



JILLY COOPER

RIDERS

THE CLASSIC BESTSELLER

About the Book

Set against the glorious Cotswold countryside and the playgrounds of the world, Jilly Cooper's Rutshire Chronicles offer an intoxicating blend of skulduggery, swooning romance, sexual adventure and hilarious high jinks.

Riders, the first and steamiest in the series, takes the lid off international show jumping, a sport where the brave horses are almost human, but the humans behave like animals.

The brooding hero, gypsy Jake Lovell, under whose magic hands the most difficult horse or woman becomes biddable, is driven to the top by his loathing of the beautiful bounder and darling of the show ring, Rupert Campbell-Black. Having filched each other's horses, and fought and fornicated their way around the capitals of Europe, the feud between the two men finally erupts with devastating consequences during the Los Angeles Olympics.

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About the Author

Also by Jilly Cooper

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Jilly Cooper

RIDERS

Dedication

*To Beryl Hill,
the Artur Rubinstein of the typewriter,
with love and gratitude*

Acknowledgements

Since I started *Riders* fifteen years ago, an enormous number of people have helped me with the book. They are all experts in their fields. But this being a work of fiction, I took their advice only as far as it suited my plot, and the accuracy of the book in no way reflects on their expertise!

They include Ronnie Massarella, Caroline Silver, Alan Smith, Brian Giles, Douglas Bunn, Michael Clayton, Alan Oliver, Bridget Le Good, John Burbidge, Diana Downie, Raymond Brooks-Ward, Harvey Smith, Dr Hubert and Mrs Bessie Crouch, Dr Timothy Evans, Heather Ross, Caroline Akrill, Dick Stilwell, Sue Clarke, Sue Gibson, Andrew Parker-Bowles, John and Tory Oaksey, Marion Ivey, Rosemary Nunelly, Elizabeth Richardson, Elizabeth Hopkins, Julia Longland, Susan Blair, Ann Martin, Kate O'Sullivan, Marcy Drummond, John and Michael Whitaker, David Broome and Malcolm Pyrah.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to dear Sighle Gogan, who spent so many hours talking to me about show jumping, and arranged for me to meet so many of the people who helped me, but who tragically died in January last year.

I should also like to thank my bank manager, James Atkinson, for being so patient and Paul Scherer and Alan Earney of Corgi Books for being so continually encouraging, and Tom Hartman for being one of those rare people who actually makes authors enjoy having their books edited.

An award for gallantry must go to the nine ladies who all worked fantastically long hours over Christmas, deciphering my appalling hand-writing and typing the 340,000 word manuscript. They include Beryl Hill, Anna Gibbs-Kennet, Sue Moore, Margaret McKellican, Corinne Monhaghan, Julie

Payne, Nicky Greenshield, Patricia Quatermass and my own wonderful secretary, Diane Peter.

The lion's share of my gratitude must go to Desmond Elliott for masterminding the whole operation so engagingly, and all his staff at Arlington, who worked so hard to produce such a huge book in under five months.

Finally there are really no words adequate to thank my husband Leo and my children Felix and Emily, except to say that without their support, good cheer and continued unselfishness the book would never have been finished.

1

Because he had to get up unusually early on Saturday, Jake Lovell kept waking up throughout the night, racked by terrifying dreams about being late. In the first dream he couldn't find his breeches when the collecting ring steward called his number; in the second he couldn't catch any of the riding school ponies to take them to the show; in the third Africa slipped her head collar and escaped; and in the fourth, the most terrifying of all, he was back in the children's home screaming and clawing at locked iron gates, while Rupert Campbell-Black rode Africa off down the High Street, until turning with that hateful, sneering smile, he'd shouted:

'You'll never get out of that place now, Gyppo; it's where you belong.'

