

NOVELTY EVENTS

by

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**Three mystery novellas
featuring Bob Creighton**

**The Saga of Eiklander's Horse
Hedging Bets
Mistress of Foxhounds**

The characters and events in these stories are fictitious.

THE SAGA OF EIKLANDER'S HORSE

- I -

A Voice from the Past, mine anyway, and to my shame I didn't immediately recognise it. It was only a matter of years ago, not decades, not half-a-lifetime. Not a good prognosis for a man just getting his sights on sixty. Is this what early retirement does to a bloke? The voice kindly placed itself, introduced itself, and said it was nice to hear *my* voice.

"And nice to hear yours, Sheree. Would you like to chat over the phone or would you like to come down one weekend for lunch or something?"

She sought the advice of someone in the room with her then said, "If we could come down, my boyfriend and I, to see you that would be much easier than trying to explain it over the phone. It's about a missing ... manuscript."

"I see. Well, I s'pose that makes a change. For me, I mean." Sheree didn't know that horses had come to loom rather large in my retirement.

We arranged a time and I gave her directions.

Now that I had time to sit down and ponder, I realised Sheree Holmes had played a rather large part in my life; I might even blame her for setting me up as everyone's favourite but mostly unpaid 'horse detective' because for some reason best known to Fate almost everything I've been asked to do since then seems to have a horse in it somewhere. Not fair. It's all right for people like Dick Francis, they know their horses, I don't. In fact, except for a couple of visits on official business to Randwick and an occasional afternoon round to the Mounted Police (I had a mate in my earlier career whose most hated mornings were out along Anzac Parade in the rush hour) I can't honestly say horses ever figured in my life.

But I said yes because of a vague sense of pity for the girl; life had handed her a tough hand and a lot of unresolved guilt. So I was curious to see how she'd turned out. After a failed desire to become a teacher apparently, and teaching does require a clean slate, she'd decided to go to uni and do English Literature; pleasant maybe but not a lot of use in the job market; still, I couldn't blame her for wanting to do something that might help to heal the scars and get her life back on track. And I was curious to see the older Sheree.

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My daughter, Rachel, was with me at our unit when Sheree and Leif

arrived. Rachel has an odd kittenish quality whereby she can sort of curl up and look as if she belongs in the heart of a situation; people seem to feel they must reach out and stroke that spiky fur into calm, soothe that untamed nature, yet at the same time they accept her being *there* in the middle of their most intimate revelations. But she always strikes me as having a bit of Scottish wildcat in her parentage, those sharp claws, that sharper tongue. Fascinating. I don't know where she gets it from.

Sheree I remembered as being a big gauche clumsy teenager. She still looked slightly gauche but she was obviously working to reinvent herself as the smart big woman, a sort of 90's Maggie Tabberer but with something appealing in her eyes. It didn't quite come off. She still struck me as being a naturally uncoordinated person; odd, because I'd seen her ride and been impressed by her skill and grace. Maybe there are some people who belong on horses instead of on their own two feet. Leif, though, was tall and thin and vaguely athletic in a double-jointed sort of way. Rachel looked the two of them up and down, not giving anything away, then went and made coffee and brought out fruit cake.

After we were settled, Sheree looked to Leif and said, "Would you like to tell the story?" I wondered if she usually deferred to him or if it was really his story. "No. You outline it and I'll fill in the fine detail." He had a pleasant neutral voice suitable, I'd think, for an English Reader or Tutor but rather monotonous after a while.

"Okay." She seemed to gather her wits together while Rachel put her own cup on a whatnot table and curled up in her favourite armchair. It was a grey day outside, the beach nearly deserted. We all waited. Sheree began with a rush: "Leif inherited a poem when his mother died. It's quite a valuable poem because it was written specially for his grandmother by T.S. Eliot."

"And who was he?"

"Oh! He was a famous Anglo-American poet from earlier this century." She seemed to realise it would take more than that. "He wrote 'Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats', you know, which they turned into the musical called 'Cats'."

"Right you are. Go on."

Leif had put on a disbelieving sort of look during her explanation; what hope, it said, would this doddering old philistine have of finding out anything about anything—

"No one knows about the poem. There's no mention of it in any records of his work, no other manuscript or notes—but Leif is sure it's genuine for other reasons. So if he could publish it as a genuine 'lost' work of Eliot's then that would be a very exciting find, there would be tremendous interest—"

"And it would be a boost to your career?" I said to the young man.

"Oh, definitely. I'm doing fine as I am but it could open up new options."

"So the poem exists—in what form?"

He opened a flat briefcase and carefully took out some photocopied sheets,

enclosed in clear plastic sleeves, and handed them to me.

That was my first view of ‘The Saga of Eiklander’s Horse’. I’m sorry it wasn’t my last.

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“So how did your mother come by it?”

“Well, you see, my grandmother lived in London. She had come from Iceland and her name was Eike—though everyone called her Elsie and this was actually what appeared on her death certificate. She was married to a Swedish businessman Erik Sandstrom who ran the London office of a Swedish firm of glass manufacturers. So that was our first clue—Eike plus Icelfander equals Eiklander.”

I nodded. Rachel simply sat there and gazed at Leif with her wide hazel-brown eyes.

“Eike died when my mother was quite young and I did wonder at first if Eike might’ve had an affair with Eliot because he lived in London and this was in the long period between the incarceration of his first wife in the mid-1930s and when he married his secretary Valerie Fletcher in the 50s. So there is a long gap when he may have had relations with other women, I mean women we don’t know about. Everyone these days has heard of Mary Trevelyan and Emily Hale.”

I forbore to say I hadn’t. “Fair enough. Except that Eike would’ve been—how old—”

“Well, don’t forget that Eliot would’ve been in his late fifties. Eike would’ve been younger. He had become a High Church Anglican but I don’t know if that would’ve stopped him ... but even if she had just been someone nice and friendly to chat with ... I don’t think she could’ve worked for him in any capacity or there would be mention of it somewhere ... and her husband had left her quite reasonably off ... I think it’s more likely she was a neighbour and Eliot probably took an interest in her as a widow far from home with a little girl ... We know that he dedicated his cat poems to several children, so it would’ve been in character ... I quite like Eliot’s work and it still goes over well with my students,” he gave us a disarming smile and I could see why Sheree was attracted; though her love had more of the nature of an ongoing crush on an older and admired man rather than an equal and comfortable relationship.

“But he was undoubtedly anti-Semitic, probably no more than most English—or Americans—of his time and of course it wasn’t simply that, it was that sort of “wogs begin at Calais” business, and anyone from the Middle East was greasy, greedy, unreliable, and not to be trusted as far as you could kick them. His world was still full of niggers and dagoes and paddies and undesirables-in-general ... some were disliked because they were seen as poor and feckless and some were disliked because they were perceived as rich and successful ... so he belonged in that group that felt the Anglo-Saxons were God’s gift to the world. But Eliot had grown up in the mid-west of the United States which has a large Scandinavian population,

particularly Swedes, who were seen as thrifty and honest and hard-working so he almost certainly would've been well-disposed to Eike and her husband, if he was still alive when they first met."

I felt it was himself, not us, he was trying to win over. "Fair enough. So you think he might actually have written the poem for your mother as a young girl?"

"It seems possible. He planned to go to Iceland during World War Two but the visit fell through but then he went to Sweden the following year. So we think it might've been round this period he either met my grandmother and mother or had the idea of writing the poem. As well as cats I've heard that he also wrote poems about pigs and parrots, so why not horses? My mother had a soft toy, which was a green and white spotted horse, which she was very fond of—and we think this might've been the genesis of the horse ... even though the poem is more in the nature of an ancient Icelandic story you can see the hints of my mother's horse in the reference to "sea-green" and "white-maned" and so on."

"So—are you wanting me to authenticate the poem itself?" This would certainly be a departure from my usual 'cases'.

"Oh no!" He looked shocked at the idea. "No, I've been working on that—and I suspect I'm best placed ... No, you see I've been pondering over how best to publish the poem ... where and how and when, so as to get maximum publicity and interest. And I had, unwisely I suppose, taken the original into my office on campus, planning to show it to the Head of my Department, Margaret Linacre, and ask her advice. I felt she was the one person I could trust. She's got where she wants to be so her ambition wouldn't be getting in the way. She's writing a biography of Margery Barnard and Flora Eldershaw so her interests are particularly in Australian women writers ... anyway, she wasn't there when I went in so I put the poem, which I had in a padded postbag for security and anonymity, into my drawer, meaning to catch her later. I hadn't told anyone I'd brought it in, not even Sheree, and certainly none of the staff ... it was only there about two hours till I went to get it—and it was gone."

He spread his long hands in an exercise of despair.

"The only thing I can think of is that someone took the bag on spec, thinking there might be something valuable in it."

"Did you report the theft?"

"No. I know it was probably stupid of me ... but I was taken up with the thought that the poem must remain secret until publication ... and if it'd been taken by mistake or by a chance thief then it might be returned. After all, no one else can publish it without making it public that they stole it."

He opened his briefcase again and took out some photos: the original type of exercise book the poem had been written in, a photo of the green-and-white horse, a photo of his room at the university, even the desk where he'd put it for a few hours.

"What would the poem be worth to a collector? After all, people collect old

books, letters, manuscripts and so on, and I suppose some of 'em aren't fussy about how they got the stuff. It's the idea that they and no one else owns a particular item."

"Mmm. It *could* go as high as \$10,000 at auction, I suppose, if it had supporting evidence, maybe even higher if you got a real Eliot fan ... after all, you hear of the most useless things going for the most extraordinary amounts ... but there's a lot of luck in it ... and of course if it had to be sold on the underground market and without any "provenance" then they would have to take less."

"People have been known to arrange for fake paintings to be stolen as a way of strengthening a shaky provenance, you know."

"Are you suggesting I stole my own poem to make it appear genuine—or to put its value up?" He sounded indignant. Sheree too tried to look cross with me; it didn't quite come off.

"My mind is completely open to suggestions at the moment. Did anyone, apart from Sheree, know that you actually owned the poem?"

"No. Well, the lawyer who drew up Mum's will—"

"So she specifically mentioned the poem in her will?"

He hesitated. "Yes. Yes, I'm sure she did. She died last year. She didn't have much to leave, but she had always treasured the poem."

"A copy of the will would strengthen your hand and strengthen the provenance, slightly. I wonder ... could you send me a copy?"

"We-ell, if you think it'll help."

"So now ... do you suspect anyone in particular, a colleague, a student, a cleaner ... is there anyone who goes into your office regularly?"

"No ... well, students, cleaners ... Sheree ... but Sheree is the only person who could get away with messing round in my desk without arousing any suspicion—though I'm not here when the cleaners come in usually, but I can lock my door ... "

"You didn't say to anyone—could you just nip down to my desk and get the folder I left in the top right hand drawer, something like that?"

"No." Very definite.

Sheree broke the silence. "Leif is a very private person, you know, Bob."

I didn't want—I didn't *intend* to go round a university, not even a department of same. I picked up the three-pages of photocopied poem. "Is that Eliot's handwriting? Have you had it checked by an expert?"

"Paper, ink, writing. All appear authentic. Style is more tricky as he never wrote anything else quite like it. Call it an experiment, if you like. It reworks, to some extent, his image of horses either as magical winged beasts, all thundering waves and plumes, you know, 'I heard the beat of centaur's hoof' that kind of imagery, on the one hand, and poor old broken-down beasts, out in all weathers, at the other extreme—nothing in between—but that's not evidence."

I turned a page in my notebook and after staring hard at Eliot's writing for a

minute or two I did a reasonable facsimile of three lines of the poem and handed them to Leif. An unremarkable hand, a slight slope, and I noticed that Eliot had that habit of using a printed 's' to begin words and a written 's' to end them; I've always regarded it as a sign of someone being pulled in different directions.

The young man's face fell. Sheree came and looked. "That's very clever."

"An expert goes by more than the look ... the pressure used, the height, spaces between words ... all sorts of things you and I would gloss over." I didn't want to waste my remaining years hunting high-and-low for a fake poem. "The exercise book, the ink, neither are old enough to be hard to come by." The two of them communed, then sat back down. Rachel continued to sit quietly, listening, watching. I wondered what she was thinking.

"My advice is that you go ahead and publish the poem as part of a human interest story involving Eliot and your grandmother, how you came to have the poem and what happened. It will get you lots of publicity anyway. You can say there are still some small points needing to be authenticated in regard to the genuineness of the poem. So you've covered your back if it's later debunked. At the same time whoever took it will find it can't now be published or sold on the open market without raising some nasty questions. They can still sell it privately—and it's possible its private sale price will have gone up a little by the degree of interest and authenticity you've added—but if the private buyer was a perfectly honest person who simply prefers not to buy such things at auction, then they may well come forward and say they were offered the manuscript by so-and-so ... "

"Yes!" Sheree's face lit up. "That sounds a great idea."

"I agree." Though I wasn't absolutely certain Leif did agree. "But could we try something else first? Margaret's daughter is getting married soon and she's having a party for the department next week and she's extended an open invitation to everyone to come along for drinks at her house, so just about everyone will be there. So if you were to come as our guest and just quietly mingle—"

"Chatting all the while about early twentieth century Anglo-American poetry," I said drily.

"About anything, but just quietly slipping in a few obscure questions and summing people up ... well, someone just might let some little thing drop."

"Would you like me to come and give your office the once over first ... fingerprints, locks, etc?"

"I—I don't think that'd be necessary. And it's been cleaned since ... And if mingling doesn't work ... well, we'll go for publication, as you suggest."

We left it at that and I saw them and their briefcase out after tea. Rachel was still sitting curled up in her chair when I came back to the lounge room.

"What did you think?"

"Christ, what a phony," she said without heat.

"The manuscript?"

“No. The guy. Didn’t you feel it?”

“I put it down to the influence of the ivory tower.”

“Philistine. As soon as he said poetry you started to feel inferior.”

“Rubbish! But in what way phony?”

“I’m not sure. He didn’t mention a father, he didn’t offer his surname.”

“True. But many people don’t these days.”

She sat back thoughtfully. “He was shocked when you reproduced the handwriting so easily.”

“Many people don’t realise how easy that level of forgery is.”

“He was also shocked when you said you’d like a copy of the will.”

“Some people see wills as being very personal and private.”

“And there’s probably no mention of any poem in it.”

It was possible. I’d wanted Sheree to be happy—ergo—I wanted to believe a hundred per cent in her young man. (Well, not so young, thirty-three or a bit more.) She’d been through court and sentencing; she’d started, tentatively, to blossom. I didn’t want her lover to be a crook. And if the poem was genuine, well, stealing it himself might give it slightly more publicity value but only if he chose to make his loss public ... but hardly worth the effort I would’ve thought ... and if it wasn’t genuine, well, undoubtedly there were Eliot scholars out there who would pull it to pieces and expose it, regardless of whether it was published from the “original” or Leif’s remaining photocopy. Either way he would have to fall back on its history (and his family’s history) as his justification for putting it out in the public domain.

“First thing, I’d better nip down to the library—”

“And read up on Eliot and his poetry,” she finished for me. “Well, don’t complain—it makes a change from horses.”

“Does it?” I suppose I sounded gloomy. “This one comes in green with white spots. It’s probably an omen.”

Rachel laughed. Heartless woman.

– iv –

It wasn’t until I’d parked as close as I could get to Margaret Linacre’s Toowong home and started to walk along to where I could see a marquee set up in the garden that I realised I’d never even thought to ask Sheree which university she was at. I’d just assumed Queensland but it could just as easily be Griffiths ... and then there was Bond and wasn’t there a Catholic University ... ‘you’d best keep a low profile, you old dunce’, I thought drily. Sheree had obviously been watching out for me and came over and slipped an arm through mine to escort me across the lawn.

At least fifty people were milling round. There were trestles with sparkling cloths and ranks of champagne glasses, there were smart waiters bustling to and fro, there were casual scruffy people in jeans and older people done up like sore toes; the bride to be was wearing candy pink and had a huge raft of pink and white roses in pink tissue paper in her arms. Was this to say Here-I-am, just in case there were

others like me who barely knew a soul, not even the happy couple.

I found myself with a vol-au-vent in one hand and a glass of beer in the other. Sheree hung over me anxiously as I chewed and looked around. “Where’s Leif?”

“Oh, over there.”

I was surprised I hadn’t noticed him with a knot of other youngish men and women; in this gathering there was something oddly neutral and nondescript about him. Just a pleasant not-very-interesting young man.

“Mmm. What’s his last name?”

“Parker.”

I nodded. “And another question—though you can tell me it’s none of my business. Isn’t there some, shall we say protocol, that says university lecturers and university students should not have affairs. Hasn’t it led to problems ... I know you’re both old enough to make your own choices but ... undue influence and so on.”

Sheree blushed and became very earnest. “Leif isn’t *my* tutor, Bob. That makes all the difference. He doesn’t mark my papers. His special field is expatriate American writers—you know, like Eliot and Pound and Hemingway—whereas I’m doing colonial women writers for my thesis, people like Catherine Spence and Mrs Humphrey Ward and Louisa Mack.”

“And that makes all the difference? So how did the two of you meet?”

“I went to an evening lecture Leif gave on why Eliot was attracted to an authoritarian religion like the Church of England.”

“You’re becoming interested in religion? Or was it Leif or Eliot that was the attraction?” And I can’t honestly say I’d ever thought of the Anglicans as being terribly authoritarian but I suppose there are degrees.

She took a big bite of a savoury triangle to give herself time to think. “I think it was all those things, Bob, but Leif mainly ... he seemed such a nice gentle person.” I understood that. “We hardly ever went to church, maybe that was why everything went wrong, you know. Now I like to go sometimes for the sung eucharist ... ” She looked slightly embarrassed to be saying that in what I imagine was a fairly agnostical gathering.

“Does that help you to understand Eliot ... or Leif for that matter?”

“He isn’t religious, not really. His mum became a Seventh Day Adventist late in life but he never comes with me.” I felt a vague sense of relief; if Sheree was wildly in love with Leif one small area of independence might be valuable. “But I think I do understand Eliot a bit better. That sort of split personality—where you live one kind of life but have other thoughts that you can’t share with anyone. And I can understand why he would like to have that sort of discipline and hierarchy and colour—without going so far as accepting the Pope and all that.”

“And do you think Eliot might’ve written that poem?”

“Yes. I think it’s possible. I think he was a bit sorry he didn’t have children.”

“So—nothing further from the university end, no one seen slipping into Leif’s office, no ransom note ... ”

“No-o,” she looked surprised, “nothing at all, just silence. Did you expect there to be something?”

“No. Not really. Well, I’d better go and mingle in a tick. But just tell me—do you think Leif’s on his way up or is he content to remain where he is.”

She took the question and turned it round and round. “I think he *is* ambitious, Bob, but in a quiet way. I mean he’s not going to knock people down in the rush to get somewhere. But he is writing his own book and he’s got his students and he goes and does some lectures for other groups—outside uni, I mean. I think he’ll get where he wants.”

“And the Eliot poem would help?”

“It’s hard to say. It *might* help but people might also say, well, that was just a lucky break and has nothing to do with good scholarship.”

- v -

In the course of the afternoon I talked about the weather, Queensland politics, and how pretty Chris Linacre was. Here and there, I managed to slip in a question about Leif, the lay-out of the English department, the status of T.S. Eliot these days, and ‘lost poems’. I learnt that hundreds of poems had been found hidden in Emily Dickinson’s letters to friends, I heard of a ‘lost’ Coleridge poem, I learnt that no one thought anything much at all about Leif Parker, I learnt that people were coming and going all the time, it wasn’t as if there were neat class-length slabs of time when people would or wouldn’t be about in the corridors and that there’d been an occasional theft of a handbag or wallet ...

A man who looked as if, like me, he didn’t belong here said abruptly, “Funny thing, these get-togethers. One half like to think they’re writers and the other half know they’re not and all the use they’re ever going to be is to write about writers.”

“And where do you class yourself?”

I half expected him to say, “I clean their bloody windows and empty their waste paper baskets.” He grinned. “Oh, the second. Churning out endless reams of paper on the impact of the landscape on the work of David Malouf or why Queensland writers play down the heat when they write—so what about you, are you working on a book?”

Birds of a feather? Takes one to know one? Etc etc. “Well, I am, but it looks like being the world’s slowest book.”

“On what? Or is that a closely-guarded secret?”

“Fergus Hume, Guy Boothby and Nat Gould.”

“Never heard of them,” was it my imagination or did his initial summing-up of me and all my doings improve, “no, I tell a lie I think ... Fergus Hume, ‘The Mystery of a Hansom Cab’ man?”

“The same.”

“Well, that’ll be a change from everyone looking over their shoulders to make sure they’re not upsetting anyone’s sacred cows—or feminist principles—or minority rights or any of the rest of it. A good old hurly-burly nineteenth century penny-shocker, eh?”

“But, tell me, do you all tend to keep your book-subjects under wraps?”

“Some do, some don’t. Some share information, some are terrified others will pinch their ideas—as though there’s only so many ideas floating around and you’ve got to guard ’em with your life.”

“So some writers, some subjects, are particularly popular?”

“Definitely. For instance, I overheard you mention T.S. Eliot. Now, he’s pretty well gone out of favour. Too much of a touchy business apologising for his anti-semitism and his misogyny—”

An attractive woman had come up beside us and was listening. Now she said, “But you must admit he’s good for getting kids started on poetry. They suddenly realise there’s more to it than jolly rhymes about highwaymen and at the same time they can feel they’re being all cynical and nihilistic without having to be so obscure they don’t know what’s going on. Old ‘Prufrock’ is a winner every time.”

The man I’d been talking with said, “My daughter Alice is a teacher of High School English. She gets ’em keen on Eliot then she whips ’em along the conveyor belt and we have to convince them Eliot isn’t the be all and end all of twentieth century poetry.”

Alice laughed. Her father turned and said, “I must catch Margaret before I go.”

“So you don’t belong in the corridors of literary power and intrigue,” I said to Alice.

“No, thank goodness! It’s the most ghastly place for rumours and gossip and back-biting. I’m not surprised that Helen Demidenko enjoyed putting egg on some faces, there’s just so many of them that think their own writing is so precious and their own theories about what Eliot had for breakfast are so damned important and that their attitudes to literature are so profound and so balanced. Dad keeps above it all—and Margaret I suppose—but if you were a fly-on-the-wall now you’d hear some pretty repulsive put-downs. You’re not part of it all, are you? You don’t look as if you belong.”

“No. I came with Sheree Holmes. I just happened to be in town and she invited me along.”

“She goes out with Dr Parker, doesn’t she? I suppose she shouldn’t—affairs get in the way, don’t they?—and I must admit I don’t see the attraction. He’s such a colourless little nerd—well, I’d better not say any more in case you’re his uncle or something!” She laughed again and she had a very infectious laugh.

“No. I hadn’t met him till a week or two ago. But is he good at his job? I couldn’t care two hoots about him but I must admit I have a fondness for Sheree, I

don't want her to be hurt. She's had a hard life in some ways."

Alice became earnest. "Then—it might be an idea if you could gently wean her away from him. I've heard rumours that he's a little bit suss, it might only be someone else's ego getting in the way, but hints of plagiarism are hard either to disprove or live down. That is, if she wants a career in English Lit."

- vi -

Every so often, I trained an observant eye on Leif and Sheree, sometimes they stood together, sometimes Sheree stood alone looking a little lost. The impression their permutations gave was the one Rachel had already come to: Sheree cared about Leif but it wasn't mutual. So why did he continue with her, was it easiest to go along with her rather than try to detach her, did he feel 'any port in a storm', or was he just not very interested in women ... I couldn't decide ...

Around half-past-two I found myself being introduced to Margaret Linacre. She was a good hostess. I noticed she'd discreetly managed to circulate and speak with all her guests, granting each a smile and a few words. A bit of the *grande dame* about her but her plump face and soft grey curls softened the edges.

"I *know* you're not from the department and Chris said she'd never seen you before so we both decided you're Ms Holmes' uncle." It was said in such a way I couldn't take offence. But I was beginning to think the afternoon was a waste of my time. After all, I couldn't ask anyone point-blank whether they were in the habit of pinching postbags out of colleagues' drawers and I couldn't ask leading questions about 'lost' poems by T.S. Eliot if this one was supposed to remain hush-hush until Leif chose to burst with it on to an unsuspecting world.

"Not quite. I'm the man who did his damndest to send her to jail."

She looked rather taken aback. "But fortunately you didn't succeed?"

"No. But I'm not sure that leaving her free to swim with the piranhas is the ideal alternative. I rather hoped she could make a career with her horses."

"Come, come," she said briskly, "we're not that bad. And I'm sure it's equally cut-throat when it comes to riding. I *have* read a couple of Dick Francis—though, of course, the more money a situation attracts the more likelihood of it attracting the wrong people."

"And there's not much money in Literature?"

"Not a lot. We fight cut-backs all the time, our department members are usually struggling to get a decent advance on a book that may have taken them anything up to ten years to research and write."

"So is there any more money, out on the periphery maybe ... say in digging up letters or documents with some historical value."

"Oh, well, that's a different field. And there you're dealing with what the market will pay rather than the intrinsic worth of the letter you've found in the attic."

"And the market is driven by—well, fashion is not quite the word, but what's

in and what's out at any given time?"

"Partly. If you can offer a genuine Shakespearian sonnet you've just found in your great-aunt's attic—well, you *know* there'll be a market. Condition as well as outside factors will come into it but you'll get a good price. Other writers are more of a lottery. Then there's historical interest if, say, it throws new light on a famous person or event. Like the so-called Hitler Diaries if they'd been proved genuine."

"So have there been forgeries of, say, Shakespearian sonnets?"

"Not that I can think of, off-hand. There was a supposed Shakespeare play but it was soon debunked. Plagiarism is more likely to be the problem in my department." She hesitated then said, more softly, "But your interest isn't in literature, is it? It's in us. You know something that possibly I should know too, and you're just quietly looking over the field. If I asked you to dinner one night, would you come?"

I said I would. I didn't try to convince her Shakespearian sonnets were my field.

- vii -

Rachel was busy getting herself organised for her departure in a few weeks to the UK but she said she didn't mind doing a bit of leg-work for me. I went over the afternoon carefully with her and suggested a couple of little points it might be useful to know the answers to.

On my way back to the Gold Coast I'd called in on a friend of mine who runs a little business researching people's family trees for them. I've suggested he call it 'The Walking Encyclopaedia'; I knew him when he was in the court system in New South Wales, one of those anonymous people that record the endless hours of transcripts that our courts throw up; then he took his brilliant memory for people and names and put it to much more pleasant use ...

I laid out the information I had and left it with him, saying I'd be in touch in a few days with a bit more. "Any time, Bob, but you know the UK will take a bit longer and cost you more."

"Yes. But we might as well get the straightforward stuff out of the way." I still couldn't decide if money or reputation (or possibly both) was driving the whole business.

I told Rachel what I'd asked for. "But you can't very well charge him for checking his antecedents," she objected. "And it still seems such a piddling little scam. Okay, he gets someone to buy his little exercise book with its scribbles, okay, he gets to be Professor when he's fifty-four instead of when he's fifty-five. So what?"

"You haven't got the academic mind. Everyone's been at pains to impress on me, this arvo, what a dog-eat-dog place an English department is."

"Maybe it is. But I still don't believe it matters."

"No, neither do I, I'm afraid. But it seems the least I can do for Sheree, just

get the thing sorted out.”

We had barely finished dinner when Sheree rang. She sounded breathless and upset. “Bob, there’s been a break-in at Leif’s flat! The whole place is a mess. We stopped off for dinner after the party and then we did a bit of shopping and came back here—”

“Well, get on to the cops for Christ’s sake! Has anything obviously gone?”

“Yes. The photocopies of Leif’s poem! Now they’ve got both the original and the manuscript copy.”

“I see.” I’m not sure I did. If the whole thing was dodgy then what better to do than get the whole caboodle out of sight and just front up with a typed copy found—well, wherever Leif might think was safe. Two robberies had more than twice the weight of one ... or did they? Did two thefts diminish the power of the one ... I couldn’t decide.

I finally persuaded Sheree to go away and console Leif and said I’d come up to Brisbane tomorrow or the next day and look over the flat.

“So that’s that. An immortal masterpiece gone the way of all earthly things.”

“Rubbish! I’ll bet you anything you get a copy of the will in a few days time and it’ll say ‘I bequeath my copy of ‘The Saga of Eiklander’s Horse’ by T.S. Eliot to my son Leif Parker’. I’ll give you a twenty on it.”

I turned down Rachel’s offer.

- viii -

It was in the mail next day. I rang Brisbane and gave my friend the name of the solicitor in England. It was neatly typed. It had been witnessed by some indecipherable signatures. It left a few household goods, some jewellery, some books, and £1,130 in two bank accounts to Christopher John Parker. A couple of small items were left to two women, no doubt friends or relatives.

Not Leif. Only a small point. And if I’d been christened Christopher John I might’ve chosen to change. Who knows? There’s no law against it.

Rachel went along to the Library in her lunch hour and drew up the university web-site and did some research for me. The gist of this was that Dr C.J. Parker had taken an Arts degree at a university in England, not a major one; he’d followed up with another degree at a small American university, then returned to England and eventually acquired his doctorate. He then migrated to Australia and got himself a position here. It sounded an unexceptional way to spend the years of early adulthood. There was no hint of anything untoward, no suggestion of gaping holes in his life, no missing years.

Rachel took her time over the will. Now that she’s decided to give the law a whirl, and after two years in a solicitor’s office here the next step hadn’t surprised me as much as it might’ve four years ago. I couldn’t quite see the need to go overseas to do it but to have a twenty-five-year old at home is a bit like keeping the cuckoo that’s tipped everything else over the side of the nest, even cuckoos need to

fly. I was surprised she'd seemed so content for so long. It saved money but restricted her social life. Now I accepted it when she passed the wording. She debated the paper but as Mrs Parker only died a couple of years ago I saw no problem, and the typewriter ... yes, were solicitors still using typewriters three years ago or had they filled their offices with the latest in computers ... and were Gold Coast solicitors ahead of their UK counterparts?

"We'll see whether the firm exists."

It was a pity the will wasn't on letterhead paper. It would've saved time. Rachel spent some time trying to track down a phone number for the firm of Danby & Morgan in Barking, Essex. She came up a blank. "Either they're not looking properly or the firm isn't there or—"

When I called to pick up information the next day in Brisbane my friend said, "Yes, Danby & Morgan existed—up until about two years ago. But all wills are on record in the UK anyway. Do you want that checked?"

I said I did. The trouble was—if Leif Parker was all above board then this was both unpleasant and unnecessary. If he wasn't then I felt sure he would've covered all the obvious bases and I was only going over tired old ground.

- ix -

The flat had been burgled via the laundry window. It was a nice neat professional job with the pane tapped out carefully. "We saw some footprints on the floor, the hose had been on in the backyard," Sheree said. "It seems a surprise that they'd come in during the day but I suppose they knew we'd both be out."

"Well, they would if it was someone who knew you both."

"A casual burglar would've pinched the video and the CD player, *not* a poem." She sounded quite indignant. She didn't seem to see the implications ...

