her nose on him. She whinnied softly when he walked into the barn.

Carl Tiflin came to the barn with Jody one day. He looked admiringly at the groomed bay coat, and he felt the firm flesh over ribs and shoulders. “You’ve done a good job,” he said to Jody. And this was the greatest praise he knew how to give. Jody was tight with pride for hours afterward.

The fifteenth of January came, and the colt was not born. And the twentieth came; a lump of fear began to form in Jody’s stomach. “Is it all right?” he demanded of Billy.

“Oh, sure.”

And again, “Are you sure it’s going to be all right?”

Billy stroked the mare’s neck. She swayed her head uneasily. “I told you it wasn’t always the same time, Jody. You just have to wait.”

When the end of the month arrived with no birth, Jody grew frantic. Nellie was so big that her breath came heavily, and her ears were close together and straight up, as though her head ached. Jody’s sleep grew restless, and his dreams confused.

On the night of the second of February he awakened crying. His mother called to him, “Jody, you’re dreaming. Wake up and start over again.”

But Jody was filled with terror and desolation. He lay quietly a few moments, waiting for his mother to go back to sleep, and then he slipped his clothes on, and crept out in his bare feet.

The night was black and thick. A little misting rain fell. The cypress tree and the bunkhouse loomed and then dropped back into the mist. The barn door screeched as he opened it, a thing it never did in the daytime. Jody went to the rack and found a lantern and a tin box of matches. He lighted the wick and walked down the long straw-covered aisle to Nellie’s stall. She was standing up. Her whole body weaved from side to side. Jody called to her, “So, Nellie, so-o, Nellie,” but she did not stop her swaying nor look around. When he stepped into the stall and touched her on the shoulder she shivered under his hand. Then Billy Buck’s voice came from the hayloft right above the stall.

“Jody, what are you doing?”

Jody started back and turned miserable eyes up toward the nest where Billy was lying in the hay. “Is she all right, do you think?”

“Why sure, I think so.”

“You won’t let anything happen, Billy, you’re sure you won’t?”

Billy growled down at him, “I told you I’d call you, and I will. Now you get back to bed and stop worrying that mare. She’s got enough to do without you worrying her.”

Jody cringed, for he had never heard Billy speak in such a tone. “I only thought I’d come and see,” he said. “I woke up.”

Billy softened a little then. “Well, you get to bed. I don’t want you bothering her. I told you I’d get you a good colt. Get along now.”

Jody walked slowly out of the barn. He blew out the lantern and set it in the rack. The blackness of the night, and the chilled mist struck him and enfolded him. He wished he believed everything Billy said as he had before the pony died. It was a moment before his eyes, blinded by the feeble lantern-flame, could make any form of the darkness. The damp ground chilled his bare feet. At the cypress tree the roosting turkeys chattered a little in alarm, and the two good dogs responded to their duty and came charging out, barking to frighten away the coyotes they thought were prowling under the tree.

As he crept through the kitchen, Jody stumbled over a chair. Carl called from his bedroom, “Who’s there? What’s the matter there?”

And Mrs. Tiflin said sleepily, “What’s the matter, Carl?”

The next second Carl came out of the bedroom carrying a candle, and found Jody before he could get into bed. “What are you doing out?”

Jody turned shyly away. “I was down to see the mare.”

For a moment anger at being awakened fought with approval in Jody’s father. “Listen,” he said, finally, “there’s not a man in this county that knows more about colts than Billy. You leave it to him.”

Words burst out of Jody’s mouth. “But the pony died—”

“Don’t you go blaming that on him,” Carl said sternly. “If Billy can’t save a horse, it can’t be saved.”

Mrs. Tiflin called, “Make him clean his feet and go to bed, Carl. He’ll be sleepy all day tomorrow.”

It seemed to Jody that he had just closed his eyes to try to go to sleep when he was shaken violently by the shoulder. Billy Buck stood beside him, holding a lantern in his hand. “Get up,” he said. “Hurry up.” He turned and walked quickly out of the room.

Mrs. Tiflin called, “What’s the matter? Is that you, Billy?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Is Nellie ready?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“All right, I’ll get up and heat some water in case you need it.”

Jody jumped into his clothes so quickly that he was out the back door before Billy’s swinging lantern was halfway to the barn. There was a rim of dawn on the mountain-tops, but no light had penetrated into the cup of the ranch yet. Jody ran frantically after the lantern and caught up to Billy just as he reached the barn. Billy hung the lantern to a nail on the stall-side and took off his blue denim coat. Jody saw that he wore only a sleeveless shirt under it.

Nellie was standing rigid and stiff. While they watched, she crouched. Her whole body was wrung with a spasm. The spasm passed. But in a few moments it started over again, and passed.

Billy muttered nervously, “There’s something wrong.” His bare hand disappeared. “Oh, Jesus,” he said. “It’s wrong.”

The spasm came again, and this time Billy strained, and the muscles stood out on his arm and shoulder. He heaved strongly, his forehead beaded with perspiration. Nellie cried with pain. Billy was muttering, “It’s wrong. I can’t turn it. It’s way wrong. It’s turned all around wrong.”

He glared wildly toward Jody. And then his fingers made a careful, careful diagnosis. His cheeks were growing tight and gray. He looked for a long questioning minute at Jody standing back of the stall. Then Billy stepped to the rack under the manure window and picked up a horseshoe hammer with his wet right hand.

“Go outside, Jody,” he said.

The boy stood still and stared dully at him.

“Go outside, I tell you. It’ll be too late.”

Jody didn’t move.

Then Billy walked quickly to Nellie’s head. He cried, “Turn your face away, damn you, turn your face.”

This time Jody obeyed. His head turned sideways. He heard Billy whispering hoarsely in the stall. And then he heard a hollow crunch of bone. Nellie chuckled shrilly. Jody looked back in time to see the hammer rise and fall again on the flat forehead. Then Nellie fell heavily to her side and quivered for a moment.

Billy jumped to the swollen stomach; his big pocketknife was in his hand. He lifted the skin and drove the knife in. He sawed and ripped at the tough belly. The air filled with the sick odor of warm living entrails. The other horses reared back against their halter chains and squealed and kicked.

Billy dropped the knife. Both of his arms plunged into the terrible ragged hole and dragged out a big, white, dripping bundle. His teeth tore a hole in the covering. A little black head appeared through the tear, and little slick, wet ears. A gurgling breath was drawn, and then another. Billy shucked off the sac and found his knife and cut the string. For a moment he held the little black colt in his arms and looked at it. And then he walked slowly over and laid it in the straw at Jody’s feet.

Billy’s face and arms and chest were dripping red. His body shivered and his teeth chattered. His voice was gone; he spoke in a throaty whisper. “There’s your colt. I promised. And there it is. I had to do it—had to.” He stopped and looked over his shoulder into the box stall. “Go get hot water and a sponge,” he whispered. “Wash him and dry him the way his mother would. You’ll have to feed him by hand. But there’s your colt, the way I promised.”

Jody stared stupidly at the wet, panting foal. It stretched out its chin and tried to raise its head. Its blank eyes were navy blue.

“God damn you,” Billy shouted, “will you go now for the water? *Will you go?* ”

Then Jody turned and trotted out of the barn into the dawn. He ached from his throat to his stomach. His legs were stiff and heavy. He tried to be glad because of the colt, but the bloody face, and the haunted, tired eyes of Billy Buck hung in the air ahead of him.