Jake woke sobbing, heart bursting, drenched in sweat, paralysed with fear. It was half a minute before he could reach out and switch on the bedside lamp. He lit a cigarette with a trembling hand. Gradually the familiar objects in the room reasserted themselves: the Lionel Edwards prints on the walls, the tattered piles of *Horse and Hound*, the books on show jumping hopelessly overcrowding the bookshelves, the wash basin, the faded photographs of his mother and father. Hanging in the wardrobe was the check riding coat Mrs Wilton had rather grudgingly given him for his twenty-first birthday. Beneath it stood the scratched but gleaming pair of brown-topped boots he'd picked up second-hand last week.

In the stall below he could hear a horse snorting and a crash as another horse kicked over its water bucket.

Far too slowly his panic subsided. Prep school and Rupert Campbell-Black were things of the past. It was 1970 and he had been out of the children's home for four years now. He

mostly forgot them during the day; it was only in dreams they came back to torment him. He shivered; the sheets were still damp with sweat. Four-thirty, said his alarm clock; there were already fingers of light under the thin yellow curtains. He didn't have to get up for half an hour, but he was too scared to go back to sleep. He could hear the rain pattering on the roof outside and dripping from the gutter, muting the chatter of the sparrows.

He tried to concentrate on the day ahead, which didn't make him feel much more cheerful. One of the worst things about working in a riding school was having to take pupils to horseshows. Few of them could control the bored, broken-down ponies. Many were spoilt; others, terrified, were only riding at all because their frightful mothers were using horses to grapple their way up the social scale, giving them an excuse to put a hard hat in the back window of the Jaguar and slap gymkhana stickers on the windscreen.

What made Jake sick with nerves, however, was that, unknown to his boss, Mrs Wilton, he intended to take Africa to the show and enter her for the open jumping. Mrs Wilton didn't allow Jake to compete in shows. He might get too big for his boots. His job was to act as constant nursemaid to the pupils, not to jump valuable horses behind her back.

Usually, Mrs Wilton turned up at shows in the afternoon and strutted about chatting up the mothers. But today, because she was driving down to Brighton to chat up some rich uncle who had no children, she wouldn't be putting in an appearance. If Jake didn't try out Africa today, he wouldn't have another chance for weeks.

Africa was a livery horse, looked after at the riding school, but owned by an actor named Bobby Cotterel, who'd bought her in a fit of enthusiasm after starring in *Dick Turpin*. A few weeks later he had bought a Ferrari and, apart from still paying her livery fees, had forgotten about Africa, which had given Jake the perfect opportunity to teach her to jump on the quiet.

She was only six, but every day Jake became more convinced that she had the makings of a great show jumper. It was not just her larkiness and courage, her fantastic turn of speed and huge jump. She also had an ability to get herself out of trouble which counterbalanced her impetuosity.

Jake adored her – more than any person or animal he had known in his life. If Mrs Wilton discovered he'd taken her to a show, she'd probably sack him. He dreaded losing a job which had brought him his first security in years, but the prospect of losing Africa was infinitely worse.

The alarm made him jump. It was still raining; the horror of the dream gripped him again. What would happen if Africa slipped when she was taking off or landing? He dressed and, lifting up the trap door at the bottom of his bed, climbed down the stairs into the tackroom, inhaling the smell of warm horse leather, saddle soap and dung, which never failed to excite him. Hearing him mixing the feeds, horses' heads came out over the half-doors, calling, whickering, stamping their hooves.

Dandelion, the skewbald, the greediest pony in the yard, his mane and back covered in straw from lying down, yelled shrilly, demanding to be fed first. As he added extra vitamins, nuts and oats to Africa's bowl, Jake thought it was hardly surprising she looked well. Mrs Wilton would have a fit if she knew.

It was seven-thirty before he had mucked out and fed all the horses. Africa, feed finished, blinking her big, dark-blue eyes in the low-angled sun, hung out of her box, catching his sleeve between her lips each time he went past, shaking gently, never nipping the skin. Mrs Wilton had been out to dinner the night before; it was unlikely she'd surface before half past eight; that gave him an hour to groom Africa.

Rolling up his sleeves, chattering nonsense to her all the time, Jake got to work. She was a beautiful horse, very dark brown, her coat looking almost indigo in the shadows. She

had two white socks, a spillikin of white down her forehead, a chest like a channel steamer funnel, huge shoulders and quarters above lean strong legs. Her ears twitched and turned all the time, as sensitive as radar.

