

A DAY AT THE RACES

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Perched on the granite terrace above the racecourse, Richie pointed. 'That's Lester Piggott's helicopter. I've seen it before.'

'Don't be daft!' George said. 'He's given up racing. He's nearly as old as you.'

'You're no spring chicken, either!' Richie bridled, like one of the glorious, haughty creatures prancing the turf below.

George cuffed him playfully. 'I was only teasing. Did you get out the wrong side of bed today, or what? You was crabby on the train, and now you're all flushed and narky. What's up?'

Richie sighed. 'Old age, I suppose. And I'm hot.' He paused, craning his head to look at the city behind them, spires and rooftops etched against a sky of deep summery blue. Turning back to savour the colours and sounds of the races on a beautiful May day, a faraway look in his old eyes, he added: 'It'd be perfect to die on a day like this, wouldn't it?'

'What a thing to say!' Nonplussed, George stared. 'It's that whisky you had on the train. It's gone to your head.' He chewed his bottom lip. 'And the cold in these seats'll get to your bum before long. It'll give you piles, and more rheumatics than you've got already. Take off your jacket and sit on it, like me.'

'D'you think I ought? Your ma was always telling folk not to cast a clout 'til May's out, and it's not out yet.'

'Oh, don't be such an old woman! You've got the posh weskit Peggy sent you for Christmas, the jumper I gave you, and one of your fancy shirts.' George leaned over, gnarled fingers pulling at his friend's collar. 'And I'll bet next week's pension you're still in your woolly vests.'

'Give over!' Laughing, Richie shrugged off his jacket and folded it neatly on the seat, unbuttoned his shirt collar, and leaned back on his elbows. 'Satisfied?' Shielding his eyes from the early afternoon sun, he asked: 'Why do we always sit here? The gritty bits in the stone scratched the backs of my legs summat awful when I was a kid. We didn't get to wear long pants for ages, did we? I can't imagine youngsters nowadays putting up with what we did, but I wouldn't be seen dead in a forty acre field in some of the clothes they wear, and they all end up looking the same anyway. Are they all fashion victims, d'you think?' He smiled. 'Aggie and Mary were always

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very smart, weren't they? D'you remember bringing them here for a bit of courting? And didn't they moan about creasing their best dresses?' He looked sly-eyed at his friend. 'If I remember right, your big paws made most of the creases in Aggie's dress.'

George flushed. 'Trust you to not to forget *that!*'

Richie rambled on. 'And we brought the kids every May, July and September, didn't we?' He surveyed the picknicking families, the children rolling on the fresh grass, and the babies stretched out on coloured blankets, kicking at the sun. 'We must've looked like that to the old ones then, and the only difference between those little ones and ours is the clothes they're wearing. Do yours still go to the races? Sue wrote the other day saying they're planning to go to the Derby this year.'

'Which question d'you want answered first?' George demanded. 'You've not stopped gabbing for the past five minutes! And you know perfectly well we always sit here because our ma and pa couldn't afford owt else when we were little, and when we were courting, we couldn't afford owt else.'

'Well, we could now. We could afford the stands. We could even stretch to the Paddock once a year.'

'And who wants to stand around gawping at a bunch of toffs and their snooty women? You can't see that lovely bridge over the river from the Paddock, you can't see the trains on the railway bridge, you can't see all the little odds and ends folk get up to, and most of all, you can't see the racing, whereas from up here it's almost like God letting you sit with Him to get a taste of heaven.'

As a muffled roar from the finishing post all but drowned out the chimes of the cathedral clock, Richie creaked upright. 'Time to make our bet.' Arm in arm, he and George helped each other down the steep bank. 'It'll rain tomorrow,' he added. 'Can't usually hear that clock unless rain's on the way. Still, the weather can please itself, 'cos I'll be indoors with my feet up in front of the telly, getting over today.'

Standing in front of the board on which his spotty grandson frantically rubbed off and chalked up the changing odds for the next race, Mo Silverman weighed up George and Richie. 'It should be illegal at your age, like it is for kids. A crying shame to throw away your little bit of pension on a nag.'

'You taking our bets or not?' George snapped.

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'Old man! Old man!' Mo sighed elaborately. 'I've taken your bets for years, and what does it get you? A bit here, a bit there, but never more than two pennies for one.'

'Less of the old man, if you don't mind!' George waved his finger in Mo's face. 'Talk about the pot calling the kettle! You should've kicked the bucket years ago!'

'He doesn't dare!' Richie laughed. 'Not with all those angry punters outside the hot place, waiting to tear him limb from limb.'

'That, I could bear,' Mo grinned. 'But if they should touch my wallet!'

Snorting, wheezing, they clutched each other for support, the spotty youth grimacing with disgust. Recovering himself with difficulty, George pulled a crisp ten pound note from his wallet. 'A tenner to win on Barley Mo in the 2.45. For once, you're going to bring me so much luck you'll run out of cash, so I'll take that big flash car of yours instead.'

Glancing over his shoulder at the numbers roughly chalked on the smeared board, Mo said: '100 to 1? You must be senile!'

Richie waved another ten pound note in the air. 'And the same for me, so that's 2000 quid you'll owe us, plus stake money.'

'We've forgotten the tax,' George said urgently. 'We'll pay it now so he can't do a fiddle later.'

'It's your funeral.' Clucking his tongue, Mo handed over two betting slips. Richie handed them back.

'D'you mind writing "Barley Mo 100 to 1" on the back? Just in case you shorten the odds as soon as we take our eyes off your ugly mug.'

They stared at the youth, his hand arrested in mid-air.

