

Jilly Cooper is a journalist, writer and media superstar. The author of many number one bestselling novels, she lives in Gloucestershire with her husband Leo, her rescue greyhound Feather and her black cat Feral.

She was appointed OBE in 2004 for services to literature, and in 2009 was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Letters by the University of Gloucestershire for her contribution to literature and services to the county.

Find out more about Jilly Cooper at her website www.jillycooper.co.uk

Also by Jilly Cooper

FICTION	Riders
	Rivals
	Polo
	The Man Who Made Husbands Jealous
	Appassionata
	Score!
	Pandora
	Wicked!
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Little Mabel's Great Escape	
Little Mabel Saves the Day	
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Emily	
Harriet	
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JUMP!
JILLY COOPER



CORGI BOOKS

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
A Random House Group Company
www.rbooks.co.uk

JUMP!
A CORGI BOOK: 9780552157803

First published in Great Britain
in 2010 by Bantam Press
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Corgi edition published 2011

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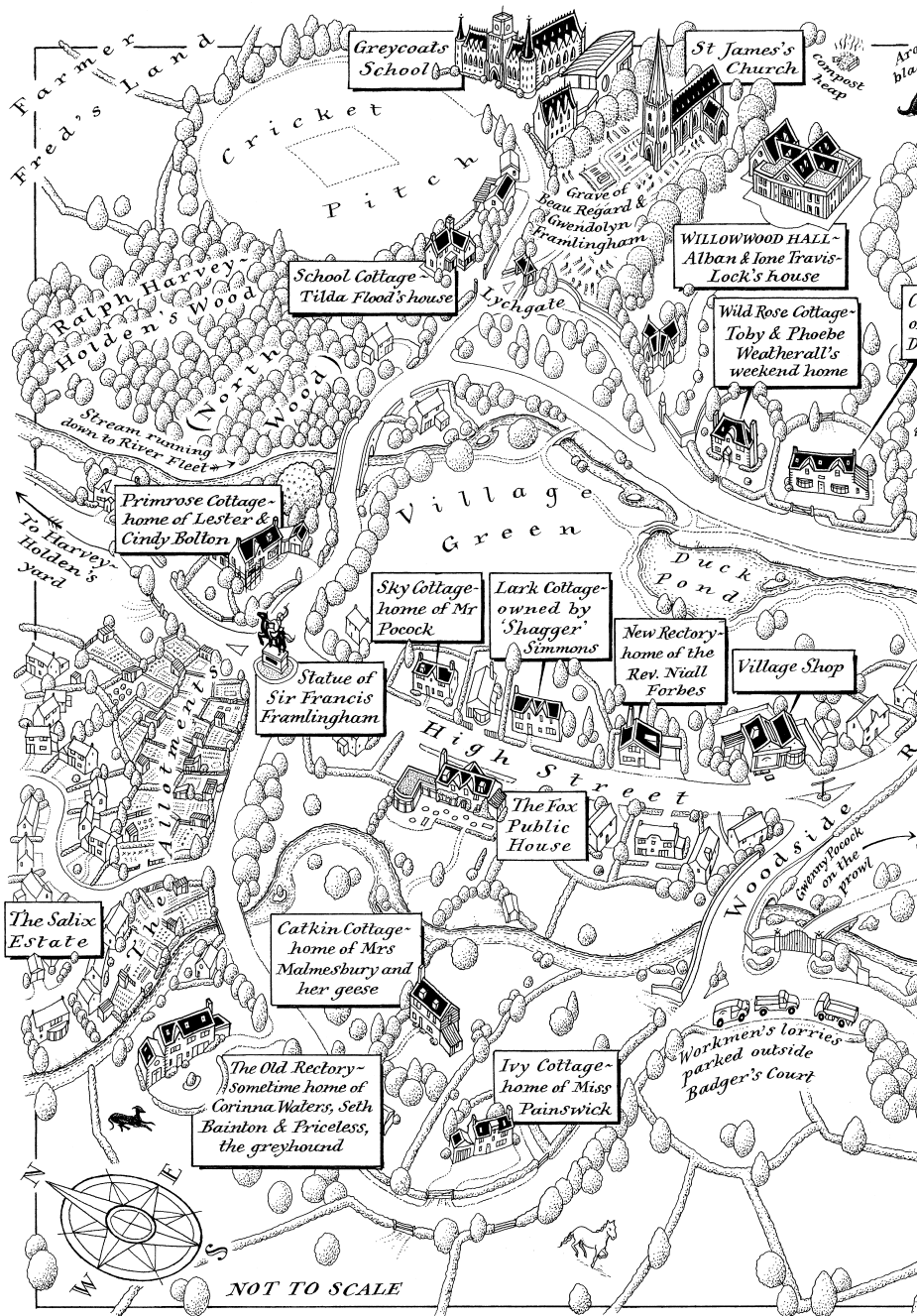
Typeset in 10/12pt New Baskerville by
Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd.

Printed in the UK by CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading, RG1 8EX.

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1



To my daughter-in-law Edwina Cooper and my son-in-law Adam Tarrant with love and gratitude for the immense kindness and encouragement they gave me while writing this book.