He jumped when the stable cat, a fat tabby with huge whiskers, appeared on top of the stable door and, after glancing at a couple of pigeons scratching for corn, dropped down into the straw and curled up in the discarded warmth of Africa's rug.

Suddenly Africa jerked up her head and listened. Jake stepped outside nervously; the curtains were still drawn in Mrs Wilton's house. He'd wanted to plait Africa's mane, but he didn't dare. It would unplait all curly and he might be caught out. He went back to work.

'Surely you're not taking Africa to the show?' said a shrill voice. Jake jumped out of his skin and Africa tossed up her head, banging him on the nose.

Just able to look over the half-door was one of his pupils, Fenella Maxwell, her face as freckled as a robin's egg, her flaxen hair already escaping from its elastic bands.

'What the hell are you doing here?' said Jake furiously, his eyes watering. 'I said no one was allowed here till ten and it can't be eight yet. Push off home.'

'I've come to help,' said Fenella, gazing at him with huge, Cambridge-blue eyes fringed with thick blond lashes. Totally unabashed, she moved a boiled sweet to the other side of her face.

'I know you're by yourself till Alison comes. I'll get Dandelion ready . . . please,' she added. 'I want him to look as beautiful as Africa.'

'Shut up,' hissed Jake. 'Now shove off.'

'Please let me stay. There's nothing to do at home. I couldn't sleep. I will help. Oh, doesn't Smokey look sweet curled up in the rug? Are you really taking Africa?'

'Mind your own business,' said Jake.

Fen took the boiled sweet out of her mouth and gave it to Dandelion, who was slavering over the next half-door, then kissed him on the nose. Her shirt was already escaping from the jeans which she wore over her jodhpurs to keep them clean.

'Does Mrs Wilton know?' she asked.

'No,' said Jake.

'I won't tell her,' said Fen, swinging on Africa's door. 'Pattie Beasley might, though, or Sally-Ann; she's always sneaking about something.'

Jake had already sweated uncomfortably over this possibility.

'They're probably too thick to notice,' she went on. 'Shall I make you a cup of tea? Four spoonfuls of sugar, isn't it?'

Jake relented. She was a good kid, cheerful and full of guts, with an instinct for horses and a knowledge way beyond her nine years.

'You can stay if you keep your trap shut,' he said. 'I don't want Mrs Wilton waking up yet.'

After she had spilt most of the tea in the saucer, Fen tied Dandelion up outside Africa's box and settled down to washing his white patches, managing to get more water over herself than the pony.

Jake half-listened as she chattered on incessantly about her sister Tory, who was doing the season but not enjoying the parties at all, and who often had red eyes from crying in the morning.

'She's coming to the show later.'

'Does your mother know you're here?' asked Jake.

'She wouldn't notice if I wasn't. She's got a new boyfriend named Colonel Carter. Colonel Cart-ah, he calls himself. He laughs all the time when he's talking to Mummy and he's got big yellow teeth like Dandelion, but somehow they look better on a horse.'

'They're coming to the show too. Colonel Carter is bringing a lot of soldiers and guns to do a display after the

open jumping. He and Mummy and Tory are going to lunch up at the Hall. Mummy bought a new blue dress specially; it's lovely, but Tory said it was jolly expensive, so I don't expect she'll be able to afford to buy me a pony yet; anyway she says Tory being a deb is costing a fortune.'

'Shampoo and set, darling,' she said to Dandelion twenty minutes later as she stuck the pony's tail in a bucket of hot, soapy water. 'Oh, look, Africa's making faces; isn't she sweet?' The next moment Dandelion had whisked his tail at a fly, sending soapy water all over Fen, Africa's rug and the stable cat, who retreated in high dudgeon.

'For God's sake, concentrate,' snapped Jake.

'Mummy's picture's in *The Tatler* again this week,' said Fen. 'She gets in much more often than poor Tory. She says Tory's got to go on a diet next week, so she'll be thin for her drinks party next month. Oh *cave*, Mrs Wilton's drawing back the kitchen curtains.'