"So the poem was where?"

She showed me a filing cabinet in the little room Leif used as a study. "Was it locked?"

"Yes. But I'm afraid the key was hanging on the key board in the kitchen."

"Is that where it always hangs?"

"Yes. Leif never locks the filing-cabinet. Why should he?"

"For a \$10,000 poem I think I'd do some locking up ... but maybe he doesn't really believe it's worth that sort of money?"

"I honestly don't know ... maybe you can't put a money value on something that might be unique." This was the Sheree I remembered; deeply unsure of herself. I was sorry to be the person undermining her limited confidence.

I asked her a few plain questions about when they left, what time they got home, what the police had done, then said, "And—was the poem the *only* thing that went?"

"Only my ring. Leif bought me a ring, it was a sapphire—"

"An engagement ring?"

She got rather red and flustered. “No, just a ring. We bought it in an antique shop.”

I couldn’t decide if this was significant or not. Eventually, I went next door to ask the elderly lady who lived with two Pekinese whether she’d seen anything while the young people were out.

She was cautious, asked me who I was and why I wanted to know when the police had come and gone. She then offered me a cup of tea but I turned it down saying I thought Sheree was making me something.

Mrs Crivelli, after her initial suspicion, said Sheree was a nice girl and that she’d moved in about three months ago and that she was very good with the dogs. “You can always tell,” Mrs Crivelli said complacently. “Dogs know.” Then she decided that needed qualification. “Of course some people use bribery. That young man, he’d do anything to make it look like he’s good with dogs when she’s around but he takes no notice of them when he’s on his own.”

Quite likely someone’s written a series of mysteries with a Peke as the detective but I brought her back to the day of the robbery. She’d been home all day and she didn’t remember seeing or hearing anything. She supposed it must’ve been a professional gang. “They use little kiddies now, you know, that can slip in through small windows and hand the stuff out.”

“Do you remember seeing Leif and Sheree go out—or come back?”

“I saw her go out and bring the car round to the front. She does everything for him, you know.”

The houses here backed on to a small lane; Sheree had gone out the back, backed the car out of the garage that opened on to the lane and taken it round to the front gate. Leif had come out a couple of minutes later and they’d driven away. So simple to set up the robbery while he was alone.

I thanked her and went back to Sheree who’d been busy making me some sandwiches with sardines and mayonnaise. I ate enough for her to feel it’d been worthwhile and asked if Leif had any photographs of his life before coming to Australia.

“Lots,” she said cheerfully. She went and got down a small shoebox and took out some packets. Here was Leif as a baby with his mother; his grandmother and grandfather; Leif wearing his mortarboard, Leif with a mongrel puppy, Leif in America, Leif outside a factory, Leif outside a small suburban house ... Sheree didn’t know where they’d all been taken but I found them interesting as much for what they didn’t show as for what they did.

“What are you going to do now, Bob?”

“Professor Linacre has invited me to dinner one evening. Is she in the habit of telling department secrets to strangers, do you think?”

“I doubt it.” Sheree fiddled with her mug. “I think she’s pretty tough under that sort of Queen Mum exterior.”

“Tough but fair—or just plain tough?”

“I—I think she’d be fair but I really don’t know her all that well. You know I’m down the bottom of the heap, she’s up the top. It’s just that I’m interested in the same area ... ”

— X —

Rachel listened carefully to my afternoon but at the end she said lazily, “You know you’re rushing here and there, a bit like the mad dog at his breakfast ... a bit of info here, a question there ... you might like to sit for a while in your chair like Hercule Poirot.”

“A bit of order? I thought I was being fairly orderly, just putting ferrets down holes and seeing if there’s anything there.”

“Well, maybe. If you really knew what to do with your herd of ferrets.” I was tempted to say I didn’t think they came in herds; all that rubbing shoulders with literary people ... “But this is my order ... ” She sat back. “One. Leif Parker tells you he has a probably genuine Eliot poem. Two. Leif Parker tells you his family history. Three. Leif Parker tells you he’s been robbed twice. Fishy? Very. So my questions are ... One. Is there a genuine Eliot poem? Two. Is Leif Parker who he says he is? Three. Is Leif Parker the rightful owner of said poem? Four. Has Leif Parker actually been burgled twice?”

“Ye-es ... it always comes back to him.”

“So to take it a little further ... he gave me the strong impression that he believes, knows even, the poem is genuine. Yet he buttresses its provenance with a lot of vague family history. But is the family history the reason he believes it’s genuine—or is there a quite different reason he can’t be up front about it? Now, family history. It’s odd that both his mother and himself seem to have been only children. There are no other family members to get in the way, maybe even claim the poem. Still, there are small families around so we won’t quibble on that for the time being.

“He makes a point of mentioning Mr Sandstrom but he never mentions his own father. Maybe his father is just Joe Blow and he simply isn’t relevant ... so, moving on, why steal the poem twice? Because both the so-called original and the so-called copy *both* need to disappear? Is this because he knows the poem is a fake? That wasn’t my impression. So maybe the problem is that Leif Parker isn’t the rightful owner of the poem, either he’s pinched it from someone else or he never had the original at all. All that’s gone missing are two lots of photocopies—and if he can photocopy the poem twice he can photocopy it a dozen times.”

“So what are you suggesting?”

Rachel uncurred herself in her feline way and took a couple of faxed pages from the top of the cupboard. “The information on Elsie came while you were out. She was born Elsie Parker. She died Elsie Parker. Her daughter was born in 1943 and she called her Ingrid and named Erik Sandstrom as the father. They weren’t

married but he acknowledged the child. Ingrid Parker also never married but lived on and off for many years with a man called Carl Herschel who died in 1989. Herschel came from Austria in 1939. He spent time in both medical and psychiatric facilities. Ingrid Parker looked after him when he was well enough to be home with her and her son.” She handed me the sheets.

“So the missing one was Mr Sandstrom. I thought, if his firm was big enough to justify an English rep it might be well known in Sweden so I rang the Honorary Consul in Brisbane and asked if they had some sort of Who’s Who in Business for Sweden. They faxed me this. Elsie was never Eike unless Mr Sandstrom happened to call her that while they were enjoying themselves in the cot ... but there *is* an Eike.” She handed me another sheet.

At first I couldn’t see where she’d found her Eike. Then I had to smile. It was so simple and so clever.

- xi -

Margaret Linacre was a good hostess. Her house was quiet, understated, her music soft, her cooking excellent. I gave her a naming-no-names version of a poem needing to be authenticated and a poem needing to be found. I said as far as I was aware no crime had been committed—unless we took into consideration such small things as wasting police time—but that a member of her department was facing both a dilemma and a temptation.

“In the event of malpractice, plagiarism, conflict of interest, those sorts of things that aren’t necessarily police business but can damage people, reputations, even the standing of, well, of the University ... how would you deal with it, a purely hypothetical case but one which you’d like to resolve within the department if possible.”

“It would depend. There are avenues. I can simply call the person or persons involved into my office. If it’s beyond me, I might ask for a committee or panel to be set up. I could go to the Vice-Chancellor. If it involved money I could ask for an internal audit. If it was a staff matter I might go to the staff union, the NTEU. If it involved a student it might be a matter for the Student Union. If it was serious but I still wanted to keep it confined within the university it might be possible to call in the University Visitor to arbitrate. If it involved some form of discrimination I might seek advice from HREOC. If it involved a breach of confidentiality I might seek advice from the Privacy Commission. If it was outside these areas I could go to the relevant Ombudsman ... there are a range of possibilities—”

“And how well do they work? Would you trust them all to see that justice and fairness was the outcome?”

She steepled her fingers over her plate and considered. “I think they work as well as the problem allows them to work. If it’s a straightforward question of plagiarism, for example, yes, I think I could resolve the question quickly and quietly. If it was a messy question of discrimination and bias and influence where

people's perceptions and relationships get in the way ... I'm not sure. So what are you asking me to do?"

"The problem is that I don't have the time, the energy, the resources or the inclination to track down all the information needed. Nor do I really want to do so when the scam, if it is a scam, has not actually been perpetrated and may never be. So what I'm suggesting is that you arrange a meeting with yourself, someone who has both standing and discretion, someone to whom Dr Parker cannot realistically say no to—though I'll leave it up to you whether you tell him before the meeting—and myself and Sheree Holmes. Give me say another three days to get my information in order, so next Monday afternoon would be a possibility."

She rose and brought back a diary and flipped pages. "Make it Tuesday. I can arrange an hour then."

I agreed to her time and place and suggested she invite Leif and Sheree and whoever else she chose. I had a lot of doubts. The bottom line was Leif and I didn't know him well enough to second guess his reactions. Nor could I second guess whether Sheree's sense of love and loyalty might be a complicating factor. I wished the whole mess need not involve me.

- xii -

Professor Linacre ushered us all into a small meeting room and invited us to help ourselves to tea and coffee. A plate of biscuits sat on a small table. Sheree looked nervous and worried. Leif sat calmly, his long legs crossed. Professor Adam Paulsen was, I gathered, from the Psychology Department. He seemed to find us all mildly amusing.

"You lead off, Mr Creighton," Margaret Linacre said. "We will just ask questions if something isn't clear." She spoke softly; I felt I should respond in a genteel mumble. She was obviously preparing herself for some disturbing and unwanted revelations ...

I nodded. A lot of things weren't clear to me but I let it pass. I gave them all a very brief run-down of the story Leif and Sheree had told me. Sheree looked both anxious and vaguely guilty. I couldn't decide on Leif's emotions. He appeared to have tuned us out.

"Now, there were four questions bound up in all this. Was the poem genuine? Was Leif Parker genuine? Did he own the poem? If the poem was stolen—then who from?"

Margaret nodded and helped herself to a biscuit.

"I'm not qualified to pronounce on the poem but the second question intrigued me—because the family history Leif Parker gave me was incorrect in almost every detail. So why did he need to reinvent himself? My answer was very simple. He believed the poem to be genuine and he needed to justify his claim to it. This suggested that someone else actually owned the poem, possibly someone who didn't appreciate what they had. Now there was a genuine person in his story. Erik

Sandstrom did come to England to represent his family firm. Sandstrom & Viger are an old established firm of glass manufacturers in Sweden. Not enormous. Not world famous. But reliable and profitable.

“So where did T.S Eliot come in all this? Did he meet Erik Sandstrom in London or did he meet the Sandstroms in Sweden when he went there in 1942? It probably doesn’t matter. But Erik’s brother had a family in Stockholm and the brother had four children, Eva, Ingrid, Katrin, and baby Erik. Eliot liked writing animal poems, he liked children particularly little girls. Sweden in wartime, even though it was a neutral country, was not like Fifth Avenue on Christmas Eve. But Eliot could repay some of the Sandstrom family’s hospitality by doing what he did best. He wrote a poem for the three little girls.”

Leif seemed frozen but his face remained set in an expression of benign interest. Sheree had begun to press her fingers together very tightly.

“Now, the following year, Elsie Parker had a little girl back in England. She called her Ingrid. But that was about all the connection she had with Sweden, the Sandstroms, or T.S. Eliot. Ingrid grew up. Elsie never had much money. Nor did Ingrid. And Ingrid, in her late teens, took up with a man considerably her senior. He was a Jewish refugee from Vienna. He had managed to get to England but he was physically and psychologically damaged. Ingrid looked after him for more than twenty years. She had a son with him. Between her lover and her son she never had any money. When she died she hadn’t bothered with a will because she had virtually nothing to leave.

“Her son made his own way—but somewhere along that way he went to Sweden to find the Sandstrom family and meet his cousins. They were a prosperous and business-like family. They knew a lot about glass but they probably had little or no interest in an Anglo-American poet who had come briefly to Sweden when they were very young and who had been kind enough to give them a poem about a horse.”

Leif had ceased looking at me and was now gazing at his shoes or maybe he saw there three women with no inkling of the worth and excitement of what they had but who, nevertheless, didn’t want to either sell or give away something which had sentimental value—and certainly not to a little-known cousin.

I’d debated whether to say anything about Sheree’s role in all this. “Leif got a copy of the poem. It wasn’t the original. It was only valuable if he could both provide a plausible provenance and explain away the loss of the original. Now, there are people who are willing to pay for something unique, including a poem. The idea surprises me but Leif had been in the USA, he’d seen what went on behind the scenes in the whole area of documents and archives and all the rest of it.

“But he was faced with two kinds of dilemmas. One was his own family history. It surprised me when he first came to see me that he should spend so much effort explaining away Eliot’s anti-semitism. I knew nothing about the man and

frankly I didn't particularly care. So the justification was in a sense Leif's own justification for the sake of his dead father, a father who'd suffered both physical and mental torment at the hands of a gang of young Nazi toughs. And the whole business with the Eliot poem depended on the continuing popularity and high reputation of Eliot.

"The second dilemma was his own. He could either publish the poem himself and use it as a stepping-stone. It was very unlikely that the family in Sweden would know or care what was going on in the small literary world of Brisbane. I assume copyright of the poem still belongs with Eliot's heirs but the poem was given to the girls and how that might be regarded by the law in Sweden is not something I've enquired into. To publish is not to take the original on its paper but merely to sell the contents, the intellectual property. To sell the poem as a document requires either the original in its exercise book or a good forgery or a plausible reason why the original cannot be provided.

"As I talked with people they seemed to be at pains to let me know what a dog-eat-dog the academic literary world is. I could understand Leif wanting any small advantage discovering and publishing the poem might bring. But he'd had a hard childhood, there hadn't been many treats. The temptation to get ten thousand dollars or whatever the poem might bring in a no-questions-asked sale must also have been a temptation."

For the first time Leif stirred. Sheree looked at me then back at Leif. I hadn't felt that her crush on him was very healthy; now I felt the glimmering of other emotions there.

"There was an *ad hoc* feel about the whole case, of someone testing the waters—and when Sheree brought Leif down to see me I had the feeling there was another agenda there. Not the poem, not the ostensible theft. Sheree was obviously very much in love with Leif. I wasn't sure that the opposite was true. Someone whose life seemed such a tissue of lies and discrepancies didn't seem the ideal lover—and I knew what her father's lies and evasions had done to her life. I wanted to discredit Leif Parker, at least in her eyes. Enough so she could manage without him. But as I put the bits and pieces together, I saw they had a lot in common and I saw that Leif'd had to overcome a lot of hurdles along the way. I went along to a little party at Margaret's house ... "

She inclined her head gently.

"... and I listened to a lot of people talking about their lives and their work. Very comfortably off people by the look of most of them. And they were full of whinge and whine. About their incomes, their workloads, their prospects, about politics and lifestyles and so on, the so-called squeezing of the middle class." Maybe this was unkind or unfair but I am expert eavesdropper. "The couple of people who didn't seem to have an axe to grind were like a breath of fresh air. I hadn't thought much of Leif Parker when I first met him but I started to think a bit better of him.

What he was thinking of doing might not be ethical, though I'm not sure that it could be regarded as criminal, but he wasn't full of blame and whinge and poor-little-me."

Sheree's gaze seemed to bore into me.

"What made you suspicious of his story in the first place?" It was the first time Professor Paulsen had spoken since introductions.

"The horse. Leif showed me a photo of a horse his mother owned, a green and white toy horse. It was such a remarkably clean and cared-for horse, yet he was telling me she'd owned it since she was a little girl. It should've been indelibly dirty, its eyes re-sewn, its mane all falling out. It was obviously a prop."

Margaret sighed. "Well, thank you for telling us all this. I'm not sure where we go next."

"That isn't why we're here. Leif may like to publish the poem, acknowledging its owners and its genesis, the English department here may like to bask in any reflected glory. That's not my business."

I stood up. This led to the general breaking up of the meeting. I thanked them for their attention and said I was sure Leif would now feel able to set them right on the points I'd only guessed at. All through my recitation of both facts and suppositions I had half expected him to leap to his feet, to deny everything furiously, and instead I felt a resignation, almost a curious kind of relief in him. He had been finding the whole sorry business increasingly hard to stay with, hard to bolster, hard to lie about, hard to keep going ...

It takes a certain type of mind, of personality, to sustain a literary scam, any type of scam ...

At the door I turned back. Sheree and Leif had come to stand by each other. There was something about their closeness that seemed to lift a metaphoric burden from my shoulders. Leif living as himself rather than this elaborate lie might ...

Margaret was pouring herself another cup of coffee. Professor Paulsen was still sitting in his armchair. His look suggested a thankfulness he didn't need to worry any further about early twentieth-century Anglo-American poetry.

I understood the feeling.

I smiled at Sheree and said, "Good luck and drop in again, sometime, the two of you." She smiled back but it was a diffident smile.

Later, Rachel said, "So when do we get to see this mysterious lost poem in print?"

I shrugged and said I wouldn't hold my breath.

I suppose I could've added that I don't usually subscribe to, buy, borrow or steal, the sort of magazines it was likely to appear in. But then Rachel already knows I am not a consumer of literary magazines.

- end -

HEDGING BETS

- i -

As I was seeing Rachel off at the airport, she said suddenly, “Dad, I’ve left an envelope on the kitchen table for you. It’s a sort of present.” I felt a bit surprised; presents, even ‘sort of’ ones, and Rachel don’t really mix. She’s too abrupt, too austere, for anything that requires sentiment ... “Promise me you’ll use what’s in there.”

“Well, it sounds a bit of a pig in a poke—but okay, can’t hurt, and you won’t be around to check too closely. I’ll give it a whirl.”

“Good. And I’ll want to know.” She leant over and gave me a quick peck, then picked up her carry-bag and walked through the departure gate. She turned, waved, and was gone. I drove home down the highway, still wondering, not yet missing her or her presence in the unit. If anything, the thought of peace, perfect peace, was pleasant to dwell on.

Sure enough, an envelope was on the kitchen table. I opened it. Read it. Put it down with a groan. A week’s paid tuition and accommodation at the Hall Equitation Centre, somewhere between Stanthorpe and Warwick. ‘I’m too old,’ was my first thought. No one should be asked to climb on a horse for the first time when he’s thinking sixty. It’s not good for you. It’s probably not good for the horse. Croquet maybe. Bowls. A gentle game of tennis doubles with some other retired dodderers. A slow jog along the beach. They weren’t officially opening until September anyway so there was time to break a leg between now and then ...

- ii -

September came round unusually fast (funny how time seems to go faster the older you get) and found me driving unenthusiastically up the Cunningham’s Gap way. In my suitcase was a couple of pairs of well-worn jeans (I refused to buy jodhpurs; jeans were good enough for cowboys) and a pair of boots in which, the salesman claimed, I could ride, climb, run, play rugby—or walk the dog. I felt a right bloody idiot. Would I be surrounded by keen horsy young people who would find me side-splittingly funny as I tried to heave my creaking self on to a “quiet pony; suit beginner”?

I found the sign, turned in, followed a twisting gravel road into the hills, some two k’s. It was a pleasant spot, green flats, old white buildings clustered round the main house with its sprawling verandahs and covering vines, poplars, willows, all bursting with Spring—and everywhere (I exaggerate slightly) horses, people, floats. I felt naked without all the requisite accoutrements, bridles hanging on my arms, a smell of horse accompanying me. I drew up at the front gate. Daffodils blew gently

along the fence. Hydrangea bushes clustered by the long ramp that led up to the verandah. A woman in a white sweater and fawn jodhpurs came out, put on a smile. I met her at the gate.

“Hullo, I’m Bob Creighton. I’m booked.”

“Oh good! Hullo Bob. I’m Letty Hall. Have you got bags? Good. If you’d like to drive round the end of the garden,” she pointed, “and park anywhere near the willows. We’ve got a caravan there for you. The white one with the red stripe.” She began to walk in that direction and I drove slowly after her. The caravans were neatly lined up behind the willows and she unlocked one briskly, handed me the key, and showed me round the facilities inside. It was nicely self-contained with kettle, snack cupboard, a big comfortable bed, enough clothes-hangers to hang my entire wardrobe; fluffy towels and soap. She pointed out the shower and laundry block, discreetly hidden under a riot of passion-vines.

“Meals over at the house,” she said and handed me a little booklet containing menu choices for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. At the end it told me there were First Aid qualified people available at all times. At the bottom of the page it said ‘Lavinia and Letitia Hall. Proprietors.’ Lav and Let Lav, I thought. But she didn’t strike me as someone who nursed a secret sense of humour. In fact, her smile had an automatic quality. Like Pavlov’s dogs. Vehicle. Guest. Smile.

“Come and meet everyone when you’ve got settled in.”

So about thirty minutes later I obediently strolled over, up the front ramp, turned and surveyed the scene. It all looked to be the sort of show you know’ll run like clockwork but will somehow leave you a bit cold; I wasn’t complaining on that score. The only un-clockwork-like thing was likely to be me on a horse. No doubt Rachel was taking time out, every so often, for a quiet snigger.

- iii -

My reverie was interrupted by the smooth whirr of an electric wheelchair. “Oh! There you are,” said an old but rather imperious voice, a bit like Lady Bracknell with a sore throat. I turned and found a grandmotherly-looking woman staring at me from a chair clustered with gadgets. “Sorry!” she blinked. “I thought you were someone else.”

“I’m Bob Creighton. We haven’t met.”

“Patience Hall.” She held out an old hand with several beautiful rings on it. Fleeting I wondered why she wore them all on her right hand. Arthritis maybe. “You’d like a cup of tea, I’m sure.” I said if it was no trouble. “I’ll call Annette.” She pressed a buzzer on a chair arm. Two minutes later a rather nondescript woman appeared with a tray. Service indeed. Mrs Hall said, “My granddaughter, Annette Hall. Bob Creighton.” Annette put on a smile without showing any sign of meaning it. Was she cast as the family drudge? The old lady raised a hand as two young women came up the side stairs and along the verandah. “Mrs Hall, how nice to see you,” one said brightly. The other contented herself with looking me over with what

seemed unusual care.

“Your fellow students.” Mrs Hall introduced us and ordered Annette to bring two more cups; then she ordered one of the young ones, Terri Lowe, to pour out. Annette came back, not bothering with a smile this time. Terri and Anne appeared bright cheerful souls, nurses, both about thirty, laughing about their inexperience, complimenting Mrs Hall on the property, the condition of the horses, the lovely shortbread; pleasant chit-chat. Then Terri turned to me. “Which horse are you riding?”

“I don’t know yet.”

She looked astonished. Because I hadn’t immediately rushed horse-ward the minute my feet touched ground?

“Danny Boy.” The old lady made it sound as if it wouldn’t be worth complaining if I found I didn’t fancy Danny Boy.

“Oh, you’ll like him,” Anne said happily. I’d forgotten there were still nurses around with this sort of scrubbed pink-cheeked “isn’t-it-a-lovely-day” attitude. I thought nurses had become tough women with Scottish union bosses to make sure they finally got the pay and conditions they deserved; but not a lot of fun. (My grandad was a Scot; got that underdog mentality fed into him with his porridge. Fair. But never expected anyone to do anything out of the goodness of their hearts. I suspect Rachel takes after him.) Over the next hour I got introduced to a string of people coming and going, then Letty Hall came back and gave me an updated list of the week’s activities. (I’d received a copy of this exciting document when I’d confirmed my booking.) “We’ve had to cut the advanced show-jumping because Mr Lewis is in hospital.” Possibly she’d confused me with someone else, an advanced showjumper. She put a finger on the classes she’d marked for me. Then she put on her Colgate smile and said, “You’ll probably like to come to the evening lectures, everyone does, but just let me know what else you’d like.”

The choice was quite wide. I could do Shoeing, Course-Building, Harness-Repairs, Lungeing, Grooming to Impress, Practical Points to Look for when Buying a Horse, Transporting Horses ... I said meekly, “I s’pose I’d better learn how to saddle and bridle the animal.”

She gave me a sharp look, “Very useful,” and made a mark on the clipboard she was carrying. Terri and Anne both gave me sympathetic looks before leaving our little group. I excused myself too and thought I’d better wander over to the stable area in the hope of catching a glimpse of my nemesis in the form of Danny Boy. The girls had waited for me outside the gate. Anne said, “Have you really never ridden before?”

“Never.”

“Why did you decide to try it?”

“My daughter gave me the week as a present. She has a strongly sadistic side to her nature.”

They both laughed. “Never mind, we’re not much good either. So we’ll all fall off together.” The trouble with this comfort was that they’d bounce up again—whereas I’d probably just lie there. Terri dropped her voice. “What do you think of old Mrs Hall?”

I hadn’t taken to the old lady; something about the way she treated her granddaughter I think; or maybe that Queen Mother quality ‘everyone is expected to love me’; “I can’t see us becoming bosom buddies.”

“No-o—” Terri still kept her voice low. “You look at her and think you’ll like her—and then you find you don’t. I wonder why. Or maybe it’s just me.”

Anne said carefully she sort of felt the same. “It’s not that she’s bossy exactly—but you feel that if you don’t fall in with her wishes—”

“She’d get back at you somehow?”

I listened, agreed privately. “What about Annette? Does she ride, do you know, or is she the general dogsbody?”

“Oh, they all ride.” Terri looked at Anne. “They’re all very good. Have you met the rest of the family yet?”

“No.”

“Well, there’s Lavinia who’s the best really. She calls herself Vin. And Annette’s daughter Isla who’s about nineteen. She’s good too. She’s hoping to get into the Australian Olympic Team for Sydney—or so I’ve heard ... but it’s funny, they’re none of them all that popular. I don’t know why really. I mean, Anne and I go to things when we can but we aren’t part of the scene so I s’pose it’s only our impression.”

“They certainly seem to have no difficulty getting customers.”

“That’s different.” Anne looked around. “You don’t have to like people ... I mean, it’s nice if you do but this place is good value for what they offer.”

A young man with an eager spotty face approached us. I could understand his thinking but I felt he’d be disappointed. Anne and Terri were already committed—to each other. He said he was Tom Lincoln and he’d come to work on his dressage. The girls kindly included him in our group and we reached the stables. In a far yard we found a solid grey horse with a label on his gate saying ‘Danny Boy’.

“There you are, Bob. Danny Boy.”

Horse and man looked at each other and were none the wiser.

- iv -

Dinner began at 6.30 pm. You could get served up till 7.30 pm but I noticed everyone was there and waiting the first evening. Small tables were scattered round a big airy room with French windows. Flower vases sat on yellow-and-white tablecloths, landscapes and hunting prints decorated the walls, horse brasses hung beside the fireplace in which a small fire burned. I simply sat down at the nearest table and let who will join me. People who knew each other tended to congregate. I hoped I wouldn’t be left in solitary state like Crusoe. Then a tall woman with short

greyish-blondish hair came over.

“Hullo, I’m Vin Hall.” She didn’t smile; in the days to come I decided she had a natural aversion to smiling, a reaction to her sister maybe. A man of about forty joined us. He had a leathery look. I felt he would be contemptuous of elderly beginners. He’d probably been thrown off a famous buckjumper at the age of two and never looked back. But, to my surprise, when he spoke it was with a soft West-of-Ireland accent. He might look like Paul Hogan after he’d crossed the Simpson Desert on foot and without stopping for a drink—but Billy Mahoney was one of ‘nature’s gentlemen’ and I don’t use the term lightly; in my experience such men are thin on the ground.

He discussed his horse with Vin Hall; he asked her about the horses the Centre was training up; he asked her how Isla was getting along. He made me feel, ignorant old codger that I’d felt so far, as though it was a real pleasure to meet someone who didn’t know a poll from a fetlock, a pommel from a surcingle. I felt he respected Vin Hall—I couldn’t decide if he liked her; she was too cold and detached maybe for liking—and his respect influenced me.

We drank our coffee. The meal had been filling and well-cooked; drab that Annette appeared, a little brown mouse, she obviously knew what she was about—unless there was a chef hidden away in the kitchen. Letty stood up by the mantelpiece and officially welcomed everyone to the Centre, hoped we would enjoy our stay, gave out various bits of information, wished everyone a safe and productive week, and then invited us all to join the family in the next room for a film and brief talk.

People either finished up their coffee and went through or took their cups with them. The room was already set up and we found chairs and waited. I assumed it would be an instructional video but it turned out to be a fairly dramatic travelogue about a man crossing Mexico with a horse and a mule. After this came a short lecture given by Letty Hall on collecting horse paintings—what you could expect to pay for the best, where to find them, what to look for if you were buying as an investment. Quite interesting. But the thing which intrigued me was the rather vicious look she gave someone just before she began. It was directed to where Lavinia was sitting with old Mrs Hall and, I realised later, Annette had been there also, in the shadowed alcove behind them.

- v -

First Day

Crunch time. I yawned as I sat down to seven o’clock breakfast. Wasn’t this supposed to be a holiday? But of course no one else saw it in those terms. They were here to LEARN. Terri and Anne came over to join me. “All set to go, Bob?”

“Not really. I’m sure it can’t be good to ride on a full stomach.”

“Well, we won’t be exactly riding to start with.” Anyway they’d gone for the ‘Continental Breakfast’, not the bacon-and-eggs. I agreed. “Who’s instructing us, do

you know?” “Oh, Annette probably. They give her all the poor jobs, by the look of it.” So they’d thought that too. Not that I’d ever exactly classed myself as a ‘poor job’.

“It seems a bit hard to ask her to run the house then go out and teach.”

“I suppose they think we’re not very demanding—which we aren’t.” Terri was candid.

Right enough, Annette Hall, neat in a blue blouse and jeans joined us at the stables about twenty minutes later. As she caught my horse for me, and said “Watch closely” as she bridled the poor beast and put on a cloth and saddle, I had the chance to observe her. Her drabness, I decided, had more to do with lack of make-up and dour expression. Up close, her skin was beautiful. (I had a disconcerting memory of someone saying “Pauline Hanson should go into the cosmetics business—she has a beautiful skin” and someone else saying “Pauline’s Perfect Moisturiser eh? Might be less damaging to the country” and banished it; Annette appeared more put upon than putting upon.) She had high Slavic cheekbones and a rather broad face. Her straw-coloured hair hung limply and untidily round her face and several times she pushed it back behind her ears in a sudden irritable gesture. I wondered what her parents had been like, assuming they were dead ... She caught me inattentive when she said, “Now you try.”

Poor Danny Boy. He stood patiently while I got bridle and saddle on to him. Annette checked thoroughly; then I led him out into a small paddock where Terri and Anne were already waiting with their horses. In the distance a group was trotting over cavaletti and another group was riding in a circle. Somewhere magpies sang. Nesting time. And for the first time I was glad I’d come. What was lolling in bed wondering whether to get up or not compared with the joys of this fresh bright morning?

Annette showed me how to mount. Terri and Anne got on without fuss. I struggled up and found myself actually in the saddle. Annette adjusted my stirrups and showed me how to hold the reins. Then she said in her lifeless voice, “Just relax. Now walk around.”

Danny Boy behaved perfectly, turning when I wanted him to, never moving out of his sedate walk. Several times Annette said “Stop” then “Walk on” and each time I managed though my mount probably would’ve obeyed anyway. She came over and arranged my legs in what was apparently the right position, told me to sit down more in the saddle, to keep my reins shorter. Clearly I was the dunce in this class.

