

Dancer's Fire

by Josepha Sherman

THE MOON was still up when I arrived at the racetrack; exercise riders—successful ones, at any rate—don't get many chances to sleep late. I don't know what whim made me turn left instead of right, so that instead of passing through the paddock into the familiar bustle of the waking backstretch and its long rows of barns full of yawning, whinnying horses I found myself in the great mass of the grandstand, silent and still clean in these hours before opening. I wandered down to the rail and looked out over the low, dark rectangles of the tote boards to the sweep of the track. Union Downs is a big course, second only to the majestic mile and a half of Belmont, and the wide rings of dirt and turf encircling the grassy infield and its geese-filled lake looked like something out of an older, more mysterious age.

I couldn't stand here staring like an idiot. I had a job to do, horses to work. Besides, if I stayed here much longer, some security guard was going to come along and ask me embarrassing questions. It had been a long time since I'd been stupid enough to so much as smoke a joint, but some people had equally long memories.

A flicker of movement startled me: a horse was on the track. My first thought was that it had to be an escapee from one of the barns; horses have people beat all hollow when it comes to being escape artists. I was all set to go back to one of the barns and spread the word—

But then moonlight blazed full on a bright bay coat, and I froze.

That was Dancer's Fire down there, sleek as a greyhound. Oh, I could recite all her statistics without having to stop and think: three-year-old bay filly by Dancer's Pride out of Laura's Secret—classic Northern Dancer and Secretariat bloodlines—ten for ten in her races, winner of the filly Triple Crown this spring. Cold statistics didn't tell it all though: the unbreakable will to race, to win, the fierce spirit within the delicate frame that could never be less than the best. I had been her exercise rider, and honored, too; Dancer's Fire moved quick and smooth as living flame. And if that double dose of

Nasrullah blood back a few generations in her pedigree gave her a fiery temperament, too, well, a few bites were a small price to pay to handle greatness. She never bit me hard, anyhow, and had a way of suddenly sticking her soft muzzle against my neck and giving me the barest swipe with her tongue as though saying she was sorry....

That was Dancer's Fire down there, no mistaking it, from the odd little jagged blaze on her fore-head to the three elegant white stockings on her slender legs. A picture to warm a horse fan's heart. Only one trouble with it:

Dancer's Fire was dead.

She had died in the middle of her last race a month ago, a never-should-have-been-run match race against Proud Trumpet, the three-year-old colt sensation, right here at Union Downs. Match races are usually won by the horse that takes the lead from the start, but those two horses had surged down the backstretch like one, ears pinned, necks outstretched, every muscle straining, churning, driving for the wire—

And just before that wire, the filly's heart had broken. Massive arterial hemorrhaging, the vets had called it, which is their fancy way of saying fatal heart attack. Dancer's Fire was dead, and like everyone else in the business, I had done my share of mourning this past month, tried my best to ignore that one empty stall, and gone on with life.

So what was she doing here now? As I watched, aching at the sight of her, Dancer's Fire paced nervously back and forth, stopping to anxiously paw the ground, her bright coat washy with sweat, then raised her proud head, searching for—

For what? What could a dead racehorse, or a racehorse ghost, or whatever I was seeing, possibly want? I'd been clean too long to be hallucinating now, though there were supposed to be such things as drug flashbacks. And yet . . .

"Dancer?" I asked, very softly.

I swear she heard me. Her ears pricked, and for a long moment she stared right at me. Then Dancer's Fire turned smoothly, trotted down the back-stretch . . . and vanished.

Well, it wasn't the sort of thing you talked about, not if you wanted to keep your job, not if you didn't want a new reputation as a crazy. I did my work that morning, which was primarily to ride amiable Pleasant Lad a brisk five furlongs, and was glad it *was* old Laddie. A four-year-old brown gelding, lop-eared and homely like his daddy,

he's quick enough (when he wants to be) to have actually set a couple of track records, but he's as calm and unshockable as an old cow, which was pretty much what I wanted just then. As he worked his lazy way down the track, blowing hard to make me think he was trying his best, I tried to put what I'd seen earlier down to a trick of the moonlight. The reality of warm, smelly, friendly horse under me helped.

That day, the should-have-been winner of the first race stumbled just short of the finish, almost as though he'd been cut off by another horse that wasn't there. I told myself he was only a cheap claimer, after all, probably sore-legged; that he'd stumbled pretty much where Dancer's Fire had died had nothing to do with it.

Nerves tight, I forced myself back to the track that night, this time with Hank, one of the security guards, at my side. Sure enough, Dancer's Fire was there, pacing anxiously before the grandstand.

"There!" I yelled. "Do you see that?"

Hank blinked, then shone his flashlight down on the track. Dancer's Fire glinted in its light, bright as a living horse, but the man only shrugged. "Nothing down there.