Hastily Jake replaced Africa's rug and came out of her box.

Inside the kitchen, beneath the ramparts of honeysuckle, he could see Mrs Wilton, her brick red face flushed from the previous night's drinking, dropping Alka Seltzer into a glass of water. Christ, he hoped she'd get a move on to Brighton and wouldn't hang around. Picking up the brush and the curry comb he started on one of the ponies.

Mrs Wilton came out of the house, followed by her arthritic yellow labrador, who lifted his leg stiffly on the mounting block, then as a formality bounded after the stable cat.

Mrs Wilton was never known to have been on a horse in her life. Stocky, with a face squashed in like a bulldog, she had short pepper and salt hair, a blotchy complexion like salami, and a deep bass voice. All the same, she had had more success with the opposite sex than her masculine appearance would suggest.

'Jake!' she bellowed.

He came out, curry comb in one hand, brush in the other.

'Yes, Mrs Wilton,' though she'd repeatedly asked him to call her Joyce.

They gazed at each other with the dislike of the unwillingly but mutually dependant. Mrs Wilton knew that having lost both his parents and spent much of his life in a children's home, Jake clung on to the security of a living-in job. As her husband was away so much on business, Mrs Wilton had often suggested Jake might be more comfortable living in the house with her. But, aware that he would have to share a bathroom and, if Mrs W had her way, a bedroom, Jake had repeatedly refused. Mrs Wilton was old enough to be his mother.

But, despite finding him sullen and withdrawn to the point of insolence, she had to admit that the horses had never been better looked after. As a result of his encyclopaedic knowledge of plants and wild flowers, and his incredible gypsy remedies, she hadn't had a vet's bill since he'd arrived, and because he was frightened of losing this substitute home, she could get away with paying him a pittance. She found herself doing less and less. She didn't want to revert to getting up at six and mucking out a dozen horses, and it was good to be able to go away, like today, and not worry.

On the other hand, if he was a miracle with animals, he was hell with parents, refusing to suck up to them, positively rude to the sillier ones. A lot had defected and gone to Mrs Haley across the valley, who charged twice as much.

'How many ponies are you taking?' she demanded.

'Six,' said Jake, walking towards the tackroom, praying she'd follow him.

'And you'll get Mrs Thomson to bring the head collars and the water buckets in her car. Do try to be polite for once, although I know how hard you find it.'

Jake stared at her, unsmiling. He had a curiously immobile face, everything in the right place, but without animation. The swarthy features were pale today, the full lips set in an

uncompromising line. Slanting, secretive, dark eyes looked out from beneath a frowning line of brow, practically concealed by the thick thatch of almost black hair. He was small, not more than five foot seven, and very thin, a good jockey's weight. The only note of frivolity was the gold rings in his ears. There was something watchful and controlled about him that didn't go with youth. Despite the heat of the day, his shirt collar was turned up as if against some imagined storm.

'I'll be back tomorrow,' she said, looking down the row of loose boxes.

Suddenly her eyes lit on Africa.

'What's she doing inside?'

'I brought her in this morning,' he lied easily. 'She yells her head off if she's separated from Dandelion and I thought you'd like a lie in.'

'Well, put her out again when you go. I'm not having her eating her head off.'

Despite the fat fee paid by Bobby Cotterel, thought Jake.

She peered into the loose box. For an appalling moment he thought she was going to peel back the rug.

'Hullo, Mrs Wilton' shrieked Fen. 'Come and look at Dandelion. Doesn't he look smart?'

Distracted, Mrs Wilton turned away from Africa.

'Hullo, Fen, dear, you're an early bird. He does look nice; you've even oiled his hooves. Perhaps you'll bring home a rosette.'

'Shouldn't think so,' said Fen gloomily. 'Last time he ate all the potatoes in the potato race.'

'Phew, that was a near one,' said Fen, as Mrs Wilton's car, with the labrador's head sticking out of the window, disappeared down the road.

'Come on,' said Jake, 'I'll make you some breakfast.'