Farmer Fred's Land

Greycoats School

St James's Church

Cricket Pitch

Ralph Harvey - Holden's Wood

School Cottage - Tilda Flood's house

Grave of Jean Regard & Gwendolyn Framlingham

WILLOWWOOD HALL - Alban & Ione Travis - Lock's house

Wild Rose Cottage - Toby & Phoebe Weatherall's weekend home

Stream running down to River Fleet

Primrose Cottage - home of Lester & Cindy Bolton

Sky Cottage - home of Mr Pocock

Lark Cottage - owned by 'Shagger' Simmons

New Rectory - home of the Rev. Niall Forbes

Village Shop

Statue of Sir Francis Framlingham

The Fox Public House

The Salix Estate

Catkin Cottage - home of Mrs Malmesbury and her geese

The Old Rectory - sometime home of Corinna Waters, Seth Bainton & Priceless, the greyhound

Ivy Cottage - home of Miss Painswick

Workmen's lorries parked outside Badger's Court



NOT TO SCALE

Araminta the black Labrador

Fred's Land

The VILLAGE of WILLOWOOD in the COUNTY of LARKSHIRE

Russet House - Alan Macbeth, Carrie Bancroft, Trixie Macbeth live here

Cobbler's - home of the Major & Debbie Gunliffe

Harvest Home - Martin, Komy, Drummond & Poppy Bancroft live here

Valent Edwards's house - Badger's Court

Modern House - Joey & Mary East & family live here

very noisy trampolene

octagonal cockpit

Wall between Valent's and Marius's Land

Marius Oakridge's River Field

very steep footpath

conifer hedge

dreadful carport

Little Hollow - Etta Bancroft's bungalow

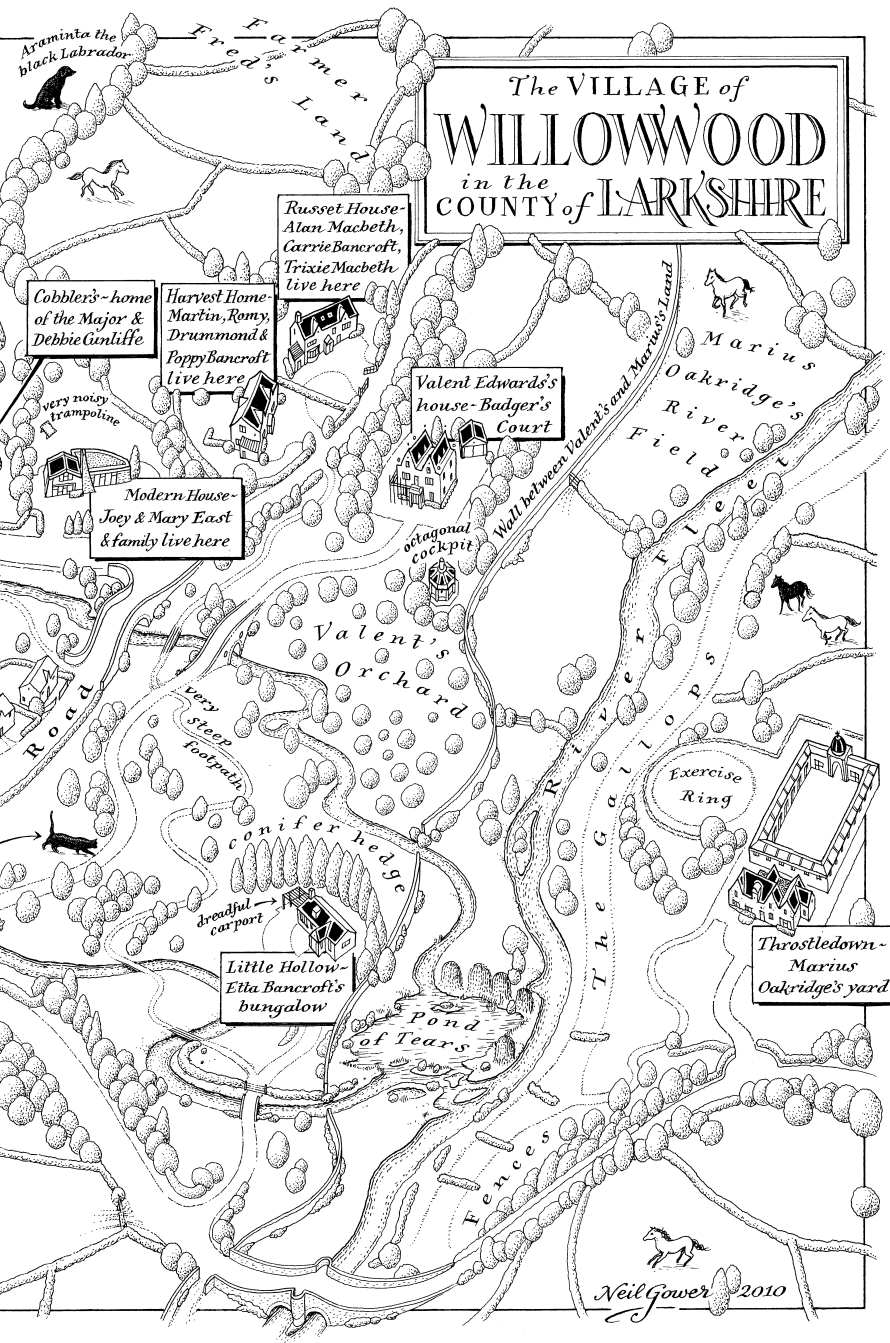
pond of Tears

Exercise Ring

Throstledown - Marius Oakridge's yard

Fences

Neil Gower 2010



CAST OF CHARACTERS

WOODY ADAMS	A delectable Willowwood tree surgeon.
EDWARD ALDERTON	Rupert Campbell-Black's nineteen-year-old American grandson, a gilded brat and former flat jockey who's spending a year at his grandfather's yard in England to try his luck at National Hunt racing.
PARIS ALVASTON	Dora Belvedon's boyfriend and ice-cool Adonis, now in Upper Sixth at Bagley Hall and dickering between Cambridge and RADA.
ANGEL	The youngest stable lass at Marius Oakridge's yard, Throstledown.
ARIELLA	The new young mistress of Bluebell Hill.
CHRISTOPHER AND CHRISTINE	Known as Chris and Chrissie.