"You mean you don't see—" I caught myself in mid-cry. "Ah, never mind. I thought I saw someone down on the track. Must have been mistaken."

I slunk away, feeling more scared than when Zack's Pride, a thousand pounds of thoroughly loony stallion, had charged me.

A ghost horse only I could see. Maybe *I* was the loony this time. Maybe my past was catching up with me, scrambling my brains years after I'd gone clean. Maybe ...

The next day, the should-have-been winner of the fourth race, a two-year-old filly who had been leading the other babies by an easy four lengths, suddenly shied halfway across the track at nothing. Well she *was* only a baby, after all; everyone knew two-year-olds sometimes did crazy things. Besides, if there were, by some wild, ridiculous, impossible chance, a ghostly racer on the track, wouldn't every horse have sensed it? I mean, didn't all the stories say animals Saw Things?

Maybe they did. For all I knew, good old unflappable Laddie could see the ghost of every horse since Eclipse. That didn't mean he'd turn one lazy hair about it. Maybe only *some* horses were scared of spooks. Even spooks trying to race with them.

If there were such things. If I wasn't quietly going over the edge, or—

Ah, hell. There wasn't anyone I could tell about this; my job might be secure right now, I was a good enough rider for that, but I couldn't afford having anyone start bringing up the bad old days. I finally went and looked up past RACING FORMS, dating from the day after that deadly match race. There wasn't anything really dramatic in them, nothing to make me yell for help. And yet ... almost every day there had been one race in which a sure winner didn't. There'd be a note that this horse had run out—bolted to the outer rail—or that horse had shied, like that silly two-year-old. There was even one race where the almost-winner had suddenly reared. They'd said he'd tried to jump a shadow, horses will do that sometimes, but I ... well, I called myself a hundred kinds of idiot, but the memory of Dancer's Fire prancing nervously in the moonlight wouldn't leave me alone.

And at last, even though I really didn't want to do it, I went back to the track at night.

She was there, Dancer's Fire, pacing about and searching restlessly by the waning moonlight, the very image of a nervous, unhappy horse . . . I couldn't stand it. Without stopping to think, I slipped down to the track, and called her name, very softly so no one would hear me.

She heard. She trotted up to me, looking so thoroughly real, so thoroughly alive I could almost forget the painful memories of a month ago. But her hoofs made no sound, and her dark mane was ruffled by a wind that wasn't there. A ghost horse.

But how could I be afraid of her? Dead or alive, this was still Dancer's Fire, and in her fierce eyes was that look of total trust a horse so rarely holds for anyone human, and a terrible fear she'd never known while alive. Dancer knew something was wrong, knew she wasn't supposed to be here, and she was crying out to me in her silent equine way to help her, but—

"I'm sorry," I whispered painfully. "I don't know what you want."

No? As I watched her resume her frustrated, head-tossing pacing, radiating that bewildered terror, an idea slipped into my head. What if...?

"Oh, no," I said aloud. "That's ridiculous."

Was it? In life she'd always been driven by that unshakable will to win. Why should she have changed now?

"Hell, horse, you're going to get me in a lot of trouble."

But what else could I do? No one else could help her—no one else could even see her! Watching her miserable pacing, sensing her pain and fright, I knew I had to take the chance.

"Wait till tomorrow night, Dancer," I begged her. "Just wait till tomorrow night."

If I'd let myself stop to think about it, I probably would have turned myself in to the loony squad. This really was a crazy idea, without the slightest guarantee it would work. I had a good job, good horses to ride for a trainer I respected. I'd almost certainly be throwing all that away, and with my background, I'd probably have to leave town, head out to another track and start all over. God, crazy wasn't the half of it.

But how could I possibly leave Dancer's Fire like that? With a shock, I realized she had been more than just another horse, more even than an equine superstar. Animal or no, she'd been a friend. And you just didn't leave a friend trapped in what looked like an endless loop of fear.

Things probably would have gone differently if Proud Trumpet had still been here. Security was always superstar-tight around his barn; likely I would have gotten arrested the moment I approached the stall. But Proud Trumpet's trainer had shipped him back out to Santa Anita right after that tragic match race.

Pleasant Lad was a different story. I won't say security was lax at our barn; it wasn't. But...well, Laddie, for all his speed, was Laddie. No one was going to steal a lazy, homely, unflashy gelding.

No one was stealing him now, just borrowing him a little. I wanted a horse who wasn't going to have hysterics on me. Laddie, bless his lazy soul, never even blinked when I snapped a lead rope onto his halter and bound up his hoofs with rags so they wouldn't clop. Together, his tack tucked under my arm, we stole out of the dark stall in the middle of the night, me on the lookout for guards' flashlights, sure I was going to feel a hard hand on my shoulder with every step, him going along as placidly as a stable pony, stopping only now and again to yawn.