Dressing later before he set out for the show, Jake transferred the crushed and faded yellow tansy flower from the bottom of his left gum-boot to his left riding boot. Tansy

warded off evil. Jake was full of superstitions. The royal gypsy blood of the Lovells didn't flow through his veins for nothing.

2

By midday, a blazing sun shone relentlessly out of a speedwell blue sky, warming the russet stone of Bilborough Hall as it dreamed above its dark green moat. To the right on the terrace, great yews cut in the shape of peacocks seemed about to strut across the shaven lawns, down into the valley where blue-green wheat fields merged into meadows of pale silver-green hay. In the park the trees in the angelic softness of their new spring growth looked as though the rain had not only washed them but fabric-conditioned them as well. Dark purple copper beeches and cochineal-red may added a touch of colour.

To the left, the show ring was already circled two deep with cars and more cars in a long gleaming crocodile were still inching slowly through the main gate, on either side of which two stone lions reared up clenching red and white bunting between their teeth.

The headscarf brigade were out in full force, caught on the hop by the first hot day of the year, their arms pale in sleeveless dresses, silk-lined bottoms spilling over shooting sticks, shouting to one another as they unpacked picnics from their cars. Hunt terriers yapped, labradors panted. Food in dog bowls, remaining untouched because of the heat, gathered flies.

Beyond the cars, crowds milled round the stalls selling horsiana, moving aside to avoid the occasional competitors riding through with numbers on their backs. Children mindlessly consumed crisps, clamoured for ices, gas balloons and pony rides. Fathers hung with cameras, wearing creased lightweight suits smelling of mothballs, wished they could escape back to the office, and, for consolation, eyed the inevitable hordes of nubile 14-year-old

girls, with long wavy hair and very tight breeches, who seem to parade permanently up and down at horse shows.

Bilborough Hall was owned by Sir William Blake, no relation to the poet, but nicknamed 'Tiger' at school. Mingling with the crowds, he gossiped to friends, raised his hat to people he didn't know and told everyone that in twenty years there had only been one wet Bilborough show. His wife, a J.P. in drooping tweeds and a felt hat, whose passion was gardening, sighed inwardly at the ground already grey and pitted with hoof marks. Between each year, like childbirth, nature seemed to obliterate the full horror of the Bilborough show. She had already instructed the under-gardener, to his intense embarrassment, to go around with a spade and gather up all the manure before it was trodden into the ground.

'Oh, there you are, William,' she said to her husband, who was genially trying to guess the weight of a piglet. 'People are already arriving for luncheon; we'd better go and do our stuff.'

Down by the horse lines, Jake Lovell, tying up a weedy grey pony more securely, was slowly reaching screaming point. The family of the unspeakably hopeless Pattie Beasley (none of whom had ever been on a horse) had all turned up in jodhpurs. Sally-Ann Thomson's frightful mother hung around the whole time, talking at the top of her voice, so all the other competitors turned around and laughed at her.

'It doesn't matter about winning, dear,' she was now telling Sally-Ann. 'Competing and having fun is all that matters.'

'Bloody rubbish,' thought Jake. 'They all sulk if they're not placed.'

After Sally-Ann's pony had bolted with her, and Pattie Beasley's cob had had a kicking match with the priceless winner of the under 13.2 showing class, causing loss of temper on all sides, Jake had refused to let any of the

children ride their ponies until the jumping in the afternoon. He had nearly had a mutiny on his hands.

‘Why can’t I do some practice jumps on Syrup?’

‘Why can’t I ride Stardust over to get an ice cream?’

‘Oh, Snowball’s trodden on my toe.’

‘How d’you rate Sally-Ann’s chances in the junior jumping?’ asked Mrs Thomson, sweating in an emerald green wool suit.

‘Non-existent,’ snapped Jake.

‘Joyce Wilton said Sally-Ann was the best little horsewoman in Surrey.’

‘Can Pattie enter for the potato race?’ asked Mrs Beasley.

‘If she wants to waste her money, the secretary’s tent’s over there.’