ASHBY

Landlord and lady of the Fox, Willowwood's pub.

SETH BAINTON

Drop-dead gorgeous actor, known as Mr Bulging Crotchester, who with his considerably older and more famous mistress, actress Corinna Waters, lives part of the year in Willowwood in a house inappropriately called the Old Rectory. Seth and Corinna have an open partnership.

SAMPSON BANCROFT

A hugely successful field marshal of industry specializing in property and engineering. A charismatic shit, whose failing health in no way diminishes his ability to bully and control.

ETTA BANCROFT

Sampson's delightful but dreadfully downtrodden wife.

MARTIN BANCROFT

Sampson and Etta's self-regarding son, who gives up the City in favour of fundraising with a celebrity-tapping bias. Has houses in Chiswick and Willowwood.

ROMY BANCROFT	Martin's even smuggler wife, who makes a fetish about being a stay-at-home mum. Despite enchanting looks, an egomaniac.
DRUMMOND BANCROFT	Martin and Romy's fiendish five-year-old son.
POPPY BANCROFT	Martin and Romy's four-year-old applause junkie.
CARRIE BANCROFT	Martin's sister. Workaholic – hugely successful in the City, a failure as a wife and mother. Prefers to be known by her maiden name but in reality is Mrs Alan Macbeth. Houses in Knightsbridge and Willowwood.
BERTIE AND RUBY BARACLOUGH	Bedding billionaire and his jolly wife. A devoted couple and very new racehorse owners.
DORA BELVEDON	Fifteen-year-old smart cookie. Besotted with horses, dogs and Paris Alvaston. Has a somewhat dubious ability to flog stories to the national press, redeemed by an extremely kind heart.

LESTER BOLTON	As short in inches as he is on charm. Internet tycoon specializing in porn. Has recently acquired romantic Primrose Cottage in Willowood.
CINDY BOLTON	Lester's child bride, an extremely successful porn star.
BRUNHILDA	An Animal Rights activist.
JOHNNIE BRUTUS	A narcissistic Irish jockey.
RUPERT CAMPBELL-BLACK	Owner/trainer who bestrides the racing world like a colossus. Despite being in his mid-fifties, still Mecca for most women.
TAGGIE CAMPBELL-BLACK	His enchanting second wife, an angel.
XAVIER CAMPBELL-BLACK	Rupert and Taggie's adopted Colombian son – a point-to-point rider.
BIANCA CAMPBELL-BLACK	Rupert and Taggie's ravishing adopted Colombian daughter, best friend of Dora Belvedon.
ABERDARE 'DARE' CATSWOOD	A complacent, handsome amateur jockey with a very rich father.

JAMIE CATSWOOD	Dare's brother, later pupil assistant to Harvey-Holden.
BLUEY CHARTERIS	Rupert Campbell-Black's retained jockey, about to retire – every jockey in the land wants his job.
COLLIE	Marius Oakridge's long-suffering head lad.
LADY CROWE (NANCY)	Martinet, MFH (Master of Fox Hounds) and Marius Oakridge's most loyal owner.
MAJOR NORMAN CUNLIFFE	Retired bank manager who has wormed his way on to every committee in Willowood. Closet leech, despite respectable exterior.
DEBBIE CUNLIFFE	The Major's wife. A bossy-boots and madly competitive gardener. Known as Direct Debbie because of her appalling lack of tact.
JOEY EAST	A wonderful builder and jack of all trades. Part of the Terrible Trio syndicate with Woody and Jase, Joey has just landed a plum job masterminding the complete gutting and rebuilding of Valent Edwards's house, Badger's Court.

MARY EAST

Known as Mop Idol, Joey's very comely wife who cleans for the Travis-Locks and Seth and Corinna when they're down in Willowwood.

VALENT EDWARDS

Brusque but intensely charismatic widower and a man of the people in his middle sixties. Ex-Premier League goalkeeper remembered for his legendary save in Cup Final. Leaving football, his hawk-like goalkeeper's eyes have found gaps in every market, making him a major player on the world stage. Valent has caused huge excitement in Willowwood, buying the big house, Badger's Court.

TILDA FLOOD

The village schoolmistress – excellent and loving primary teacher, whose pretty face is ruined by very buck teeth. Gagging for marriage and a family, Tilda has developed a passion for Shagger Simmons, Willowwood's beast of a bachelor.

NIALL FORBES

Vicar of St James's, Willowwood. In despair over his dwindling congregation and as yet undisclosed fondness for his own sex. Niall is drinking rather too much of his parishioners' sherry.

DENNY FORRESTER

Harvey-Holden's embattled head lad.

MARTI GLUCKSTEIN

Rupert Campbell-Black's red-hot lawyer.