But, strangely, I found I was enjoying myself. I think this had to do with the rock-like nature of Danny Boy and something, maybe, to do with the encouraging grins both Terri and Anne sent my way. I must find which hospital they work at, I thought; keep it in mind if my prostate starts to play up ...

After walking around a while we had to draw up in a line, walk a figure-of-

eight, stop, dismount, mount again. Then the dread words: "You can trot now." She came over to me and explained what to do. But it's one thing to explain and another thing to catch the idea of rising in rhythm with a horse. After I'd bounced along, sack-like, for ten minutes I began to get the hang of it. The other two trotted and made it look easy. Every so often Annette reminded me to "sit straight", "legs back", "keep both hands down"—there was a terrible temptation to grab the pommel and hang on—and so it went on till morning tea time when Isla came with a small van and set up drinks and sandwiches on a rough trestle alongside the main arena.

I counted twenty-five people lined up for smoko. They all looked cheerful. Billy Mahoney came over to see how I was getting on. It was a temptation to say facetiously, "Well, I haven't fallen off *yet*." Instead I said, "Oh fine", and that Annette seemed good. Though good seemed too strong a word for her teaching. For reasons of her own, she didn't really care a puff whether we learned to ride or not; maybe she'd rather be doing something else, something more exciting.

"She is, isn't she." He looked away into the distance where Annette and Isla were talking. I wondered if Isla too resented having to serve tea when she'd rather be riding.

"Poor relations do you think? Annette and Isla."

"Oh ... " He considered the question. "Not exactly poor, I would not think ... but there is something here ... " he finished his sandwich. "There is a tension between them. I have heard it said that it's old Mrs Hall who sets them against each other, but that may merely be wagging tongues. Or it may be a mother and daughter thing ... "

"Mmm ... interesting." It wasn't my business, it didn't matter, but the way people, families, interact *is* a matter of perennial interest. "What do you do when you're not riding?"

"I'm a professional layabout," he said with a smile. "My uncle has a property near Charleville. I help him when he needs help. I do a bit of fencing, windmill and bore maintenance, the odd bit of carpentry, just enough to keep body and soul together and pay to keep a horse at a friend's house. And you?"

"I'm retired. My daughter gave me this week. I think she thought I needed some exercise." He grinned at that.

Then people began mounting again. I went away to Danny Boy who was dozing but perked up slightly when he saw me. Did he find it fun carting round this sack of spuds? Annette now took us out into a larger area where we walked sedately through a large timbered paddock to reach the creek. The water was very shallow and we splashed across an artificial ford and on up into the quiet hills. There were birds aplenty, and long grass swished gently round our horses' legs. I felt getting this far was an achievement.

We stopped at the crest of a low rise and looked back down over the scene below. Even Annette seemed more relaxed now. Though she seemed to get less

pleasure at looking over the farm than Terri or Anne. Several times they'd tried to draw her into conversation but she stayed tight-lipped. Was it the Centre's policy—not to get too friendly with the guests? Or was it Annette herself?

We came down another winding path through the trees and reached the stables by another route. Annette told us how to leave our harness ready for next time, where to water the animals; as they'd had nary a chance to raise a sweat we simply returned them to their yards; I felt quite affectionate as I watched Danny Boy stroll away then I went to hang my gear in the big harness room.

Annette took us on a tour around this room, telling us what each piece of equipment was for, why they had such a range of bits, when it was all right to use a whip or spurs ... and over everything hung the pleasant smell of chaff and molasses and warm leather. Then Annette excused herself and left abruptly, saying lunch would be on in about twenty minutes.

"Do you feel stiff yet, Bob?"

"Not really."

"You wait. It'll hit you when you come to get out of bed tomorrow morning. But never mind, we'll give you a massage if it's too bad." I thanked them for the offer, not sure if it was meant seriously.

- vi -

Mrs Hall was parked near the door of the dining room and urged people to change tables as a way of getting to know new people. I wasn't enthusiastic about such determined bonhomie but sat at a different table and watched Terri and Anne head for other young women near the window.

An older couple came over and said, "Room here?"

"Help yourself."

Tod and Maria had just come in for the day as they only lived a couple of k's away; they said they had a small orchard, kept bees, and entered endurance rides at every chance. They said they were beginning to feel their age a bit on the long rides and had come to Letitia's hacking classes. They seemed pleasant, normal, easy to talk to—and showed no surprise that I should be having a first lesson at my age.

Afterwards, it struck me as strange that I should've put so much emphasis on their normality. Why shouldn't they be normal? I assume people who ride normally *are* normal. I couldn't put my finger on whatever it was that made me feel something about the Hall Equitation Centre wasn't normal.

- vii -

After lunch, there was a lecture given by Lavinia on Feeding for Performance. I was tempted to take a short siesta but was firm with myself. It wasn't as if I was being asked to do anything, stay up till all hours, answer tricky questions ... in fact I let the talk of vitamins, bulk, variety, salts, commercial dietary supplements, titbits, electrolytes, etc etc flow over me and simply watched Lavinia. She was a good clear speaker, answered questions carefully and fully, obviously knew her subject. When

she finished the session she simply turned and walked away.

I had nothing to do now until I went along to their forge later for the first part of the shoeing session. So I took a folding chair from the stack by the gate and went and settled down where I could watch a group of six people getting ready to do some jumping. It was Lavinia who came over to them, riding a tall bay horse (and if I'd been under the illusion that Danny Boy was a tall horse, as I struggled upwards, I knew now I was kidding myself); again she showed herself a careful competent instructor and I enjoyed watching the precision with which she put her own horse over the jumps and carefully corrected the problems the others were having.

Further away her sister was showing another little knot of people how to lunge a horse but they were too far away for her method of instruction to be heard. Another group was riding under Isla's supervision. I wondered if she found her youth a handicap; I hadn't yet had a chance to get to know her at all. There was a quiet whirr behind me and the wheelchair came smoothly across the manicured lawn, manoeuvred through the front gate, and a little less smoothly across to the rails beside me.

Patience Hall merely said "Hullo" and fixed her gaze firmly on the classes proceeding in front of her. "You must miss the chance to ride," I said with the little smidgin of sympathy I could muster.

"Oh, but I still do."

She didn't look at me as she said it, her eyes still following the gyrations of various horses and riders. "The chair is a convenience, not an essential."

I wondered if she was someone who used age and infirmity to have everyone dancing attention but I suspect she was strong enough, as a personality, to have them dancing, no matter what her health was.

"You must be happy having your family around you—and all doing things they enjoy."

"Oh, I am." For the first time she turned and looked straight at me and despite the warmth of the spring afternoon I felt faintly chilled.

"Family, Mr Creighton, matters more than anything. We fool ourselves in this modern age if we try to convince ourselves otherwise."

I could agree. Instead I stayed silent. It seemed to spur her into adding to her blunt statement. "I have been blessed to have daughters, granddaughters, even a great granddaughter," (I wondered how old she was), "all of them with skill, determination, mental and physical toughness—these things matter ... we are making a world of wimps, you know. It is adversity which toughens people." I couldn't see that her family had particularly wanted for anything, if my surroundings were any guide, though she herself must've lived through the depression and war years.

"What kind of adversity did you have in mind?"

"Loss of the breadwinner—" she began, then she simply closed down. She

raised her be-ringed hand. “Look at that dreadful Morris woman, I can’t think why Vinnie doesn’t drop her from her class—one day she’ll kill herself and someone will try to blame it on us.”

Yes, it would be hard, being sued by someone who had chosen not to grit their teeth and suffer adversity in silence. The person referred to was a young woman on a black horse who had come clumsily over a jump. She had my sympathies.

Soon after this the class took a breather and Lavinia rode over to the fence. “Hullo Mum. Hullo Bob. How’s it going?”

I said everything was fine. The old lady said she was a little tired and turned her chair for home. “Your mother says she still rides. Remarkable really.”

“Yes.” Lavinia didn’t seem to find anything remarkable in it. “Go over and get yourself a cup of tea at the house any time you like.” I thanked her but didn’t feel drawn to more of Mrs Hall’s company and conversation. Adversity *can* toughen people, undoubtedly, but toughness in itself is not an endearing trait.

- viii -

To my surprise it was Annette who ushered about ten of us into the old forge. There were three shoeing sessions set down. The place had a charcoal-heated forge and it was like reliving something out of a book—“Under the spreading chestnut tree, the old smithy stands” or something like that; we had it in a poetry book in my primary years, I seem to think. The fire glowed under the puffing of the bellows. Annette showed us different sized shoes, how to heat one and, as it glowed red, how to hammer it on the anvil. She had a horse tied outside and she held the hot shoe against its foot where it sent up a strong smell of singeing. “See, it’s still a little wide in the heel.” After some more work on the shoe she said it was right and dipped it in a bucket where it steamed and spat. Then we gathered round to watch her nail the shoe to the horse’s foot. It looked simple—when she did it. But the question time afterwards turned into a chance for people to trot out horror stories—of nails in the wrong part of the hoof, over-large shoes, lost shoes at momentous times, cracked feet, thrush ... I can’t claim to have got much out of it, I had no plans to shoe anything ... and farriers are like shearers, prime candidates for back trouble, poor sods ...

Letty untied the horse and led it away but not before she’d said something to Annette which caused the younger women to hiss something back at her. Not a compliment.

Did the family have a suggestion box for departing guests—“If you have any ideas on how we might improve our service, please, let us know”—and did departing guests write “lovely spot, good meals, excellent instruction—but the atmosphere could be improved”. It struck me that the Hall family had a lot going for it except the most fundamental thing: they just didn’t seem to like each other.

- ix -

As I again sat down to dinner I wondered with whom I'd get to share my table this time in our round of musical dinners. I still didn't know the majority of my fellow guests. Not that it mattered. But as I sat expectantly and decided to have the steak rather than the meat loaf I found myself thinking, lots of families don't like each other but then, in that case, they don't usually choose to live and work together, except in cases of firm economic necessity. Was it the power of the old lady's belief in the strength and value of family life? She would be hard to say no to—but her views would lose some of their potency if they had to be conveyed by phone or letter. Did she hold the purse-strings? Were her family vying to inherit the place? These things interest me.

The young lad I'd seen yesterday, eyeing Terri and Anne, came over. With him was another youngster, short and rather Italian-looking. "Okay if we sit here?"

"Go ahead." With an effort of memory I dredged up 'Mark' then realised it'd been 'Tom'; the other youth introduced himself as David Winter. "How's the dressage going?"

"Not bad." He seemed rather taciturn though it might've been shyness; either way I didn't see him getting very far with any of the young women here.

David did most of the talking, telling me about his horse, his vehicle, his job, his family, his ambitions, all crammed into the first course. He chaffed Isla when she came to remove our plates and give us apricot crumble and custard; Tom gave him a 'why can't I be like that' look.

Isla herself seemed to regard them both with disdain. Or maybe it was the business of waitressing after a long busy day that bothered her. "She's pretty," David said when she'd moved out of hearing, "but I've heard she's a right little bitch."

"Where did you hear that," I said neutrally; an angry flush had spread up Tom's neck.

"Oh, around the traps, you know. You get to know everyone a bit, or about them—"

"That's gossip." Tom was brusque.

"Sure." David spoke with an easy confidence. "Doesn't mean it's not true. You can see what she's like just by looking at her."

"Can you?" I said drily. "Can you sum up the people here just by looking at them."

"Probably."

"Well, try him." Tom pointed at me.

"He's retiring soon, looking for a bit of a hobby. His doctor told him to take up some sort of exercise. Probably runs a hardware store." David grinned. "How am I doing?"

"Wrong all around. But I'm enjoying it. Keep on."

"Okay. Two kids, both doing well. Wife—" he pursed his lips; he really was a

good-looking youth, not even that could spoil him. “No, a widower. Got in a bit of a rut. This’s a good way to meet some older women.” The impudent young rascal winked and added, “It’s Annette he’s got his eye on. He feels sorry for her.”

I was about to say “All wrong” again when I realised that though I didn’t *like* Annette particularly I *did* feel sorry for her. Pointless. Her drabness might have something to do with the loss of a husband recently. Her lifeless manner might simply be her inability to stand up to the stronger personalities of her aunts and her grandmother.

I said, “Divorced. One child. Near enough.”

“Okay. You try Tom.” David having already told me his life history—

“Mmmm.”

I sat back and looked young Tom over carefully. “You work with machinery. Garage maybe. You ride in your spare time. You haven’t got a lot of confidence, except when you’re riding. You’re ambitious. Neither you or your family are particularly well off and you look down a bit on the people who have the money to buy good horses and good equipment. You’d like to have a girlfriend whose background and ideas are much the same, so that you don’t have to feel inferior ... You don’t like being here but you see it as a way of helping along your ambition.”

Tom pushed away his plate. He was looking a bit embarrassed and he covered this by turning round to see if the coffee was coming. Annette had just come in with the trolley and she came first to our table.

I said, “That was very interesting this afternoon, out in the forge. There can’t be many working forges left on farms surely?”

Briefly, so briefly it was hard to know if I’d really seen it, a kind of spark lit her eyes. Then she said in her monotone, “I s’pose not.”

I felt she would be nearly as hard to keep a conversation going with as Tom Lincoln. Still, only another four days ...

She moved on and in another few minutes we gravitated again into the next room. As we went in, David said in my ear, “That was good—what you said about Tom. I reckon it’s pretty right.”

It didn’t mean Tom had seen it that way and I could probably have expressed it more tactfully. I noticed the lad had chosen to sit on the far side of the room.

This time we got to see a video of the cross-country at the Atlanta Olympics. Then they began handing out pencils and little notebooks for a quiz. Would there be a booby prize on offer? The questions started off easy—I assume they were easy as everyone else wrote quickly with grins on their faces—and got harder. Hard had things like “what is the leg movement for the Spanish Walk” and “what is the highest ever jumped in a Puissance in Australia”. They’d lost me after about the third question and I now looked round at the intent faces, the bit lips; amazing that people should take a fun thing so seriously. It was like being back at school or going for the big money on a TV quiz.

Letty offered more coffee, then there were two more simple games; I say simple only because she said they were simple. She showed a short video called ‘Guess the Breed’ which had shots of various kinds of horses standing still, then moving round. I think there were twenty and I got one right. They let me have ‘racehorse’ when the correct answer was ‘thoroughbred’ ... then to cap the evening we had to tear a horse out of a square of newspaper. At last the seriousness broke down and people laughed as they compared the odd creatures emerging with those their friends and neighbours were producing ...

As I walked to my caravan, Terri and Anne joined me. “How are things going, Bob?”

“Oh, not bad. How did you get along?”

“You should’ve seen my horse,” Terri laughed, “it looked more like a hyena!”

“But you got nearly all the breeds right,” Anne said consolingly.

“Yes, I only missed the Timor pony. I thought it was a Welsh Mountain Pony.”

Talking of Timor ponies brought an old case back and I felt the flash of temptation to share it, then knocked it back. (And not only because the case had never been resolved, no one had ever been charged.) I didn’t really want anyone here to know I’d once been one of Sydney’s Finest—and had been forced into resigning with a cloud left hanging; I continue to claim the cloud was not of my making—if anyone should ask. I preferred the idea of being manager of a hardware store—except people might ask me to solve tricky plumbing problems.

I laughed with the girls and said I’d got one right and I left them then and went on to my caravan but I’d just unlocked my door (as they’d given me a key I assumed I was expected to keep it locked) when the girls came back and said, “Bob, do you think there’s any way we can sort of ... well, you know, mediate ... I hate to see people so unhappy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there was an awful row going on in the kitchen this evening ... we came in the back gate and heard a bit of it and then she looked as if she was going to cry—”

“Annette?”

“No. Isla.”

“Do you know what the row was about?”

“Well, it just *seemed* to be about the dinner but I couldn’t say for sure ... ” Terri looked to Anne who nodded. “I thought it was just something between the family but this afternoon I wondered if it might not be one of the guests who’d sort of sparked it off. It’s hard to know, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” This was a new thought. But I couldn’t see whether it was likely or not—and where, if anywhere, it might take me. “Well, let’s sleep on it. After all, we hardly know these people. We might be jumping to conclusions.”

Second Day

There was cloud about the hills next morning and I pulled a sweater on before heading to the ablution block, then over to breakfast. With the clouds low on the hills there was something closed and almost claustrophobic about walking through this soft white landscape. I told myself it'd soon lift, turn itself into a pleasant morning.

I'd spent a while musing on last night. A guest. A guest who'd sparked off something. Not that I'd seen or heard anything. But here was a house of, effectively, five single women. Of course some families just live in a permanent state of tension and flare-up. Jealousy. Fear. Anger. Suspicion. None of that seemed to fit. Enjoying a right doozy? But then—tears? And of course I was a guest. A male guest. Someone might know something about me. Something disconcerting. To every question I'd responded blandly "I'm retired" and there's no one like an old cop for saying that to end more questions. But someone might already know something. I'd been around, met people, met horsy people ... it didn't seem likely.

As I walked across through the damp morning the thought came to me. Rachel. I assumed she'd heard of this place while she was still working at the travel bureau. Now I re-thought that. It was quite a while since she left—and this place was new. The bureau was an extremely unlikely place for the Halls to have advertised. So where had she heard about it? Was there some secret reason for wanting to get me here, one that had nothing to do with getting me on to a horse?

The couple who had the end caravan joined me. There were four rooms at the end of the main house, also an old farm cottage converted into extra bedrooms; several people had brought their own vans. Peter and Cheryl were in their thirties, I'd say, and they told me they had a farm near Tenterfield but did a few shows in their spare time. They seemed quiet people, keeping mainly to themselves; not, it struck me, for anti-social reasons but simply because they felt most comfortable moving through life as a self-contained little twosome. Fair enough. There *are* husbands and wives who prefer each other's company to anything else that may be on offer. They made a few remarks about the weather as we went in, and asked me over breakfast if I'd brought my own horse—"I don't think we noticed you yesterday, Bob"—so I explained my status.

As conversationalists they were rather slow. We talked through the meal but by the end we hadn't progressed beyond the weather and how comfortable it was here.

Isla served us, then disappeared. Had I looked at her over-closely after the girls' talk last night? Neither Anne nor Terri appeared but they might've come and gone.

The mist lifted slowly and the sun sparkled on the spiderwebs. The day was very still. I went over to see Danny Boy, not sure I was up to catching him and

getting him saddled. The stables seemed deserted. Were people waiting somewhere for the clouds to lift. Odd. Then I remembered there was an early ride scheduled. The better riders must've been and gone, fog or no fog. Well, I'd just hang round till Terri and Anne came—and whoever was scheduled to instruct us today.

It was true I felt a bit stiff but not enough to use it as an excuse. I walked along the yards till I came to Danny Boy's gate. To my surprise he came straight up to me and whiffled at my tentative hand. Did this mean he was hungry, pleased to see me, keen to get out of his boring yard ...

I thought I could hear voices somewhere away on my right. Of course the others were getting their bridles and things for the day. I'd forgotten which was the harness room. Down this way, I thought. The early sun struck the wet roofs and somewhere in the distance I heard a whinny; then the sound of a car on the drive. Probably Tod and Maria or one of the other day visitors.

I came to the harness room—hard to miss, I realised, with its sign above the door. I hadn't noticed yesterday as I'd simply followed Annette's back ... the voices were inside; I thought they sounded worried ... I stepped through the door into the dim interior ...

"Hullo."

"Oh, it's you, Bob!" Terri stood up quickly. "Can you help us?" I stumbled over to them.

"What's happened?"

"It's Letty. It's very strange but she seems to be drunk."

"Drunk! Surely not?"

- xi -

Together we lifted her gently from where she was lying against the wall in the far corner, half-hidden by several horse-blankets hung over a rail. She smelled strongly of whisky. Her breathing was slow but steady. She lolled helplessly against me.

"I think she's all right." The young women had checked her pulse, pulled up an eyelid, felt her forehead. "But I had no idea she had a problem ... "

"And it's an odd time to *start* drinking," Anne added.

"Hair of the dog?" I suggested.

"Maybe." Letty slept on, a little hoarse. "So what should we do?"

"Was she our instructor this morning, do you know?"

"I suppose so. There's no sign of Annette and I'm pretty sure Isla said she was going on the ride."

"We could get her back to the house. Her mother will know what to do—if this is a regular occurrence."

"I'd be scared to drink with a mother like that," Anne said *sotto voce*.

"I don't think Letty lacks courage—whatever else she might lack."

"But still it's strange," Terri said again.

It was. But I took the woman up in a fireman's lift and staggered off down the laneway while Terri hurried away to get her car and drive up to meet me at the bottom gate. Together we got Letty Hall into the back seat and down to the house where Anne went, with some trepidation, to find Mrs Hall and Terri and I sort of man-handled Letty up the path. The soft whirr of the chair met us on the verandah and the old lady just said, "Put her down there," indicating a kind of settee on the verandah. That's all. A brisk thankyou then we were made to feel superfluous. We went back to the car and Terri said suddenly, "We haven't got an instructor."

"So we haven't. I'll ask the old lady if all the others have gone out—"

Over by the fence, a car and float drew up, parked, and two people began unloading horses but apart from that there was no sign of anything happening. I went back to the verandah. "Sorry to bother you," I said to the old lady, "but was Letty going to be our instructor today?"

She looked up sharply. I suspect she'd given her daughter a good slap; her face was still stung red. But Letitia slept peacefully on.

"She isn't drunk, is she? She's taken something."

The old lady appeared to struggle with angry responses; but she spoke mildly. "I don't know—but she'll get the side of my tongue when she wakes up."

"Is she on anti-histamines, anything like that, that she might've accidentally taken too many?"

Patience Hall put her hands in her lap, lightly clasped, a perfectly-composed picture, and tears came to her eyes. "I don't know, Mr Creighton, I really don't know. She isn't on medication, she's always been healthy. She must've drunk something by mistake. We'll just have to wait till she wakes up and explains ... now, your instructor ... oh dear ... look," she winked away a tear, "I'm so sorry, but if you and the young ladies would like to come in, I'll make a cup of tea and we'll ..." she trailed off and managed to look both extremely old and extremely helpless.

"That's all right. We can amuse ourselves until the ride comes back."

The people who'd been unloading came over; a father and son, maybe.

"Hullo. Has there been an accident?"

"Yes," I said, "but nothing serious."

Introductions followed. Tony Johns was about forty-five, his son Adam about twenty. There was something about the lad, cheerful, interested, but not quite following the conversation, which suggested ... slightly retarded maybe, but happy to be here. And the tension that had been almost palpable a couple of minutes ago seemed to disperse. For all her imposed calm Mrs Hall was deeply embarrassed as well as annoyed.

The two men eventually mounted and rode away quietly to have a look around the jumping arena, which now sparkled with red and white paint in the sun. Terri and Anne speculated on whether they could manage to harness and mount up without help and I sat beside Letty Hall as she slumbered on and her mother went to

the kitchen to put the kettle on.

There was something about the whisky smell which had struck me so strongly before; I leant forward now and sniffed carefully along the sleeping woman. Yes, that was what had seemed strange; the smell came from her chest not round her mouth; it was something spilt on her clothes. Was it some kind of solvent, with a similar smell, pure alcohol, and the fumes had overcome her. Had she been cleaning something? It was an odd time to be doing so but not impossible—and if she'd had the door closed ...

The string of riders came into view, into distant hearing, and a few minutes later they came cantering up the road towards the house. Lavinia reached the front gate, pulled up, and swung down in a couple of graceful movements.

"Bob, aren't you riding today?" she called out.

"Letty's had an accident."

Did I imagine the look of concern on her face or did I simply assume it to be there? She came swiftly up the path and on to the verandah. For several minutes she stood looking down at her sister in silence. Then she sighed and said, "Poor Letty."

She turned back to me. "I'll get Isla to go with you. What about the others? Are they up at the stables?"

"Yes."

"Good." She looked at her watch; it was just after nine. "Come along then." I could insist on staying for the tea Mrs Hall was making but I didn't want to hold everyone up. Lavinia walked beside me, leading her horse, and obviously debating what to say or whether to say anything at all.

"She's had some problems since her husband died," she said at last.

"I didn't know she was a widow."

"Yes. She reverted to her maiden name when she moved back here. Koblinski isn't the easiest name to spell."

"True. Had she been married very long?"

"Oh no, only a year or two."

We reached the stables and Lavinia grew businesslike. "Now I'll just help you with Danny Boy, then I'll get Isla." She had him saddled and bridled and me in the saddle in no time flat and I rode slowly and creakingly out into the small paddock I'd thoroughly traversed yesterday. Both Terri and Anne were already there and looking remarkably at home already on their mounts.

"Is everything okay, Bob?"

"Yes, we're going to have Isla."

"Oh good." Then Terri blushed. "I find Vinnie a bit daunting," she said by way of explanation. Yes, Lavinia with those pale grey eyes and rather autocratic manner, her mother's daughter certainly, was not the easiest person to talk to; Letty might not have much humour, only smiles, but I suspected Lavinia had even less—and I was not surprised the deceased Mr Koblinski had chosen Letty; not, of course,

that it may've come down to a choice ...

Isla joined us looking fretful; had she been looking forward to something more exciting than our version of 'Play School'.

"What do you want to do?" She sounded curt.

"I don't think it's a matter of choice, Isla, you're here to teach us to ride."

I think I spoke more sharply than I'd intended but Terri and Anne (and Rachel) had paid as much as anyone else.

She bit her lip. "All right. Come on." But although she could probably ride as well as her mother and aunts, and possibly better if she had the Games in her sights, she'd had little experience teaching and her impatience got in the way. Danny Boy was his usual placid self and carried me kindly but Terri's horse seemed to pick up the irritation emanating from Isla and became nervous and uncooperative.

After ten minutes Terri rode over to the gate and dismounted. "I'm sorry—I don't feel quite ... he—it isn't ... it doesn't feel safe like yesterday ... "

"Well. I'll go and see if I can find mum." Isla looked relieved to have an excuse to abandon us. After she'd gone we stood round feeling (looking?) a bit helpless.

"I s'pose it's too much to expect from a nineteen-year-old," I said at last, "but I don't think that young lady is trying very hard—"

"I know," Terri said apologetically, "but it's partly my fault. I just felt myself getting all ratty and nervy with her, with poor Pogo," she patted her horse which was a fat chestnut. "I'll be all right in a minute." She stood there taking deep breaths. "I don't even know why I dislike her—or why it should upset me."

Anne came over and put an arm round her shoulders.

"Probably for the same reason you felt a bit offside with the old lady—" I spread a hand vaguely, "you don't matter to them, not really—and it's hard to consider spending an expensive week with someone who sees you as ... "

"As what?" Anne looked from Terri to me. "They make me feel ... sort of manipulated ... yet I can't exactly explain it ... after all, lots of businesses don't exactly leave you feeling good."

"It's fair enough to be treated as customers, clients, not as friends or fellow horse-people, respected but nothing more personal—but that's not the feeling, is it?"

"I s'pose it's harder with a residential thing like this—and we were the ones to find Letty ... maybe if we were just to come in for the day we'd seem more like customers—and the Customer Is Always Right, etc etc—"

"I still think that was *funny* about Letty," Terri said slowly, as though she'd been following her own train of thought. "I don't believe she was drunk at all."

"No, I'm sure she wasn't. But it could've been medication—anti-histamines, that sort of thing."

"Yes." They both looked at me. "Or," Anne said gravely, "a Mickey Finn."

Lavinia rescued us and put us to work in a no-nonsense way and we put Letty and melodrama out of our minds. She was a very competent teacher and also, strangely, a very 'safe' teacher. I found myself relaxing in the sense of utter confidence she provided, in herself, in the horse, in my ability to control him. We walked, we trotted, we pulled up, we turned small circles, we rode side by side; then she said briskly, "Now, I want you to canter." It had the feeling of moving from baby food to chops.

She told me exactly what to do and how to do it; then Danny Boy set off in a gentle rocking-horse motion. After my first moment of panic—that I'd never be able to pull him up, that now was the moment when I would disgrace myself—I found I was managing, even quite liking the sensation. For the next half hour she moved us calmly from gait to gait, up and down, till the first tiny sprout of confidence emerged in the rocky soil of my mind; I'm not sure that it reached my flailing hands, my insecure legs, my bouncing seat ...

When I finally dismounted, feeling a threatening twinge, I felt I'd achieved something.

A different instructor might've praised us; Lavinia Hall only looked us over carefully, told us what to do with our horses, and said she'd see us at lunch. I understood why Billy Mahoney referred to 'respect'. I wondered if anyone had ever *liked* her—but respect is worth having.

- xiii -

I chose a chair which gave me a good view round the dining room. The new arrivals, Tony and Adam, joined me, looking a bit lost in the dining room bustle. But with food in front of them they were happy to chat; Tony telling me they lived in Warwick—but I got the impression that, though he enjoyed riding, he was mainly here for Adam's sake. The young man was burning keen but needed someone he could turn to. I liked them both and asked if they knew the Halls well.

"Oh, so, so," Tony said. "The old man had Herefords here but his son Richard turned it into a Santa Gertrudis stud, said they had less eye-problems than Herefords."

"What was the old man like?"

"Well, I hardly remember him—though I remember my father saying—well, overheard as a matter of fact—that old Mr Hall was a "vicious old sod". That always stayed in my mind but I honestly don't know how much truth is in it. There was a rumour, years ago, that the old lady couldn't take any more and discreetly got rid of him but I'm sure that's only gossip. Still, I don't think Vinnie or Letty had things easy when they were kids."

"Did they always live at home?" I thought of old Mrs Hall keeping the girls tied to her apron-strings but that mightn't have been the case.

"Letty was here most of her life. Just a few years away when she was married—and Annette and her daughter came here then, I think. Lavinia was an

accountant in Toowoomba. She retired last year and came back. I think the Centre was her idea.”

I thought of asking him more about the family but I didn’t want to draw attention to Letty’s problem, if it was a problem and not an accident, and asked them about their horses. I hadn’t taken Anne’s suggestion seriously. In my experience Mickey Finns belong in a particular type of American fiction.

As we left the room after lunch I asked Lavinia how her sister was. “Oh, quite all right again.” Her tone didn’t invite further questions.

“Someone suggested it was—sleeping pills?”

“Oh, nonsense!” Her voice suggested frosty mornings and frozen pipes. “She spilled something. The fumes. But I can’t see it happening again.”

Nor could I. And there’d be no more talk of ‘problems’ and widowhood.

“Well, that’s a relief. Nasty things around in some solvents and cleaners.”

“Yes. Thank you for your concern.”

- xiv -

I went to see how to go about Buying a Horse after lunch. Lavinia pointed out everything I should watch out for, apart from an affordable price, then she arranged for half-a-dozen people to parade their animals while the others discussed their good and bad points. This could’ve been embarrassing—to be told your animal has a roach back, a ewe neck, weak pasterns, shows too much white in the eye (I forget most of the possibilities)—but such was the cool detachment Lavinia brought to it, we might as well have been discussing images on a screen. When it was my turn to walk around my ‘specimen’ I honestly couldn’t think what to say except “he looks fine to me”.