Sally-Ann’s mother returned to the attack: ‘We’ve paid for the pony all day.’ (Mrs Wilton charged £12 a gymkhana.) ‘My little girl should be able to ride as much as she likes.’

Jake’s head throbbed with the effort of filtering out conversation. The clamour went on, deafening, shrill and demanding. He might as well get a job as a nanny. No wonder sheepdogs had nervous breakdowns. No wonder mothers battered babies and babies battered mothers. He wanted to turn off the din, like the wireless, and lie down in the long lush grass by the river and go to sleep.

His eye ran over the row of bored, depressed-looking ponies standing on three legs, tails swishing ineffectually against the flies, occasionally flattening their ears at one another. They’re trapped like me, he thought.

His face became less frosty as he came to little Fenella Maxwell, standing on a bucket, replaiting the long-suffering Dandelion’s mane for the third time. She was a good kid. Surprisingly she wasn’t spoilt by her bitch of a mother, who would be guzzling champagne up at the big house with the nobs by now.

His eyes softened even more when they came to rest on Africa. Not dozing like the ponies, she looked around with

her huge eyes, taking everything in, reassuring herself constantly that Jake was still there.

The prospect of the open jumping and the risk he was running made him steadily more sick with nerves. He lit another cigarette.

Next time a huge horse box drew up, a groom got out, unfastened the ramp and led out a beautifully plaited-up grey, sweating in a crimson rug with dark blue binding. A girl wearing a white shirt, a black coat, skin-tight breeches and long black boots walked over and looked the horse over critically. She had a haughty pink and white face. Jake thought how attractive some women looked in riding clothes, the austerity and severity of the uniform contrasting with the wild wantonness beneath. He imagined her long thighs threshing in ecstasy, while the hat, tie and haughty pink and white face remained primly in place. He imagined laying her on a bed of straw, as tempting as a newly made bed.

As if aware of Jake's scrutiny, she turned around. Jake looked away quickly, determined not to give her the satisfaction of knowing she was being fancied.

'Lavinia!' A handsome dark boy, white teeth gleaming in his suntanned face, pulled up his huge chestnut horse beside her.

'Christopher. Hullo. I thought you were in Marbella.'

'Just got back.'

'Come and have a dwink.' She couldn't say her Rs. 'Mummy's parked the car by the collecting wing.'

'Love to.' He rode on.

Bloody upper classes, thought Jake, all making so much bloody noise. He was fed up with wearing a cheap riding coat and third-hand boots that were already killing him. He wanted a horse box, and a groom whisking out different horses like a conjurer producing coloured handkerchiefs, and a tackroom wall papered with red rosettes, and a beautiful

pink and white girl asking him respectfully how many strides there were between the gate and the rustic poles.

A shrill piping voice brought him back to earth.

'I've bought you an ice cream,' said Fenella Maxwell. 'You ought to keep up your strength. Oh, look, they're bringing out the jumps for the junior jumping. I know I'm going to let Dandelion down. Mummy and Tory'll miss it if they don't stop stuffing themselves.'

Inside Bilborough Hall, Tory Maxwell, Fenella's elder sister, looked up at a large Rubens, in which a huge pink fleshy Venus was being pursued by half the satyr population of Ancient Greece, while adoring cherubs arranged her rippling pearl-strewn hair. 'She's much fatter than me,' thought Tory wistfully. 'Why wasn't I born in the 17th century?'

She had huge grey eyes and long, straight, light brown hair, which her mother insisted she wore drawn back off her forehead and temples and tied in a bow on the crown of her head. A style which made her round, pleading, peony red face look bigger than ever. She was tallish and big boned, with a huge bust that bounced up and down as she walked. However she stood on the scales, she weighed eleven stone.

She'd just got the curse, which made her feel even fatter, and, however many layers of *Erace* she put on, a large red spot on her chin glowed through like a lighthouse. She was getting hotter and hotter, but she couldn't take off the jacket of her red suit because the skirt was fastened precariously by a nappy pin. Her ankles had swelled and, having kicked off her tight shoes, she wondered if she'd ever be able to get back into them again. She wondered if she'd ever been more miserable in her life. Then, with a stab of pain, she remembered last night's dance and decided she was comparatively blessed.