CRAIG GREEN

The village leftie – Green by name and Green by nature.

RALPH HARVEY-HOLDEN

A controversial, networking trainer, whose Ravenscroft yard lies to the north of Willowwood.

LYSANDER HAWKLEY

Rupert Campbell-Black's assistant, brilliant at bringing on horses.

HINTON

Etta Bancroft's gardener at Bluebell Hill.

JOSH

Handsome stable lad working for Marius Oakridge.

RAFIQ KHAN

A magnificently moody Pakistani with matchless looks and militant tendencies. After a stint in prison for suspected terrorism, where he learns to love and look after racehorses, Rafiq is trying to make it as a jockey.

BILLY LLOYD-FOX

Ex-Olympic showjumper and much loved BBC sports correspondent.

JANEY LLOYD-FOX

Billy's wife, a totally unprincipled journalist.

AMBER LLOYD-FOX

Billy and Janey's ravishing daughter. A cool beauty determined to make it in National Hunt racing, where she is encountering bias against women jockeys.

ALAN MACBETH

Carrie Bancroft's husband. His talent as a writer is somewhat dissipated by a thirst for alcohol, only equalled by a taste for winners. Alan's unsung skills as a househusband, on the other hand, have contributed hugely to Carrie's success.

TRIXIE MACBETH

Carrie Bancroft and Alan Macbeth's long-legged teenage daughter, disastrously lacking in parental attention and totally aware of her overwhelming sex appeal.

OLD MRS MALMESBURY

Willowood bidy who saves badgers and habitually gets the wrong end of the stick.

MICHAEL MEAGAN

One of Rupert Campbell-Black's stable lads.

MICHELLE

A seductive, scheming stable lass at Marius Oakridge's yard.

SILAS 'SHADE' MURCHIESON

Sexy but shady arms dealer and owner with more than twenty horses in training and definitely something of the night about him.

NUALA

An Animal Rights heroine.

'KILLER' O'KAGAN

King of the Irish jockeys, who rules the weighing room, goes brutally to work on horses with great success and has no scruples whatsoever.

MARIUS OAKRIDGE

An obsessive, brilliant trainer, who bonds with horses but woefully lacks the small talk necessary to charm owners. Marius's yard, Throstledown, is to the south of Willowwood.

OLIVIA OAKRIDGE

Marius's wife and, to many, the only good thing about Marius. Olivia's charm makes up for her husband's lack of diplomacy as she works her backside off cherishing horses, stable jockeys and owners.

INDIA OAKRIDGE

Marius and Olivia's five-year-old daughter.

BLANCHE OSBORNE

Sampson Bancroft's *mâîtresse-en-titre*.

BASIL OSBORNE

Blanche's complaisant husband.

JOYCE PAINSWICK

Formerly Hengist Brett-Taylor's dragon of a secretary at Bagley Hall, retired to a cottage in Willowwood and missing school life dreadfully.

JASON (JASE) PERRY

A farrier who mostly shoes racehorses, consequently best gossip and worst

tipster in the world.
Partner of Woody Adams
and Joey East in a racing
syndicate entitled the
Terrible Trio, which has a
good deal more fun than
success.

HAROLD POCOCK

Willowood widower and
gardener to Ione Travis-
Lock. Runs the allotments,
which mean a lot to him,
and as Tower Captain
rules the St James's
bellringers.

CHARLIE RADCLIFFE

Long-suffering vet.

BONNY RICHARDS

Valent Edwards's trophy
mistress – a stunning,
hugely fancied actress
determined to be taken
seriously, paranoid about
media interest in her sex
life and gold-digging
ability.

ROGUE ROGERS

Prince Charming of the
Irish jockeys, who battles
with Killer O'Kagan for
weighing-room rule.
Awesome rider of horses
and women, Rogue is
forgiven his bad behaviour
because the racing world
needs stars.

TOMMY RUDDOCK

Marius Oakridge's sweet-natured stable lass, no beauty – therefore adored more by the horses than the opposite sex.

RUTHIE

Etta Bancroft's cleaner at Bluebell Hill.

'SHAGGER' SIMMONS

A City Slacker – but shrewd financially. A bachelor bruiser, he owns a weekend cottage in Willowood. Has an on-off relationship with Tilda Flood, who longs for a ring but is more often left looking after Shagger's holiday lets.

CECIL STROUD

A red-hot QC.

BRIAN TENBY

Sampson Bancroft's lawyer.

ALBAN TRAVIS-LOCK

Charming, self-deprecating, newly retired British ambassador who has mostly served in Arab countries. Desperately missing embassy life and spending rather too much time in the Fox with Alan Macbeth.

IONE TRAVIS-LOCK

Alban's formidable wife – with her sister the last living descendants of Sir Francis Framlingham, whose twelfth-century stone effigy lies in St James's church, Willowood. After forty years as an ambassador's wife, Ione, a serious gardener, has returned to Willowood Hall to reclaim her rights as lady of the manor.

TRESA

A seductive blonde stable lass working for Marius Oakridge.

VAKIL

A sinister Pakistani stable lad working for Ralph Harvey-Holden.

JIMMY WADE

Former stable lad at Ravenscroft, in prison with Rafiq Khan.

CORINNA WATERS

A very famous and still beautiful actress in her late fifties who lives with Seth Bainton. Corinna and Seth have an open partnership.

