

## Praise for Jilly Cooper and *Mount!*

‘I couldn’t have loved this delightful  
doorstep of a read any more’ *Daily Mail*

‘Jilly is about bringing joy into your life: daft, silly, boozy  
joy . . . There is no one else like Cooper’ *Guardian*

‘Fun, sexy and unputdownable’ Marian Keyes

‘Packed with warmth, wit and unforgettable characters,  
this is an utterly joyous read’ *Daily Express*

‘I know of no woman my age who won’t admit that  
Rupert Campbell-Black nearly ruined them for  
other men for life’ Jojo Moyes

‘This tale of rivalries, sabotage – and, of course, sex – will  
have Cooper’s army of fans galloping to the finish line’  
*Sunday Mirror*

‘Reading *Mount!* was pure, unadulterated joy and makes  
me want to move to Rutshire, instantly. Jilly Cooper is on  
top, effervescent form, and I loved every moment’  
Sophie Kinsella

‘It’s Cooper doing what she does best . . . it’s a  
thoroughly enjoyable roll in the hay’ *The Times*

‘A big yummy brick of a book packed with horses,  
glamour, comedy and lashings of luxury sex . . .  
A joy from the start. Divine’ *Saga*

‘I devoured *Mount!* Rupert Campbell-Black  
is . . . still delicious’ *Tatler*

‘Irresistible’ *Daily Telegraph*

*Also by Jilly Cooper*

FICTION

Riders  
Rivals  
Polo  
The Man Who Made  
Husbands Jealous  
Appassionata  
Score!  
Pandora  
Wicked!  
Jump!  
Mount!

NON-FICTION

How to Stay Married  
How to Survive from Nine to Five  
Jolly Super  
Men and Supermen  
Jolly Super Too  
Women and Superwomen  
Work and Wedlock  
Jolly Superlative  
Super Men and Super Women  
Super Jilly  
Class  
Super Cooper  
Intelligent and Loyal  
Jolly Marsupial  
Animals in War  
The Common Years  
Hotfoot to Zabriskie Point  
(with Patrick Lichfield)  
How to Survive Christmas  
Turn Right at the Spotted Dog  
Angels Rush In  
Araminta's Wedding

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Little Mabel  
Little Mabel's Great Escape  
Little Mabel Wins  
Little Mabel Saves the Day

ROMANCE

Emily  
Bella  
Harriet  
Octavia  
Prudence  
Imogen  
Lisa & Co

ANTHOLOGIES

The British in Love  
Violets and Vinegar

For more information on Jilly Cooper and her books,  
see her website at [www.jillycooper.co.uk](http://www.jillycooper.co.uk)

**MOUNT!**  
**JILLY COOPER**



**CORGI BOOKS**

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To dear Amanda Butler, who  
by her sweet nature, sense of fun  
and unbelievable efficiency has  
transformed my life.

## CAST OF CHARACTERS IN 1786

RUPERT BLACK	A bloodstock expert and awfully amusing adventurer.
THE FOURTH BARON RUTSHIRE	A lecherous old peer, owning much of the county, including Rutminster Racecourse.
THE HON. JAMES NORTHFIELD	Lord Rutshire's scholarly reclusive elder son.
THE HON. GISELA NORTHFIELD	Ex-kitchenmaid and James' very new wife.
THE HON. RUFUS NORTHFIELD	Lord Rutshire's younger son, hard man to hounds, hellraiser, inseparable crony of Rupert Black and far more suited to run the estate.

## THE ANIMALS

SWEET AZURE

Rupert Black's blue roan mare.

SPARTAN

James Northfield's dark-brown gelding.

SEEKER

James Northfield's white mastiff.

THIRD LEOPARD

A super-stallion, winner of the St Leger and Leading Sire.

## CAST OF PRINCIPAL CONTEMPORARY CHARACTERS

SHEIKH ABDUL BADDI

Qatari big hitter, newly obsessed with racing and snapping up star horses.

WOODY ADAMS

Delectable Willowwood tree surgeon. Live-in lover of Canon Niall Forbes.

EDDIE ALDERTON

Rupert Campbell-Black's American grandson, known as Young Eddie. Gilded brat, poster boy and former flat jockey trying his luck at jump racing, Eddie is also trying to stay faithful to his girlfriend, Trixie Macbeth.

PARIS ALVASTON

Dora Belvedon's boyfriend. Ice-cool Adonis simultaneously reading Classics at Cambridge and forging a highly successful acting career.



SETH BAINTON

Unscrupulous, drop-dead gorgeous, middle-aged actor known as Mr Bulging Crotchester and the estranged father of Trixie Macbeth's forthcoming baby.

MARTIN BANCROFT

An appalling fundraising creep.

BRUTE BARRACLOUGH

A dodgy racehorse trainer, who gets a lot of extra-marital sex.

ROSARIA BARRACLOUGH

Brute's sweet, bullied, endlessly cheated-on wife, whose hard work and gift with horses holds his yard together.

HARMONY BATES

Excellent but extremely large Valhalla stable lass, more adored by horses than the opposite sex.