Several people smiled. But no such glimmer showed on Lavinia. She walked round the patient creature saying “look here” and bit by bit she pulled the animal to pieces—then put him together again. The horse, which belonged to David Winter, put up with this till Lavinia was stepping back—then he suddenly whipped out his neck and closed his teeth on her arm. Instead of leaping feet into the air, swearing, or yelling at David for help, she calmly tapped him on the nose and said “bad!” I don’t know if it was my imagination but the horse seemed abashed; to bite the Ice Maiden! oh no! and poor David was abject in his apologies. He couldn’t think what had made Captain do that. He started to add that the horse had never done such a thing before then seemed to realise that wasn’t the most tactful response. I watched him hurry the horse away and wondered was it just boredom or had she caught the horse on a ticklish spot with her pointer. Did he understand she was criticising him? It didn’t seem likely.

Two other people went through the motions but we were all a bit preoccupied—wondering if Lavinia was in secret agony; maybe getting bitten is an everyday hazard for horse-owners in the way ferret-fanciers have to mind their fingers, but it can’t be pleasant. Ten minutes later, everyone was mounted up,

myself included, and with Annette, Terri and Anne, I rode quietly away down the lane on a toddler's version of a cross-country ride.

Annette kept close watch on us but said nothing until we were well out of sight of the house, then she suddenly turned and looked back through the trees and said in a heartfelt way "Oh God" and fell back into silence.

- xv -

We dismounted under the trees and Annette undid her saddle-bags and took out some sandwiches and some pineapple Fruit Boxes. We sat down on handy logs and had our snack. We all wanted to ask Annette if she was okay, yet it was hard to know how to broach the subject.

Instead Terri and Anne talked cheerfully about the landscape, about their horses, even about work, and I felt that Annette relaxed a little in their cheerful company.

"I wish ... " Annette sat there looking out to the hills, her hands round her knees. But we didn't hear what she wished because she looked at her watch and said wearily, "I s'pose we'd better be heading back."

"But you'd rather not?" I felt again a sense of unfocussed pity but she just shrugged and mounted her horse and we all trailed back down the path. There was a sense of anti-climax about our expedition.

- xvi -

After returning Danny Boy to his paddock—I was beginning to see him as the calmest sanest thing around the place—I left him with a sense of regret and strolled down to my caravan. I unlocked the door, went in, took my new boots off, lay down, closed my eyes ...

It'd be nice to be home, to be dropping in to see my neighbour, Russ Taylor, for a chat, for a quiet evening, a video, a glass in my hand ...

There was a knock at my door.

"Come in." I expected Terri or Anne or both.

Instead it was Tony Johns.

"Sorry to bother you, Bob, but I was worrying a bit about what I said to you at lunch."

"Forgotten already. Don't worry."

"Well, it wasn't that I exactly wanted you to *forget* what I said ... " He sat down on my one and only chair.

"I'm not a blabbermouth—if there's anything you'd like to tell me."

"Well, it's not that exactly." I could see us going round all day. "You see, that bit about old Mr Hall dying—as a matter of fact, that might be true. But I don't know that it's any of my business. But I wondered if you might sort of accidentally say something. It's hard to know. It's quite a while ago."

He looked a bit awkward.

"Just out of curiosity—what did people say *had* happened?"

“Tetanus.” He didn’t look at me. “People said she infected him with tetanus and he died.”

“That’s hard to prove.”

“That’s what I mean.”

“And who actually started saying that—do you have any idea?”

“Lavinia. Or that’s what people say.”

But although I tried, discreetly, to learn a bit more, he simply kept on saying it was just what he’d heard and no one had any proof.

“And if the old man was the terror you suggested ... ”

He sat there, his hands planted on his thighs. “Not my business, Bob, but they say that changed the inheritance. It doesn’t matter really, not now, with all the family living here.”

I was curious about the question of inheritance but he said he really didn’t know. And it didn’t matter, did it.

- xvii -

Dinner. Fish pie. Annette impressed me with her skills. I wondered about her marriage, her father was Richard Hall so was he the one who inherited—or did Patience Hall—and had this affected the family. Did it explain the tensions between the women? It was hard to believe so. David and Tom, who seemed to have formed an easy-going friendship, came and sat with me. Obviously I was forgiven for lacerating Tom’s feelings. They mainly talked horses. The only question I ventured was the simple one—“Is your horse in the habit of biting, David?”

“No! Christ! That was embarrassing, wasn’t it!” But he grinned. So did Tom.

“Was Lavinia hurt?”

“Oh! I wouldn’t think so.”

“Do you think she’d done something to annoy him?”

“Probably.” He gave a quick sideways glance to where Lavinia was sitting on the far side of the room. “The way she was flourishing that cane around.”

“I see.” It was his horse. But this didn’t explain the pure joy he seemed to have got out of the incident. “Poor Lavinia. She doesn’t seem very popular.”

“Popular!” He snorted. “She’s a right bitch. Thinks she knows everything.” Tom nodded slowly.

“Billy Mahoney told me he respects her. You obviously don’t. I wonder why you came to learn from her.”

They’d been on a roll. Now they seemed to hesitate, draw back slowly. Tom shrugged. “She’s not a bad teacher, I s’pose, and the facilities are good.”

“Yeah. That’s true.”

“Did you know any of the Halls before you came here?”

“We’ve met Isla—riding, you know.”

“Mmmm.”

“She’s got tickets on herself.”

“Does it matter? Maybe she’s got something to be pleased about?”

“She’s got good horses.”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t mind that chestnut of hers. Her mother is supposed to have paid five thousand for him.”

“I thought Annette was the poor relation?”

“Well, not *that* poor.” Tom leaned on the table. “And it may’ve been one of the others that bought him.”

“Annette seems to do a lot of the work—”

But they weren’t interested, talking instead about several of the other women who might be available—now they’d realised Terri and Anne were not. Though Tom still seemed to harbour vague hopes ...

“What do you think, Bob, are they—you know, lezzies?”

“Possibly. They’re not particularly interested in men as men. But they’re nice girls to have as friends.”

They didn’t show any interest in friends; I don’t suppose I did either—at their age.

Isla came and slopped down bowls of ginger steam pudding with custard. She had her fretful expression on; I was beginning to wonder if she had any other expression in her repertoire. Or was it that life was doing this to her. Yet I couldn’t see that her life was all that bad. I smiled at her. She didn’t smile back. Even kids in refugee camps can manage a smile now and then.

- xviii -

Afterwards we watched a video about dressage done to music—it had a name which I promptly forgot—then a ten-minute segment on building good stables: drainage, ventilation, size, layout ... a pity I had no one back home to run all this exciting and esoteric knowledge past; maybe I could bore the pants off Russ.

This was followed by a short segment “Guess Who?” in which famous (human) faces were flashed on the screen. I didn’t know any of them. The others wrote industriously and I assume correctly. Then there was a round-the-room quest in which everyone was asked to tell a horsy anecdote and each one was applauded; the most applause signified the best, the most interesting. In general they were funny little things that had happened to people at competitions but several were either critical or sad. One person spoke about losing a favourite horse in tragic circumstances.

I could think of various stories. But a) they were mostly sad and b) I didn’t want to risk giving away my ‘cover’. “Bob? Can you offer anything?” Letty was back on deck and sounding as if she’d never been anything but. I was tempted to say “pass” but instead, unwisely, I said, “I heard a story once—about some Iceland ponies that were being stolen and used as sacrifices in a kind of weird religious cult.” It was the story which had most stayed to haunt me. “It’s a story I heard which has always stayed with me, bothered me—but whether it was a one-off thing with a

bunch of weirdos—or whether there have ever been any other cases, I don't know. I've never seen anything in the paper. But it always made me wonder about the mentality of people who would be willing to use horses in that way."

There was a long silence. "Where was that, Bob?" Letty said. I told them, though not down to the day or the month.

"And how did you come to be involved?"

"Oh, I just happened to know one of the people who had ponies stolen. She was very distressed by it."

There was another long silence. I began to feel like someone who's dropped an awful clanger at a diplomatic dinner. I could've passed. Should've. But I felt a secret desire to somehow push things out of their 'comfort zone' ... Then someone said abruptly, "Now, I know! I remember hearing something about the case."

Letty intervened. "What about you, Tony, something a tad more cheerful?"

Tony Johns obliged. But I was only half listening. I wasn't absolutely sure who said he remembered the case and I didn't like the tone it was said in. My fault for not making more effort to retain the overall cheerful tone of the evening.

- xix -

Third Day

Again the clouds were present, damp and thick around the hills when I heaved myself out of bed. This morning my muscles complained loudly. It was a temptation to loll a while longer in bed but I forced myself up and out. As I pummelled them under a hot shower I wondered about Terri and Anne and their offer of a massage. They might be feeling a bit iffy too.

The girls were already in the dining room, along with Peter and Cheryl from the other caravan. As I sat down I realised I hadn't read a paper or listened to the news since I'd arrived. It was nice, in a way, to forget the big bad world out there but I wasn't yet convinced this world in microcosm was the ideal alternative.

Billy Mahoney was finishing his coffee. I went over and joined him and told Isla I'd have my usual. He seemed pleased to see me. But after a moment of casual chat, he said in his soft way, "Are you here *only* for a holiday, Bob, or is there another agenda?"

"I beg your pardon?" Maybe I was still half-asleep.

"Derek Hurburgh told us last night after you'd left that you're really a CIB detective. You can imagine what a stir it created."

"I am retired. And I *am* here on holiday."

Billy smiled, disarmingly. "But people were saying it's a strange kind of holiday for a man your age to be choosing."

"I didn't choose it." Did I sound resentful? "My daughter chose it, presumably because she thinks a man of my age shouldn't be spending so much time snoozing in an armchair." Derek Hurburgh, I thought somewhere between anxiety and curiosity, but the name hardly registered. Still, rural south-east

Queensland is hardly the anonymity of New York ...

Billy Mahoney continued gazing at me but it wasn't an uncomfortable interrogative gaze; and he would accept whatever I said with all his natural courtesy; it didn't necessarily follow that he'd believe me.

"I don't think I even know a Derek Hurburgh."

"Tall man, rides a black horse with a white blaze." He looked around. "He must've come and gone. He's staying in the cottage. "I've heard that he sees quite a lot of Vinnie, though I've never noticed them together particularly. But then I'm not a noticing sort o' man."

"Was there any special reason why she never married, do you think?"

"Vinnie? I really couldn't say. The grapevine can work overtime in the various worlds—dressage, hacking, show-jumping, and so on—you tend to meet the same people at the different shows and it can be hard to keep things private ... but Vinnie, I think, is just one of those very self-sufficient people."

"Yes, I felt that too, She told me her sister had had some problems since her husband died—"

"I didn't realise he'd died."

"You knew him at all?"

"Max? Oh, just to say hello to. He was supposed to sail a bit close to the wind but I never saw any evidence of it. Vinnie used to refer to him as my brother-in-law, the crook ... it used to make Letty spit fire if she overheard ... "

"So you haven't seen him around for some time."

"No. But I just assumed they'd parted and he'd gone back down south. He always came to watch any time she was riding but he didn't ride himself. I think he preferred a day at the races. But even if he was a bit—" Billy looked apologetic, "easy—he was also a generous man. I hope there was something left for Letty."

I found it hard to care particularly whether Letty Hall benefitted from her husband's death. Maybe that's why few people would bracket me with Billy. He excused himself and left and I ate two pieces of toast slathered with marmalade and finished my coffee. Again I was the last to finish and there was no one else around when I finally rose creakily and went out.

The wheelchair whirled along the verandah. "Mr Creighton, how nice to see you!" Mrs Hall's dulcet tones hailed me, her excellent false teeth smiled at me. "I hope the food here is to your liking?"

"Excellent. You've got a gem there in Annette."

"Annette," she echoed vaguely as though she couldn't, for a moment, place the name. "Yes, she's a good girl."

"It must've been hard for her—bringing her daughter up on her own. It's nice to think that she had all your support."

"She never married, I'm afraid. I didn't approve but I know times have changed. My son Richard lost his wife while Annette was quite young. It's a terrible

loss. Girls need a mother.” I thought Annette might’ve had all the mother-substitutes she could handle. Then Mrs Hall gave me her sweet insincere smile again and I went on down the ramp and off to face another day with Danny Boy.

- xx -

The harness room was empty and Terri and Anne already had their horses ready. Time to give it a go myself? Danny Boy couldn’t have been more co-operative, even opening his mouth to receive the chunk of metal, but then the three of us stood round waiting for an instructor to deign to arrive.

“Not again,” Terri said irritably. “I really don’t want to have to cart someone else down to the house.”

“We’re getting Vinnie, aren’t we?” Anne said.

They looked at each other. “Maybe something’s bitten her.” They both giggled then tried to look as though they wouldn’t dream of laughing at anyone’s misfortune. After five minutes of waiting, Annette came trudging up in her life-is-a-burden way and said, “Lavinia isn’t well. I’ll take you into the games paddock.”

“It sounds like Play School.” I clambered up in my unathletic way and settled myself on Danny Boy’s safe back and we went along to a gate which Annette showed us how to open and shut without needing to dismount. The other two managed well but when I went to lean over I felt my saddle slipping with me. Danny Boy must’ve taken a deep breath just when I fastened the belt under his belly. Annette grabbed it and pulled me upright and tightened the girth. Terri and Anne grinned but without malice.

In the games paddock we trotted through rows of pegs and through a kind of maze and then over poles laid along the ground. Several times I caught Annette looking away from us. Was something bothering her or were we just a great ho-hum? She put a pole on two bricks and we stepped over it. She put it up higher and suggested we trot over. I had to grab for the pommel to stay on but I was over. “Next stop—Sydney Royal,” I said to Terri as Danny Boy came alongside her mount. She laughed again and Annette looked over at us; not a pleasant look, somehow full of bottled-up resentment, almost spiteful, then her usual tired-of-life expression took over again. Was it that Terri and Anne appeared happy with one another, happy with life, free, successful—and Annette had ceased to hope for such things in her life? She was a hard person to read.

We got through our morning. I walked down first. As I glanced back I saw Annette walking between the two nurses and I hoped they’d find a way to imbue her with some of their overflow of good spirits. Insincere Letty and her mother might be—but I found their smiles preferable to Annette’s gloom and Vinnie’s coldness.

This might be a good place to learn, and I undoubtedly had learnt things, but I couldn’t see myself recommending it to anyone. There must be places with equally good instructors—and a pleasant happy atmosphere to be instructed in.

- xxi -

Letty, when asked about her sister's health, said it was just a bit of a bilious attack. "Vin," she said firmly, "has always been a bit prone to stomach troubles." People commiserated. I wondered if it was really her arm which was still paining her but couldn't be mentioned.

"Can you get tetanus from a horse?" I asked old Mrs Hall later. For a moment she simply stared at me. The effort to pull herself together and say crisply, "Of course not," was palpable.

"That's a relief. Horses and tetanus go together, or so I've heard."

"We are very careful."

"That's cheering."

Was it my imagination or did she whirl away at greater speed than usual.

"What was that about tetanus?" Letty had come quietly up behind us. She smiled. I smiled. "Someone told me your father died of tetanus. I was a bit worried about that bite your sister got yesterday."

"Horses often bite Vin."

"Do they?" The idea that horses might take such a dislike to someone astonished me; at least in this context where they appeared to be so well looked after, well-fed, well-trained. "I thought your sister was—well, she looks to be a beautiful rider ..."

"Is she?" It wasn't what she wanted to hear.

"You both are." But she wasn't mollified.

"She breaks the spirit of her horses."

I wasn't sure how you break a horse's spirit—or how you go about telling if it's broken. Lavinia's horses didn't look like old broken-down pathetic nags to me—but then I was hardly the person to judge.

"Other people's horses bite her. Not her own."

"Often?"

"No, I suppose I'm exaggerating."

"Well, anyway, I'd better let you get on."

"Yes." But she stood there irresolute. Then she said softly, "Is it true you're a police officer?"

"I'm retired." Would I get to a point where I wanted to shout it to the skies.

"I don't care if you're retired or not. Could you find out something for me?"

"No. But I can put you on to a good enquiry agent if you want."

"All right. That'll do." She glanced round swiftly then walked away; leaving me curious but not caring all that much.

- xxii -

Annette showed us how to lunge our horses. I got lost in the talk of flexed necks, following the bit, supple backs ... it sounded more like Swedish massage. But Danny Boy consented to obey me when it was my turn to stand in the middle of the ring and give him orders. I didn't even need to point the whip. I thought I'd

probably underestimated the intelligence of horses, this horse anyway. He was no oil painting though that isn't to imply he was scraggy or ugly or knock-kneed. He was just a patient good-natured old horse who accepted the bumping and lurching and ham-handedness of beginners with unflinching calm. (And I didn't believe it was because Vinnie had broken his spirit.) I was sorry I couldn't take him away with me.

Terri and Anne went about their lungeing with much more verve, enjoying the sight of their horses cantering round like horses in a circus. Annette just stood there, occasionally making a comment or a suggestion. I wondered what she thought about when she wasn't having to think about us.

Letty came up, walking quickly and spoke to Annette. I thought I caught the word hospital. Had Lavinia got worse or had one of the riders fallen off? Annette just nodded and went on standing there watching Terri work her horse. But it seemed to me she actually brightened a little as Letty spoke.

- xxiii -

The three of us walked down later and sat watching the more advanced riders for a while. Isla was with them but I had the impression she was just riding, not contributing anything. Her mother walked over and waited there until her daughter left the group and came over. I don't know what was said but a few minutes later Annette was talking to the group and they all appeared to be listening intently.

"It must be Vinnie." Terri whispered. "It's probably appendicitis or something."

"Something anyway."

"You've got a suspicious mind, Bob."

"Yes. It seems strange for only one person to get an upset stomach."

"She might have ulcers, she's certainly repressed enough," Terri said.

"She might've been born that way."

"No. I bet she had a bad experience with sex." Terri tried to make it sound as though we were standing round at a cocktail party for clinical psychologists.

Anne agreed. "You can see a mile off she doesn't like men."

"Are you suggesting she likes women?"

"No-o-o." They communed briefly. "No, she just doesn't seem to like people much. And *I* don't think she likes horses either." Terri added this challenge almost defiantly.

"She's a good rider," I objected.

"Yes ... but that's not the same as being a good horsewoman."

"Isn't it?" It had never occurred to me to consider the distinction before. But it could be true. Lavinia seemed to lack the empathy, the gentleness, to create the best relationships; something lacking at the centre of her psyche.

"But it needn't necessarily come from bad sexual experiences. And you can get ulcers for all sorts of reasons." CIB work and hassles and stress and back-biting

had certainly played havoc with *my* stomach.

“Yes. I remember my father had a perforated ulcer once,” Anne said. “It was quite serious there for a while.”

Afterwards, this struck me as the oddest part of the whole conversation.

- xxiv -

Annette said there'd be a cuppa for anyone who wanted one and then she'd give another shoeing demonstration for anyone who'd missed out last time. I sat with the Johns and drank coffee and chose from the plate of bought biscuits Isla abruptly shoved under our noses. When she'd moved on I asked Tony if he remembered anything more about old Mr Hall; I did my best to make it sound as though we were continuing our casual conversation from yesterday, just interrupted by this and that.

“Well, not much. Though I remember he always carried a rifle with him. He had a Landrover, or it might've been a Jeep, and he'd have the gun on the seat beside him and he'd just sort of run his hands gently along the butt, sort of *caress* it, if you know what I mean ... I don't think much of that mob in Canberra but I'll say one thing—I agreed with Howard on the guns. We never needed all these automatics and semi-automatics when I was a kid. A good farmer doesn't need anything more than a .22 for emergencies—he manages his problems, he doesn't blaze away at 'em with a sub-machine gun. It's the bad farmers and the bored louts from the country towns that're demanding the right to hang all this expensive hardware round them—but you can't go round saying that out here or people call you a wimp—or something worse.”

I agreed. You won't find many cops who want to see the populace armed; they've attended too many shooting accidents, shooting suicides, suburban hold-ups ... they've been on the receiving end too often ...

“Old man Hall scared people, he scared me as a kid. We'd see him coming, you know, and be off like hares ... ”

“Did he scare his family?”

“I'd say so, wouldn't you? They reckoned he kept a gun loaded in his bedroom but I don't know if that's true. But I'd say it helped the rumour that his wife got rid of him somehow ... because the whole family seemed more relaxed after he was dead—so it's only a small step to saying they helped him on his way.”

“Mmmm, that can happen. Do you remember what old Mrs Hall was like in those days?”

“Not much. She hardly ever went out before the old man died. Afterwards she started going out more. The kids went to boarding schools in Warwick. I was at the high school.”

We rambled on a bit about riding, horses, Warwick. Annette came by with the trolley to collect our cups and Tony asked if there was any news on Lavinia.

“Letty took her in. She was a bit worried but I don't suppose it's anything

much.” She turned to Tony. “Are you both staying for dinner?”

“No. No, we won’t, thanks Annette. We’d best be getting home. You’ve got enough on your plate with Letty and Vin away.”

“Letty’ll be back soon,” she responded in her neutral way.

“Still ... ” He and Adam stood up. Annette moved on.

I was about to say merely, “Well, I’ll be seeing you tomorrow,” then I thought—no harm in hedging my bets. It could well be a bilious attack. People did get ’em now and then. It could also be something else.

“Tony, could you drop into the hospital—not to see Vinnie unless you want to—just to drop a note off to the sister on duty.”

He looked surprised but said, “No reason why not.” I went into the Centre’s office and helped myself to an envelope and a sheet of notepaper and enclosed it with one of my cards from my wallet; they say ‘Detective Inspector Robert Creighton (Ret’d)’. I asked them if they’d check to make sure Lavinia had no access to any substance. She might’ve taken, or someone might’ve given her, something. I couldn’t guess what but I had an unease about the course of events.

There was Letty’s ‘attack’ yesterday, Lavinia’s today. It could be coincidence. I just wanted to be sure it was.

Tony took the envelope cautiously and said he’d be seeing me. I hoped he was reliable.

- XXV -

There wasn’t much to be done now; the house was quiet, the family busy elsewhere. I didn’t want another lesson in shoeing so I sat down in the library surrounded by ‘horse books’ but without being tempted to take anything down from the shelves. Instead I settled myself in a large comfortable armchair and closed my eyes. I didn’t feel called to do anything; I quite likely had already jumped to ridiculous conclusions. I thought about Lavinia and the ideas Terri and Anne had presented ... and I set them alongside the idea she was often seen with Derek Hurburgh ... maybe I could angle to sit with him at dinner ... not that it mattered. Lavinia’s life was her own. I didn’t really feel called to interfere beyond my feeling that her safety just might be better with a bit of ‘insurance’ ... I wasn’t even sure her safety *was* compromised ...

There was a slight chill in the evening air and I hoped they’d light the fire. Even so, I was reluctant to heave myself out of the armchair even to turn on the light let alone go over to my caravan to get ready for dinner.

Instead I let my thoughts just play as they wished over the day, the last couple of days, not trying to force them here or there. It can be a useful exercise but nothing happened. Finally, I got up with a bit of a groan. My legs ached. My back creaked. Oh Danny Boy! I groaned across the lawn, past the willow trees, unlocked my caravan, and pulled a clean shirt and pair of slacks from the cupboard. I was brushing my hair, what’s left of it, when a little memory surfaced. Letty. Yes, a

couple of times through the day I'd seen her lift a hand to her head in a sort of vague way; the way someone might test a tender spot? If I was right, then it was possible Letty had either been hit or she'd fallen, spilling something as she fell, a tin or jar could've rolled away into a dark corner of the room.

I took my pocket torch and walked briskly up to the harness room. I hunted round the dark heavily-scented room. No sign of a tin, but just above where we'd found Letty were a couple of greyish-blond hairs caught in the rough wood of the back wall. Whether she'd tripped or whether she'd been pushed or hit was the question here.

All the women in the family quarrelled but did it sometimes go beyond the verbal? And if it did, did that make it my business? Probably not.

- xxvi -

No sign of Derek Hurburgh at dinner. I knew him only as a rather reserved-looking man with black hair going grey round the ears.

"What's happened to Derek," I said to Isla when she came round to take my order. "He's about the only guest I haven't yet had a yarn with."

She shrugged. "Maybe he's gone to see my great-aunt." She seemed to find the idea amusing, not with a cheerful amusement, but with a kind of cynical youthfulness which finds the romances of older people absurd.

"Well, that's nice," I said mildly.

"Except she can't stand him." Then she seemed to feel she'd said too much and marched away without another word.

Interesting.

But it wasn't Derek and Lavinia *a deux*; no, it was Derek—and how he came to know something about me.

- xxvii -

Tom and David came over. David had obviously been good for Tom; he seemed much more open and relaxed, able to give back chaff for chaff. I let their talk flow over me. Decent enough kids. Isla slapped our plates down and was gone before we could say anything.

"Fancy her?" David said lazily.

"No. But adolescence in this house wouldn't be a bundle of laughs by the look of it."

"Maybe not." They both thought it over. "But it'd be nice to ride every day. And to have the money ..."

"We'll get another quiz, I s'pose," Tom said suddenly, "I hate the things."

"Do you?" I was surprised. I thought it was only dunces like me that shied away—

"Like being back at school. Now, kiddies, sit up straight, hands up, now, who knows—" He grimaced. "And who cares really."

"But—for people interested in horses—don't you find it fun, testing

yourself?”

“You aren’t interested in horses?” Shrewd kid.

“Not all that much. Though I’ve developed a soft spot for Danny Boy.”

“You’re here to investigate something, aren’t you—you know, like undercover?”

“No. I really am here just to ride. Scout’s honour.”

“It must be those nurses then.”

“Terri and Anne?”

“Yeah. I’ll bet they’re not nurses.”

“Why do you say that?”

He held out his hand. There was a nasty lump on one finger. “Do you know what this is?”

I looked at it more closely. “A whitlow? I remember suffering from one once. Damn painful for a while.”

“Yeah, it is. But they didn’t know.” It was said with a faint air of triumph. One up.

“They might just be beginning.”

“A bit old for starting.”

“These days I don’t think it matters so much.”

“Maybe.” But he was tenacious with his idea. “Do they look like plain-clothes detectives to you?”

“No. As a matter of fact they look like nurses to me.” Which they did. It didn’t prove anything, of course, and I had a hunch he was right. Nurses, in my limited experience, talk cases, patients, staff, doctors ... these two turned to more personal examples.

“That’s their cover—so they *have* to look like nurses—whereas nurses usually look like ... ” He couldn’t decide what nurses usually look like.

“Well, that’s a very interesting theory. I must watch them more closely.”

David grinned. “They’re worth watching—pity they’re ... you know ... ”

I wasn’t absolutely sure they were ‘you know’; their natural affection and sharing, though, were heart-warming.

- xxviii -

The night’s quiz which this time followed a full-length video called ‘Into the West’ (set in Ireland, very pleasant) dealt with horse-drawn vehicles. To my surprise I did a bit better this time. Old Mrs Hall was in charge of the ‘entertainment’ and if she was worried about Lavinia she gave no sign. I worked through the list—sulky, brougham, landau, stagecoach, curricule, buggy, dray etc—and only missed two. Amazing! I half-expected a pat on the head.

Letty came in, looking tired, and managed one of her clockwork smiles—for her mother, for the room.

“Vin. How is she?” someone asked.

“She’s sleeping now. They say she’ll probably be able to come home tomorrow.”

I saw Derek lurking behind her, and wondered if he’d been allowed in to see Vin. He didn’t look worried. In fact he seemed over-assiduous in his attentions to Letty ... and I wondered if Lavinia was a smokescreen. To get one sister alone might, at times, be a little tricky. They seemed to do quite a lot together. Earlier on, I’d looked out for him, thinking to have a bit of a chat. The same thought seemed to have struck him because he caught up with me as I walked back to my caravan later.

“You’re Robert Creighton, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Why?”

“I heard about you from my uncle.”

“Your uncle?”

“Dennis Mack.” He had a sharp voice with a slight catch somewhere in the back of it; as though he was given to bouts of self-pity. But it was the mention of Dennis Mack which made me groan inside. Senior Sergeant Mack. The man who was convinced I was a bloody interfering bugger from down south whose one mission in life was to stir people up and turn his life into a minor hell on earth. I’d known men like Mack all the way through my career. They “lost” evidence, they handed in sloppy reports, they turned up in court with buttons undone and their beer guts hanging over their belts; if they ever solved a problem it was luck, coincidence—or a bit of the heavy stuff. They filled quotas. They could occasionally be helpful, by reason of their bulk, if it came down to a brawl; they earn their keep on front desks—anyone wanting to lodge a complaint soon realises it won’t be worth the hassle ... in other words, I could do without Senior Sergeant Mack and his nephew in my life.

“Fancy,” I said drily.

“He says you’re trouble.”

I shrugged. “Takes all sorts to make a world.”

He came closer and hissed—“So what are you doing here?”

“Learning to ride. Any objections?”

“No, you’re not.”

Should we now while away the evening with a bout of: “Yes, I am”—“No, you’re not”. A laugh a minute.

“Derek, strange as it may seem I am here to learn to ride, nothing else. I had never met anyone here until I arrived three days ago. I had never even heard of any of them. It isn’t my business. It may be yours if you fancy one of the Mesdames Hall but that’s your business and I wish you all happiness.”

I felt waves of anger, irritation, despair—I didn’t try to analyse what seemed to be his changing feelings, his changing expressions—then, surprisingly, he came out with a pessimistic, “It’s hopeless. I don’t know why I bother. I fancied Vin when she was young but she wasn’t having any ... I married someone else. She went to

Toowoomba. Then I got divorced and Vin came back here. I thought we might ... ”

“I really don’t see your problem.” I couldn’t pretend to any great interest.

“Don’t you?” He fired up. “Don’t you?”

“No. Not my business anyway.” I seemed to be saying that a lot this week.

“She either ignores me or she’s so cold and distant—anyone’d think she hates me—and—oh, what the heck!”

“What was she like when she was young?”

He shrugged. “You never knew what she was thinking or feeling. I s’pose it made me curious ... After her father died I thought there might be a chance for me—but it was Letty and Richard—their mum too, I s’pose—who seemed more easy-going then. Maybe she liked him more—her father I mean—I don’t know, but he was a cold bastard.”

“You knew him well?”

“No. He wasn’t that sort. He had money, he was on the Shire Council, but I don’t reckon he had any friends. None that I ever heard of.”

He walked on in silence.

“Maybe that’s always been Vinnie’s trouble. She wanted a friend, not a husband. Maybe she *needed* a friend ... ” I was thinking this through but he didn’t respond. “Try it,” I said quietly. “Just friendship. Maybe she wasn’t the one who liked her father best—maybe she was the one who hated her father the most.”

He stared at me.

I said goodnight and went on my way.