TOBY AND PHOEBE
WEATHERALL

Newishly weds with a house in Fulham, who weekend in Wild Rose Cottage in Willowood. Phoebe, very pretty, works in an art gallery. Toby, rather pink, white and chinless, works nervously for Carrie Bancroft in the City, but is a nephew of Ione Travis-Lock, which means they are asked everywhere. Toby is a great friend of Shagger Simmons, who both he and Phoebe think is a hoot.

JUDGE STANFORD WILKES

A wise, not-so-young judge.

THE ANIMALS

ARAMINTA	Alban Travis-Lock's black Labrador, missing embassy life even more than her master.
BAFFORD PLAYBOY	Shade Murchieson's awesome bay gelding, trained by Ralph Harvey-Holden. A bully.
BULLYDOZER	A huge, sweet Irish gelding belonging to Shade Murchieson.
BARTLETT	Etta Bancroft's Golden Retriever.
CADBURY	Dora Belvedon's chocolate Labrador.
CHISOLM	A rescued goat – companion to Mrs Wilkinson.
COUNT ROMEO	A very lazy equine narcissist devoted to Mrs Wilkinson.
GWENNY	Harold Pocock's black cat, who moves house mid-story.

DILYS	A sheep, companion to Furious.
FAMILY DOG (DOGGIE)	A short-legged sweet-faced hurdler, owned by the Terrible Trio syndicate.
FURIOUS	A delinquent rescued racehorse, destined for a career move into polo or eventing, but returning instead to National Hunt racing.
HORACE	A Shetland with attitude.
ILKLEY HALL	Shade Murchieson's equally awesome black gelding, trained by Marius Oakridge.
JUDY'S PET	A horse.
OXFORD	A foxhound.
STOP PRESTON, OH MY GOODNESS AND HISTORY PAINTING	All horses trained by Marius Oakridge.
LOVE RAT	Rupert Campbell-Black's most successful stallion.
LUSTY	Love Rat's son, Rupert Campbell-Black's most successful liver chestnut National Hunt gelding.
MISTLETOE	Marius Oakridge's lurcher.
NOT FOR CROWE	Incurably greedy tailless wonder, owned by the Terrible Trio syndicate.

PRICELESS

Seth Bainton's beautiful
black greyhound.

SIR CUTHBERT

A doughty dapple-grey
warrior. Trained by Marius
Oakridge. Owned by
Nancy Crowe.

MRS WILKINSON

The Village Horse.

JUMP!

1

Bullies and dictators are everywhere, not just imposing their stranglehold on vast companies and entire continents but also creating reigns of terror within small businesses and even marriages.

Sampson Bancroft was both a Hitler at work, where he kept 50,000 employees worldwide on the jump, but also at home where he imprisoned, albeit in a beautiful Dorset house called Bluebell Hill, Etta, his sweet wife of forty-five years.

Sampson Bancroft had been so phenomenally successful in both property and engineering that legends were woven around him.

On one occasion, having reached a deadlock while trying to sell a thousand Bancroft engines to the Chinese, he had stunned the meeting by suddenly announcing:

‘If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I have to go and fuck my secretary.’

Although this was interpreted to bemused Chinese officials as a family crisis, by the time Sampson returned forty minutes later the world’s markets had shifted dramatically, a foreign power had threatened China and the deal was closed. No one was sure what Sampson had been up to but ‘having a Bancroft’ became City terminology for a quick shag.

Sampson’s courtship of his wife Etta in the early sixties, known as *A la recherche du temps perdu*, had also gone into

folklore. Sampson, then in his twenties, was already running his own company, Bancroft Engineering, when on the way out to lunch he had spotted Etta, the latest temp, tearing out her lustrous curls in the typing pool.

Learning on his return that she had just been fired for hopeless incompetence by the personnel lady, Sampson fired the personnel lady.

Arriving home to her parents' house in Thames Ditton, a tearful Etta, terrified of confessing she'd been sacked yet again, found Sampson's dark green XK120 parked outside. Such was the brutal splendour of his blond looks and the force of his personality that he and Etta were engaged in a month, to the delight of her elderly parents, who were relieved that their dreamy, unworldly daughter would be so well provided for.

But even during their courtship, Sampson always put Etta down, and frequently quoted W. H. Davies's 'Sweet Stay-at-Home':

I love thee for a heart that's kind,
Not for the knowledge in thy mind.

It was Etta's kind heart, ironically, that had most infuriated Sampson over the years. She would slip his money to charities or friends or visiting workmen, and listen endlessly to girlfriends' problems on the telephone: 'Oh, you poor, poor thing, how awful.'

Sampson also resented Etta's passion for animals. As an only child, she had been particularly close to the family fox terriers and to Snowy, the grey Welsh pony, which her parents had scrimped and saved to buy her and whose photograph still adorned her dressing table. Sampson, who gambled thousands daily on the stock market, hit the roof whenever he caught her putting a tenner on a big race.

He was even angrier when he discovered that Roddy Smithson, the local riding master in Dorset, knowing Etta loved greys and hoping she would visit his stables more

frequently, had offered her free access to a lovely dapple-grey mare. Sampson promptly forbade any further contact. He also removed his considerable custom from the local garage, on learning that the manager was servicing Etta's Golf for nothing.

Sampson loathed men who effortlessly attracted women, particularly when, like himself, they were tall, blond, rich and arrogant. Etta's pin-up, the owner-trainer Rupert Campbell-Black, whom she'd hero-worshipped since his showjumping days in the seventies, was therefore anathema.