DORA BELVEDON

Eighteen-year-old smart cookie, besotted with dogs, horses and Paris Alvaston. Multi-tasks as press officer for Mrs Wilkinson and ghost-writer for both Rupert Campbell-Black and a goat called Chisolm.

JAMES BENSON	A smooth and very expensive private doctor.
LESTER BOLTON	Internet tycoon specializing in porn, living in Willowood and as short on inches as he is on charm.
CINDY BOLTON	Lester's child bride, an extremely successful porn star and sometime race-horse owner.
WALTER BRANDON	Rupert's Head Lad, in charge of Rupert's yard. Known as Walter Walter because he shoves his nose in everywhere.
SAM BRIDLINGTON	Chairman of Panel at the British Racing Association enquiry.
RUPERT CAMPBELL-BLACK	Hugely successful owner, trainer, breeder, who bestrides the racing world like a colossus. Despite being as bloody-minded as he is beautiful, still Nirvana for most women.
TAGGIE CAMPBELL-BLACK	His second wife, an angel.

BIANCA CAMPBELL-BLACK	Rupert and Taggie's ravishing Colombian adopted daughter, best friend of Dora Belvedon, girlfriend of rising football star, Feral Jackson.
XAVIER CAMPBELL-BLACK	Rupert and Taggie's adopted Colombian son – a point-to-point rider.
EDDIE CAMPBELL-BLACK	Rupert's increasingly dotty father, known as Old Eddie. Five times married and sexual buccaneer of the old school.
ADRIAN CAMPBELL-BLACK	Rupert's younger brother, who runs a New York art gallery. Boyfriend of Baby Spinosissimo.
JEMMY CARTER	Apprentice jockey and Penscombe stable lad, lacks ambition despite huge potential.
CELESTE	A lazy, malevolent, manipulative but extremely pretty Penscombe stable lass.
COLIN CHALFORD (Mr Fat and Happy)	A very nice rich man looking for love.

CLOVER	Penscombe's youngest stable lass.
MAJOR NORMAN CUNLIFFE	Retired bank manager and pompous ass, treasurer of Willowood syndicate who formerly owned Mrs Wilkinson.
MANU DE LA TOUR	Charismatic French jockey.
VALENT EDWARDS	Etta Bancroft's brusque, but intensely kind and charismatic, new husband. Man of the people and ex-Premier League footballer, his hawk-like goalkeeper eyes have found gaps in every market, making him a major player on the world financial stage.
ETTA EDWARDS	A poppet – very newly married to Valent Edwards, and the original rescuer and now owner of Grand National winner, Mrs Wilkinson.
CANON NIALL FORBES	Formerly vicar of Willowood and Woody Adams' boyfriend.
MRS FORD-WINTERS	Geoffrey's owner. Resident of Ashbourne House, a Rutshire care home.

GEE GEE	Gentle giantess and Junoesque Penscombe stud hand, worshipped by Meerkat.
GERALDINE	Rupert's PA who'd like to be the next Mrs Campbell-Black. A bitch.
MARTI GLUCKSTEIN	Rupert's lawyer.
CATHAL GOGAN	Rupert's travelling Head Lad, in charge of horses the moment they leave the yard.
SIMMY HALLIDAY	Rupert's Estate Manager.
DAME HERMIONE HAREFIELD	World-famous diva, and Cosmo Rannaldini's mother, seriously tiresome, brings out the Crippen in all.
LADY HAWKLEY (HELEN)	Mother of Marcus and Tabitha Campbell-Black. A nervy beauty. Having numbered Rupert and Roberto Rannaldini as former husbands, Helen hoped marriage to ex-headmaster and classical scholar, David Hawkley, would mean calmer waters but they seem to have drifted apart.

HANJI HIROSHI	Leading Japanese jockey.
PAT INGLIS	Penscombe's essentially kind and phlegmatic Stallion Master.
HAMMOND JOHNSON	Leading American jockey.
GAVIN LATTON	Rupert Campbell-Black's work rider, a genius with horses, marred by alcoholism exacerbated by the contemptuous infidelity of his wife, Bethany.
BETHANY LATTON	A beautiful bitchy nymphomaniac.
JANEY LLOYD-FOX	Billy Lloyd-Foxe's widow, a totally unprincipled journalist on the hunt for a new husband.
ISA LOVELL	A brilliant obsessive trainer and ex-champion jockey – a Heathcliff of the gallops, now in sinister partnership with Cosmo Rannaldini, with a yard and a stud at Valhalla doing alarmingly well.
MARTY LOVELL	Isa's very boyish Australian second wife.

ROMAN LOVELL

Isa and Marty's eighteen-year-old son, a jockey.

ALAN MACBETH

Etta Edwards' beguiling son-in-law, author of *Wilkie*, a hugely successful biography of Mrs Wilkinson.

TRIXIE MACBETH

Extremely pretty and very bright teenage granddaughter of Etta Edwards. Estranged from Seth Bainton, the caddish middle-aged father of her forthcoming baby. Trixie is trying to form a relationship with the seriously wayward Eddie Alderton.

HEREWARD/HERRY  
MACBETH

Trixie's baby son, known as Hereward the Awake.

LOUISE MALONE

Very pretty Penscombe stable lass, known as Lou-easy because of her freedom with her favours.