- xxix -

Fourth Day

A bit of massage wouldn’t go amiss, an hour in a warm bath with soothing crystals, maybe some ultra-sound on my worst spots. Danny Boy had done the damage, poor fella, and the worst part was—he’d just have me licked into shape when it’d be time to go home; sun and sand and beer gardens and a pizza in the microwave ... I groaned my way into clothes, walked over to the ablution block and then to breakfast. I came in the side gate rather than round the front, and walked across the dewy lawn. Banging and clattering were coming from the kitchen. I was simply going to walk on round to the front. I was. Then I thought I’d detour through the arbor of grape-vines; I stood there, looking at my watch, then around as though I thought I might be too early. I listened. It was Isla doing the yelling. She was unhappy, it seemed, about having to take on the beginners’ class. (I didn’t blame her.) “If Aunt Vin wants to commit suicide, if she wants to bash up Aunt Letty—why should *I* have to do their work—it’s not fair—” something along those lines; then Annette returned viciously, “Shut up! It won’t *hurt* you to work a bit harder! The world never owed you a living no matter what Gran says!” Something along those lines, accompanied by the banging of oven doors, the crashing of cutlery ...

“But it’s all hers—so you can say what you like—she’s the only one that’s

ever mattered—”

I walked on. I didn’t want to become obvious. The dining room was deserted. Another early ride! I hadn’t consulted my timetable for the day. I sat down in silence. I couldn’t hear anything with the doors closed. But did Isla *know* for certain her great-aunts had been indulging in a bit of push and slap; did they indulge regularly, had something been said, or had Isla simply read correctly scenes that continued to baffle me, the outsider. I suddenly felt rather sorry for her. If the family relationships involved physical abuse then this was not a good environment for a young girl to grow up in; money, horses, opportunities notwithstanding. It was a pity she couldn’t socialise more with other young people rather than be confined to a tutor/client sort of relationship. Was she free to come and go? Did she have reasonable time off? Did she have access to a vehicle? Did she receive a salary or just board and keep and her own horse? I didn’t know.

Annette came in. “Oh!” She seemed surprised to see me. “The usual, Bob?” She’d reverted to her lifeless voice. I almost preferred her all fired up.

“Thanks, yes. Any news of your aunt?”

“No. We’ll ring after breakfast.”

“Mmmm ... by the way, where do you normally advertise this place?” I indicated my surroundings. “I was just wondering how my daughter came to hear about you.”

“We don’t. So far it’s all been word of mouth. I suppose if bookings dry up we’d advertise in the various riding magazines and newsletters.”

“I see. And are we getting you today as our instructor?”

“Isla.” She bit the name off as though she couldn’t trust herself to say more about her daughter.

“That’s nice. She seems to have made a hit with a couple of the young men ... they’ll envy me.” Rachel says she detests me in my avuncular moments (not quite in those words) and I s’pose I can see why.

Annette started slightly. Was she unaware of normal human interactions? I didn’t like the expression she put on. Did she envy her daughter her looks, her opportunities—or was it her place in the family; did Mrs Hall make a pet out of Isla, promise her this and that? And what was it Mrs Hall had said about loss of the breadwinner ... was Annette now on the outer because she had rejected her grandmother’s most deeply-held views. Thinking on family permutations made me tired ... but the alternative, thinking on horses and riding, was also tiring ... Peter and Cheryl came in and joined me. They were both yawning so it wasn’t only me. “Hullo Bob. Hi Annette.” They ordered and asked the same question about Lavinia and got the same answer.

I was draining my coffee when Annette returned and said I was wanted on the phone. She escorted me to the office then went away. Rachel ringing from ... Scotland? Would she be there yet? Probably not. Instantly I envisaged accidents,

robbery, loss of travellers' cheques, hijackings on British Rail ... "Hullo, Bob Creighton here."

My caller introduced herself as Sister Neville. She asked if I could come into Warwick at any time during the day. I said I could make time. What was the problem. She said she'd prefer not to say over the phone but it was about my note and the health of a certain patient.

"I see. How is she?"

"Stable. I can't say more than that."

I thought I'd best go at lunchtime; to rush out now might encourage unwanted speculation.

- xxx -

Isla put us through our paces, then we rode up the long lane to the east of the stable block. The grass grew drier, the ground stonier, but it was pleasant to be right up in the hills. Scattered here and there were some cattle which apparently came on agistment; scattered through the timber were also some very professional-looking cross-country jumps. We scrambled up the last stage and stopped for a breather. In the distance we could see about ten other riders, Letty escorting them. I envied them the ease with which they negotiated the trail and dispensed with the various jumps. Danny Boy pricked his ears as if he'd like to join them. I wondered how much land the Halls had. We had gone in other directions before today without seeing any other farmhouses; only the distant view of a railway cut through the hills to our north. "You must have quite a bit of land," I said to Isla. "Is all that yours too?"

She shrugged. "I s'pose so."

Maybe you have to be born to it to treat it so casually. 10 x 8 backyards create a different mentality.

The riders were heading our way. We stood and watched, Terri and Anne sharing my nervousness in case our neddies wanted to bolt off and join the cross-country fun. I noticed Derek and Letty riding side-by-side and looking as if they enjoyed each other's company. Either they didn't know anything about Lavinia's state—they must've left the house early—or they didn't care.

- xxxi -

The riders reached us, there were choruses of "Good morning", "Hi!", "Lovely day"; they slowed down and considerably passed us at walking pace. Isla said "Okay" and we went down the far side of the hill while she told us how to negotiate downhill tracks. We reached a small dam and stopped to let the horses have a drink from the string of waterholes up the gully. I still needed the occasional clutch at my saddle when Danny Boy caught me napping but it was all pleasant; even Isla seemed to set aside her hard-boiled pose and ride along, looking the most cheerful I'd yet seen her. But then Terri and Anne were good for the soul with their warm-natured chat and sensible questions.

It took us nearly an hour to wend our careful way back to the stables and,

after putting Danny Boy in his paddock, I asked Isla to give my apologies at lunch as I just wanted to whip into Warwick to see an old friend.

“Do I know her?” Isla didn’t seem to be convinced; not that it was her business where the guests went.

“I’ve no idea. Her name’s Elizabeth. She’s getting married soon.” Well, I did know an Elizabeth and I’m sure she would’ve been delighted to see me. The only problem was—she had moved from Warwick some time ago. Isla realised I’d imparted all I had to say and turned away with a kind of flounce. It was the mix of cynicism and pettishness which made the girl so hard to like.

- xxxii -

I made good time along that stretch of the New England Highway. On my way back, I thought I’d call in and get some honey from Tod and Maria (or whoever looked after their business when they were out riding). I parked in the hospital car-park and went in to ask for Sister Neville. Then I sat a long while in the waiting room before being ushered into a small office. She was about forty, a thin angular woman with her hair drawn back and rather almond-shaped eyes. She smiled and thanked me for coming and introduced me to the cop in uniform who was standing rather awkwardly in front of the desk. I suppose he preferred to do the questioning and she’d usurped his role and his procedure.

She said without preamble, “We took your note seriously, Mr Creighton, as we weren’t happy about the diagnosis of a simple stomach upset, and had her—we asked the police to test—”

“Vomit? Urine? All the usual?” I said.

“Yes. Also a vial of unmarked capsules we found in her toilet bag.”

“And?”

“They contained arsenic.”

“Were you suspicious before you received my note?”

“We were.” She hesitated. “There were old scars on both her wrists. We couldn’t discount the possibility of previous suicide attempts. She could’ve taken a variety of substances but arsenic is still easy to get and the symptoms were the same.”

“It’s a painful way to do it though.”

“Yes.” She spoke with a quick, almost bird-like quality, rather attractive. “That is why we felt it necessary to communicate with the police here. Someone may have tampered with her capsules—or given her food which ... ”

“All the capsules are being tested at the moment.” Sergeant Brierley intervened ponderously.

“And Lavinia—what sort of state is she in?”

She looked at the sergeant, then back to me. “We’ve kept her under sedation. Give her body a rest ... and we didn’t want to risk her trying to discharge herself yet.”

“So what next?” I was curious.

“That is the sixty-four dollar question.” She permitted herself a small smile. “What do you suggest? She will probably be fit to be discharged tomorrow or the day after. But is she still at risk?”

“What does her sister say?”

“That’s a good question,” the sergeant said. “Her sister insists it is a bilious attack. She said that yesterday. She says the same today.”

“To attempt suicide would still be seen as a terrible sin in some families ... ” Sister Neville turned to me.

“True. But so far as the Halls go I haven’t seen any sign of a religious dimension to their lives—though I only met them a few days ago. There are certainly tensions ... how deep they go I don’t think I’m qualified to say.”

“Have you got to know Lavinia Hall at all in your time there?” The sergeant fingered his notebook, longing for something definite.

“She’s a hard person to get to know. Very cool. Very detached. Doesn’t show her feelings. Efficient, capable. I’ve heard her described as repressed.” Sister Neville nodded as though I’d confirmed her thoughts, her fears maybe.

“There is one curious thing—and it’s only a rumour—it’s about her father—that he may have died in suspicious circumstances—I understand there was some gossip at the time—childhood guilts and confusions over death can sometimes be very potent ... so far as I know, the rumour never led to an investigation ... ”

“I’ll check,” Sr Neville said briskly. “I wonder if she would welcome the chance to talk about—things ... we could arrange ... ”

“Well, I’ll drop by tomorrow.” The sergeant sounded relieved.

I sat on. I had a hunch. Nothing more. “You have counselling facilities here?”

“Yes. But do you think she would—” Her gentle scepticism mirrored my own.

“I doubt it. But ... give her the opportunity, keep her in as long as possible ... there’s something there but I don’t know her well enough ... it’s a problem.”

“What are you suggesting, Mr Creighton?”

“Sexual abuse as a child maybe.”

“She would seem to fit a pattern,” she said carefully.

“Her sister said to me that she sets out to break the spirits of her horses. It made me wonder—if someone, most likely her father, set out to break her spirit as a child. It might not be sexual. It could be a pattern of humiliation, destructive criticism—but I suspect sex comes into it. She appears to have lived her life avoiding men, except in formal business situations.”

Sister Neville listened closely. “Yes.” Then more softly, “Poor woman.”

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I drove back to the Hall Equitation Centre, my long bows temporarily stowed; I bought a bucket of honey. But as I followed the long gravel road into the farm I

finally faced up to my uneasy intuitions: this family wasn't only what is referred to as "dysfunctional" which can mean no more than confusions over attitudes, expectations, disciplines. No. There was deep hatred in this family.

I drove up, parked, got out my leaflet to see what I might be doing this afternoon. Letty would be with a Mr Allison who was described as a well-known course-builder. That'd do. I walked over, taking a fold-up chair and sat down, just out of range of the action. They'd finished introductions all round. Everyone had a clipboard and pen. It looked like a class. I sank deeper in my chair and closed my eyes. But Mr Allison's big voice boomed in my ears. Did he get described as "jolly", Australia's answer to Brian Blessed?—"The first thing you have to decide is what sort of jumping you want to provide. Do you want a course which will show the big bold-jumping horse to advantage, do you want the sort of course that requires precise footwork and careful planning—with tight run-ins and sharp turns. Do you want your horses to jump high, to stretch out, to show off how supple they are, which are you trying to test particularly—horse or rider. These questions are important. You may say you want a bit of everything. Fair enough. But you may end up with an itchy-bitsy course that isn't very attractive to watch. I know you're all coming at it from the rider's point-of-view but don't forget—no one's going to put on competitions if they don't think it'll draw the crowds—and I'd think you all want more opportunities, not less."

I liked him. Even I could follow ...

"So you need a check-list. First is safety—for both horse and rider. People may enjoy seeing riders take a dip at the water-jump—they don't want to see them stretched off. Nor do they want to see good horses lamed. So your materials have to sit firm enough not to fall down in a strong breeze but not so firm that the horse'll fall before they do."

He went on briskly through his list—Spectator Appeal, Testing Riding Skills, Providing Jumps that Encourage Horses, rather than put them off, Using Available Materials to Best Advantage ... eventually they moved off round the big arena and I must've dozed off in the warm spring sun because I woke with a start when someone shook my arm.

It was Annette. "Mr Creighton."

I blinked. "Is something the matter?"

"Yes. Well, not exactly. It's my grandmother."

"She's not well?"

"Yes ... I mean, she's fine. But she's got herself into a state about Vin. I wondered—would you mind taking her in to see her—I'd pay your petrol and everything. I'd take her myself but I can't really leave Letty and Isla to do everything."

"Did the hospital say your aunt could have visitors?"

"They said no visitors but they'd make an exception for her mother."

“Fair enough.”

“If she takes her walking frame she’ll be able to manage.”

“Okay.” I couldn’t really claim my life depended on knowing how to build a show-jumping course. I brought my car to the front gate and Annette loaded the frame and helped her grandmother in. The old lady was wearing a pink twin-set and tailored grey slacks. Very smart. I helped her with her seat-belt before we drove off.

“Would you like some music?”

“Oh, that’d be lovely, Mr Creighton.”

I put in a tape of John Williams playing a Rodrigo selection, the most soothing thing in the jumble of tapes I carry round with me ... I don’t know about the old lady but I’d never seen anyone less ‘in a state’—but I felt I could use something soothing myself and what better than classical guitar and it always reminds me I am not a complete philistine ... Mrs Hall seemed content to sit back and listen and we hardly spoke on the drive in. I helped her out and walked slowly beside her. Money may not be able to buy happiness but it *can* buy peace and quiet. Lavinia had a room to herself and after I’d seen her mother settled into a chair beside her bed I left her.

It was perfectly natural for a mother to want to be with her daughter—so why did I feel not entirely comfortable with her presence there? I stopped the first nurse to come by and explained that the old lady was very frail and had had a shock with her daughter’s sudden hospitalisation and would she mind just looking in on them every so often? She said that was quite all right. I said I’d come back in half-an-hour to take the old lady home again.

Then I made my way to the nearest pub. A drink’d go down nicely. My watch was nearly on two so they’d likely be finished in the dining room but there might be someone to chat with. Did people who didn’t ride know the Halls, did they have any views about them. I said Johnny Walker’d do fine. I didn’t have hours to savour anything more special. The barman had sleek black hair just receding a little. I said casually I was out at the Halls’ riding school for a week.

“Are you?” He didn’t sound much interested. “Like it?”

“Not too bad. Strange to be at a place completely run by women.”

“Is it?” He began to wipe down the counter.

“You wouldn’t happen to know them?”

“Can’t say so, no.”

“Who’s that, Peter?” A man came up on my right and chose a stool.

“This gent’s out at the Halls’ place. You know, horses. I’ve seen the sign.”

“I’ve heard of them,” he said cautiously. “Any good?”

“Not bad. Nice food. Good horses.”

“My daughter badgered me to let her go to one of their weekends—but I was never much fussed on the family.”

“They do seem a bit ... ” This was only partly to encourage him, ‘do jump in,

mate', I simply couldn't decide how to describe them.

"A bit what?" Unhelpful sod.

"Hard to describe. None of them seem really fussed on the others. Still, families, I s'pose."

"I used to know Richard Hall a bit. No loss really. They say he took his mum to court to try to get the farm from her. Strange really. He's been dead ten years and the old lady's still going strong."

"Yes, she's certainly the matriarch there. I can't imagine her going without a fight."

"Other way, people used to say."

"In what way?"

"They say she got rid of her old man—and there's some to say she got rid of her son too."

"Just gossip?"

"Oh, I'd say so."

"I just brought her into the hospital to see her daughter who's not well. She always makes me think of the sort of granny you see on TV ..."

"Does she? She always makes me think of spiders. Sticky."

"Ye-es. Yes, I see what you mean."

He drained his glass. "Well, enjoy your stay."

"Will do. By the way, who do you think is likely to get the place when she does pop off? It looks a nice bit of land."

"Looking for land, are you?" He seemed to brighten a little.

"Not really. Just curious."

"Her daughters, I'd say. They might go off and leave her—but they always come back. Must be something in it for them, wouldn't you think?"

"Family affection?"

He gave a snort, picked up a briefcase, and raised one hand briefly.

"Another?" the barman came back. I looked at my watch. "Better not—but could I buy a bottle."

"Through that door there."

I went round to Bottle Sales, then stowed my purchase in the pocket behind the driver's seat. Who knew how Mrs Hall felt about closet-drinkers. She'd come out and was sitting, looking not unlike a younger version of the Queen Mum, a bit slimmer and trimmer maybe, in the waiting room.

"All ready?"

"Thank you, Mr Creighton, yes, I'd better get home. Poor Vin's still asleep."

"Right. I'll just tell the nurse."

"Oh, you don't need to do that. I said I'd be back tomorrow."

"Of course." Did she want me out of there? I caught sight of the same nurse in the distance and walked briskly towards her. "Just check Ms Hall, would you.

The old lady may've left something for her that Sister would rather she not have."

She smiled. "Yes. Families do."

I joined Mrs Hall and we went slowly out to the car. We were just about to drive off when the nurse came running out. She looked flustered.

"Wait! There's a—it's Ms Hall!"

"What's happened?"

Her eyes implored. "If you'd come back. I'll get Sister for you."

I looked at Mrs Hall. "Doesn't sound good."

"Poor Vinnie. She didn't know me." She put a frail hand on mine. "But I don't understand—Letty said it was just one of her stomach upsets. She often gets them. You wouldn't think it but she's quite a high-strung person, Mr Creighton."

"Yes, I thought she might be."

A sister, not known to me, met us at the door. She sat us down and called for tea. "I'm sorry, Mrs Hall, terribly sorry. But your daughter has just slipped away in her sleep—" She went on talking soothingly to the old lady as tears wandered down her wrinkled pink cheeks. She helped her hold her cup steady. After a couple of minutes she turned to me. "The family ... "

"Yes. Of course. And you'll need to call the police. Sergeant Brierley knows about the case."

Mrs Hall trembled, "Oh dear, oh dear, this is terrible, what do you need the police for ... what's Vinnie gone and done ... "

The sister held her hands comfortingly. "We were worried, Mrs Hall. It wasn't just a stomach upset. There were indications she had taken a poisonous substance."

The old lady fluttered vaguely then slid down the chair. She had fainted.

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The call from the hospital was taken by Isla. Could Letty come to the hospital. So the guests would soon be out of staff. I finally left Mrs Hall to the ministrations of a nurse and drove back. *Had* the old lady done something to her daughter? Smothered her? Fingers to the carotid? Or was it a tragic coincidence. Lavinia had absorbed too much arsenic ... Lavinia had managed to kill herself, despite our best efforts, or someone had still managed to kill her ...

Isla thought Lavinia had "bashed" Letty. Had Letty been getting her own back, thinking to make her sister go through a painful bout of sickness. At one level I wanted answers. At another I just wanted to drive out and leave them to it. I'd felt pity for them, one by one, but I couldn't pretend I liked any of them.

Victims, victimizers ... the lines blurred.

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Surprisingly, the farm was at perfect peace. Mr Allison was having a cup of tea and a ham sandwich, and still talking between bites. I saw no reason to burst in and say "Vinnie's dead!" I didn't believe any of the guests had been feeding her

arsenic so why spoil what looked to be an interesting and instructional afternoon.

I walked across to my caravan and made myself a cuppa. Three general possibilities, I thought. One. Mrs Hall was an extremely good actor. Two. Mrs Hall didn't care two hoots about Lavinia but had become rattled when she heard the police were involved. Three. Mrs Hall had nothing whatever to do with her daughter's death and her reactions were perfectly natural reactions of shock and dismay.

And if Mrs Hall had already been put through, at the time of her husband's death, what Agatha Christie once called 'Ordeal by Innocence' then there was a good chance Lavinia's death would put her through the same awful gossip mill. It was very pat. She comes in. Lavinia dies. Too pat? Though it might, normally, have been an hour or more before Lavinia was checked—in which case a connection with her mother might not have been made. Or if it had—"the poor old lady, so frail, doesn't see too well, poor dear, she might've sat there, not knowing her daughter was already dead ... kissed her goodbye ... "

Well, it'd be up to the post-mortem to throw light into *that* corner.

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I flopped down and listened to music for a while before sprucing myself up a bit, indulging in a small glass, then walking across to the house. People were still out with horses and I could see someone in the distance carrying an armful of hay. What happened round the farm normally? I'd hardly seen it as more than meals and horses.

No sound from the kitchen. I'd assumed someone would be here—but the whole family might have deserted us. No doubt we could rustle up something. I was about to take a verandah chair then went over to where several newspapers sat on a cupboard and took the top one; surprisingly it was *The Australian* rather than a local one. I sat and browsed. Still no one came. Maybe, being extra sensitive, everyone else had gone into town to eat rather than intrude on the family in their time of loss? I wasn't that sensitive ...

Footsteps. Billy Mahoney came in. "Oh, hullo, Bob." He came and sat down. "Anyone around?"

"It doesn't look like it. I was just starting to wonder about raiding the kitchen."

"I'll join you then. I'm quite peckish—though it was a grand afternoon."

"Have they all gone to town, do you know?"

"Letty went earlier. But I thought Annette and Isla were staying on."

"Maybe they're just feeling a bit overcome by everything."

Together we went down the short hall to the kitchen. It was deserted. We stood and looked around. Billy Mahoney suddenly said, "Shh, what's that?" I listened.

Heavy breathing.

Two rooms opened off the hallway. One proved to be a large pantry. The other was a bedroom. Annette lay on the bed, flat on her back, snoring slightly.

My first fear was—something's happened to her! I tiptoed over, bent down, there was a strong smell of alcohol—and on the bedside table was a glass containing what looked and smelled like red wine. We backed out and closed the door gently.

"Loss of a good cook," Billy said without emphasis, and we returned to the kitchen. Even a pile of sandwiches would hit the spot I thought. We began to open fridges and peer in cupboards. Isla came in quietly and made us jump by demanding—"What the hell do you think you're doing!"

Did we respond like naughty boys stealing cherries?

"Starving," I said.

"Where's mum then?"

"Leave her. She's having a little lie down."

She whirled out of the room, banged on her mother's door, barged in—and a minute later was confronting us again. "How dare you! My mum never drinks!"

"We didn't say she did."

Her eyes blazed. But exactly what had made her so furious was not clear.

"Look, Isla," Billy said in his soft way, "she's had a hard day and so have you—and we're very sorry about being a nuisance when you probably wish we'd all just disappear ... so if you'd just point us towards some food we'll leave you in peace. You'd probably like a bit of a lie down yourself."

"Everyone else'll start coming." She was still angry. Then she seemed to come to a decision: whirling round the kitchen, taking potato salad out of a fridge, putting a foil-covered dish in the oven, slapping some steaks on a cutting-board—

She turned to us. "Go away. I won't be ready for another twenty minutes. Go and tell everyone."

Billy and I went out, stationing ourselves on the verandah. There was a disorganised embarrassed feel about the place as people wondered what, if anything, they should be doing or saying.

"Poor lass," Bill said at last. "She obviously hates the trade-off, doesn't she, having to work here in return for the time, money and chance to ride every day."

"She could leave home, I imagine, if she felt the trade-off was too one-sided."

"She could. But she won't ... not yet."

I agreed. After a while, he added, "Sad, isn't it. So little love—and so much going for them. Though I s'pose she loves her great-gran."

"Do you think so?"

"I assumed so. I s'pose that isn't the same thing."

"No. But you could be right. They depend least on each other."

Tom and David came through, followed by Terri and Anne. I suggested they might like to offer Isla a hand; she might accept young company.

"What did happen today, Bob?" Billy sat back and stared out over the

darkening yards and paddocks.

"I'm not sure ... maybe the key question is—did Vinnie take arsenic by accident, by design, or did someone, accidentally or on purpose, give it to her."

"By accident, I'd be thinking."

"Possible."

"I've never heard of a suicide by arsenic."

"No. Nasty way to go. Though I remember my mother knowing a little girl who drank a bottle of iodine. She may not have known just how painful it was going to be."

"Mmm. Poor kid. But Vinnie was a bright woman."

"For sure ... but not perhaps a happy woman."

"No. She didn't strike me as happy, but neither did she strike me as suicidal."

Peter and Cheryl came by. "What's up?"

"Dinner'll be a bit late. Take a pew."

They pulled up two chairs. "Mind if I smoke?" Peter offered a pack around, got no takers.

"I remember seeing Vinnie in Brisbane years ago," Cheryl said with a sentimental sigh. "She was so *cool*. I wished I could ride like that—instead of being a bundle of nerves all the time. That's partly why I came, hoping she might be able to give some good tips."

"And could she?" I asked.

"No. Not really ... I don't think it's being critical—but I think it's just that she had no nerves because she didn't really care, you know. About whether she won or lost, whether she rode well or made a laughing stock of herself by falling off at the first jump. I think I'd rather care—even if it means going through those kinds of agonies when I get absolutely paralysed about remembering which jump comes next—"

"Yes." We all agreed with her summation. People who go out intending to do their best do usually find themselves struggling with their nerves. "And yet—I wonder why Vinnie didn't care." I spoke into the silence which had followed Cheryl's words.

"I suppose," Peter began, almost embarrassed to be touching on feelings, "in a way, it's not just you and your horse ... you're riding for every one you care about too. I don't think Vinnie felt all that much about her family, they all just worked together because it was convenient. I don't think there was anyone special in her life."

"Did she care about her horses?"

They couldn't decide on an answer. A kind of uncomfortable yes-and-no situation. Even I could see her horses were well-groomed, well-fed, immaculately turned out (as was Lavinia herself; strange that she should've chosen arsenic, it's so damned messy—you vomit, you lose control of your bowels, your skin flakes

nastily, your legs cramp up ...) but most people pet their horses a bit, give them funny little nicknames, anthropomorphasise them to some extent; Lavinia didn't—or if she did, she did it very privately.

“Will there be a funeral, do you think?” Cheryl said suddenly.

“After the post mortem.”

“We'll be gone by then, I suppose.”

“Seems likely.”

“Well, what say we all chip in for a wreath.” We agreed to do that and Cheryl said she'd make the arrangements with a florist. What would we like? I thought of the cool Lavinia, the glimpses I'd had—snow-drops, lily-of-the-valley ... then I thought of her trying to squeeze the good red blood out of her cut wrists—when and where and why had she failed (had she merely caught her hands in a window or something); had she wanted to fail; was it her cry, and then she found she couldn't bring herself to talk to anyone, or there was no one who'd listen, not *listen* ... and I said. “Something deep and rich, crimson, gold, purple ... something for the personality she might've been if things had worked out differently for her.”

They liked the idea. Cheryl winked back tears, then gave in and took out her handkerchief. “Poor Vinnie,” she said between sniffles.

Isla came out into the dusk and said curtly, “Dinner's ready.”

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We'd hardly gravitated to a table and begun on our meal when someone said, “What's going on?”

We all looked up. Walking across behind the back fence were Letty and two uniformed cops. A buzz went round the dining room. I assumed they were going in search of Lavinia's arsenic; a garden shed maybe, or a shelf at the back of a garage or a cupboard on the verandah, the careless places where old tins get left.

I went on with my dinner, leaving speculation to the others. Derek Hurburgh came into the room, looking a bit weary maybe, but not upset, unless he was good at hiding his feelings.

Cheryl leaned forward. “I always wondered if there was something between him and Vinnie, but maybe it was between him and Letty and it was a bit awkward for them because he used to go out with Vinnie when he was young.”

People took this up and considered it without coming to any conclusion or even questioning her “go out with”. Peter said, “Well, Letty has more go in her, wouldn't you say?”

“That isn't necessarily desirable once you get into your fifties, you know.”

“I suppose not.” He now looked at me as though I'd just stepped out of ‘As Time Goes By’ and any minute would be settling down for my after-dinner snooze. “But there's go and there's go ... one's mental and one's physical—”

“And one's an attitude about the world,” Billy put down his fork. “Vin didn't lack energy.”

“No. She had vim,” Cheryl gave a sudden giggle.

“Not vim precisely.” Her husband seemed to weigh up his impressions. “More—let your head save your heels, that sort of thing, yes, she certainly didn’t waste energy ...”

The police and Letty had disappeared from sight. Isla came by. “Coffee?” she said as though daring us to want it.

“If it wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

She slopped a coffee-pot down on our table. “Help yourselves.” She went on to Tom and David. “Coffee?”

“Hey, don’t sound so sour about it,” David said cheerfully. “We won’t have it if it’s going to bug you. Do we get a quiz tonight?”

“No,” she snapped it out. “You can watch a video.”

“Which one?”

“Hell, I don’t care what you watch!” Her voice rose. “Choose your own damn video!”

Terri got up and came over. “You go and sit down, we’ll serve the coffee. It’s been a long day. Okay?” I thought Isla was going to argue but she changed her mind and rushed out of the room, shutting the door with more noise than was polite. I beckoned Anne over. “Could you go and check on Isla and her mum in a little while. Thanks.” I turned back to the table. “Handy having two nurses on the premises.”

“It’s a pity they weren’t asked to look at Vinnie,” Cheryl said. “Perhaps if she’d got to hospital sooner—”

“Yes, although it wouldn’t be the first time arsenic’s been mistaken for a gastric upset.”

Billy nodded. “And everyone kept saying it was just that Vinnie was prone to that kind of trouble. They probably would’ve been influenced by that.”

This raised the question: was there a family GP and did he or she know Vinnie’s medical history. Of course most people don’t go to the doctor for a bilious attack but if they came over-frequently ... her mother might’ve been in the habit of saying “Vinnie’s always had these little upsets—with Letty’s it’s always been her chest”; something along those lines, conditioning people. I could check ...

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We drifted through into the next room and David constituted himself MC for the evening, reading out a list of video titles from the cupboard, then asking if we’d like a quiz. Several people groaned, myself included; others said “Oh yes!” Next minute a notebook and pencil were thrust into my hands.

“Okay, here’s the first test.” Tom, whatever his dislike of quizzes, seemed to like being in control. “Name three famous horses in history, then name three famous racehorses, then name three famous show-jumpers, then name three famous horses in literature.”

There were more groans. But I started reasonably well with Bucephalus. What was Napoleon's grey horse called ... I couldn't remember ... I ranged over other historical figures ... wasn't Dick Turpin's horse called Black Bess? I couldn't decide so I finished up with Simpson's Donkey which they decided wasn't good enough. Racehorses ...

Phar Lap

Tulloch

What won last year's Melbourne Cup? Awful that I couldn't remember. I dredged my memory for 'Horses I Have Known', came up with Light Fingers; I'd got her in a station sweep one year; that'd brought on some leg-pulling ...

Three famous show-jumpers? I drew a blank there.

Literature. Black Beauty. The Black Stallion. The Silver Brumby. I put my pencil down.

Billy ran out the winner.

"Okay, now here's the next quiz. You've got to look carefully round this room. Then you've got to go into the next room," David and Tom had obviously given the evening some thought; had they known their hostesses were going to fail them, "and write down twenty objects. And you can't put cupboard, TV, chair or table."

We all got up obediently and roamed around, imprinting things on our memories. Some books, some videos, some figurines of horses on the shelves, a vase of flowers, and several pictures on the walls. I hadn't really looked at these before. Could I put 'six pictures' or would that count as one; if I specified the subject of each would that count as six? I went from one to the next and memorised them. The last one was a studio portrait of a young woman, one of those artistically lit ones, done in near profile, which can make anyone look beautiful. I wasn't sure which of them it was but thought it was Letty. Still, 'studio portrait' should do.