Sampson resented his wife for being so lovable. For a start Etta was so pretty, her complexion delicate as apple blossom, her soft curls the glowing light brown of woods before the leaves break through in springtime, and her eyes, the dark blue of clouds ushering in an April shower, were never far from tears or laughter. She also had a lovely curvy figure (which Sampson had kept in check by weighing her once a week), slender ankles and the natural grace of a dancer.

But it was not just Etta's prettiness. When Sampson wasn't around, her natural high spirits and cheerfulness broke in.

She had such a loving smile, indicating she was really pleased to see you, such an infectious laugh, such a gentle voice, interrupted by squeaks of excitement, such a sweet, confiding way of tucking her arm through yours and asking after your wife or your sick grandchild or how your exams had gone, as if she really minded.

The words 'that bastard Bancroft' were never far from the lips of those familiar with the set-up. It was common knowledge in Dorset that Sampson not only bullied Etta insensible but kept her very short.

Why hadn't she left him? For the same reason that birds often don't escape when the cage door is left open: she had lost the ability to fly. Then she couldn't leave because disaster struck.

Except for the rare sporting injury, Sampson had never been ill. His superhuman energy had enabled him to work all day and make love all night. Then, during a long winter in

the early 2000s, his secretary noticed Sampson nodding off in the afternoon and even during crucial meetings.

In May, the firm's annual cricket match took place, traditionally held on Sampson's birthday to provide yet another showcase for his prowess. Even into his seventies he had taken wickets and knocked up the odd forty runs. This year he was bowled first ball and dropped two easy catches.

At the dinner afterwards, Sampson, who never forgot a face, blanked half the distinguished guests, and his normally rabble-rousing speech to the faithful was slurred and rambling.

Leaving the hotel, he had tripped and hit his head on a pillar and ended up in hospital. Here blood tests revealed Howitt's – a dreaded, degenerative heart disease.

An outraged Sampson turned to the internet. Finding a prognosis not only of blindness and the collapse of organs and muscles but also of searing pain and probable dementia, he rolled up at a board meeting next day and once again collapsed. As his resignation became official, shares in Bancroft Engineering went into temporary free fall.

Back at Bluebell Hill, where he was confined to bed or a wheelchair, Sampson could no longer terrorize Etta by appearing massive-shouldered and six foot three in doorways, his eyes as cold as a lake at twilight.

Instead he bellowed from all over the house but, except for the occasional very pretty carer allowed in to read or sit with him, he refused to let anyone but Etta look after him.

'I can understand that,' cooed an admiring district nurse. 'Mr Bancroft is too proud a man to let a strange woman see him naked.'

That had never been Sampson's problem, thought Etta wryly, remembering the serial mistresses he had kept throughout his marriage. But ever kind-hearted, aware that Sampson could no longer walk, was in dreadful pain, felt mocked by the books in his library that he could no longer read, and was finding even children's crosswords increasingly difficult as his mind and his grasp on reality slid away, Etta felt desperately sorry for him.

Nor did their two children provide much solace. More than forty years ago Etta had nearly died giving birth to two hulking twins, Martin and Carrie, neither of whom she had managed to breastfeed. They seemed to have inherited Sampson's contempt for their mother. Whenever she had tried to cuddle them they had gone rigid and wriggled out of her arms.

Not that they got on any better with each other, perhaps because when they were children Sampson, with stopwatch poised, had set them constantly at odds, not just on tennis court or sports track or in icy swimming pool but in endless history, geography and general knowledge tests.

As a result both twins were indelibly competitive. Dark, handsome, square-jawed Martin and heavy-faced Carrie, who was even more successful in the City than her brother, gazed belligerently out of silver frames on Sampson's desk.

Neither child had been assiduous in visiting their stricken father, who admittedly wasn't keen on his grandchildren and roared with rage when they switched television channels or rampaged across his painful feet.

When five-year-old Drummond managed to bugger both the stairlift and Sampson's reclining chair on the same morning, his father Martin had threatened to smack him. Whereupon Sampson, to the rapture of Martin's wife Romy, had growled that nothing could be achieved by smacking children – then spoilt it all by saying the only answer was to shoot them.

Since then, while claiming 'Dad was such a joker', both Martin and Carrie had found it hard to tear themselves away from their brilliant careers. To assuage their consciences, however, they encouraged others to descend on Bluebell Hill:

'Dad's so desperate for intellectual stimulus and cheering up and Mother's got nothing to do.'

This led to Etta further exhausting herself cooking and putting up for the night Sampson's friends, or his ex-mistresses and their husbands. Street angel, house devil. Sampson

managed to be polite, even genial, to them while remaining foul to Etta. Tiredness from continually disturbed nights made her absent-minded, groping for names or why she'd come into a room, which irritated Sampson more than ever.

Early on in their marriage they had been nicknamed Sampson and Delicious because Etta had been so engaging. Even now Sampson's visiting ex-colleagues and friends, many of whom he had cuckolded, squeezed her waist. Like Penelope's suitors, they appreciated what a rich and charming prospect she would be, if anything happened to Sampson.

'We know it's just as tough for the carer,' they whispered as they thrust ribboned boxes of Belgian chocolates into her hands.

'So nice to see you relaxing, Etta,' said their wives tartly. 'London's so tiring.'