MARKETA

A gorgeous, voluble, volatile, voluptuous Penscombe stable lass from the Czech Republic who adores horses and the opposite sex.

TEDDY MATTHEWS	Hong Kong jockey nearing retirement.
TARQUIN (TARQUI) MCGALL	Joint First Jockey to Cosmo Rannaldini and Isa Lovell. The go-to jockey for the big occasion, Tarqui goes every which way sexually.
ASHLEY (ASH) MCINTYRE	Isa Lovell's chillingly ruthless stable jockey, a post shared with Tarqui McGall. Rupert refers to the gay Ashley and the bisexual Tarqui as 'Sodom and Begorrah'.
MICHAEL MEAGAN	Penscombe work rider and sometime stud hand known as Roving Mike.
MEERKAT	Nickname for Stevie O'Dell. Rupert Campbell-Black's adorable second jockey.
GALA MILBURN	A Zimbabwean carer, employed to look after Old Eddie Campbell-Black.
THE HON. RODDY NORTHFIELD	Lord Rutshire's younger brother. A Stipendiary Steward and pillar of the British Racing Association, a self-important prat, nicknamed Famous Grouse because of his incessant nitpicking.



ENID NORTHFIELD	Roddy's wife, known as 'Damsire' because of her obsession with horses' pedigrees.
CHAS NORVILLE	Racehorse trainer, very reliant on charm and the ability to give his owners a good time.
LIONEL (LION) O'CONNOR	Rupert's workmanlike and conscientious stable jockey.
DERMIE O'DRISCOLL	Geoffrey's jockey.
LORD O'HARA (DECLAN)	Ex-television megastar and author. Rupert Campbell-Black's father-in-law.
LADY O'HARA (MAUD)	His feckless actress wife.
CHARLIE RADCLIFFE	An excellent vet.
COSMO RANNALDINI	Dame Hermione Harefield's son, a little fiend possessing the same lethal brand of sex appeal as his evil conductor father, the late Roberto Rannaldini. Forming a partnership with Isa Lovell, Cosmo has transformed the land round the haunted Abbey of Valhalla into a magnificent state-of-the-art racing yard and stud.

WOLFIE RANNALDINI	Cosmo's stepbrother, as straight and honourable as Cosmo is corrupt.
TABITHA RANNALDINI	Rupert Campbell-Black's tempestuous daughter, Olympic eventing gold medallist, married to Wolfie Rannaldini.
TIMON RANNALDINI	Tabitha and Wolfie's six-year-old son, bears an alarming resemblance to his Uncle Cosmo.
SAPPHIRE RANNALDINI	Timon's four-year-old sister.
LORD RUTSHIRE (RUFUS)	Chairman and owner of Rutshire Racecourse, whose estate borders that of Rupert Campbell-Black, causing many territorial skirmishes over the years.
SAUVIGNON SMITHSON	Cosmo Rannaldini's stunning but utterly ruthless PA. Used by Cosmo to lead up horses and lead on owners.
BABY SPINOSISSIMO	Dazzling Australian tenor and racehorse owner, ex-lover of Isa Lovell and current lover of Rupert Campbell-Black's New York gallery-owning brother Adrian.

CONSTANCE SPRIGHTLY	A rather pushy vicar's wife.
SALLY STONEHOUSE	Member of panel at the British Racing Association enquiry.
LARK TOLLAND	A sweet, hardworking, endlessly cheerful Penscombe stable lass, harbouring a hopeless passion for Eddie Alderton.
BAO TONG	Savvy Chinese teenager, who spends several months at Penscombe learning about training and breeding racehorses.
MR TONG (GENGHIS)	Bao's father, trillionaire manufacturer of aeroplanes.
MRS TONG (AIGUO)	Second wife of Genghis Tong and Bao's stepmother.
IONE TRAVIS-LOCK	Very green, bossy-boots, married to ex-ambassador Alban, and Willowwood 'Lady of the Manor'.
JAN VAN DEVENTER	A South African carer.
BOBBY WALKER	Rupert's lorry driver.

MRS WALTON (RUTH)

Cosmo Rannaldini's mature but stunning squeeze.

MR WANG (ZIXIN)

A corrupt Chinese mafia warlord who is cruelly colonizing Africa. Also sexual predator known as 'The Great Willy of China'.

MRS WANG (BINGWEN)

His second wife – a beauty.

TOMMY WESTERHAM

Another charming race-horse trainer who ensures his owners have even more of a nice time.

## THE ANIMALS

PRICELESS	Etta Edwards' black greyhound.
BANQUO	Rupert Campbell-Black's black Labrador.
CUTHBERT	Rupert Campbell-Black's Jack Russell.
FORESTER	Taggie Campbell-Black's brindle greyhound.
GROPIUS	Gala Milburn's Staffordshire Bull Terrier.
CADBURY	Dora Belvedon's chocolate Labrador.
GILCHRIST	Rupert Campbell-Black's other Jack Russell.
GWENNY	Etta Edwards' black cat.
PURRPUSS	Another black cat – Master Quickly's stable companion.
CHISOLM	A goat – Mrs Wilkinson's stable companion and later Nanny to Master Quickly.