'I could write "Jezebel was a tart" for all the good it'll do,' Mo said, scribbling on the cards. 'That nag'll still be in the stalls when the moon comes up.'

'We'll see,' Richie said. 'As the man says, we'll be back!'

Too late to recross the track to their eyrie, they watched from the rails as the next race went, surrounded by the scents of trampled grass and sweating horses, the smell of hot dogs and onions from the catering booths, the pungency of rich tobacco, and the flowery perfume of a tall blonde in a short skirt who teetered past on spikey heels. Coats glistening, the horses paraded in a tight circle, their jockeys like brilliant butterflies come fleetingly to rest.

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'Look at 'em,' George observed. 'Dried up looking, or what? They've got faces like prunes.'

'Who? The horses or the jockeys?'

'The jockeys, stupid!'

'Dehydration, isn't it? They live off champagne to keep their weight down, and suck on a bit of steak now and then.'

As the starter's flag went down, the stall gates clanged open, burst apart by an explosion of colour and thundering hooves. George grinned, mouth as wide as a melon. 'Worth it, eh? Just to see them!'

The silver helicopter which might have belonged to Lester Piggott took off before the next race, buzzing away over the railway bridge, where a brightly painted engine hauled a cargo of coaches towards the station.

'That's the boat train from Holyhead,' Richie said. 'Late, as usual.'

'D'you remember going to Holyhead to watch the boats set off for Ireland?'

'Do I just!'

'Richie?'

'Yes, George?'

'What will we do with all that money if we win?'

'Die from shock, most probably!'

'No, seriously. I've got a feeling in my bones.'

'Have you really? And is it like the one you had at Bangor on Dee when you told me to put a whole day's winnings on that - that corpse - in the last race?'

'God! You were in a paddy!' George chortled. 'Mary said you stomped round the house half the night calling me every name in Christendom, and a few others beside.'

'D'you blame me?' Richie said. Then he caught his breath. 'They're going into the stalls. Don't look!'

'I'll only have a heart attack if we win,' George said, his eyes shut tight. 'But we can dream, can't we?'

'We dream, and Mo laughs all the way to bank.'

'I don't care.' Yawning, George stretched. 'We'll send some money to the kids, of course, and we could have a slap-up meal at the Grosvenor on the way home.'

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'And we'll take huge bunches of roses to the cemetery,' Richie offered. 'Mary and Aggie loved roses, didn't they?' He started. 'Oh, lordy, they're off! I feel sick!'

'We could take the steam train special to Holyhead,' George droned on, savouring prospects, 'and watch the catamaran set sail. Then we could get a taxi to South Stack lighthouse, and have great big steaks washed down with Guinness at that Irish lady's place in the town.'

'We can't eat steak with false teeth.'

'Then we'll have steak and kidney pie, but we're still going.'

The crowd at the finishing post roared again. Mutely, George and Richie waited for the tannoy announcement, and when it came, the garbled words were snatched away by a sly breath of wind.

'Blast!' George struggled to his feet. 'I'll have to ask somebody.'

He padded away, to return from his foray ashen-faced, almost gibbering, Mo Silverman in tow, and when Richie recovered from his faint, he found Mo and George bent over him like a brace of ugly nurses.

'What a turn you gave us!' Mo said.

'But,' George added gleefully, 'not half as nasty as the one we've given his wallet!'

Lounging on the sun-warmed grass, every so often they patted the wads of notes heavy in their pockets, George giggling when he looked down on the sour-faced Mo plying his trade. Still bemused, by luck and sunshine and sheer happiness, Richie listened as George's giggles subsided into gentle snores, then watched the horses canter to the start for the last race, their shadows long on the turf. He nudged George.

'Last race, old mate. Wake up, or you'll miss it.'

George lay quietly, his face turned to the sun.

'George! Wake up! George!' His voice rising, Richie nudged the limp body again, harder, more urgently, then the tears welled in his eyes, and his heart swelled to fill his throat. 'Oh, George!' he whispered, cursing himself for being too engrossed in the racing to notice Death stopping by to touch his friend. 'Oh, you dear, wonderful old pal!'

The crowds drifted away and the sun sank further to the west, lighting the railway bridge with a nimbus of gold, while Richie waited for the warmth to desert the

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day before going in search of Mo and the spotty youth; planning how to tell the children, his and George's; how to organise the best send-off in the world, and how to keep faith with their plans. He must travel alone to Holyhead, he thought, and haul himself down and up the three hundred and odd rocky steps to the lighthouse with only his memories for company, then drink a solitary toast in the Irish lady's cafe. And he must scatter roses on three graves, not two, but he would do it; for friendship, for gratitude, and for love.

A huge tear fell like a dew drop on George's head. Brushing more tears from his eyes, Richie wiped it gently away, feeling sun-warmed skin beneath hair as wispy and soft as his own first born's. Infancy and old age, he thought: times of innocence at each end of the human span.

Knees protesting, back stiff, he rose as the first chill of evening touched his face. 'I'll only be a little while, old friend. You won't be alone for long.'

Starting down the bank, he heard a grunt behind him.

'Eh? What did you say?' George sat up, shaking himself like a dog. 'Blast it, Richie, I've missed the last race.' Lumbering to his feet, he added: 'Never mind, there's always another time. You wouldn't believe the dream I've had. All about Aggie and me and.....Come on! What're you waiting for? And why is your gob wide open? I'm starving and I want my posh dinner.' He patted the notes in his pocket, and grabbed Richie's arm, grinning again like a melon. 'What a day, eh? *What a day!*'