Etta's solace throughout her marriage, when Sampson had spent so much time away, had been her girlfriends. Now home all day, Sampson grew increasingly jealous, loathing it when they dropped in or chatted to Etta on the telephone. As she had felt compelled to refuse their invitations, they had drifted away.

Etta's refuge was her exquisite garden, created over thirty-five years, in which her sense of design and colour had had the chance to blossom. She'd been working on a flame-red rose to be called Sampson when he'd fallen ill. In her greenhouse, she grafted plant on to plant, creating ravishing new species.

Her other comfort, apart from her bird table and reading poetry and novels, was Bartlett, her ancient Golden Retriever, who she took on increasingly slow walks round the countryside, wondering who would go first, Bartlett or Sampson. Was there life after Sampson? she was bitterly ashamed of wondering. A patient could live with Howitt's, although it would increase its hideous grip, for twenty years.

2

One March morning, nearly two years after Sampson was struck down, Etta woke in rare excitement. Despite having been roused several times in the night to turn Sampson over and readjust his pillows, she remembered that the guest-free day ahead coincided with the first day of the Cheltenham Festival. If she could settle Sampson in his study with a video of an enthralling Test match or a Grand Prix, she could sneak off to watch the races in the kitchen – particularly as her pin-up and Sampson’s *bête noire*, Rupert Campbell-Black, had a horse running in a big hurdle race.

After that the day went downhill. Sampson, who insisted on opening the post, discovered a letter from one of her few remaining girlfriends enclosing Etta’s £100 winnings on a horse called Tigerish Tom: ‘Such a brilliant tip, darling, here’s your share. Hughie and I put on a hundred and celebrated with a wonderful dinner at the Manoir last night. Hope Sampson isn’t giving you a horrid time.’

Sampson’s roar of rage, ‘You’re not allowed to bet, Etta,’ rose to a bellow when he opened a receipt for another £100 from SHAC, the animal rights group battling to close down the laboratories in Huntingdon.

‘How dare you support them, Etta! D’you want to kill me? How can they ever find a cure unless they test on animals?’

Worse was to come. As a result of a warm dry spell, spartan Sampson had turned off the central heating. Last night the

temperature had plummeted and now he was bucketing around in his wheelchair, demanding the whereabouts of the hot electric pad which eased the pain in his back.

Etta had just said she had no idea when, passing a dog basket in the hall, Sampson caught sight of the flex of the electric pad coming out from under the tartan rug on which Bartlett was happily snoring.

Sampson exploded. Etta fled to the kitchen. When she crept back later with Sampson's midday pills and a glass of claret, she found him in a further rage. He'd been ringing some bloody woman all morning but she'd been permanently engaged. Yet when he thrust the number on a piece of blue writing paper towards her, she realized he'd been ringing his own number and her heart went out to him. Then it retreated as the telephone rang.

'Sampy darling,' cooed a voice as Etta answered it, 'just to let you know it's Cheltenham races and roadworks on the M4 so we probably won't be with you before one.'

Blanche Osborne was Sampson's longest-term mistress. Beautiful, self-satisfied, she had been spoilt by Basil, her complaisant husband, who'd been rewarded for the blind eye he'd turned with excellent deals from Sampson over the years.

'Blanche and Basil will be with us around one,' Etta told Sampson, then, with a surge of spirit: 'I wasn't aware.'

'I told you last week,' interrupted Sampson, 'but you never listen. Why don't you stop being obstinate and get that deaf aid.'

By the time Etta had chucked a leg of lamb in the oven and defrosted a raspberry Pavlova, lit the fire, laid the table in Sampson's study and organized drinks, Blanche, who liked to catch her on the hop, had arrived half an hour early, giving Etta no time to change, put on make-up or hardly wash.

Blanche was looking stunning, her sleek silvery-grey bob enhanced by a red suit with a large ruby brooch on the lapel in the shape of a geranium – no doubt given to her by Sampson. Instantly she went into an orgy of plumping

Sampson's cushions, re-buttoning his saxe-blue cardigan, which Etta's trembling fingers had done up all wrong earlier, and smoothing his hair with a dampened hairbrush.

'We must make you look as handsome as possible.'

Basil, who had a puce face and a fat tummy, reminding Etta of Keats's poem about the pot of basil, tucked into a large whisky and the *Financial Times*, while Blanche talked to Sampson. Etta raced back and forth to the kitchen, and throughout lunch, crying: 'You'll need mince sauce', 'Redcurrant jelly?', 'Sorry I forgot the water jug' and 'More cream on your raspberries?'

No one noticed when she went missing. With the sound turned down, she lingered in the kitchen to watch the races.

They had moved on to celery and a very ripe Brie, and Sampson was beginning to look grey from the exertion, when Etta noticed the clock edging towards three fifteen.

'You need another bottle of red and a glass of port,' she said airily.

Back in the kitchen to open the wine she couldn't resist turning up the sound, mindlessly finishing off the Pavlova as the coloured carousel of jockeys and horses circled at the start. Instantly she recognized Rupert's dark blue and emerald green colours, today worn by Rupert's longtime stable jockey Bluey Charteris, whom Rupert, spurning younger jockeys, had coaxed out of retirement to ride a special horse.

This was Lusty, a magnificent plunging liver chestnut showing a lot of white eye. Home-bred and the son of Rupert's greatest stallion, Love Rat, Lusty had been disappointing on the flat. Once gelded, however, he had won over hurdles, but was still at five the most inexperienced horse in the race.