I followed the others into the dining room and began briskly. 1. Curtains. 2. Rug. 3. Vase. 4. Shelf of videos. 5. Pony figurine. 6. copy of 'The Horse Whisperer'. 7. copy of 'Equitation'. 8. copy of 'The Arab Horse'. 9. copy of 'Basic Horse Management'. 10. horse and rider figurine. 11. calendar. 12. studio portrait. 13. yesterday's newspaper. 14. small clock. 15. photo of woman showjumping. 16. photo of girl with painting. 17. painting of house. 18. china bowl containing jelly beans. 19 ...

Someone touched me on the shoulder. It was Letty Hall. She said quietly, "Bob, could you come into the kitchen for a moment. The police would like to see you—but they didn't want to intrude and upset everyone."

Remarkable tact? We weren't upset that easily surely? I followed. The door to Annette's room was open and there was no sign of her but it struck me again what a poor room it was, just a couple of sticks of mismatched furniture, no pictures, no knick-knacks. It looked as if it'd been a pantry. Was this a reminder of her status or

had she simply moved for this week to free up a room for the visiting riders?

The two men were seated with cups of coffee. Isla and Annette sat across from them, Annette looking much the worse for wear, her brown hair mussed up, her eyes bleary. I wondered if Annette really didn't drink—and something unbearable, some thought, some knowledge, some guilt, had driven her to the bottle—or if she had a problem which Letty or Isla or both interpreted as weakness or for some reason pretended didn't exist.

I sat down. "We have two problems here," the older man said mildly in my direction, "and we are debating whether to enlist people's help more widely."

"People—as in guests?"

"Yes."

"So far we have been unable to find what Ms Hall took. The minute amounts in her capsules are unlikely to have been sufficient, we are not yet sure whether she took another dose today, that'll have to wait for the p.m. The other problem is her state of mind which may have led her to take her own life. Her family," he indicated the three women sitting at the table, "cannot think of anything unusual, except possibly the extra stress and pressure of putting on the first full residential week."

"We've only had weekends before now," Letty said to no one in particular.

"We wondered if she'd said anything to you."

"No. She was always polite and business-like, never wasted words. She struck me as a very capable woman." I looked at Isla as I spoke. She dropped her eyes. The men looked disappointed. I hesitated then went on: "There has been some speculation among the guests as to what happened to Letty in the harness-room when she fell and knocked herself out." Again I looked at Isla. She suddenly clasped her mug tightly.

Annette said in a slurred voice. "They're always fighting. Letty and Vin. They hate each other." She stood up unsteadily. "Oh God. I feel terrible." She stumbled over to the nearest sink and retched into it.

Letty said briefly, "She's talking nonsense. She's got a problem and we can't convince her to get help. It's not an easy situation for us to live with, you know."

Both men stayed silent.

"She blames us, my sister, myself, my mother."

They still said nothing.

"It's not true!" Isla suddenly broke. "None of that's true! Mum didn't drink! I hate her but I won't have you telling lies!" She picked up her cup and hurled the contents straight at Letty. Both Letty and the sergeant got splashed. Isla sprang up and rushed out of the room and we heard a door slam. "Shall I go after her?" the younger man said. Sergeant Kelly ruminated. "Okay, but take it easy. I want her back here. *Someone* must know where that damn arsenic is."

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Kelly got up and went to stand four-square in the doorway before turning

round. He had a highly-charged situation on his hands. If he handled it right he might learn something; if he got it wrong ... he'd face claims of harassment, like as not ...

"Do you want to have a lawyer present," I said to Letty.

"I have absolutely nothing to hide," Letty said with dignity. "None of us has. If my sister took something accidentally I don't know where or how."

"Then why did you ask me to recommend a private investigator?"

"I did not!" She was quite indignant.

I shrugged. My word against hers.

Isla came dragging in again and sat down; there were tears on her cheeks. She suddenly looked very young. The two men communed; what next, their gaze said.

"Did anyone here ever read an Agatha Christie story called 'Evil Under the Sun'?" I looked around. Blank looks. Annette had rinsed her mouth out, rinsed the sink, sat herself down again and was taking sips of black coffee with the exaggerated care of the still-drunk.

"No. Why?" Kelly sat calmly and waited.

"In it was a young girl who hated her step-mother. She hates her so much she'd like to see her dead. But when the woman *is* found dead she believes she's done it, that the wish has somehow transformed itself into the deed. She is consumed by a sense of guilt."

Isla raised her head, stared at me. "I didn't wish anyone dead."

"Yes you did. But I wasn't thinking of you. Though hate is a terrible thing to live with."

Annette put her cup down with a thud. "I hated my step-mother."

"You haven't got a step-mother," Letty said witheringly.

Curious. But instead of arguing, Annette pushed her cup away, cradled her head on her hands. It would take more than black coffee to bring her back.

"I wasn't thinking of you," I said to Isla. "I was thinking of Lavinia as a girl."

- xl -

"I'll make some more coffee." Letty got up and moved round briskly. "Would you care for a sandwich," she said to the two men and went to the fridge for butter and some sliced ham. She put knives and plates and fresh bread in front of them. It was an interruption but they didn't say no, slapping ham on bread, adding pickles, eating hungrily. That there'd just been a death by poison didn't seem to worry them.

"By the way," I asked Letty as she moved to and fro, "would your sister have left a will?"

"Of course. But the property and house are in Mum's name so it'd only come to her, jointly with me, if Mum'd died first."

"So there'd only be—what, her horses, some personal belongings?"

"That's about it."

"What would her horses be worth?"

“Oh, a few thousand maybe. Depends. And she had a little invested, I believe.”

“Did she have a solicitor?”

“We do all the farm work through Burt & Gregory. I assume she would’ve used them.”

“I don’t understand,” Isla broke in, “why you were talking about Aunt Vin as a girl.”

“Yes, we’ve got away from that.” Kelly put down his sandwich.

“What was her relationship with her father like?” I said to Letty.

“Oh, she was daddy’s girl,” Letty sounded bitter suddenly. “He never wanted to ride with me, he and Richard, it always had to be them taking her out on her pony. She was very wilful as a child. Mum would tell her to do something and she wouldn’t—and I’d end up doing it.”

“Where did they like to ride?”

“Oh—up in the hills,” she spread her hands vaguely.

“And when your father died—do you remember how he died. How old would the two of you have been?”

“He’d had a fall, I don’t remember the details, and he got lockjaw. Mum said it was his own fault for not getting vaccinated. He had a cut in his leg and he used to insist that Vinnie come into the room and change the bandages for him. Then he went to hospital but too late—and that was that.” She didn’t sound sorry. “I was about fifteen.”

So Lavinia would’ve been a little more.

“If he got lockjaw sometime after his accident—but while Lavinia was doing his dressings ... ”

“Interesting.” Sergeant Kelly saw no reason to commit himself further. Annette had begun to snore. “Well, we’ll come back tomorrow. Or we’ll be in touch.” He picked up his cap. I went out with them and left the two women to deal with Annette.

- xli -

They got into their vehicle. I said, “I understand Lavinia spent most of her working life in Toowoomba. It might be interesting to know if she had any friends or relations there.”

“Yeah. Good idea.”

I wasn’t used to people finding my ideas good; not if they wore uniforms and carried identification. Mostly I’m an unmitigated nuisance. He must’ve seen my look of surprise. “You’re suggesting she may have been sexually abused by her father, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I hadn’t considered Richard but he may also be a possibility.”

“The full p.m. is scheduled for tomorrow but a Sister Neville tells me Lavinia Hall probably had a baby.”

Now it was my turn to say, “Interesting”; then “I wonder if she had the baby in Toowoomba? It seems more likely than Warwick if they wanted to hush it up.”

“Will check.”

But none of this was guaranteed to answer the question—did Lavinia shovel down the stuff herself—and if not, then who and how—

- xlii -

Fifth Day

To say I slept the sleep of the dead is inappropriate but between riding and rushing round and trying to get a number of disparate ideas to make sense, I was a bit weary. Most of the others were here solely for the riding and they didn’t intend to let Lavinia’s death get in the way of what they’d paid for; more so as the family did not appear unduly upset.

Isla served breakfast without looking at me. Billy Mahoney was just finishing up. I saw my notepad still sitting on the table where I’d left it last night, and picked it up intending to return it to the pile. I looked down my list and wondered what if anything I’d been going to put as my last two “subjects”.

Billy drained his coffee.

I said, “Oh, by the way, who won the quiz last night?”

“A tie between Terri and myself. What did the coppers want—or is that confidential?”

“Just trying to determine Vinnie’s state of mind. I wasn’t much help, you might’ve been more help ... ” He looked pensive. “Mmmm, but I can’t think of any way she’d been different in the last few days.”

“You said you respected her. Does that mean you knew her well—or was it just a general impression.”

“I felt ... how can I put it, that she always wanted to do everything absolutely correctly, no cutting corners, no being easy on herself.”

“I see.” Most people would choose liking over respect—if they were offered the choice—but I felt Lavinia probably saw the choice and made it. “Yet Letty told me her sister tried to break her horses’ spirits. Would you agree?”

“No.” He smiled his leprechaun smile. “I think Letty was jealous. But there *was* something about Vin and her horses, I’ve never been quite able to pin it down ... I think it might be that she was totally unsentimental ... we expect that bit of sentiment in the relationship between horse and rider ... ”

“Why do you think Letty was jealous? She seems a very capable rider?”

“Put Vin’s horses and Letty’s horses together and you’ll see the difference.”

“I see.” The difference might not be obvious to me. “Did they never share horses though, being sisters?”

“Oh no! Never. Not horses, not fodder, not tack. Strange really. But I suppose it saved any quarrels—you know the way siblings like to find fault, saying “You left my saddle dirty” or “You took too much of my oats”, that sort o’ thing.”

“Mmmm.”

Was that the reason behind the ‘fight’, if fight was the word I wanted, that Letty had touched or taken something of Vinnie’s? After breakfast I’d have a closer look round the harness room; not that I expected them to label their belongings, but if things went in two-by-two ranks ...

- xliii -

“Oh, there you are, Bob,” Letty greeted me with no apparent awkwardness after last night. “We’re going to have a grooming session. Want to join in?”

I joined Terri and Anne. It was hard to believe there’d been a death in the family. Letty worked briskly, laying out all the grooming gear, explaining what the brushes and things were used for and demonstrating on her big bay horse the most efficient movements. Every part of him got some attention.

She showed us hoof picks and we all had a go at lifting his hoofs and scraping the accumulated muck out. Then we moved on to the trimmings—how to plait a tail, how to run a pair of hand-clippers over his fetlocks, even how to make an amazing checkerboard pattern on his rump (I couldn’t see the point of it; did bored riders play draughts while waiting their turn to go into the ring?) Then she showed us how to put all sorts of fancy equipment on him including what she called a running martingale, as well as leg guards, crupper, nose-band, etc; then she asked briskly, “Any questions?” Terri and Anne had several but I was content to watch and accept that this was what advanced riders did.

It was bit of a relief to go and get Danny Boy and put his relatively simply gear on. As I led him past the yard which contained Vinnie’s big black horse I decided Billy Mahoney was right. The horse looked magnificent; his coat gleaming; his eyes bright; his whole stance saying ‘mettle’; if she’d broken his spirit I couldn’t see what the phrase would mean.

I turned back to Letty. “At least Vinnie’s horses will be in good hands with you.” She nodded, apparently without interest in the prospect; and of course Vinnie’s will might determine otherwise.

This morning Letty suggested we change horses as it was easy to become complacent and over-familiar with one horse. This was quite a challenge. Terri’s horse was a bit taller and quite a bit more narrow; Anne’s horse carried his head very low which I found tiring. It was a relief to get back on Danny Boy. “He really is a cutie,” Anne said later.

Letty left us to unsaddle and went away briskly. I wondered if Annette was on deck today. Then I glanced down towards the house and saw a police car, Mrs Hall, and two men escorting her up the path. After hanging up my saddle and bridle I made a quick but fairly thorough circuit of the room. There were dozens of tins on a high shelf containing veterinary preparations as well as such vital things as rubber-bands, buckles and eyelets; but, interestingly, nearly every tin had a sticker on it with either ‘L’ or ‘V’. At the furthest end of the shelf away from the door I came

upon a bottle with 'V' on it. It had no label but looked remarkably like a whisky bottle. I used my handkerchief to open it, eased the lid off; it looked and smelled remarkably like whisky. Next to it was an old biscuit tin containing sugar lumps, also with a 'V' sticker on it.

Had I found Lavinia's secret for conditioning her horses? Whisky and sugar? It didn't seem very dramatic. And if Letty believed it was, there was nothing to stop her giving *her* horses whisky and sugar. Or had she tried it—and nothing remarkable had happened?

I hesitated. Terri and Anne could come in, at any minute. I didn't really want to discuss the matter with them. I looked round for something to wrap both items in. An empty paper-bag was folded on the shelf below. I wrapped them loosely and carried them down to my caravan, before walking across to the house. Sergeant Kelly was just settling the old lady into a chair on the verandah. She looked as sweet and grandmotherly as always. I came and said "hullo" and hoped she'd had a good night's rest. She didn't appear to want my solicitude.

"When are you leaving, Bob?" Sergeant Kelly was in something of a bind. He couldn't keep people here but he still didn't know if he'd need to question them eventually. Nor did he know whether I was a useful person to keep around. Nor, probably, had he told his superiors that he was relying rather heavily on someone who'd left the force under a cloud. If he knew. But if he was as sensible and careful as he looked he might well have checked. Anyone can go round flashing fake cards—if they've got sufficient gall—

Several other people came and fussed over Mrs Hall which she obviously liked. The two men took the opportunity to drift out on to the lawn, with me. "You were right," Kelly said. "Lavinia had an aunt in Toowoomba. No children. Died about six years ago. We're checking both the Mother's and St Vincent's for a baby. The old lady," he tipped his head in the direction of Mrs Hall, "said her daughter never had a child. We must be mixing her up with someone else. Do you think she's a bit—senile?"

"If she is it's well hidden. But I've got something I think might be worth getting tested." I explained what I'd taken.

"Who should we give a receipt to?"

"Well, they clearly belonged to Lavinia—but you could give it to the old lady unless you know who Lavinia intended her personal belongings to go to."

"It's quite a strange will as a matter of fact. She doesn't leave anything to any of the family except a couple of small items to Annette."

"To friends?"

"No. If her mother died before her then a share of the farm would come to her and she wanted that to go to a Mr and Mrs—what was it, Constable, Stoivich, Sterevich, something like that—"

"And who are they? Not that they will benefit anyway."

“We believe they are, if they’re still alive, the parents of Annette’s mother, Anna.”

“And the horses?”

“There’s a name and address. We’re checking it. The old lady was sure Letty would get the horses. I don’t think she’s too happy about them going out of the family. But the will won’t be officially read till Monday—and then there’ll be probate and whatnot.”

They put my booty in the car and wrote Mrs Hall a receipt, telling her everything would be returned when they’d checked them. The old lady looked perplexed more than anything. I said I’d be interested to know if there were prints other than Lavinia’s then I went in to lunch. The two men stayed a while longer looking through Lavinia’s bedroom. Still convinced there should be a note; Lavinia was too neat, almost obsessively so, and too business-like just to spring without warning, without justification, into the unknown.

- xliv -

“Bob.” Terri and Anne came and plonked themselves down. “Gosh, I could eat a horse.” Then they both laughed and picked up the menu. Isla came by and plucked it away. “Only meatloaf and vegetables, then fruit salad.”

“Sounds fine.”

“So,” I said to the young women, “when do you confess?” They both looked startled. “We hardly knew Lavinia,” Terri protested.

“I wasn’t thinking about Lavinia Hall, I was thinking about you and a little conspiracy which turned you both into nurses ... when do I get to hear the fine details?”

Terri blushed but Anne laughed. “We wondered how long we’d be able to fool you. Rachel told us not to talk too much. You were too good a listener. So how did you guess?”

“Strangely enough it was young Tom. You didn’t recognise a whitlow.”

“Is that what that revolting thing was,” Anne seemed to find it very funny. “He suddenly shoved it in my face and said what should he do about it. No wonder he hasn’t got a girlfriend!” Then they both broke down and giggled helplessly.

“So what would you have done *if* Letty had asked you what to do about her sister’s bilious attack?”

“Heaven knows!” Terri became sober.

“Told her to rest and take some Glucogen,” said Anne. “Just as well she didn’t. We’d probably now be labouring under the terrible guilt of believing we’d killed her.”

“So tell me about you and Rachel.”

“Well, I heard about this place,” Terri said carefully. “We’d been a couple of times to a riding school up near Brisbane and it was a pretty awful place. The horses looked so *miserable*, I don’t mean skinny or covered in sores or anything you could

call the RSPCA about—but just so hang-dog and dreary. I felt guilty each time I went. We were talking about it one day—”

“Where at?”

“Oh ... in the café just down from James & Montefiore,” (this was the solicitor’s where Rachel had worked after leaving the travel agent’s), “We usually ate together, you know.”

“You worked—where?”

“I’m at the estate agent’s just round the corner and Anne’s in the boutique a couple of shops along.”

“Uh-huh. So Rachel was all ears?”

“Yes, so we gave her the details and she said, let me see, I think it went like this—Bob, she always calls you Bob, keeps getting mixed up in these weird cases involving horses—we already knew about you being a detective ... and he doesn’t know one end of a horse from the other ... so maybe if he actually went and learned how to ride it might break the sort of hoodoo, the jinx on him ... and then, never again, will anyone ask him to find a horse or solve a horsy mystery.”

“Kind of her.”

“So she booked you in for when we planned to come—she didn’t know if you actually would come—and she asked us to just keep a discreet eye on you, because if everyone else turned out to be high-powered riders you might feel a bit out of things.”

“And then you were horrified to find there were only the three of us in the beginners’ class.”

Terri smiled. “Yes, we hoped you wouldn’t twig too soon or you might feel sort of set up, you know.”

“Did she say why she wanted to rescue me from cases involving horses?”

“Well, no, not exactly. But one time she told us that when you were being accused of something in the police force, she said she behaved like a “real little shit”; she said she always felt bad about that.”

“Mmmm.”

Rachel and I aren’t like the folk in American sitcoms where everyone tells everyone else they love them in every episode; but we’d come through that awful rocky gorge and were able to feel comfortable and affectionate, even if we never said so.

“And now I’m involved—well, not exactly involved—with a “case” quote unquote—though there don’t seem to be horses in it.”

“Ah, you mustn’t speak too soon. The jinx won’t be broken for sure till you graduate, Bob.”

“Graduate?”

I had a horrible image of myself being handed a kitschy little certificate probably decorated with crossed whips and saying in beautiful calligraphy that I had

survived a week at the Hall Equitation Centre. And would I have to dress up to receive it?

They laughed.

And horses. Were the horses involved in any way? Did it matter that Vinnie's horses looked better than Letty's. Did it matter that Vinnie had left her horses to someone outside the family—

- xlv -

I spent the afternoon sitting out near the main arena and just watching; there was a 'lecture' later, on exercising on horseback. I thought I'd go. It might be interesting to see people doing acrobatics on their horses ... It was quiet. I closed my eyes. I dozed. It was Mrs Hall who came out and parked her chair beside me. I sat up.

"How are you feeling now, Mrs Hall."

"Not very well. It has been a terrible shock to me. I do not believe my daughter took her own life—" She shook her head slowly and perplexedly. Earlier on, I would've said cynically, 'no, not if you hadn't given her permission'; now she just seemed a very old lady, a bit muddled and lost.

"No. The police don't seem to believe so either. They are convinced that all suicides leave notes."

She seemed to relax a little. "I always knew it was an accident. Poor Vinnie."

"Except that they can't find the arsenic she apparently accidentally ingested. You can't think where she might've got it?"

She looked away. "I don't know, Mr Creighton. I'm beginning to feel my age. Maybe I should know—but I can't think of anywhere ... she might've got something mixed up ... "

"Yes, that's the problem with poisoning. Often it's so sort of indeterminate. By the way, do you know if she was very fond of jelly beans?"

She stared at me. "Not particularly, I don't think. She liked the black licorice ones best. But no ... why?"

"Just a thought."

"Well, I hope you've enjoyed your time here." Then she went on, determinedly, to talk of horses and the farm and I simply sat and listened.

"So what will you do, to keep things going without Vinnie. Have you thought of taking on staff? It's a lot of work for the four of you."

"Oh yes. We have. But so long as we can manage ourselves there seems no reason to pay anyone."

I assumed she meant to pay strangers but, equally, she could mean no one in the family got paid. Money always strikes me as a vital aspect of any investigation. But I felt I could leave that question to the 'Kelly gang'.

- xlvi -

Could I—should I—seek out Annette without embarrassing her or drawing

attention to her lapse; which probably had gone unnoticed by most of the guests.

The exercises on horseback, for someone who had been expecting circus tricks, was a bit of a let-down though the riders looked to be enjoying themselves, except for an occasional groan oh-I-can't-possibly-touch-my-ankle etc ...

I was the first into the dining room, taking a book with me and settling myself; Annette must've heard the scraping of the chair, my heavy tread, and came in. I got up and went over. "I hope you're feeling all right now. Yesterday was an awful day for you and the family ... " I can sound sympathetic if I try.

"Do people know about me," she whispered, "are they talking?"

"No. Not a word. Don't worry about it any more."

"But I said something stupid to those men that came, didn't I?"

"You suggested there was some bad feeling between Letty and her sister. I don't know how seriously they took it. But most families have tensions. I don't think you need to be ashamed of them."

She leant, looking weary, against the doorpost. "I'm not ashamed exactly. It's the truth. But Letty will find a way to pay me back for saying that. You know I'm right, don't you?"

"You could leave, couldn't you—or do you have money invested in the farm?"

"No. I've never had any money. And if I leave I won't get my father's share when my grandmother dies."

"Would it matter? There's still time to build a happy life for yourself somewhere else, teaching riding maybe ... "

"Sometimes I think about it. But I'm not a strong person. Isla talks of leaving. Maybe it'd be good for her. I know she looks down on me for being weak ... just being the dogsbody here ... even her father just dropped me when he found out ... "

I heard voices in the distance. "Well, I'd better not keep you now. But take care, anyway."

"Yes ... but it frightens me not knowing how Vinnie died, you know ... maybe the enemy is 'within the gates' ... "

"Then take extra care—and tell the police if there's anything you think they should know."

She sort of ducked her head and scuttled off. Had she always been a mouse or had the family made her like that. Was it realistic, let alone kind, to urge her to go out and start a new life?

Dinner was a curious meal; the last night for most guests, but I think they were realising they'd go away and never know exactly what'd happened here ... there'd be rumours, they'd be treated as 'the horse's mouth' and they'd have to say: "I don't know exactly but—"

We had a video about pony-trekking then someone suggested charades, using words of an equine nature—the example we were offered was martingale—mart, as

in auction mart—in—gale, as in strong wind; clearly the person making the suggestion didn't have a high opinion of our collective intelligence. I was just gathering my voice to say "Count me out" when I felt both my arms clasped and Terri and Anne said, "Come with us—we've got a great word to do!"

We sat through 'in-and-out', 'eye-socket' and 'D-ring-bit'—none of which would ever have occurred to me—then it was our turn. Their brilliant idea was Riding School (rye-ding-school) and strangely enough, and no thanks to me, we ran out the winners according to the level of applause. Did people respond to the verve and good humour of my two fellow-actors?

- xlvii -

Sixth Day

My last day began on schedule; I was even feeling a mite more supple, though nothing to write home about. But a police car came after breakfast and before I'd headed for Danny Boy. Also expected was a very superior instructor called Ingrid Schmeile who was going to put the advanced classes through their paces.

The cops asked Letty and her mother to join them in the office. "You're not supposed to be part of the investigation, Bob, but we wouldn't have got this far, this fast, if it hadn't been for your ideas." Gratitude is always gratifying. He handed me several photocopied sheets. "Sorry we can't ask you in. But she'd left a letter with a solicitor in Toowoomba, he was her aunt's solicitor, he hadn't known she was dead as the notice won't go in the paper till next Monday—and her solicitor here was under the impression he did all her business. Don't read it in front of anyone and don't let on that I gave you a copy."

"Thanks. I'll watch it." I went over to my caravan and read it quickly before facing my last ride.

It was a searing document:

"I was still at primary school when my father bought himself a stallion—until then we'd just had a couple of quiet horses and ponies. He took me and Richard riding in the hills up to where there was an old miner's hut—the colt was constantly bothering my little pony mare along the way. I didn't know about 'in season' then; I was very ignorant about sex really. Then my father told us to take the saddles off and let the stallion mount the mare. I was very shocked and frightened and disgusted. Naturally I'd never seen horses do it. Then my father undid his trousers and I saw this huge red thing sticking out and he encouraged my brother to fondle it and then he encouraged Richard to try and do it to me—he couldn't that day—but later, it went on all the time. I was very frightened of my father. None of us could say anything or he'd bring out the strap. (Though I don't think Richard minded what our father told him to do.) I went to boarding school for two years in Warwick. It was such a relief to be away from home. Some of the girls thought I was very

strange to *like* boarding school. When I was about fifteen my father started on me too—so every time we went out riding, and I couldn't say no, I didn't want to go, I had to take the both of them as much as they wanted—and they would talk as though I wasn't a real person, just a dummy. My father cut his leg quite badly one time and he told me I had to change the bandages. It was a nasty deep cut. Every time I came in I first put my fingers in some horse manure, then touched him. I'd heard this gives people lockjaw. I hoped it would—then he did get sick and went to hospital and died there. I was glad that I'd killed him—no, I was glad that I'd never have to see him again. And mum and Letty didn't mind that he was gone. My father hadn't made a will so my mother got the farm and she said Richard could farm it. Richard never let up on me and I got pregnant. I ran away to my aunt in Toowoomba. She looked after me. I was afraid the baby would have twelve toes or something. I didn't know how to get an abortion. In those days if you were having your baby adopted they didn't let you see it or even tell you if it was a boy or girl. They came that evening and said they were sorry the baby had died a couple of hours later. My aunt kept me at her place. Then she suggested I go back to study and I did an accounting course. Later I bought myself an old horse to ride. I had been a bit afraid of horses but I gradually got confident and joined a small group which used to ride at weekends. It did a lot to help me forget the past. Richard married a very young girl, Anna. Her parents had come here after the war and bought a little orchard near Stanthorpe. She wasn't very bright but she was a sweet girl. She liked looking after the house and she had some pet bantams. She was afraid of horses but my mother and Richard forced her to ride. Instead of letting her start on a quiet little pony they put her straight on to one of Richard's big horses and she fell and broke her neck. Annette was just over a year old then. They said Anna was expecting again when she died. My mother mainly brought Annette up.” (Was this what Annette meant by ‘stepmother’?)

“I finally started thinking about coming back—demanding my share of the farm and everything after both my aunt and Richard were dead. Maybe I could put everything behind me. I remember Derek Hurburgh from school dances but I wasn't interested, he married someone else, but after his divorce he tried to invite me out. I still dislike anything to do with men. But Letty was interested, after Max left her. She is welcome to him. I put a match to that old shack in the hills. If I can destroy the past maybe I can relax enough to enjoy the future.

Only my mother and Letty left now. It's hard to forgive them for not caring when I most desperately needed their love and support. They were afraid of my father too, I'm sure, but just once if they'd shown a moment of affection instead of shutting me out. Now I just want them to know that as far as I'm concerned the past is the past. How I feel about them in the now depends on them.”

- xlviii -

Isla put us through our last morning like a cavalry sergeant—turn, halt,

dismount, unsaddle, saddle, mount, walk, trot left, halt, walk, trot, canter, turn right, diagonal (read 'all over the place'), walk, halt, rein back (I hadn't got the hang of that either), walk forward, trot—on and on. Good for us, no doubt.

Then she handed us an apple each and we gave our mounts slices as our parting gifts; then we turned them out into a bigger paddock, and Isla rushed off to grasp whatever pearls might fall from Ms Schmeile's lips and we walked down more slowly. When I reached my caravan I found a note pinned to the door. Sergeant Kelly wanting me to get in contact. I rang him on my mobile.

"Bob!" he sounded cheerful.

"What did Letty and her mum say?"

"Oh, all lies. Lavinia was an inveterate liar. She just never accepted that she couldn't be number one in the family. We told them we had the records of the baby. They said it just proved how sly and deceitful she was. Not pleasant."

"And you do have evidence there was a baby?"

Young unmarried mothers were sometimes told their babies had died when they'd really been adopted out. In Lavinia's case she'd agreed to adoption but it could still be used as a way to stymie any later search. I found myself doing a lightning run-down of my fellow guests. Who would be the right age. The unknown equation. The X factor. A way of passing time. Nothing more. Kelly nipped it off by saying: "Born at the Mothers' Hospital. Died the same day. She was attended by old Dr Gietzelt. He's dead. But his son is also a GP and took over his practice. I've left a message for him to ring me when he gets in. There's a good chance he kept his father's records."

"Interesting. Anything on the sugar cubes or the grog?"

"Yes. Very neat. One grain of arsenic per cube. I wonder if she did it or bought them like that. I'll check around the vets. But you can see where they'd been doctored."

"And her whisky?"

"Just grog. Quite drinkable."

I couldn't help a grin but it raised the speculation. Had Lavinia caught Letty taking (or about to take) a swig from *her* bottle—and had she tried to grab it away from her, pushing her sister against the wall and spilling some? It was a plausible scene. And had Letty retaliated in some way. A juvenile way for two women in their fifties to behave. But I could not discount deep-rooted unmentioned, unmentionable, animosities and rivalries. I said in a more serious vein: "One thought which occurred to me. If you could give Annette a copy of Lavinia's letter, or at least acquaint her with the contents, I'd say there's a strong chance her father interfered with her as a child. Men who've acquired a taste for little girls rarely break the habit. If she knew she wasn't alone in this she might get help."

(Was this why her boyfriend had left? Annette had real and deep hang-ups about sex?)

"I'll see. Well, that's about it, Bob. We haven't got evidence to prove suicide—so it looks like it'll go through as accidental ingestion ... "

"Cause of death?"

"Oh. Poison. One of the nurses said there was a faint odd smell in the room when she went in. It's just possible the old lady tried to give her daughter something. But both the mouth and nose were clear ... no sign of an injection ... so we're at a dead end."

The old lady seemed to harbour rather unmotherly feelings towards her daughter but it didn't mean she'd pushed her over the brink. Still, families can be complex and dangerous things ... and the 'family values' refrain ... well, there are times when I wouldn't say no to replacing them with talking computers ...

- xlix -

I was tidying myself up, putting off a sweaty shirt in preparation for lunch when Sergeant Kelly rang back.

"Just thought you'd like to know—there's a rather bizarre twist in the case. We've found the baby."

"Good Lord! So it didn't die after all?"

"Oh, it's dead all right. It's been pickled in a large jar for the last forty years."

"Because it had twelve toes?"

"Not quite. But yes, it is slightly deformed."

"Boy or girl?"

"Boy."

"Well, maybe it can be laid to rest with its mother."

"Good idea. It's been in a cupboard just labelled "Baby Hall" with the date." He hung up. Baby Hall. I felt it should have a name. I tried on several, wondering if Lavinia had been tempted to choose one despite agreeing to give it up. Danny Boy Hall. William Mahoney Hall. No. Baby Hall it should stay. Because Lavinia would've remembered it always as "my baby".