## RUPERT CAMPBELL-BLACK'S STALLIONS

LOVE RAT	Master Quickly's sire – Rupert's favourite.
PEPPY KOALA	A Super Star.
TITUS ANDRONICUS	A psychopath.
THANE OF FIFE	
HAMLET'S GHOST	
ENOBARBUS	
DARDANIUS	
BASSANIO	
BLOOD RIVER	A South African First Season Sire – in love with the vet.

## RUPERT CAMPBELL-BLACK'S HORSES IN TRAINING

SAFETY CAR	Another one of Rupert's favourites.
PROMISCUOUS	Son of Love Rat.
LIBERTINE	Another son of Love Rat.
PETRUCHIO	
FLEANCE	A real trier. Yet another son of Love Rat.
NEW YEAR'S DAVE	An angel. And yet another son of Love Rat.
TOUCHY FILLY	Whose stable name is PMT.
BLANK CHEKOV	Known as Chuck-Off.
BEIJING BERTIE	Ex-pat who likes lots of patting.
DELECTABLE	An appropriately named Chestnut filly.
DICK THE SECOND	
HELL BENT HAL	
SEE YOU IN A BIT (BITSY)	A pacemaker.

## **HORSES IN RUPERT CAMPBELL-BLACK'S STUD**

DOROTHY	The practice mare.
GLOUCESTER	The teaser.
MY CHILD CORDELIA	A favourite brood mare.

## **ISA LOVELL AND COSMO RANNALDINI'S ACE STALLION**

ROBERTO'S REVENGE  
(VENGIE)

## **ISA AND COSMO'S HORSES IN TRAINING** *(All progeny of Roberto's Revenge)*

FEUD FOR THOUGHT

I WILL REPAY

IVAN THE TERRORIST

NERO TOLERANCE

BONE TO PICK

BORIS BADENOUGH



EUMENIDES

VIOLETTA'S VENGEANCE

JEZABELLA

### OTHER HORSES INCLUDE

VERDI'S REQUIEM

Irish Triple Crown winner and a leading sire for past fifteen years.

MRS WILKINSON

Etta Edwards' Grand National winner.

MASTER QUICKLY

Son of Mrs Wilkinson and Love Rat – a piece of work, later trained by Rupert Campbell-Black.

WAGES OF CINDY

Cindy Bolton's brood mare.

GEOFFREY

Star colt of very humble origins, trained by Brute Barraclough.

TRANS JENNIFER

Seductive filly trained by Chas Norville, and fancied by Master Quickly.

RED TROUSERS

Roddy Northfield's colt.

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

A mighty French mare.

TO DIE FOR

A mighty American mare.

NOONDAY SILENCE

A Japanese success story.

MOBILE CHARGER

Colt trained by Tommy  
Westerham.

# PROLOGUE

*Rutshire, 1786*

The last race should have been called off, as the twin saboteurs, night and fog, crept stealthily over the course. Rutminster Cathedral spire, a landmark for miles around, was no longer visible. The Bishop of Rutminster, battling to ban racing, could identify neither rabble nor runners as he peered furiously out of his palace window.

Nor had bitter cold nor relentless drizzle dispersed a vast crowd, swarming round the betting posts, clamouring to watch the most eagerly awaited race in years – despite there being only two contenders.

The first was Rupert Black, a young adventurer, hell-raiser, hard drinker and womanizer, who possessed the hauteur of beauty, but not of birth. His father was a small Northern racehorse trainer, and in the late eighteenth century, trainers were regarded as no higher than grooms.

Rupert Black had no income and fewer principles, but was such an amusing fellow that a fast aristocratic set had taken him up, welcomed him into their houses and let him advise them on bloodstock – about which he was clearly an expert.

Rupert Black had been called 'Blackguard' and 'Black Sheep', but was more often nicknamed 'Rupert of the Roan' because of his dashing cavalry charges on the hunting field and his beautiful blue roan mare, Sweet Azure, whom he was riding in the race ahead.

Pitted against him on a vastly superior horse called Spartan was the Hon. James Northfield, elder son of the fourth Baron Northfield, who owned 2,000 Cotswold acres, which included Rutminster Racecourse.

The austere, scholarly James, who had hitherto shown little interest in the estate or in women, had then outraged his parents and scandalized society by impregnating one of his mother's kitchenmaids: a pretty Dutch girl called Gisela. Even more scandalously, he had then secretly married her.

The Hon. Rufus Northfield, except for having the same dark auburn hair, sallow complexion and close-set, fox-brown eyes, was a total contrast to his older brother James. A crack shot and rider, the inseparable crony of Rupert Black, Rufus loved the land and carousing with his father's tenants. Despite his profligate behaviour, Rufus was showing signs of calming down, having just become betrothed to a rich and well-born local beauty.

At the ball given by Lord and Lady Northfield to celebrate this engagement, James' new wife, Gisela, had nearly died of embarrassment after her husband had insisted she attend: only for her to be sneered at by the guests and served by the very servants on whom she had waited in the kitchen.