'Oh!' Etta gave a sigh of longing and took a slug of red out of the newly opened bottle, for there was Rupert himself, gimlet blue eyes narrowed, smooth Dubai tan displaying none of those wine-dark rivulets caused by years of icy winds pulverizing the veins. His thick brushed-back gold hair was

hidden by a trilby tipped over his Greek nose. A covert coat emphasized the broad shoulders and long lean body. Goodness, he was heaven.

Having rudely refused to discuss his horse's prospects with any of the press, he had taken the unusual step of going down to the start to calm Lusty. Now, with his arm round the horse's neck, he was repeatedly smoothing his satin shoulders.

The cameras then switched to Rupert's lovely wife Taggie, who, in a big midnight-blue hat with a feather, was biting her nails in the stands.

The horses were coming in, bunching up towards the tape, and they were off, lifted by the most exhilarating noise in the world: the Cheltenham roar. Etta turned up the volume even further to hear the Channel 4 commentary over the rattle of hurdles and the thunder of hooves on dry ground.

Three from home, Lusty was still tucked up in the back watching the leaders battling it out. Bluey unleashed him, hurtling up the field, overtaking everything. Coming up the straight, Bluey glanced back between his legs. The rest were nowhere.

'Come on, Lusty!' screamed Etta, as with the relief of a fox who'd shaken off the pack Lusty sauntered past the post and Cheltenham exploded, hats and race cards hurled in the air.

As two beaming red-coated huntsmen led them back past wildly cheering crowds, Bluey rose in his stirrups to punch the air with both fists and nearly got bucked off by a still fresh Lusty.

Now the cameras were on an exultant Rupert who'd loped up from the start, pumping Bluey's hand, hugging Lusty and Lusty's ecstatically sobbing stable lass, and the crowd erupted once more.

Rupert had mostly deserted jump racing for the flat but the punters loved him, and once again he'd delivered. Taking another celebratory slug, Etta jumped higher than Lusty, as an accusing voice cried: 'We thought you were fetch-ing us another bottle. Sampson's getting very stressed, he

must be due his second lot of pills and poor Basil's still waiting for his glass of port.'

'So sorry,' gasped Etta.

'And now you've spilled wine all over your jersey. You really ought to smarten yourself up,' chided Blanche, grabbing the bottle and racing back to Sampson.

Scurrying after her, dripping port like drops of blood on the flagstones, Etta heard Blanche say: 'She was drinking from the bottle and drooling over Rupert Campbell-Black, triumphalist as ever, winning some race at Cheltenham.'

'Would you all like some coffee and we can eat your lovely chocolates?' asked Etta nervously.

'Not if it means you disappearing for another hour to salivate over Rupert Campbell-Black,' snapped Sampson.

He wouldn't bawl her out before Blanche and Basil, that would come later.

Bartlett stirred in her sleep. Etta must walk her before it got dark and the greenhouse needed watering, but Blanche and Basil were showing no signs of leaving.

Blanche was rhapsodizing over the children.

'So good-looking – you must be so proud. So brilliant Carrie winning that High Flyer of the Year award and Martin doing so well in the marathon, he looked almost as dishy as his dad on telly.'

Basil slept.

If she had known they were coming, Etta would have arranged for Ruthie, her daily, to pop in to wash up and stay on to keep an eye on Sampson, but Ruthie had gone to her grandson's school play. The sun was sinking, round and red like Basil, as they finally left. Feeling dreadful, knowing Sampson shouldn't be abandoned in such a choleric mood, even with the distraction of a video of the Bahrain Grand Prix, Etta escaped to walk Bartlett.

Scuttling through drifts of white daffodils and blue scillas, past un-cut-back flower beds, through an unpruned rose walk, she reached the fields. Here she got her daily horse fix,

from a lovely bay mare and her plump skewbald Shetland companion. Although they flattened their ears and nipped each other as Etta gave them chopped carrot, the two horses were utterly devoted. If parted, their anguished cries could be heard by half of Dorset.

A proper marriage, thought Etta wistfully.

Bartlett progressed slowly, her waving blond tail gathering burrs, stopping to sniff everything, leaving Etta to admire the sulphur explosion of the pussy willows and leaves escaping like green rabbit ears from the lank brown coils of the traveller's joy. Nature had already carpeted the woodland floor with wild garlic. As she returned through the trees, she could see the faded russet towers and gables of Bluebell Hill warmed by the last fires of the sun.

'Come on, Bartlett.'

Bartlett smiled and refused to be hurried.

Where the wood joined the garden, Etta found a sycamore blown down by the recent gales and gave a cry as she noticed that three or four bluebells, trapped beneath its trunk, had struggled out from underneath and were trying to flower. Such was their longing to bloom.

Frantically Etta tried to roll back the tree but it was too heavy. She'd get Hinton the gardener to lift it tomorrow and chop up the logs. Tomorrow she'd prune the roses.

Bartlett was snuffling smugly ahead, searching for a stick or a leaf to take home as a present for Sampson.

There was no bellowing as they entered the house, nor when Etta called out. In the drawing room, she found Sampson slumped in his wheelchair. The television was still on, with Bancroft engines roaring round the track. The telephone had fallen from Sampson's hand. His grey, waxy, outraged face would haunt her for ever. And wilt thou leave me thus? He had been extinguished by a massive heart attack.