We reached the track, and the moon (waning but still bright enough) obligingly came out from behind a cloud. Dancer's Fire was waiting for us. Pleasant Lad took one look and stopped dead, ears shooting up in sheer equine astonishment.

"You see her, too," I whispered, feeling a rush of relief wash over me. "Hallelujah."

Laddie, as I've said, was Laddie. He took one deep sniff at Dancer's Fire, presumably picking up no scent of horse, then seemed to shrug and accept the situation. Refusing to let myself think about what I was doing, I took the rags off his hoofs and tacked him up, then vaulted up onto his back and started slowly down the track. Was Dancer's Fire bound to the one spot where she had died? No. As I'd hoped, she had the freedom of the whole track, and followed us silently.

As I've said, Union Downs is a big course, which means that a mile and a quarter race starts just at the end of the first turn. It seemed to take all night to get there, me jogging Pleasant Lad to warm him up (if he was puzzled by the whole business, at least he moved out with, for him, good grace), Dancer's Fire cantering smoothly at our side. Of course there was no starting gate in place, but I hoped that wouldn't matter. What the hell, we didn't have anything else right either, not Proud Trumpet, not jockeys or outriders or anything that would make this the exact copy of the match race. For all I knew, none of this would make a difference, except that I would be out of a job.

"What the hell," I repeated aloud to the two horses—one snorting, one eerily silent—"let's try it."

I yelled in Laddie's ear. Startled, he took off like a shot, and Dancer's Fire went with him.

I had expected her to pass us in a flash. After all, even assuming she would run like a normal, earthbound horse, with no jockey or tack burdening her she was carrying over a hundred pounds lighter weight. All I'd hoped to do was give her the illusion of one last winning race. But for whatever ghostly reason, Dancer's Fire was replaying her final start, just as though the stands were full of screaming fans, just as though it were Proud Trumpet with Corson up, not Pleasant Lad with a fool of an exercise rider aboard. She ran neck and neck with Laddie, her lovely head out-stretched, nostrils wide, dark eyes wild with their usual fire.

And Laddie, good old Laddie—maybe he was overcome by the weirdness of it all, maybe he felt something of Dancer's Fire's urgency, but this once in his life he needed no prodding, this once he ran with all his strength and will. I crouched low over the straining neck, burying my face in his tossing mane, feeling the bunch and release of powerful muscles under me, hearing the thunder of his hoofs (his hoofs alone) as we swept through the far turn and down into the long straightaway towards the finish line.

The three-eighths pole went by in a striped blur, and the little clock all exercise riders carry in their minds screamed that we were surely shooting for some kind of weird track record.

Then all at once Dancer's Fire seemed to stumble, all at once I realized we were at the spot where she had died and knew she would replay that final scene, die and die again—

"No!" Struggling with Laddie to slow him down, I shouted over the rush of wind at the filly, "Damn you, no! You never surrendered to anyone or anything in your life— You can't give up now! I won't let you give up!"

It was a stupid thing to yell, as though she were a human to understand me, or even a living horse. But in my voice just then was what was in my heart: all the rage and love and anguish for her, for every brave, beautiful animal that ever died racing its heart out. And maybe she caught the pain behind my words, maybe she felt that surge of raw, despairing love, because all at once Dancer's Fire seemed to blaze with strength. I saw the merest shadow of a horse sink to the track, but she—oh, she swept past mortal Laddie as though he were a stable pony, she flew on, and she was suddenly herself and more, she was Ruffian, Twilight Tear, Black Gold, all those doomed, brave, wonderful horses, and I could only shout, my sight blurring, "Yes, oh yes, you beautiful things, run!" and she was a horse of flame and air so radiant the breath caught in my throat—

But just as suddenly she was only her own lovely self. It was Dancer's Fire, her proud head high, her tail a shining banner, who surged past the finish line alone, winner of her final, finest race.

In the next moment she had vanished into the darkness. I let poor, puzzled Pleasant Lad finish his race, then eased him up. Springing to the track on feet that seemed too wobbly to hold me up, I started to walk him the lonely, weary way back, stroking his sweaty neck and murmuring to him, thinking that though the wild run didn't seem to have done him any harm, he'd need a lot of hotwalking before he'd cooled enough to be put safely back in his stall. I'd pretty much ruined his training schedule for him, which wasn't going to endear me to trainer or owner.

I stopped short, Laddie (reverting to his old lazy self) stopping with me without a fuss. There was a commotion in the grandstand, the sharp stabs of flashlights piercing the night. They couldn't very well have missed our midnight race.

"There goes my job," I told Laddie. "It was worth it."

God, if only I could be sure I was right! If only I could know it hadn't all been in vain! Then a soft muzzle brushed my neck—and it wasn't Laddie's, I was looking straight at him. A warm tongue took the barest swipe at my skin in a way that only one horse ever had.

Dancer's Fire.

But when I turned to look, she was gone free, and only empty, tranquil racetrack met my eyes.