Worse was to come when the loathsome Rupert Black, already in his cups and having fluttered the pulses of all the ladies, had wandered up to her. Sliding a too-high hand around her thickening waist and squeezing her breast, he mockingly handed her a late wedding present. It turned out to be a copy of *Pamela*, Samuel Richardson's

wildly popular novel about a servant girl fighting for her virtue in the house of a lecherous master.

‘Richardson could have been writing about you,’ drawled Rupert, causing a ripple of laughter to run through several female guests who’d gathered around.

To their disappointment, however, Rupert showed no desire to dance with any of them and instead retired to the gambling tables in an attempt to reduce his debts and finish paying for a colt called Third Leopard, whose owner was threatening to sell him elsewhere.

As he raked in his winnings – a pile of sovereigns as gold as his hair – Rupert Black was singing the praises of his mare Sweet Azure, whom he might have been forced to sell if things didn’t pick up.

‘Like all good fillies,’ he said insolently, so a passing James Northfield could hear, ‘she has the face of an angel and the posterior of a cook – not unlike your new wife, James.’

Looking down at Rupert’s cruel, unsmiling face, its beauty hardly impaired by bloodshot, slightly crossing blue eyes, James, who loved his wife, upended the table; and, as coins scattered all over the floor, he challenged Rupert to a duel.

‘A better idea,’ suggested Rupert to noisy cheers, ‘would be a match race between Spartan and Sweet Azure round Rutminster Racecourse on the old track through the woods, the loser giving the winner four thousand guineas.’ And, as the Northfields owned the racecourse, it was arranged in front of witnesses that the contest would take place after the final race on the following Saturday.

Throughout that Saturday, rumours swirled round more thickly than the fog. Many of the gentry rolled up on horseback after a day’s hunting and were instantly engulfed by pickpockets, drunkards, prostitutes, cutpurses and

gypsies telling fortunes, crowding round the betting posts as the money poured in.

Northfield had the finer horse, Black was the finer rider. But, although lithe and lean, at six feet tall, Rupert was twelve pounds heavier than the weedy James – twelve pounds which Sweet Azure, far smaller and slighter than Spartan, would have to carry over four miles. Yet Black was still the favourite.

The fog was thickening, ghost-grey, suffocating and blurring everything. As James pulled on his boots, he was reminded of Leonardo da Vinci's treatise on painting, which claimed that objects seen through fog will loom larger than they are. In fact, James had been so busy writing his own treatise on Leonardo that, unlike Rupert Black, he hadn't bothered to walk the course.

The only person apart from the Bishop of Rutminster not at the races was Gisela Northfield, who, fighting all-day sickness, was in the cathedral praying for her husband's safe return.

Down at the start in the water meadows, oak trunks darkened by rain, like towers in the twisting vapours, were just distinguishable from the black wooded hillside beyond. Once again, the starter questioned whether the race should be run.

'I can see well enough,' mocked Rupert Black, who was already mounted, 'to notice the sweat of fear glistening on James Northfield's face and to have no difficulty recognizing the winning post.'

James didn't reply. He was having difficulty merely climbing aboard the plunging, insufficiently ridden Spartan. More so when Hibbert, his groom, let go of the reins in order to contain Seeker, James' white mastiff, who was fighting to join the race and follow his master.

The crowd huddled together, unwilling to lose their places on the rail, blowing on their fingers, drinking from

bottles which they might later throw at a losing horse, and shouting to keep warm. Their roar could almost be heard in Newmarket, miles away, as the two riders splashed off across the water meadows and up on to a track that ran round the wooded bowl of hills, before dropping back down to the water meadows for the finish.

It was colder and more claustrophobic up in the woods. The going was as slippery as the fat from the roasting capon Gisela had spilled over the floor, the first time shy James had stolen a kiss.

Leaves blew into the horses' faces and lay in a treacherous carpet over arthritic roots, fallen twigs, Cotswold stones, rabbit holes and badger setts. Not to mention the sinister coils of Old Man's Beard hanging from overhead branches, waiting to garrotte a passing rider. As the track grew narrower from being little used, James Northfield cursed himself for not walking the course.

The bellow of the impatient crowd rose to a deafening climax, then turned to a groan as a horse and rider eventually emerged from the woods, parting the thick grey curtain of mist and splashing back across the water meadows. Both were so coated with dark-brown mud, they were assumed to be James Northfield and Spartan. But as they galloped up the straight, the groan became a thunderous cheer again, as the mob distinguished the flying gold curls of a rider, almost too big for his gallant little mare. Instantly the jubilant mounted spectators peeled off to follow the pair up the course to the winning post.

But as time ticked away there was no sign of the Honourable James.

'I lost him about two miles back, just above Walker's Mill,' Rupert told the stewards as he removed his saddle to weigh in.

Sweet Azure stood desperately panting with drooping

head, steam pouring out of inflated red nostrils. From the wheals on her quarters and her bleeding flanks, it was clear that neither whip nor spur had been spared. Rufus Northfield, overjoyed because he'd backed his friend very heavily, ordered Rupert's groom to cover the damage with a rug.

Then everyone waited and waited for James Northfield and Spartan, until Seeker the mastiff broke away from Hibbert the groom and plunged back into the dark in search of his master. No one else left. The crowd had closed round the betting posts to stop any bookmaker doing a runner. Then over the shouting and celebration came the unearthly howl of a dog.

