

C N fiction

Before their parents left for Spain, the twins, Susan and David, had been given permission to compete in the Dublin Horse Show.

When Anthea, who had been left in charge of them, refused to allow them to go, they decided to run away on their ponies, and persuaded their best friends, Martin and Clare to join them.

Now, only a day's ride from Dublin, their adventure had turned to tragedy. During the night, two of their ponies had disappeared . . .

5. Stolen!

"THEY must have got out of the field," David said.

I snatched up Brandy's bridle. "Which ones?" I gasped. "Which ponies?"

"Sooty, and . . . Brandy." I felt my heart thump, and I thought, shakenly, *Brandy, it would have to be Brandy!*

It was not of course that I wanted the others' ponies to disappear, but why did it have to be my Brandy?

With the help of the farmer and his two sons, we searched the field and the road for clues. On the roadside we found distinct hoof-marks in the soft mud.

"They've been taken," said the farmer briefly. "Were the two ponies any better than the other two?"

"I suppose so," answered David, for the rest of us were too horrified to reply. "Silver isn't much to look at, and Mistrust



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She was still a schoolgirl when she wrote *Runaway Riders*

would have been too hard to manage because she's nervous."

"Then it was someone who knew horseflesh, and had probably seen these ponies before, so they could pick them out in the dark. Unless they could have been taken while it was still light. Did you see them after you left them in the paddock?"

"No, just vaguely when it was dark," I told him. "And it could have been just these two we saw."

"Well," said the farmer, "I'll get my car out and make inquiries up and down the road. You two boys can take the other ponies and do the same. You girls had better stay and clear up your camp and get ready to move."

He went off to get his car, and the boys got the ponies saddled while Clare gave Martin careful instructions on how he was to ride Mistrust. We waved them off from the paddock-gate, and then wandered back to the barn and our camp. We felt at a loose end and out of it all, and I for one was longing to go and help find my pony and Sooty.

The farmer's wife asked us into the kitchen and gave us butter-milk to drink, which was horrible, but we took it anyway, because it made us feel even more miserable.

It was not long before the farmer returned, and we all dashed out to meet him when we

Runaway Riders



heard him rattling into the yard in his ancient car.

"Have they been seen?" I cried, as he stepped out.

"Aye, I think I've found where they are," he said. "But I tell you, we'll have a hard time getting them. There were gypsies camping up the road last night. The farmer across the road was up with a sick pig. He heard horses passing at about two in the morning, but he thought it was just the gypsies and paid no attention. Then he saw them breaking camp about seven o'clock, and, when he asked them, they said they were going to the Horse Fair at Clonrea. Those ponies of yours couldn't have got out of the field themselves—I bet you anything they're on the way to the Fair behind those caravans at this moment!"

stop myself thinking all the thoughts calculated to make me feel worse.

I thought of Brandy and all the little habits that made him so endearing; the trick he had of lipping at your buttons; and the funny way he had of wiggling his bottom lip at me; and how he could look so innocent when he'd just eaten the tops off my mother's best flowers, or had stolen sugar out of my pocket. All this had gone, and I felt awful.

Clonrea at last, and the streets were packed with people and cars and animals, farmers standing in groups discussing the stock, and families out for the day, swarming

"This is no place for kids—out!" said the evil-looking man



I could hardly bear the thought. The ponies would be terrified tied behind those rumbling, bumping vans. And, oh—if they were sold they would be gone for ever!

"Can't we do something?" I cried desperately. "We must go after them!"

"We will, we will," said the farmer, in what I thought was an exasperatingly slow way. "Get your gear completely packed while I go after the boys."

He seemed to be away an eternity, and we had all our things piled up in the yard long before he came back. But once there, he moved surprisingly quickly. Before long, all our things were packed in the car, the boys had left on the ponies on their way to Clonrea (which was on our route to Dublin), and we got into the car with the farmer and rattled off.