- l -

I found myself sitting with Billy and Ingrid over lunch. She was a pleasant dark-haired woman, late thirties. Graceful and charming. I let them do the talking. I had a lot to mull over. But in the end I mentioned that Vinnie Hall had apparently been in the habit of feeding her horses sugar cubes containing small amounts of arsenic.

Ingrid knew of Vinnie's death but obviously not the way of it, because she said cheerfully, "How interesting. I've heard that tiny amounts of arsenic can improve a horse's coat and general condition. I know some soils contain small amounts," she turned to Billy for confirmation, "but I don't know that I'd be game to actually feed it to my horses. You'd have to know exactly what you were doing."

Certainly Lavinia's horses had thrived on it. Billy looked at me and I saw thoughts in his bright gaze. My thoughts? Was their rivalry, their desire to have the

best horses, to succeed ... enough of an explanation ...

Everyone else was in a rush to get back to the horses after lunch. Only Terri and Anne remained with me. I excused myself, saying I'd dropped my pen somewhere and would join them in a few minutes—then I hunted through the dining room and living room. No sign of the jelly beans. It might simply have been emptied and taken to the kitchen. And it remained the vaguest of ideas. If any of the others knew that Lavinia doctored sugar lumps for her horses—then how easy to doctor the black jelly beans ... and what about the vitamin capsules found in Lavinia's bag? Had someone doctored those, had she doctored them? Of course a guest might help herself to a jelly bean but was unlikely to take a handful ... whereas Lavinia ... was she known to have a sweet tooth ... had they been her own supply, kept in her room, and moved out when the police came looking ... where they'd gone unnoticed, except that I'd written them down on my list and left my notebook lying in full view on the table ... and without any jelly beans to test ...

And had someone thought that if anyone did get suspicious it would be a good idea to have so many suspects to hand?

- li -

We enjoyed watching Ingrid put the others through their paces. Annette and Isla set up a trestle table on the lawn and crowded it with scones and jam, shortbread, hot asparagus puffs, and a large cake with 'Good Riding' iced on top. Letty made a short speech wishing us all well—and yes, we did all get fancy certificates! Mine had an attractive head study of Danny Boy glued to it. A nice touch.

I looked round, the family busy with their last tasks, and were they the same people that they'd been before Lavinia died? Did any of them harbour secrets, unpleasant ones? Did they know things they would much prefer Sergeant Kelly never discovered ...

I managed to draw Letty aside over tea and asked her if she still wanted that address of a private investigator. She looked at me blankly. "No, why should I want such a thing?" "You did ask." "I'm sorry, I think you must've got things mixed up." No point in labouring it. I shrugged. Secrets.

Then I packed my cases into the boot of the car and went round saying goodbye to those staying on for dinner or waiting for their horses to cool. I suggested to Terri and Anne they might like to drop in sometime and they said cheerfully they'd do that. Then I drove away.

- lii -

Three days later Lavinia Hall was quietly and privately buried in Warwick and the large jar holding her day-old-infant was wrapped in black silk to go into the same grave. I wasn't there but Sergeant Kelly attended discreetly and was kind enough to let me know how it went. An inquest was scheduled but I'd already been told I wouldn't be needed. Kelly had been apologetic that I was being excluded from

‘my’ case; I said he was more than welcome to see it as ‘his’ case.

All was decorous—then Annette suddenly demanded to see what was in the jar. It was her half-brother, was it not, she said shrilly. Before any one could say anything she tore away the black silk and screamed. Old Mrs Hall responded by giving her a sharp slap. “How dare you!” Kelly thought she said. “Shaming the family like this!”

Letty went pale but continued to stand, hands clasped. The jar was hurriedly re-wrapped and coffin and jar went into the quiet earth. The minister gravely intoned his “dust to dust” (though formaldehyde would rather delay the process) and crumbled a sod. The family stood round in attitudes of condolence for several minutes afterwards then drifted towards the entrance.

They had all reached the gate when Letty abruptly turned round and hurried back. She knelt by the side of the grave in the damp clay and trampled grass. She was still crying when Sergeant Kelly came over and gently took her elbow.

- end -

MISTRESS OF FOXHOUNDS

- i -

(This is Rachel’s story. Great though the temptation sometimes was I have not interjected, edited, blunted, softened, or glossed the story in any way. The only thing I can lay claim to is the title.)

I booked into Yorke House, a quiet hotel which looked pretty modest and boarding-housy till I got inside. I would’ve gone straight out again except that it was raining cats and dogs. So I decided one night wouldn’t kill me. I would relax and enjoy discreet elegance, good food, a few little extras. I could economise tomorrow.

My being in the English city of York wasn’t exactly because of a desire to be a tourist; more just hanging round, filling in time, enjoying myself, until I needed to be in Glasgow for the start of my first semester at uni there. Maybe this was a crazy idea, maybe it would be fun. Time would tell. In the meantime I was slowly making my way northward, sometimes walking (my heavy luggage was being stored for me), sometimes train or bus. I just hadn’t bargained on the rain. Well, maybe I had— isn’t that what everyone says? UK and Ireland, never stops raining?—but the first week had been lovely and I’d put rain out of my mind.

I dumped my backpack and shoulderbag in my room. I knew the place wasn't fussed on such things by the look the woman at the front desk had given me. But there were empty rooms. I might as well fill one. I could almost see her mind ticking over. After a hot shower, very welcome, I put on a skirt and my heaviest jumper and went downstairs to see about something to eat—and whether I could afford something more than baked beans on toast.

The menu was plastered with French and the only language I ever did was a couple of years of Japanese. I felt like saying to myself, brave the rain, kiddo, go out and get fish and chips, at least you can see what you're getting. In the dining-room was a party of eight old ducks in pearls and cardigans and a sickly-looking guy in black who looked as if he'd come for a funeral and missed out on his inheritance afterwards.

The waiter—a waiter—pretended he didn't see me—which was okay by me, I had nothing else to do and could sit him out. I tapped my fingers and hummed a tune and one of the old dames said, Ricky, don't you think you'd better ... and raised an eyebrow. Finally he sashayed over and snapped his pad. I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to *know* him.

Moddom, are you ready to order? He honked rather than spoke.

Sure, I'll have vegetable soup, cheesecake and coffee.

Regrettably, moddom, those are not on the menu.

You look hard enough, I'll bet you can find them, okay.

He went away and all was quiet and I wondered what I'd get and when. I should've brought a book down. I'd been reading this whodunnit set in Glasgow, put me off going out at night there. I took my pen out and doodled some faces on the fancy parchment menu, then the picture of a weird-looking dog and underneath I wrote 'Ricky'. Childish? Of course. I was cold, hungry, and I didn't take kindly to being treated as a nuisance. Then I sat back and gazed around. The room had moulded ceilings, chandeliers, antique sideboards, and I thought of all these fancy touches coming out of my vegetable soup and wished I'd stuck it out in the rain and found a backpackers' hostel.

The undertaker finished his meal and went out. The little old ladies kept on cracking jollies and making little ladylike chuckles while they scoffed some sort of sweet with cherries on top. And still my food didn't come.

Finally I'd had it up to here and went the way Ricky had gone and found myself down a short passage and through a swing door and into the kitchen. All stoves and sinks and large work surfaces but no one there actually doing anything. I went over to a stove and lifted a lid. The stuff inside didn't smell too bad. Some kind of mince or casserole in the making. I found a dish and a spoon and began to ladle some out. Ricky came barging in. Hey! What—guests aren't allowed—

Like hell, they aren't. I'm starving, you lazy sod, and I gave you my order half-an-hour ago. If I have to serve myself—oh, and you needn't bother putting it on

my bill either. I've a good mind to report you to the bloody Tourist Board, etc etc.

I thought he'd make some excuse but he just stared at me, shrugged, and went away. He doesn't know how close he came to a ladle ... but no point in wasting time, I went on dishing the stuff out.

The door re-opened, not Ricky back surely—but an older man came in. He looked at me, I looked at him. Then, surprisingly, he said, I'm terribly sorry that you should've been inconvenienced, Ms Creighton.

Inconvenienced?! But he did seem sorry. Even though he had one of those dreadful English voices which imply that if anyone should be sorry it's not him. Probably went to the wrong school.

I didn't realise it was such a big deal getting something to eat in bloody England.

Normally no, and he put on a sad sort of smile. He said nothing about his waiter or the lack of people in the kitchen and I wondered if Ricky was being a pain off his own bat or if his orders came from higher up.

If you don't believe in feeding people under fifty just say so and I'll find somewhere else.

No, please don't. It's just that we have a policy of not taking backpackers, they are more likely to want vegetable soup or baked beans on toast and I've been trying to develop this place into ... well, four stars would be nice ...

Times are hard, spurious sympathy comes easy and clichés cost nothing. Never mind, I'll get my cheap carcass to a youth hostel tomorrow.

No, please don't. But you might like to eat your food while it's hot. He looked at my bowl and added, I'll join you for dessert if I may.

I shrugged. It's your place, well, I assume it is, unless you're the missing cook—

I took my plate and went back to my table and hoed in. It wasn't very good, too watery. No one had got round to evaporating, thickening, seasoning. But I wasn't going to complain. The sides of my stomach were practically glued together.

Ten minutes later he came out—maybe he'd been busy, maybe he just didn't want to witness feeding time at the zoo in his exclusive establishment. By the way my name is Robert Carlinghall.

Bob eh? My father is a Bob.

Is he? Is he here with you, if you know what I mean.

No, back in Surfers. Well, I s'pose he's back in Surfers. He spends his time racketting round the countryside solving problems for people—

Surfers?

Surfers Paradise. In Queensland.

I see. What sort of problems does he solve?

Good question. Murder, suicide, fraud, kidnapped horses. Some pretty strange cases. He mostly does it for free. I like that.

I see. Robert Carlinghall moved my empty bowl and handed me a plate of caramel cheesecake. No cherries? Would you like coffee now? He flourished a silver coffee-pot.

Okay.

I didn't know what to make of him, he was maybe thirty-five or a bit more, reasonably good-looking in a bloodless sort of way. Well dressed. Quiet.

He seemed about to say something then changed his mind and busied himself pouring two cups and handing me a silver milk jug and a bowl full of lumps and with these dinky little silver tongs.

Have you got anyone else here apart from that pain-in-the-neck, Ricky, and the old dame out the front?

No. My receptionist will be here tomorrow.

How come?

A long silence. He seemed to weigh up replies. Maybe the truth was too terrible, too boring. Then he said, I've been blacklisted.

What on earth do you mean? How can people blacklist a boarding-house? Salmonella? Legionnaire's?

A boarding-house? He gave a small smile. Unfortunately it's a family problem and I haven't been able to keep the hotel separate from it. The word has gone out that anyone working here—

Ricky?

He is what you would probably call 'scab labour'.

I felt he was using his charm to try and get me on side before I found out what came under the heading 'family problem'. Well, I had no desire to probe, let sleeping dogs sleep etc etc.

And the lady out front?

Ricky's aunt. She's gone home now. So next time you see me it'll be in apron and cap.

Well, so long as the bed's reasonable and you can rustle up a couple of boiled eggs, that'll do. I'll be off tomorrow if it stops raining.

It may not. More coffee?

Decent coffee. Okay. Thanks.

What brings you to Britain? Just a holiday or family?

I'm off to Glasgow to study law. Well, bumming my way north slowly.

Folk didn't bum in *this* hotel. His smile faltered.

Look, I'm okay to sit here on my own if you want to buzz off and do the washing up or whatever.

Dismissal! His smile came back. My female guests often seem to like my company—

If your guests are all like the Bowling Club ladies you had in that corner I'm not surprised, they're probably escaping from whatever they've left sitting on the

patio.

That true Australian bluntness, he murmured, but I'm deeply thankful they stayed on. And what about your family ... they're all back in Australia?

Mum's in Sydney, Dad's in Surfers. Mum doesn't do much. Dad catches crooks in between growing cacti ...

So your father is a—

Was. A retired cop. Can't leave it alone. Or people refuse to let him retire. A bit of both.

And—did you ever help him in his ... cases?

No. I worked for a travel agent, then in a solicitor's office. He only asked me when he was stuck.

And what would you tell your travel clients, after this evening? But I felt he was pondering on a different question.

I guess things can go wrong anywhere. But I've never heard of a hotel losing *all* its staff. Your family must've done something pretty awful ... jobs don't grow on trees ...

I know. And new immigrants will usually take anything ...

So?

Oh, it's not a secret. In fact it's been plastered all over the tabloids. But it's all wrong. That's the ghastly part of it all. My brother's been accused of murdering our maid—

Cor blimey! Do people still have *maids* ... and how do you know he didn't?

Robert Carlinghall sighed. They're calling it a sex crime. But my brother is gay. Never the twain shall meet, not if Justin can help it ...

So the fact your brother is a suspect has caused all the hotel staff in Yorkshire to boycott your place? There has to be something more. I had been practising an interrogative look for use somewhere down the track. Now I tried it out on him.

At last he said, no, there's more. My family are accused of trying to get rid of the evidence by feeding her dead body to the foxhounds.

Hell's bells. No wonder people don't want to stay here in the family hotel ...

- ii -

I wasn't sorry to get to my room, to lock the door, to roll into bed. The city was still veiled in rain. Had it kept away the ghouls who might want to stare at the hotel, hound the proprietor, snap any guests. I thought of myself walking across Yorkshire, bumbling round the Lake District, all sodden and dreary. Maybe the bus made sense. I had to be in Glasgow by next week. Bob had paid for me to live in college for the first term. After that ...

- iii -

I slept like a log. When I dressed and went out into the grey dawn, the soft beige corridor, it was to find a pile of newspapers by my door. I wondered if it was Robert or someone else. Nothing subtle about the headlines:

Peer's Son in Grisly Death
He Killed Her—and Had Her Eaten
Sex and Horror in Stately Home
Did the Butler Do It? No, the Honourable Justin Did It!
(Don't they have libel laws in the UK?)
Grisly Remains Found in Kennels
GIRL EATEN!

I took them in and skimmed, put them back out in the corridor. Sometime on the night of the 1st, a young woman, Susan Murrell, had died, the means of death not known, and had been found next morning partly eaten in the nearby kennels where a pack of foxhounds had mauled and chewed, unpleasant reading, and few details had been left to the imagination—which isn't the same as saying the details were correct.

There were pictures of the house, a large dreary pile, pictures of Lord and Lady C. Pictures of foxhounds behind a netting fence. There was a fuzzy picture of Susan. Poor Susan. She had worked in the house for the last three months. Her parents were tenants on the estate. It all sounded pretty feudal. Susan was the eldest of four children.

And there were pictures of Justin Carlinghall. Pictures galore. Not very good pictures. He was helping with enquiries. But the pictures seemed designed to present him as a playboy. A layabout. A rich parasite. A young man with a white Porsche. It had everything to titillate. Money. Title. Sex. Horror.

I wasn't sure I wanted breakfast cooked by the Hon. Robert. Boiled eggs were reasonably safe though even they'd been known to get tampered with ... I might nip down the road for brekkie.

Still, if the Carlinghalls had nothing to do with Poor Susan's death—maybe there was a secret boyfriend, a spat, a falling-out; maybe she teased the dogs until they bit her—that they probably had more money than was good for them shouldn't lead to the pillory.

I went downstairs. Still raining. A woman, very smartly coiffured and dressed in Le Businessse Suit, sat at the front desk. She raised a supercilious eyebrow as I trotted down. *Where do these dames get off!* I went over and said, haven't seen you round the place—

I returned from ... she hesitated, never mind. Are you staying for breakfast or would you like your bill now?

Of course I'm staying for breakfast. Or are the staff still on strike?

I can arrange a tray if you'd like.

Someone certainly made sure I got the papers this morning. Ten of the rubbishy things at least.

An odd look passed over her face. Oh dear, Miss Perfect Manicure, you will have to do better than that.

Did they? She changed her face to look mildly pained, though without moving her make-up. There is hot coffee in the dining-room and some dishes under covers. Please help yourself.

There was something about her, about this place, who knows, about England as a whole, which made me want to act supremely crassly. Ta. I could eat a horse I'm that hungry. Shouldn't say horse, I s'pose, they feed old horses to the hounds, don't they?

She stared at me but was saved from a response by the phone burring at her elbow. I went on in and helped myself to a big lamb's fry. I wondered who had cooked it. The room was deserted and there was no sound except cars swishing on the wet streets and the perfect miss speaking in perfectly-modulated tones into the phone.

I was just finishing up when Mine Host came by, all nice and trim and not a hair out of place and a nice superfine suit. I looked up cheerfully, Well, I see you've got some staff back. I waved a hand.

Yes, Ms Mansfield has been with me since the beginning. This was not quite the same as saying, Ms Mansfield's been a tower of strength. I can rely on Ms Mansfield through thick and thin.

He sat down at my table, his table, I suppose. Do you mind if I call you Rachel ... and please call me Robert.

(None of this pally Bob business?)

Suit yourself. Miss Perfect Hair glanced our way then carefully averted her gaze. Oh dear, Ms Mansfield, you have got it bad. And you obviously haven't used your time 'since the beginning' to best advantage. But, surprise, surprise, I'm not the Competition. I hope your Bowling Club Ladies are staying on? Little Ms Rachel at her concerned best.

Yes. But his mind was not on them. They've gone to a Conference actually. But there was something I'd like to ask you.

Fire away. I helped myself to another cup.

It was obviously a hard subject to get stuck into.

Would you be willing to spend a couple of days with my family, as an outsider there just might be something you'd pick up on. I'd be willing to pay you for your time. It wouldn't exactly be an investigation, just keeping your eyes open ...

I'm not trained. And I can't pluck a more suitable suspect out of thin air, you know. Poor old Justin might not have done it but there's a good chance *someone* in the house did. Most crimes are domestic. And you mightn't fancy your dad or mum in the clink instead.

It might be the staff—

Oh, the good old butler ... or how about a tramp ...

He winced. I know. I don't want it to be anyone I know. But it's falling hardest on Justin, he's not very—strong—

And how safe is it there for a stranger?

Yes, I'm sorry. I'm being a bit crass. I can't tell you it's perfectly safe. You wouldn't believe me anyway. But if you would give me, say, three days ...

Okay. Three days. And what do I go as?

My mother has been talking of getting someone in to check and catalogue the library. It's not in very good condition. Is that something you might like to do, pretend to do ...

I shrugged. Why not? It couldn't be duller than old legal files.

(I shouldn't say that; aren't I gripped with a sudden passion for the law ... but it takes dedication to love old tussles over plumbing invoices and boundary measurements.)

How do I get there?

I'll ring my mother and take you out later this morning.

- iv -

We wound through grey lanes, grey hills and dips and streams and paddocks. A light mist gradually rose and let me see the countryside. Even with the car heater on I still felt cold. And I wasn't sure about any of this. The local CID undoubtedly make their share of mistakes but I assumed they knew what they were doing, most of the time, whereas I felt like a fish out of water.

The house appeared at the end of a long winding lane through some parkland and a small commercial pine plantation. It was a strange house. The central section was a Queen Anne creation (I found this out later) and the two wings were Victorian.

But the left wing had copped a stray bomb in World War Two when the bombers were heading for Hull and places like that. It wasn't obvious from the front, the façade was still intact, but the wing was now unliveable—except I s'pose for desperate squatters.

Robert's mother came out on to the front steps as we drew up. Quite an attractive woman in that very fair rather beaky English style. Her hair was grey, her eyes a grey-blue, she was dressed in a cream linen suit with a cardigan loosely knotted round her shoulders and cream pumps on her feet. I got out and the chill of the day seemed to slice through me. If this was Yorkshire I thought grimly I would *die* in Glasgow—

I am so glad you can come and help me with our books, she said without any particular inflexion; no emphasis on the 'so', none on the 'glad', perhaps just a tad on the 'help'. She said it was a chore which would take her mind off the sad things that had been happening. She ushered me up the wide stone stairs and Robert followed with my bit of luggage. We went up a central staircase, up and up, and I started to think if they were going to park me in some grim attic bedroom it wasn't likely I'd be staying long. But the room she showed me into was quite nice, very old-fashioned with a big bed with a canopy, a high dressing-table, big wardrobes, a

couple of chairs drawn up to a heater in front of an unused fireplace.

She said she hoped I would be comfortable and just ring if I wanted anything. My first impulse was to look around for a telephone then I realised she meant the bell-pull beside the fireplace. As I couldn't see any reason to ask some poor slave to pant all the way up these steps I just nodded. Then she took me along the hall to a reasonably modern bathroom. Plenty of hot water, she said, so don't feel you need to conserve it. The thought hadn't occurred to me. Then she left me and said to come down when I was ready and she would show me around the house. Robert hesitated then said, do you think you'll be all right? He pointed to a key in the inside lock.

I shrugged. Probably. I took a few karate lessons a few years ago. I didn't say so. And after all the sitting round I'd been doing lately my leg would probably lock up if I did want it to do anything!

The library was a big dark room behind a pleasant sitting-room. Two lamps in pink shades had been turned on but I still wondered how I would manage to see anything. Maybe I could get them to move a couple of extra lamps in? An old man was sitting there. He rose carefully as we came in. Oh there you are, my dear, Robert's mum said clearly. Perhaps the old geezer was a bit deaf. He came round and held out a hand and she introduced him as Robert's father. I was surprised. He looked at least twenty years older than her. But he had an amazingly strong grip.

Lank white hair wisped round his face. There was something vague and not really 'with it' about him. I wondered if he had Parkinson's or Alzheimer's or something. Mrs Carlinghall took me round the room, pointing everything out, then opened a small door hardly noticeable in one corner and we stepped into a kind of store-room. She said these files and boxes and piles tied up with ribbon were family papers which she wanted to go through and sort and make sure nothing had been chewing on them. I imagined armies of mice and silverfish having a ball in a place like this. But I hoped she wouldn't want me to actually *work* in here. The place was airless and dark and musty. I would soon be screaming with claustrophobia.

We sat down in the little sitting-room and a maid came in with a tray containing a silver tea service and a jug of milk and more little sugar lumps in a bowl with tongs. It made me feel like a horse. Then she returned with another tray containing small plates of shortbread and macaroons. Robert and his parents sat down and his mother poured out. The old man looked a bit shaky with his cup and I thought I wouldn't trust him with my best china but he had a small table by his chair; the rest of us just had to perch the cups on our knees. I can never see the point of having money if comfort and good sense don't go along with the 'good things' ...

I assumed they had money. Though a place like this would eat the maintenance budget. My thoughts, unless they were planning to take in boarders, would be to dismantle the two wings and just have the central house in all its original style and taste. Selling the rest off to a salvage company would pay the

upkeep for quite a while. But maybe they needed all this room to store their heirlooms. I'm not much into heirlooms.

I hoped they would start in and talk about what had happened—presumably Robert didn't expect me to question *them*—but nothing was said, just trivia about the gardens and the estate and a few questions thrown to me about my travels and plans. Maybe this was normal, maybe they didn't know how to broach the subject. I asked where was Justin, was he going to join us. Robert said no, not today, he was staying locally. The 'locally' was made to sound significant. I thought of a remand centre and graffiti ... 'this place sucks' ...

You don't mean they've charged him?

Robert darted a look at his father and said, no, just questions. Then he rose and said he would take me round the estate, then he must be getting back to York. As we went out he lowered his voice and said the police were holding Justin for his own safety. There had been threats.

We went down masses of corridors and stepped outside. It was nice to be out in the sun again, not that it was a lot warmer but it had a sense of freshness that the house lacked. I revised my ideas and thought it might be a good idea to pull the whole damn edifice down. We walked through kitchen gardens and orchards and a little open space which had been mown close and where the family sometimes played bowls or croquet. I asked him if his father wasn't well. He was silent for a while, then he said the old man was failing, it had come on over the last year or so and there wasn't a lot they could do, but he was quite happy here and everyone kept an eye on him. I don't think he meant to but he made it sound like mental rather than physical decline. Bit of both maybe.

Eventually we came to the kennels. I know nothing about foxhounds. I assume people will keep them as pets when they cease to use them for hunting. I thought they were quite attractive dogs with their patches of brown and lemon on the white. They all came up to the wire of their runs and barked.

Do you actually *hunt* with them?

A bit. You don't approve?

Well, the stupid bloody Poms brought foxes to Australia and now they've gone everywhere and are killing off the rare species like kangaroo rats and potoroos (I didn't actually know what they were killing off but I wasn't going to let on) and rare ground-nesting birds. If we waited for some spoilt brats to come charging along in red coats to get rid of them we'd be waiting a long time. People shoot them. If you really want to get rid of them I assume you're capable of doing the same thing rather than putting the poor things through hours of terror every week.

You don't like us much, do you?

Should I? Someone here killed a young woman in a shockingly cruel way. I only have your word that it wasn't you or your brother.

Nor my parents.

Wasn't it Hercule Poirot who was always saying he suspected everyone. Can you give me one good reason why I shouldn't suspect them?

Well, they *are* my parents.

And parents are exempt? How comforting.

I cannot imagine them doing such a thing. Can you imagine your father doing such a thing?

Yes. My dad was in the police for thirty years. I never met a cop I didn't believe was capable of killing.

I see. You are very ... tough ... cynical.

Isn't that why you asked me here? I'm not squeamish. Instead of Ms Goo-Goo-Eyes.

Instead of who? He looked startled.

Your receptionist. She fancies you.

I thought he was going to respond, then he simply shrugged and unlatched a gate and took me through. He pointed out the older dogs, the puppies 'in training', the shed where their food and equipment was kept. The cottage where the kennel man Cyril lived. We walked past it and saw an old man picking peas in a small garden at the back. Further down the slope we could see several houses.

Who lives there? I pointed to them.

Our tenants. The one closest is the home farm. Cyril's son and daughter-in-law run it for us. Susan, the girl who died, was their daughter. She was working in the house. We've now only got Edna as cook-housekeeper and Eilidh as general maid. We had a general handy-man-cum-gardener but he left about a month ago—

You don't suspect him?

No, he was gone at least two weeks before all this happened. He was emigrating to New Zealand.

So it just comes back to the people who were in the house at the time, Cyril's family—and your mysterious stranger. So, Bob, what's your theory?

No one's ever called me Bob, he said.

Oh, I thought, from the way you talked about your staff that it was all buddy-buddy and first names and all that sort of thing ... Sorry ...

If he wanted to get sniffy I didn't mind in the least. I couldn't wait to get out of this place. I had only said yes out of curiosity. How does someone with an Hon. in front of his name live when he's at home? That sort of thing.

But you're right, he said slowly. There aren't a lot of suspects. But Susan must have known young men in the district. She was an attractive girl. She might've had a falling out with a boyfriend.

She might. But I'm sure the police are following up that angle. You want me to try to make sure no one here is hiding something.

I think so, yes. If it's not Justin, and I'm sure it isn't, then I want to be sure it isn't anyone who is going to stay here ... and maybe ...

Yes. You don't want them all gradually done away with while your back is turned.

He turned and looked at me. You have a very sarcastic way of putting things and yet, I don't know why, I rather like it.

I wasn't sure if that was a compliment or he was buttering me up for his own purposes or he just said it without thinking. We walked back to the house and I said I would go along to the kitchen and meet Edna and Eilidh. He said it would be lunch in about an hour.

- v -

Edna was a big woman with a lot of untidy hair pinned up. I wondered if the family regularly got hair in their soup. Eilidh was a thin dark-haired girl with a very slight stammer. I wondered if events of the past weeks had brought it on. They looked surprised to see me.

I introduced myself and said I'd just be hanging round the place for a few days while I looked at the family's piles of junk and old paper etc etc. Eilidh brought a chair for me and I sat down at a big kitchen table. There was a huge range in one corner of the room and an equally large refrigerator at the other end. But I noticed they cooked on a small electric stove and used an ordinary-sized frig. Thus are the mighty fallen, I suppose, but the two women after their first awkwardness (what was I doing barging in here?) sounded friendly.

I never heard them say anything about you coming, Eilidh said softly.

Not even to tell you to make up the room for me?

Not even that. The Missus ... She looked at Edna with raised eyebrows. Edna shrugged her massive shoulders. They had the room done up for that lady that didn't come. The one that fancies Justin and won't accept that he's queer as Dick's hatband.

Eilidh had a soft Irish voice, a bit hard to understand; Edna had a loud Yorkshire voice, also a bit hard to understand.

I've never found out who Dick was. I sat back and looked round. But it must have been awful for you when that poor girl that worked here ... I saw something in the paper ...

Oh, you've no idea. Edna sort of fanned herself as though the very idea made her feel hot or brought her out in beads of sweat. When they said the next morning—she pressed her hand to her heart—not here! not us! I nearly had one of my attacks. Angina. It gets me here. You can see how quiet our life is here. We've never had anything like that. We thought at first that someone was playing a dreadful practical joke but then we saw the police and everything and then they brought poor Susan down to the house, what was left of her ... oh I can't talk about it ...

I nodded. I hope I never have to see anyone who's been chewed up by a pack of dogs.

But do they actually hunt the dogs themselves. I haven't noticed any horses around.

They looked at me kindly. Such ignorance.

But Eilidh said, they only have two horses now. She rides and Robert rides. They still rear the dogs, it's a very ancient and famous strain. Other people come here to buy dogs to improve their bloodlines. But there is a small hunt here. The MFH is Irving Saltmarsh. But old Cyril does all the work. He's a grumpy old thing but he knows what he's doing.

Does anyone suspect him? That maybe he lost his temper with Susan. Maybe she was going out with someone he didn't approve of?

But she wasn't going out with *anyone*. Her fiancé was killed on his motor-bike about six months ago. It was very sad. And Cyril always called her his pet.

But it must've been someone who knew about dogs surely? I mean I didn't even know tame dogs would eat a *person* ... Sorry, I know that sounds awful, but you know what I mean ...

They said she was already dead when they put her in the run, just dead, and it was because there was blood on her ... but you're right, it must've been someone who knew something about hounds. Eilidh looked at me with stricken eyes.

A mysterious stranger perhaps. Someone hanging round. A tramp. A homeless person. Ferals.

We don't have people like that here. Edna sounded rather prissy. Just the occasional poacher.

Someone who escaped from an asylum.

There's nothing like that round here, nothing closer than York, I don't s'pose ... just that old Borstal place and they closed that years ago. Some company bought it to store waste stuff.

Charming. The joys of the toxic English countryside.

The two women looked at each other. Then they used lunch as their excuse to get busy and leave me to go off wandering round the house. I wondered if anyone ever got lost here. The central part of the house was where the family lived and entertained and enjoyed themselves, if enjoy is the right word. There was a sort of glum air about the house. The east wing seemed to be mostly closed rooms shrouded in dust sheets. It seemed a shame to have all those rooms going to waste with thousands of people living on English streets. The lunch gong rang and I went down and found the small dining-room (they also had a large dining-room which was very large) and sat down to lunch with Robert and his parents. I thought I would explore what was safe in the west wing this afternoon, then I would need to look as though I was busy on old books.