It took time to light torches, then stumbling and sliding through the darkening woods, a party of mounted stewards set out. After two miles, they at last identified the ghostly white form of Seeker, still howling on the side of the track. As the distraught animal refused to let anyone closer, he had to be shot before Spartan's body was discovered slumped at the bottom of a fifty-foot ravine. Beneath the horse, his back and neck broken, lay James Northfield.

Next day the fog cleared, but rumour writhed round more thickly and darkly, particularly when, by the ravine, two sets of hoof-prints were discovered side by side, accompanied by much skidding. Only the smaller set of footprints passed onwards.

But as Rupert Black, refusing to admit he had blue blood on his hands, pointed out, he and Sweet Azure must have passed the spot a good ten minutes before James and Spartan – and both riders must have taken an identical route to avoid a big sycamore branch that had fallen across the track.

Darker rumours suggested that Rupert could have been egged on by Rufus, whose extravagant tastes were



hampered by the enforced poverty of a younger son. Any suggestions of foul play, however, were quashed by the Northfield family, who owned the racecourse and probably the local constabulary. Refusing to blame Rupert, they honourably paid him the four thousand guineas. This, added to his winnings from the vast sum he had wagered on himself and Sweet Azure, enabled him to complete the payments on Third Leopard.

Did the Northfields feel a secret relief? James had always been a difficult, introspective son. Rufus, particularly when guided by his sensible new wife, would run the estate far better. Privately, Lord Northfield had never forgiven James for stealing from him the fair Gisela, on whom he too had had designs. After a few weeks, nemesis struck and his Lordship was punished by a fatal heart attack.

The timid, heartbroken Gisela was speedily paid off and sent packing back to Holland. Although she wrote occasionally to Mrs Jenkins the cook, by the time she gave birth, the title had already passed to Rufus.

Gisela, who had never ceased to mourn James, sank into despair and took her own life. No one in Rutminster bothered to find out if she had given birth to a daughter or a son.

Meanwhile, Third Leopard, who was both a direct descendant of the Darley Arabian and grandson of the mighty Eclipse, was trained by Rupert Black into a great horse, winning numerous races including the oldest classic, the St Leger, which had been established in 1776.

At stud, Third Leopard was even more successful, siring 400 sons and daughters, who in turn won many classics, notching up 822 victories. This for several years made the stallion the country's Leading Sire, during which time his master Rupert was able to charge a massive stud fee of fifty

guineas. With riches pouring in, Rupert Black became a grand gentleman, marrying, like Rufus Northfield, a rich, well-born beauty, a Miss Campbell, whose ancestors had fought bravely for the Royalists in the Civil War, and who joined her name with his. The Campbell-Blacks bought a beautiful house in Penscombe overlooking a wooded Gloucestershire valley, where horses have thrived ever since.

The marriage was successful. If Mrs Campbell-Black corrected her husband Rupert's pronunciation a little too often, he could always find solace in the adulation of the neighbouring belles.

Such was his hubris, he and Third Leopard were even painted by Stubbs in a country landscape with a pale-gold house peering out of dark-green trees, with olive-green lawns flowing down to a lake on which floated swans.

Normally Stubbs immortalized legendary racehorses held by grooms identified by name. But Rupert Black insisted on aping the Prince Regent. Like Prinny he was dressed in tight white breeches and brown topped boots, with a wide-brimmed hat tipped over his Greek nose and flaxen curls flowing over the collar of a long, brass-buttoned riding coat, which emphasized his strong, lithe body. A frilled white shirt showed off the perfect jawline and a passionate but ruthless mouth. Rupert Black was also portrayed like Prinny, trotting past with a triumphant wave of his whip: 'Haven't I and this great horse done well.'

And yet to this day, no one – least of all Rupert Black's descendants – likes to ride or walk in Rutminster woods at dusk. There have been too many sightings of pale riders on dark horses and howling white mastiffs. Even hounds in full cry on late winter afternoons have always turned away, whimpering, if a fox has run into the woods.

# 1

On a stifflingly hot June evening, some 225 years later, Rupert Campbell-Black, the great-great-great-great-great-grandson of Rupert Black, looked out of his office in the west wing of the same pale-gold Queen Anne house at Penscombe.

The same lake still glittered as sweetly azure as his ancestor's blue roan mare in the June sun, but to the right of the olive-green lawns and down the valley sprawled a giant complex of a racing yard, entitled Rupert Campbell-Black Racing. This was surrounded by a tangle of gallops for all weathers and distances, a stud farm, Penscombe Stud, helicopter pad, hangar, lorry park, staff cottages, and lush paddocks, with plenty of shade to safeguard every kind of racehorse: stallions, visiting mares, mares in foal or with foal, yearlings and horses in training.

But Rupert Black's descendant didn't feel any great pride as he scrolled through the emails still congratulating him on his three-thousandth win, or his Grand National victory with a mare called Mrs Wilkinson back in April or the 2000 Guineas back in May. He was merely irritated not to have won the Derby earlier in the month.

