

Before Race Day

A K O R E R O R E P O R T

“RUFUS RAN a half in 50, tra-la; Rufus ran a half in 50, tum-tum; heigh ho the merry oh Rufus ran a half in 50. Dear old Rufus, sweet old fella, we'll show 'em in the Derby. Heigh-ho the . . . whoa, whoa you brute, whoa you pig.” Stooze, the stable lad, loudly whistled, happily sang, cheerfully yelled as he rubbed Rufus down after the five o'clock grey, chilly morning schooling at the course. Stooze because his name is Sturgess, and he would look, wonder who you meant, if you called him Trevor, his Christian name; and Rufus because you simply couldn't call a horse, even the finest thoroughbred in the land, Royal Victor every time you wanted to speak to him, sing about him, shout, and, if the boss isn't round, curse at him. Stooze, a flopping mop of hair almost as long as himself, which isn't such a great length at all, and weighing not much more than a couple of horse-shoes without the nails, is more than a stable-boy; he has his apprentice's license and it won't be long before you read his name in the list of winning results in your Saturday night's sports paper. At least he hopes not. Perhaps an apprentices' handicap for a start, but later all sorts of things like hack sprints, classics, New Zealand Cups, and gold plates. “Yep, I'm doing some jumping.” So maybe hurdles, even steeplechases—Stooze

would clear ditches, fences, hedges, and church spires, even the moon just for the chance.

He told us of all his hopes, his plans for the future. But in the meantime he had to have his breakfast—not too much either; platefuls stacked high, second helpings would mean that soon the only thing left to ride would be railway trains.

On the Wairarapa Plains is Masterton, a town divided on either side of a sleepily pleasant main street with fifteen weighing-machines, nearly as many banks, a half-mile of shops, dogs sleeping in the middle of the road, a church damaged by earthquake, and lots of commercial travellers. Four or five miles along that main road are five acres, nine paddocks, and eight horses. It is a racing stable. And that's where Stooze eats his breakfast, does his whistling, and a lot of other things besides. There is a head stableman Ted; his wife (Ted says he has to be careful—he's giving away quite a bit of weight) is the cook and the mother of the staff; there is Alex, a stablehand (he has more years to his age than hairs in his head), there is Stooze, and his mate, Ray, the second stable lad.

Of the eight horses seven are youngsters, the eighth a four-year-old hurdler.

There is Rufus for Royal Victor, colt, rising four; Corrie for Gay Corrie, gelding, rising four; Bill for Gigli, he's a two-year-old colt, he was bred, sired,