I asked if it was true that Justin had a 'woman friend'; I wasn't sure if that was the right description.

Lady Jane Annersley. Robert's mother Leigh said the words like an

incantation.

Is she nice?

Everything. Robert raised his eyebrows and added, rich, beautiful, a lovely home, intelligent, traces her family back to the ninth century. What more could you want. And the only reason she wants Justin is because he is the one person who is totally uninterested in her.

But surely she can recognise a—

I was going to say ‘gay’ but Robert shot me a warning look. The sexual revolution hasn’t reached the wilds of Yorkshire? Hey! I can’t believe that.

I think she is very suitable, Leigh said coldly, but I cannot like the young woman. Very sharp and brittle. Justin needs someone quiet and restful as a counterpoint.

It seemed an odd way to match people up but perhaps she had a point.

Robert’s father listened—I assumed he listened—but he inserted nothing into the conversation and he ate his ox-tail soup very noisily. I thought people with titles were supposed to have nice manners. Maybe he thought manners were a bourgeois invention? In fact I thought his whole demeanour was rather peculiar. Maybe it really was Alzheimer’s and he didn’t know where he was or what he was doing ...

Maybe it was Justin who was queer as Dick’s hatband, maybe it was this decrepit old man ... but it was hard to imagine him attacking anyone ... I didn’t think he would have the strength to lift a blunt instrument ... and yet ... I had felt a latent strength in his handshake ... I decided to reserve judgement. The lady of the house. She was quite tall, quite fit looking. If she rode and gardened and carried books around I assumed she wasn’t totally without strength ... had she killed Susan because the girl fancied her precious son and Lady Jane or some other girl with money and a title might not want him if they thought he fancied housemaids. Maybe Justin was an honourable man and insisted on marriage rather than a quick one in the pantry? But then I’d been given to understand Justin and girls, full stop ...

I couldn’t quite define the old man’s oddness. Because he rarely spoke I couldn’t pin it to his ideas and attitudes. Yet he gave the impression of someone who didn’t care what anyone else thought of him. He didn’t believe in polite calls, inhibitions, manners, respectability ... maybe if you’ve grown up with the belief you’re superior to the people around you ... but it was something slightly different ... I discarded description after description. There was something slightly leering about him yet he didn’t strike me as lecherous ... it was physical without being sexual maybe ... I pondered on it all afternoon without coming to any conclusions.

- vi -

I asked Leigh if it was safe to go into the west wing. She said they never went there. She hadn’t been through there in twenty years and she had no idea what sort of awful state it was in now. She said they should demolish it but that would make the house look lop-sided so it seemed more sensible to leave it as a façade.

Why, she said suddenly, do you think it is—relevant?

Well, someone could be squatting in there and you wouldn't know, would you.

I see. Yes. I never saw it like that.

She turned to her husband. Do you think that's possible, my dear?

He merely stared at her. Then he said abruptly, of course not.

I found his response odd. Almost as though he was angry with her, with me, for even suggesting such a thing.

I spent about an hour in the library taking dusty old paper out of dusty old boxes and putting it out on to a small table which Robert's mother had set up under the best light. Several of the ribbons came apart in my hands when I pulled them undone. Finally I said I needed a bit of fresh air. The old man had begun to snore in an armchair. Leigh Carlinghall came out with me and said she was going to go up to the potting shed. She said I was very welcome to walk anywhere in the grounds but I might like to take a whistle with me in case I got lost. This was an interesting idea but I thought why not and accepted the thing and hung it round my neck. Perhaps they gave whistles to all their guests. Here, let me take your coat—oh, and here's your whistle. Better than a name tag.

I went up to the first landing then along the corridor which seemed most likely to give on to the other wing (if it was like the east wing) and came to a door with a key in it. I turned it and went through. I was in another corridor but this one only had rooms along one side. The other side had been sheered away by that bomb. It wasn't a neat slice but rather a cascade of rubble and timber and rotting furnishings. The corridor dipped under my feet and I felt its unsafeness. I didn't like to think what their insurance company would say if I fell through.

I began with the first door on my left and opened and investigated every room. All the windows had been blown out at the time, or taken out since, so the rain and wind and sun had made an awful mess of what remained of carpets and furnishings. Thick stone dust lay over everything. There were cracks in the plastered ceilings. Several large gobs of plaster had fallen. It wasn't a pleasant place. There were two lots of steps, one lot leading down about half way along ... and leading up as well except that the steps above were charred and broken ... and another lot at the end of the house. I went down these very gingerly. They led into another corridor, equally dusty and chaotic, equally strewn with rubble.

Again I checked every room. Once or twice the whole structure seemed to sway above me but that may have been my imagination. The place gave me the heeby-jeebies and I couldn't wait to get out of there but I was thorough and I found something which gave me pause.

One room had been cleaned. Not very clean certainly but it looked as though someone used it. It was a bedroom. There were sheets and blankets on the big double bed. There was an old-fashioned wash-stand. There was a hat-box standing

on a chest-of-drawers. I took out my handkerchief and gingerly opened a couple of top drawers. In one of them there was a pouch of pipe tobacco. I had noticed that the old man smoked a pipe. Did he come along here for a rest from his family? But the room had a film of dust. No one had been in for a while. I tried to decide how long it had been untenanted. Not long, I felt. That constant sifting of stone dust would probably make a room look unused within a few days.

But did he come here simply to sit in silence? Maybe his wife complained about his smoking and he came here? Did he come here because it held memories for him? Did he keep things here he didn't want his wife to know about? Girlie magazines. (I hate that description: girlie magazines imply they are for girls. They should be called mannie magazines.) I searched that room with great care. I had thought Robert's unwillingness to have me talk about sex at lunch was out of respect for his mother; she might know her husband had a weakness for porn ... and yet, as I thought back, I felt it was his *father* he was protecting. Maybe the old man disliked the younger generations' casualness in such matters? If he was as old as he looked then he was effectively two generations removed from his sons. Maybe they came down here for a quiet smoke and a bit of a 'chat' when they were home. Justin might smoke a pipe too.

As I quartered the room slowly and carefully I felt a very slight change in the floor. There was a very dirty rug on the floor. Dirty with the grime of ages rather than recently dirty. I hated the thought but I rolled the rug up carefully and saw a trapdoor underneath.

So someone could get in undetected! But from where?

I needed a torch. I went back the way I'd come. But when I came to the door into the top corridor I found someone had re-locked it. Had they simply thought a draught had caught it or had someone locked me down there? As there were lots of ways out, not very safe ways but not impossible, I couldn't see any point in locking me in. But I could try the door into the corridor downstairs or I could scramble over rubble or I could try that space below the bedroom. It looked horribly dark but there might be some light further along. Would they have had dungeons in a house of this era? I really didn't know. But I thought the space below the house was more likely to be a wine cellar or store rooms.

I never want to do another exploration like that one. I checked the trapdoor carefully to make sure it had no bolt. I didn't want to be accidentally or on purpose locked down there. It could be lifted from above and pushed up from down below. Fair enough. Then I fumbled down the steps and into a chill space. Even here there was rubble and thick dust but I made my way through what seemed in the gloom to be a vault and came into a room which was a wine cellar and still feeling my way I came out into another room full of cartons and boxes and bins of potatoes and so on. A chink of light came in through what seemed to be hatches. Maybe they simply tipped things straight in here from the outside. I came to another set of steps and

fumbled my way up them. I came to a door and turned the handle.

The relief to find it wasn't locked! I know now I could've got out the hatches if really stuck or back up into the house but the dark and cold and dust and feeling of being closed in was almost more than I could bear.

I stepped out into a small pantry. It took me into the kitchen. It probably was just as well it was deserted. I had dust and cobwebs all over me. And appearing suddenly from the bowels of the earth might've given Edna and Eilidh the fright of their lives. I didn't want to kill Edna before I had pumped her some more ...

But if I could come out then people could go in.

Someone had gone in. Susan?

A little hideaway for sex? What might they call it here? A boudoir? A sex pad? Whatever.

And if Susan went in from this end, did she take her partner in with her, or did he come from the other part of the house? Or she. Maybe the Lady of the Manor had a fancy for a bit on the side. I couldn't really imagine her getting excited about her husband.

I sat down after getting myself a glass of water. My throat was clogged with dust.

- vii -

Glug, glug, glug, I could've drunk a bottle full. But I was half way through when Edna came in carrying some greens from the garden or the hothouse. I didn't look closely.

She gave a sort of squeal. You gave me that big a fright! I thought it was a ghost sitting there!

Little me? Do I look anything like Susan?

She calmed down and went over to the sink and put the vegetables down.

What has happened. She looked at me pretty sharply.

Nothing. I was exploring the rooms up there and came down through the cellar and up into the kitchen. Do you ever go down there?

The cellars? Of course I go down to get things. But why are you all dusty? I keep the cellars swept.

But you don't keep those wrecked rooms up there swept do you?

You surely didn't go in them. You'll set them all off and there'll be a gigantic crash and everything will come down!

Who told you that?

She did. When I came here to work.

And did she tell Eilidh?

She supposed so. She sat down and pressed her hand to her chest.

So you or Eilidh have never been in there? What about Susan? Did she go up there?

I'm sure she didn't. What would she want to go in there for?

Good question. I found a bed made up. I don't think it's left over from World War Two.

Oh dear. These girls ...

Well, I could believe it was girls and not Edna who, if she tramped round those corridors like a baby elephant, probably *would* bring everything crashing down.

But then she seemed to put two and two together and it obviously added up to ten. She looked at me with horrified eyes.

You mean ...

But I didn't know what I meant.

Did Susan ever say anything to you—or did you find her down in the cellar when you—

No, I never did.

She sat there looking blank. I sat too. If there's one useful tip I've picked up from Bob over the years it is the value of just sitting, not talking, just looking interested.

But I did see him. Her eyes suddenly grew rounder and rounder and her hand came up again and pressed against her massive bosom.

Him? Justin, you mean?

No. The old man. Her voice had dropped to a whisper. I thought he was checking things. I didn't say anything. He didn't say anything. I thought it was a right funny time for him to be checking round.

And Susan?

Susan had gone home. She wasn't back.

You've got a good memory. If anything she looked more stricken at that accolade. I asked her if she'd been in all day and she said no, she'd gone into the village nearby to do some shopping. She had a little Toyota.

Then I shrugged. But surely Susan wouldn't want an old man like that, not when she'd lost her boyfriend only a short time ago ... and the old man looks as though he'd keel over if he tried to ...

That didn't seem to reassure her.

You don't understand. She said it in a faint strangled voice. I didn't think people really speak like that outside of movies. Someone like Susan. Her dad and mum, her granddad, that's been here with the family for ever. If the old man fancied her ... and maybe gave her a nice present ... she wouldn't like to say no.

- viii -

I sat down with the two old people for dinner. I've had cheerier company. It was all pretty horrible. I kept looking at the old man and wondering ... and I felt there was truth somewhere in my horror ...

He looked at me in the sort of way he had probably looked at Susan. Except I was older. I was less biddable. He was debating with himself. And she knew it. I

think that was the most horrible part of it. Sitting there with that woman who might be a snob but probably hadn't done anything awful enough to deserve to live with this knowledge. And half of my sick feeling was the thought: what do I do next? I was blown if I could think how to broach this subject with either of them.

In the end I thought I'd just sleep on it. Maybe it would all seem easier to resolve next morning. I shook some more dust from some more old papers in the library for a while. It had ceased to be a horrible job. I almost found it peaceful and soothing now.

Leigh Carlinghall came in and sat down beside me. I hoped she wouldn't ask me if I'd had any ideas. She didn't.

After a while as the pile of old papers grew at my elbow she said it was strange. I said what was?

All this. She indicated my pile. This is my husband's family. They've lived here for three hundred years. They did well under Charles II and William and Mary. Before that they were nobodies. I know you won't like me saying that. But my father urged me not to marry Humphrey. (No, marrying a Humphrey would put me off a bit too.) He said we could trace our family back to the D'Estutevilles in the eleventh century.

I didn't bother to say we could trace ourselves back to the Creightons of Glasgow. Even though I wouldn't be surprised if they've been round longer and behaved better on the whole.

I feel I should care about all this. It *is* of great historical value. She touched the pile with her fingers. She had asked me to wear gloves.

You haven't been happy?

I didn't think she was going to answer. But then she sighed. This place oppresses me.

At last! A bit of common ground. I don't blame you. It gives me the willies. I'd sheer off both wings and just restore the central part of the house.

Would you? But then it's easy to see what other people should do. It's harder to destroy something which means something to someone.

Does your husband *really* care about this place? I mean care as in he'd chain himself to the doorpost rather than let the bulldozers in?

I don't think so. But it will come to my son one day and he may prefer to make his own decisions.

Then why not move out and let him move in. Why not get yourself a nice comfortable little place at the seaside, whatever, and enjoy your life.

If only it was that easy.

But she obviously didn't intend to lay her problems on me. Not that I wanted them. But most things aren't as hard as you think they'll be—once you get stuck into the business. I think that's something else I've learnt from Bob. He gets results on his lonesome. But my lonesome that first night in that huge dark dim dank musty

old house was pretty tedious. And I had only been in bed about ten minutes when someone started rattling the door handle. I was glad I'd put the bolt on. I thought of yelling Who's there! But as whoever it was hadn't bothered to knock I didn't see any point in engaging in conversation. Let 'em rattle the knob till it ... no I didn't want it to fall off. Then I waited in silence. I heard faint footsteps move off and nipped quietly out of bed and over to the door. I pulled the bolt back as carefully I could, swung the door open and looked out. There was one dim light at the far end of the corridor. It briefly gleamed on the old man's head. Then he disappeared down the stairs in a flowing dark dressing-gown.

Just an old man. And yet I stood there for several minutes and felt a kind of apprehension, a curious taut uneasy feeling. Just an old man. But one who had probably killed a young woman. Why? Because she'd gone out when he'd asked her not to? It hardly seemed a good enough reason. But I didn't feel I was dealing with someone who was quite ... sane ...

Senile dementia? Someone who was no longer inhibited because something had broken down in his brain? Just a dirty old man? Maybe.

- ix -

I watched him like a cat watching a mouse, at breakfast, which was silver dishes with bacon and eggs and fried bread in them, and he was a bit cat-like and watched me back. I didn't know what it was about him that gave me cold shivers. The way he looked at me maybe.

I asked him whether he still went to the House of Lords and when he had inherited his title. He just stared back in his chilling way. His wife said his health wasn't good enough now and he had inherited the title in 1969 when his father died.

After looking at me and listening to his wife he went back to eating.

It was an uncomfortable meal but as no one had suggested anything about people getting poisoned I hoed in. I thought I might as well stoke up for when I got back on the road again.

A watery sun came out and Leigh said she would talk to Edna and then she would do some work in the garden. As the old man seemed to be ensconced in the library again by a small fire I ducked upstairs and along those dicky corridors and down the stairs and checked that bedroom again. I lifted back the bedclothes and had a look at the sheets. I felt an awful bloody perve but I hoped I might find out whether the bed was used for sleeping or for sex. The sheets looked clean and untouched. I checked the pillow for any sign of hair or dandruff or anything and found a brown hair, much too long to belong to any of the men I'd met, unless the Hon. Justin or old Cyril went in for pony-tails. I prowled round the room for several minutes without finding anything else interesting. I put the hair back where it didn't show and went back along the corridors.

It was good to get out into the garden. Summer was coming to an end but there was still plenty of colour. I followed a small stone path and saw Leigh in the

distance cutting flowers or pruning or whatever English gardeners do at this time of the year. Closer to hand was a large garden shed and beyond it a small greenhouse. I went in. It was quite pleasant with the sun shining down on the glass. I looked round carefully. What I wanted was a wheeled vehicle. I didn't believe the old man could've carried Susan all the way up to the kennels. He might've dragged her but dragging would leave marks.

Two wheelbarrows were leant up against a wall. I checked both as thoroughly as I could. One had been used for carting manure. Before or since? I've never envied anyone who puts forensic in their title. Over in a far corner was an old pram. One of those wickerwork ones. I tried to imagine the old man getting it out and squeaking his way across the back yard. Nothing else seemed to fit the bill. He might've carried her on horseback, a donkey-cart, a pet sheep ... I was getting out into the world of wild speculation.

I went back inside and along to the kitchen. They might have a suitable vehicle. A trolley. A shopping cart. Even a bicycle. Eilidh didn't own a car so she might cycle into the village. There was a wooden trolley parked in the pantry. It had a pretty embroidered cloth on the top tray. I didn't like the idea of it being used to cart Susan around and then bring in our dinner. But its wheels looked too small to get over the fairly rough path.

I went outside again. So much for old papers. Almost anything seemed better than going back to the library and working near old Lord Carlinghall. I walked up to the kennels. An old man who didn't believe in making Gillette rich was wheeling a couple of large bags of doggy-din into a shed. I stood and watched him for a while, unsure how to start a conversation with him. Dogs have their place but except for a brief spell as owner of a small terrier pup, which my mum managed to accidentally run over in the driveway (she may have done it deliberately, not being a dog-lover, but I always prefer to give people the benefit of the doubt) they've never had a place in mine. After the demise of Boogie I never felt like another pet.

He saw me standing there and came over. I said hullo and he took off a very ancient cap and scratched his head. Interested in hounds, eh?

Well, that was a good start. I said they looked fit and healthy.

Aye, he said after a long while. They're healthy. They don't deserve to be. Had to purge the lot of 'em.

I said I was terribly sorry to hear about his granddaughter. The terribly was stretching things. But the whole thing *was* awful.

He scratched his head some more. Dog fleas probably. Hear they've got that young bloke, that Justin. Don't think he done it. Heard the coppers went in and found him in a room at the pub there and said he'd better come along with them. That's the last I heard. Mebbe you've heard summat else.

I found him hard to understand. But I think that was the gist of it. They've got him somewhere safe. People want to carve him up. That's what I heard.

He considered this for a while. Can't bring Susie back. She was a lass, all right, all go and lots of laughing. But, soon as she got to working in that house, he jabbed a dirty thumb in its direction, she started to get odd. Sort of scared and funny. She wouldn't tell me anything. Just said that house spooked her. She used to go in there as a little kiddie when her mum worked there for a while. I don't remember it bothering her then. The boys were there then. Now it's just those two old people. I reckon they're both—

He touched his finger to his forehead.

This half fitted my ideas. Leigh? If she was covering up for the old man ...

I couldn't decide if I believed she was completely normal or not.

Was it you who found your granddaughter? That must have been horrible for you.

In there she was. The young 'uns. She was a right mess. I didn't know what it was when I come up. Someone had cut her about before she went in. That's what done it. The blood. And there was dog food sprinkled over the top of her.

And I'm the boastful sod who said I wasn't squeamish! I came close to losing it there.

A younger bloke and they'd have him off to a trauma counsellor before you can say Jack Robinson. But had anyone done anything for this poor old sod? I doubted it.

I gave his hand a pat. It had begun to tremble.

After a while he said, I'm giving up, moving, spent a lifetime here, but I can't look after the dogs proper any more. I always see Susie lying there. Just got to find somewhere to go. Got my son and daughter-in-law and the rest of the kiddies here but ...

Hard for an old retainer to pull up stakes.

- x -

I spent the afternoon shifting more papers around. They all seemed to be nineteenth century stuff so I didn't try to read anything. If they'd been the old man's medical records I would've read them like a shot, confidential or not.

Another awful dinner followed. I don't mean the food was awful. Edna wasn't a bad cook and we got three courses which beats a takeaway pizza and coffee in a Styrofoam cup.

Their whole ... I'm not sure what to call it ... the kind of way he seemed so little aware of anything beyond staring at me and her awareness of his staring and a kind of protectiveness in the way she looked at him ... it killed any conversation. We talked. But it was just pointless trivia. What a nice day it had turned into. How there were a lot of snails in the parsley bed. They said something, I mean she said something, about Robert hoping to drive out tomorrow. That was the one bright spot in it all. I would tell him my ideas. He would say, My Dad! You've got to be on another planet! My Dad wouldn't hurt a fly! To which I could respond with *my*

dad's favourite saying: then who buys all the fly-spray?

But it was a case of like it or leave it. He could do what he liked with my ideas. I'd be on my way. The weather had fined up. With luck I should be into Scotland by tomorrow evening.

Suddenly I was really looking forward to Glasgow. Not as had been the case up to now as a kind of abstract place. No, now I saw it as place to escape to. Once I was there Lord Carlinghall could look at other women in that disturbing eerie mad way that made me want to get out of his presence as fast as possible.

I hadn't made any notes. I thought I would just take Robert into the other wing. He might not believe anyone ever went there. I couldn't prove anything. I didn't want to get Edna or Cyril into trouble. They might know things. They might not be the people they seemed. Edna might regularly belt up her housemaids for not leaving the kitchen sink sparkling. Cyril might only be pretending to love his granddaughter. The Hon. Justin might even be pretending to be gay just so as to escape the fervid attentions of the Annersley dame. The Hon. Robert might have cooked up an elaborate scheme by which his brother went to jail and he inherited the crumbling pile and immediately turned it into ...

What could you turn this place into? My little place in the country. Oh nothing grand. Just forty bedrooms and a pine plantation and some foxhounds with a fancied bloodline. What did that add up to? There are occasional times when it is such a relief to be able to say and mean it: not my business.

- xii -

As I sat down to breakfast with Leigh there was no sign of the old man. She said he was a little off-colour. I didn't commiserate. Pleeease! No. I went straight in.

So what is the matter with him? I mean the permanent problem?

For a moment she seemed to go a bit pale. Maybe she thought I was psychic. Then she rallied and said in her brook-no-nonsense voice: he's getting old.

I can see he's getting old. But that's not what's wrong with him, is it. He's got some kind of mental disturbance, hasn't he, and you're covering up for him.

Does everyone in your benighted country believe in going for the jugular?

They do if they care about justice. You made those threats to the police about your son didn't you. You said he wasn't safe if he was left outside. You or Robert. You didn't want him back here.

She didn't say anything.

And what happens when he tries to get Eilidh or some other young woman—

She could have humoured an old man.

Susan? I stared at her. Did I hear you right? You mean you allowed it to happen and didn't lift a finger to protect her? I don't believe anyone could sink that low.

I think you'd better go. I'll arrange for Edna to run you into the village. You can get a bus from there.

Yes. If you like.

She lifted her napkin to her lips, put it down, rose and went out. I thought, what the heck and poured myself another cup of coffee and scoffed another slice of toast and marmalade. Then I went into the back hall where they had one telephone and a telephone book. It took me several minutes of messing around before I found a number for the nearest cop shop. I rang and said I was ringing from Carlinghall. I hoped Eilidh wouldn't come in just yet to start clearing away. I might need another cuppa after this.

I finally managed to get on to their most senior person. I explained that Lord Carlinghall had been having some sort of secret relationship with Susan Murrell and that the old man was mentally deficient in some way. I said that they used the damaged wing of the house and exited through the cellars into the kitchen. I didn't know how he had taken Susan up to the kennels but probably a wheeled vehicle like a wheelbarrow. He knew where the dog food was kept. His wife had told me that the one thing, apart from young women presumably, in which he retained an interest was his foxhounds. I gave them my planned address in Glasgow but said I would be at this house for about another hour.

Then I walked slowly upstairs. I had no idea how, or if, the police would respond. I packed my bags and came downstairs again. Eilidh was just brushing crumbs off the table with a tiny silver-handled brush and dustpan as I came down. I said to her to be very careful, this house wasn't safe, and to try not to be alone at any time. She was dark and not particularly pretty but I didn't feel any young woman was safe with the old man. The feeling had grown stronger and stronger. And yet it was only a feeling. I couldn't prove anything. An old man who didn't talk about the weather wasn't likely to confess to a brutal murder.

I went out on to the front steps. The sun had come out but there was quite a chill wind blowing round the house, probably through the house. I wondered how long before Edna turned up to escort me off the premises.

Instead it was Robert who came driving up through the parkland and drew in by the front steps. He got out.

My mother said she has asked you to leave. I'm sorry about that. She said you were insufferably rude.

Oh I was. Did she tell you why?

At that moment Leigh came to the front door and said something about Robert dear, do come in. Rachel is just leaving as soon as Edna brings the car around.

Edna? He looked blank. No I'll take Rachel back to York with me.

Oh no dear. I've arranged it all.

I don't know why it should come to me at such an inopportune moment. Bob invited a young man called Paul Johnson to stay with us some while ago. Paul was one of his—not lame ducks but people he takes under his wing—and Paul had,

maybe still has for all I know, a fascination with STDs. I liked Paul. And suddenly some of his stuff seemed to coalesce with the terrible unease I'd been feeling these last two days.

It's tertiary syphilis, isn't it. Your father. I turned to Robert. Your husband. I turned to Leigh. He should be in hospital. Not here.

They both stared at me. Then Leigh simply turned and walked away.

He is dangerous and he is sick. Why on earth didn't you get him some help sooner?

He sat down slowly on the stone balustrade and said how, how do you take someone to hospital when they won't go, how do you run the risk of having everyone know ... and anyway how do *you* know ... you're just making wild guesses. He's not well, physically or mentally, but there is no way he could—

Oh come off it! A man who went through the war, a man who expected to get every girl he looked at, a man who had money and a title, if not much else to recommend him—of course he could catch VD! Why didn't he get treatment? Who knows? Maybe he got it before there was any reliable treatment. *I* don't know how old your father is. But he would have to live on a desert island before you can say no way.

Maybe you're right. I've wondered what is the matter with him myself. But how could you shame my mother like that, yelling all that out at her?

Your mother blames Susan for her death. She blames *Susan*! She said why didn't she humour an old man! I still can't believe any decent woman would say that! Why didn't poor little Susan working as a housemaid here not humour a dangerous syphilitic wreck! Oh God! How could you—

But I had run out of words.

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The police came about half an hour later. I was surprised. I had thought I might be reduced to making nuisance calls at regular intervals. I showed them the bedroom. I told them what I believed. They didn't seem to take to me. They were very deferential when it came to talking with Robert and his mother. They might read the tabloids but a title still counted for something here it seemed.

Edna took me into the village and I walked around and had lunch in the pub. I wondered if it was the same pub in which the Hon. Justin had been staying. Did his father not like the fact that his son was gay, was he afraid he might catch AIDS. I didn't know and I didn't want to know.

Robert came and collected me in mid-afternoon and drove me back to York. It was a very silent drive. I had nothing more to say to him. And he seemed to be so introspective and preoccupied that he had nothing to say to me. Maybe instead of sending people to prison we could make them sit day after day, week after week, with people they have nothing to talk about with?

Will you stay at the hotel tonight? My guest.

I said I would see if I could get a bus or train out of York tonight. If I could I would say no. If I couldn't I'd take up his offer and leave first thing in the morning.

In the end I got a seat through to Edinburgh but tomorrow. I put my things back in the hotel room and sat there for a while. I could write home. I could read my guide book. I could go out and wander round the old wynds of the town and take some photographs. And instead I found myself sitting on the bed and the tears began to trickle down. It was that old kennel man, Cyril, all his years of service, all his belief in the family he worked for, that moment when he came up to the kennel yards and saw the pack worrying at something ...

I've heard some awful true stories in my life but there was just something about that old man with his slow puzzled despairing words.

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Eventually I went down to dinner. Ms Mansfield was in the foyer talking to a small party of businessmen. I wondered if this was a sign that the blacklist had been lifted. She was behaving in what she probably felt was a sparkling manner.

Dinner, Ms Creighton? She came over to me reluctantly. Maybe Robert had told her to treat me nicely. It looked to be an effort.

Why not? I know my way to the kitchens now if your waiter skives off like he did the other night.

She shot a nervous look at the men. No. All was safe. They weren't listening in. Do go on through, she warbled.

I sat myself down, took up the menu. More French. But they'd got rid of the one with my silly scribble on it. Last time I'd been worried about paying for a meal in a classy joint like this. Tonight I knew the class was all in the externals—and it *was* a lovely chandelier—and I wouldn't be paying. So why not leap out and try something with a long French name? A sort of mystery meal. Come on in folks, have we got some surprises for you!

An elderly man tottered in. He looked as if he'd been waiting for the last hundred years. Maybe he needed the job. But he took me through the menu explaining what things were and suggesting the duck with chestnuts as something not to be missed. I wasn't sure if this was hype or if things really had got back to normal in the kitchens. Two elderly women came in. They took a table on the other side of the room and he tottered away. At least he hadn't called me moddom.

I was on to my sweet, a thing with rum and chocolate swirling beneath rich cream, when Robert came in. He went over to the other diners first and they chatted for a couple of minutes. Then he came over to me and asked if he could sit with me. I was irresistibly reminded of Basil Fawlty. This might aim to be a quality hotel instead of a recurrent shambles but the image cheered me up a little.

Be my guest.

Would you care for a glass of port?

No thanks. And I think you'd better go and attend to your businessmen. They

are your future. Ms Goo-Goo Eyes might run away with them before you've got them booked in.

You are very unkind at times.

No I don't like being patronised or looked down on. If somebody takes my money I expect the same level of service they would give to their most favoured customers. Not the feeling that I am some sort of tramp who's just made a mistake and wandered in off the street. If I'd come in here and said I was Lady So-and-So I'll bet your receptionist would have been all over me like a rash.

He inclined his head. You may be right. Anyway I just came by to tell you that they took my father to the hospital this afternoon to do some tests. You are probably right. About everything.

He began to fiddle with the cutlery laid for a second place at the table. I felt ashamed, listening to you, that you should care so much about justice for Susan and we seemed to care so little. But I never suspected my father. Even now I find it very difficult to accept. I knew he was 'unwell' but he had been 'unwell' for so long that it was just something I accepted as being part of growing old. It wasn't anything obvious. No sudden change. I don't know what my mother knew. I think she closed her mind to any possibility that it was something other than senility. And you can walk away from it all. She can't.

I know. But no one really walks away from murder. It touches your life and stays with you always. But you owe something to Susan's family. They believed in you, your family.

Yes, I suppose they did.

He opened his wallet and took out fifty pounds and handed them to me. I wondered if the old ladies would think he was paying off his latest fling. I looked over at them but they were absorbed in their meal.

Rachel, I wish we could've met under different circumstances.

Would you have waltzed over if we'd been at a polo match?

Yes. I think so. You are like no one I've ever met before. Sometimes it's like being in a Force Ten gale but it's curiously stimulating. Most people only pretend to be something. You are somehow absolutely real, not an imitation. And when I saw you get so angry with us ... it was like watching a magnificent figure from the past, an Esther or a Judith or a Joan of Arc ... that sudden outburst of righteous anger ... I've never before thought of a woman in those terms. It is strange but exhilarating.

I didn't know what to say to this. In the end I drank my coffee. At least it was just coffee.

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I was glad to leave next morning. Robert called a taxi for me. Then as I prepared to walk out the door he said simply: Thank you, Rachel, and lifted my hand to his lips. Ms Mansfield got an excellent view. He walked to the entrance with me. I got in the taxi and turned and waved and he waved back.

I got into Glasgow by seven o'clock that same evening. They were selling papers at the terminus but there was nothing on their front pages about the arrest of a peer for murder. I didn't really expect it.

- The End -