During the week-days she was at a finishing school in London, learning to cook, to type, and to arrange flowers by

ramming bits of rhubarb into chicken mesh. By night she practised the art of wallflower arrangement, going to drinks parties and dances and trying to appear as though she belonged to one of those chattering, laughing groups of debs and their admirers. Occasionally, hostesses took pity on her and brought up wilting, reluctant young men who talked politely or danced one dance, then drifted away.

The more miserable she got, the more she ate. But never at dances, never in front of her mother. She would wait for everyone to go out or to bed, then wolf three bowls of cornflakes swimming in double cream. Yesterday she'd eaten a whole box of chocolates, which had been given to her mother by an admirer, and then had to rush out to the shops and buy another box to replace it before her mother got back.

Why couldn't she be like Fen, and have something like horses to be passionately interested in and keep her nose out of the trough? Why did she have to stay inside on this lovely day when she wanted to be outside, picnicking with Fen and Jake? At the thought of Jake, dark-faced and unpredictable, whom she had never spoken to, her stomach felt weak, her mouth dry. Oh Jake! At night she wrote him long passionate letters which she always tore up. Small men were supposed to like big girls; look at D. H. Lawrence and Stanley Spencer. Perhaps having no parents, and being brought up in a children's home, he might be looking for a mother figure, but he didn't seem to be showing much sign so far.

Tory's mother, Molly Maxwell, had enjoyed her lunch *enormously*. She was delighted to be asked. Colonel Carter, who had accompanied her, had enjoyed himself too. It had been fun being able to introduce him to Sir William, and they'd got on well talking about the war. She combed her hair surreptitiously; Gerald had done it beautifully this week. Why was Tory hanging round like a wet blanket? Sir William's sons were there. All of them Old Etonians, nice

looking and so suitable, and Tory hadn't addressed a word to any of them all through lunch, just sat like a pig, and taking a second helping of pudding when she thought her mother wasn't looking.

'Poor Molly,' she could imagine people saying, 'poor Molly to be saddled with such a lump.'

'No, I won't have any more wine, thank you, Sir William.' She didn't want to get red in the face. Her new, silk-lined dress and jacket in periwinkle blue was most becoming. This afternoon she'd probably take the jacket off; her arms were still slender and already turning brown.

She was really enjoying Tory doing the season. Jennifer's Diary, this week, had described her as the chic and most attractive mother of Tory Maxwell. At least one deb's delight and several fathers had declared themselves madly in love with her. And now Colonel Carter was getting really keen and sending roses twice a week.

To top everything, last night she had heard two young bloods discussing Tory.

'Wonder if it would be worth marrying her for her money,' said the first.

'I'd certainly marry her for her Mummy,' said the second. 'Molly Maxwell is absolutely gorgeous.'

Molly thought that was too amusing for words.

Molly was a bit short of cash at the moment. Her rather stolid husband had paid her a great deal of alimony, but when he inconveniently died, he had left all his money, unaccountably, in trust for Tory. That was another grudge; what did Tory want with an income of £5,000 a year?

Tory looked across at her mother. 'I'm the fruit of her womb, and I hate her, hate her, hate her,' she thought, 'for her ankles slender as a gazelle's, and her flexible high insteps, and thin Knightsbridge legs, and her painted malicious face, and her shrill clipped voice, not unlike Fen's! Look at Sir William bending over her.'

‘No, really,’ Molly was saying, ‘is it by Ferneley? How fascinating. No, do tell me.’

And that dreadful Colonel Carter, Colonel Bogus more likely, handsome as an ageing movie star, matinee-idling about, a cliché of chauvinism, his large yellow teeth gleaming amicably beneath his greying moustache, as he blamed even the weather on the Socialists.

‘No, my younger daughter Fen’s riding,’ Molly was saying to Sir William. ‘She’s absolutely horse-mad; up first thing mucking out, never get her to wear a dress. Oh, I see you take *The Tatler* too; not for the articles really; but it’s such fun to see which of one’s chums are in this week.’