Clonrea was only a few miles away, but to Clare and me it could have been hundreds. In spite of trying to keep a firm hold on my imagination, I couldn't

all over the roads and determined to have a good time. The car crawled along, the farmer honking his horn continuously, and Clare and I suddenly found we were hanging on to the backs of the seats in front of us, trying to push the car faster.

When at last we found a place to park, we all jumped out and hurried over to the makeshift, roped-in pens to look for the ponies.

We hunted through one after the other without success.

"Oh, this is terrible!" I exclaimed. "They must be somewhere!"

"Look in that pen, over behind the village pump," said the farmer. "They might have put them over there; it's quieter."

We had almost given up hope as we pushed our way to the side of the pen. Then, quite suddenly, I saw Brandy. He was standing

dejectedly in the middle, with his head and tail drooping, and a horrid rope head-collar on with "Lot 37" printed on it.

I stood on the railings and called him, but there were too many ponies between us, and he didn't hear me. Then I saw Sooty over at the other side of the ring, showing quite plainly that he did not like his captivity. His ears were back and he was snapping and backing angrily into the other ponies.

I jumped down and clutched the farmer's arm.

"There they are!" I shouted excitedly.

"Well," he said, "now to find a policeman, and try to prove that they're yours. You keep your eyes on the ponies and look out for the boys."

He elbowed his way through the crowd and out into the road.

"Sooty's going to hurt someone," said Clare. "I suppose there's nothing we can do? He's going to get himself kicked too, if he keeps going for the other ponies like that."

I looked at all the milling ponies doubtfully, and then climbed into the ring and pushed

silence! The auction of these here animals is now starting, with Lot 15."

Clare and I turned to each other with horror, and I did some frantic arithmetic.

"Fifteen from thirty-seven, that's twenty-two! Only twenty-two lots and then it's Brandy! Oh—where is the farmer?"

"Here he comes now, with the boys."

It did not take the farmer long to size up the situation.

"I've got a policeman," he said, "he's coming in a minute. Look, you two boys had better leave your ponies over where I parked the car, then you can come back and help here. Clare, you go with them and then stay and look after the ponies. We can't have them taken or sold by mistake as well."

A red-faced policeman appeared. "Now, then," he boomed, "what's the trouble, sir?"

The farmer explained, and I noticed that the gypsy was eying us curiously until he saw we were looking at him, when he quickly looked the other way and started fixing Brandy's bridle. I recoiled in disgust as I saw the dirty fingers touching my pony and fixing the bridle on his head.

The policeman waved his arms about and made a lot of noise, which wasn't hard because of his size. At last he attracted the gypsy's attention and called him over.

"That gentleman there seems to think this girl here owns that pony of yours there, and the black one, like," he said.

The gypsy began to shout angrily. "Well they're not their ponies! They're mine, they are. Brought 'em up from foals I did, from my old mare that pulls the cart, see?"

Behind me the auctioneer called, "Lot 22."

"Well now," said the policeman, "have either of you any proof that these animals are yours?"

"Easily!" replied the gypsy triumphantly, and I felt my heart sink. "Watch this."

He walked quickly between the ponies, stood some feet away from the angry Sooty, put out his hand and called him. Sooty pricked his ears forward and came docilely to him, and nuzzled his head against his shoulder. Little did he know what he was doing.

The policeman turned to me.

"Well," he said, "the pony certainly seems to know him. Are you sure you haven't made a mistake?"

"He's bewitched him!" I said. I was nearly crying. "All gypsies can do it. Oh, he's ours, they are ours! Look, they know me too!"

I was climbing into the ring, but the policeman pulled me back. "You'll only get hurt in there," he said.

Then suddenly I had an idea. "The Forms, the Veterinary Forms!" I cried. "We had to have them coming over the border. They give our ponies' height and description and everything."

"Ah, that's more like it," said the policeman.

I tore back to the car and pulled all our camping-gear to bits in my haste as I searched for the Forms. Then I became aware of Clare calling.

"Look, idiot, what are you looking for?"

"The Veterinary Forms! They've gone!" I wailed.

To be continued
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