Nor did he bother to read more emails pouring in to congratulate him on the speech he'd made at Billy Lloyd-Foxe's memorial service yesterday, a task he'd found harder than winning an Olympic Gold in Los Angeles with a

trapped nerve years ago. He had never dreamed how wiped out he would be by Billy's death. Billy, his inseparable companion of fifty years, joined at the hip, finishing each other's jokes, rejoicing in every success.

Rupert looked down at his speech.

'This was the noblest rider of them all,' he had told a packed Rutminster Cathedral congregation which had spilled out over the water meadows. Then he had regaled them with stories about his and Billy's antics at prep school and Harrow, hellraising on the showjumping circuit, fighting for a television franchise, moving on to Billy's career as equine correspondent for the BBC.

'Nothing in Billy's life became him like the leaving of it,' he had ended. 'He bore pain and illness with equal fortitude, but the happiest moment of his life came at the end, when his daughter Amber won the Grand National on a little one-eyed mare called Mrs Wilkinson.'

'Billy had an equally marvellous little horse called The Bull on whom he'd won a silver medal. "I hope I see The Bull again," were his last words. I'm sure Billy's riding The Bull across the clouds. Lucky heaven, to have both of them.' Bloody mawkish that, Rupert thought wryly.

The party afterwards, most of which he'd paid for, resulted in him having a blazing row with Billy's widow Janey, who'd made a drunken and soppy speech, repeatedly quoting the line: 'That's the way for Billy and me', while boasting of the over 3,019 letters of sympathy she had received. She was furious Rupert hadn't praised her as a wonderful wife.

'You were a fucking awful wife,' Rupert had snarled back. 'Billy'd be alive today if he hadn't been permanently stressed by you squandering his money and fucking other men.'

This had also resulted in a rare screaming match

between Rupert and his wife Taggie, who'd ticked him off before rushing away to comfort Janey.

Rupert was sure Janey would take the opportunity to solicit an invitation to move back into Lime Tree Cottage, the little seventeenth-century house in Rupert's woods nearby, which she and Billy had lived in rent-free when they were first married. If Janey returned, Rupert knew she'd be hanging round, playing the grieving widow, reminding him of Billy for the rest of his life.

Last night's row with Taggie had ended up with her sleeping in the spare room and their not speaking all day. He was tempted to ring her in the kitchen and make it up. Instead he poured himself another glass of whisky.

On the wall opposite were monitors on which he could watch his own horses and the progeny of his stallions and brood mares winning races all over the world. On the left wall, flanked by framed photographs of victorious horses, hung the Stubbs of Rupert Black and Third Leopard, winner of the St Leger and for five years Leading Sire.

Today there were two ways a horse could become Leading Sire: either if he were the stallion whose offspring had clocked up the most wins in a year, or, more importantly, if those offspring had earned the most prize money. Verdi's Requiem, a dark-brown Irish Triple Crown winner, had topped the Leading Sire charts for Great Britain and Europe for fifteen years but now, aged twenty-five, his reign must be drawing to a close.

Opening the *Racing Post*, Rupert noted Bloodstock News had predicted a bloody battle to topple Verdi's Requiem between Rupert Campbell-Black's Love Rat and Isa Lovell's Roberto's Revenge. Rupert ground his teeth. Isa Lovell, ex-champion jockey and ex-son-in-law, had worked uneasily for Rupert for ten years, learning everything he could about training and breeding before defecting to start his own yard directly in competition with Rupert.

Even worse, Isa had joined forces with Cosmo Rannaldini, the fiendish little son of Rupert's arch enemy, the late, great conductor Roberto Rannaldini. Married to Rupert's first wife Helen, Roberto had not only tried to rape Rupert's daughter Tabitha, but had managed to batter to death Taggie's little mongrel Gertrude when she tried to protect Tabitha. In the Campbell-Black canon, it was arguable which was the greater crime.

Cosmo and Isa were proving maddeningly successful with the progeny of Roberto's Revenge, particularly with a colt called Feud for Thought, which had just beaten Rupert's colt Dardanius in the Derby. Cosmo had inherited a great deal of money from his father, but he and Isa were spending such a fortune on yearlings and two-year-olds that someone must be bankrolling them. Rupert would kill to stop them beating him to Leading Sire. Love Rat *must* topple Verdi's Requiem.

In the still-baking evening, out in the fields he could see foals lying flat and motionless except for their frantically waving tails. Rupert's four dogs: Jack Russells, Cuthbert and Gilchrist, a brindle greyhound called Forester and a black Labrador called Banquo, panted in their baskets.

Up on a monitor, evening racing had started at the Curragh, Ireland's greatest racecourse. Rupert hoped one of Love Rat's progeny, Promiscuous, would win a later race there.

Promiscuous had been trained by Rupert's old stable jockey, the also lascivious Bluey Charteris, who'd married an Irish trainer's daughter, and managed to stay faithful enough to take over his father-in-law's yard. Bluey and Isa Lovell doing so well made Rupert feel old. Overwhelmed with sadness and restlessness, he rang Valent Edwards, who had just married Etta Bancroft, the owner of Grand National-winning Mrs Wilkinson, and who was now back from their honeymoon.

‘We ought to discuss Mrs Wilkinson,’ he said. ‘Come over and have a drink.’

The moment he rang off, the telephone rang again: ‘No, you can’t have a discount on three mares,’ said Rupert tersely, and poured himself another glass of whisky.

There was a knock on the door and a very pretty blonde, with an utterly deceptive air of innocence, walked in. Dora Belvedon was the eighteen-year-old daughter of Rupert’s late friend, Raymond Belvedon, and his much younger second wife, Anthea. A gold-digger and an absolute bitch, Anthea had never given Dora enough pocket money. As a result, Dora had supported herself, her dog Cadbury and her pony Loofah by flogging stories to the tabloids.

For the past two years, as well as acting sporadically as Rupert’s press officer, she had been ghosting his contentious, highly successful column in the *Racing Post*. She also wrote a column supposedly by Mrs Wilkinson’s stable companion, a goat called Chisolm, in the *Daily Mirror*.

Missing her sweet father desperately, an itinerant Dora found comfort spending time at Penscombe, where she could always grab a bed if needs be. In addition, she often stayed in Willowwood, in the cottage of Miss Painswick, the former secretary of her old boarding school.

Fearing that Mrs Wilkinson might be homesick just before the Grand National, when she had been moved to Penscombe to be trained by Rupert, Dora, in an incredibly daring move, had smuggled the little mare into the mighty Love Rat’s stallion paddock, and a joyful coupling had taken place.

Mrs Wilkinson’s dam had been a successful flat horse called Little Star, and her sire was Rupert’s most successful stallion: the Derby and St Leger-winning Peppy Koala. As Love Rat had been a champion sprinter, who would add his lightning speed to Mrs Wilkinson’s stamina, any foal

consequently should be a cracker. But as Dora had executed this move without Rupert's permission, she was extremely anxious to avoid the subject of stud fees. Now, brandishing an Italian phrasebook, she said, 'Poor Emilia was awfully low, but I've been talking to her in Italian and she's really perked up' – Emilia being a very good filly Rupert had bought cheap because of the collapsing Italian economy.

'I've also been playing her *La Traviata*,' babbled Dora, 'and she loved it, particularly the bit that goes, "Da dum dum da de dum, da dum, dum da, de, dum".'

'Where the hell have you been?' demanded Rupert, who adored Dora but felt she needed reining in.

Dora replied that she'd been in Sardinia with her actor boyfriend Paris, and housesitting Mrs Wilkinson while Etta her owner and her husband Valent were on their honeymoon.

'It's Mrs Wilkinson we've got to talk about,' Rupert said.

'I must get your *Racing Post* copy in by tomorrow afternoon,' Dora said hastily. 'I thought you might like to write about Roberto's Revenge's climb up the Leading Sire's chart. Isa Lovell's doing really well.'

'I'm not doing any favours for that moody, vindictive little shit, or that oily little toad Cosmo.'

'I quite like Cosmo,' confessed Dora. 'He's funny and we both have mothers who are embarrassingly bats about you.'

'Shut up, Dora,' snapped Rupert. 'We need to talk about Mrs Wilkinson.'

'Did you see Amanda Platell's piece in the *Mail*, about the doctors' surgeries teeming with women suffering from loss of libido, and suggesting the perfect cure was Rupert Campbell-Black?'

'Don't be even more fatuous,' said Rupert irritably. But he smirked slightly. 'Now about this stolen service.'



On cue, Dora's chocolate Labrador, Cadbury, wandered in from Taggie's kitchen, and all Rupert's dogs woke up and fell on him, barking joyously. 'Go back to your boxes. Stop that bloody awful din!' roared Rupert.

'Din, because they want their dinner, ha, ha. Can Cadbury have some too?'

'Shut up, Cuthbert.' Rupert pulled a Jack Russell on to his knee, shutting its yapping jaws with his hand and asked: 'Can you remember exactly what day Love Rat covered Mrs Wilkinson?'

'About a fortnight before the National.'

Rupert looked up at the calendar. 'Foal in February then.'

'Mrs Wilkinson's had a lovely day,' sighed Dora, edging off the subject again, 'opening a supermarket in Cotchester. Huge cheering crowds turned out to pat her and Chisolm. They do adore the attention.'

'With a valuable foal inside, she ought to be taking it easy.'

'Mares can run up to a hundred and twenty days,' chided Dora. 'Mrs Wilkinson's a working mother, has to earn her keep.' Then, deflecting Rupert's shaft of disapproval: 'And did you know that people are Skyping Chisolm from all over the world? She's got a website called Skypegoat. Isn't that a cool joke?'

'Quite,' said Rupert, who was then fortunately distracted by a monitor on which jockeys and horses were going down to the start of the Curragh. There was Promiscuous, son of Love Rat, looking really well.

Dora looked out of one window at the squirrels fighting in the angelic green of Rupert's beechwoods, which formed a great crescent round the rear of the house.

Turning back to Dora, Rupert said: 'Do you realize Love Rat's stud fee is £100,000?'

'Goodness,' she said, then gave a sigh of relief as Valent

walked in. 'Hi, Valent, hope you had a lovely honeymoon. Mrs Wilkinson missed you both. Must go and counsel Emilia some more. Dum, da, da, dum de dum,' sang Dora as beaming, followed by five dogs, she sidled out of the room.