‘No, not my only child,’ Tory could hear her mother going on. ‘There’s Tory over there; yes, she’s more like her father . . . Yes, just eighteen . . . Well, how kind of you to say so. I suppose I was rather young when I got married.’

‘Mustn’t monopolize you,’ said Sir William, getting up from his chair and noticing Colonel Carter hovering. ‘Come and sit down, Carter; can’t say I blame you.’

Next moment, Sir William was hurrying across the room to welcome the two judges, Malise Gordon and Miss Squires, who, on a tight schedule, had only time for a quick bite. Malise Gordon, having accepted a weak whisky and soda, refused to follow it with any wine. He took a small helping of salmon but no potatoes, not because he was worried about getting fat, but because he liked to practise asceticism. An ex-Cavalry officer, much medalled after a good war, Colonel Gordon not only farmed but also judged at shows all around the country during the summer, and was kept busy in the winter as the local MFH. He was inclined to apply army discipline to the hunting field to great effect and told people exactly what he thought of them if they talked at the covert side, rode over seeds or left gates open. In addition to these activities, he played the flute, restored pictures in his spare time and wrote poetry and books on military history. Just turned fifty, he was tall and lean with a handsome, hawklike

face, high cheekbones and dark hair hardly touched with grey.

That is easily the most attractive man in the room, thought Molly Maxwell, eyeing him speculatively as she accepted Colonel Carter's heavy pleasantries, and let her laugh tinkle again and again round the room. Malise Gordon was now talking to Sir William's wife, Lady Dorothy. What an old frump, thought Molly Maxwell. That dreadful fawn cardigan with marks on it and lace-up shoes and the sort of baggy tweed skirt you'd feed the chickens in.

As an excuse to be introduced to Malise, Molly got up and, wandering over to Lady Dorothy, thanked her for a delicious lunch.

'Absolutely first rate,' agreed Colonel Carter, who'd followed her.

'Would you like to see around the garden?' said Lady Dorothy.

Malise Gordon looked at his watch.

'We better go and supervise the junior jumping,' he said to Miss Squires.

'Oh, my daughter's in that,' said Molly Maxwell, giving Malise Gordon a dazzling smile. 'I hope you'll turn a blind eye if she knocks anything down. It would be such a thrill if she got a rosette.'

Malise Gordon didn't smile back. He had heard Molly's laugh once too often and thought her very silly.

'Fortunately, jumping is the one event in which one can't possibly display any favouritism.'

Colonel Carter, aware that his beloved had been snubbed, decided Malise Gordon needed taking down a peg.

'What's the order for this afternoon?' he asked.

'Junior jumping, open jumping, then gymkhana events in ring three, then your show in ring two, Carter.'

A keen territorial, Colonel Carter was organizing a recruiting display which included firing twenty-five pounders.

'We're scheduled for 1700 hours,' snapped Colonel Carter. 'Hope you'll have wound your jumping up by then, Gordon. My chaps like to kick off on time.'

'I hope you won't do anything silly like firing off blanks while there are horses in the ring,' said Malise brusquely. 'It could be extremely dangerous.'

'Thanks, Dorothy, for a splendid lunch,' he added, kissing Lady Dorothy on the cheek. 'The garden's looking marvellous.'

Colonel Carter turned purple. What an arrogant bastard, he thought, glaring after Malise's broad, very straight back as he followed Miss Squires briskly out of the drawing room. But then the cavalry always gave themselves airs. Earlier, at the briefing, Malise had had the ill manners to point out that he thought a horse show was hardly the place to introduce a lot of people who had nothing better to do with their afternoons than play soldiers. 'I'll show him,' fumed Colonel Carter.

Outside, hackney carriages were bouncing around the ring, drawn by high-stepping horses, rosettes streaming from their striped browbands, while junior riders crashed their ponies over the practice fence. By some monumental inefficiency, the organizers of the show had also ended up with three celebrities, who'd all arrived to present the prizes and needed looking after.

Bobby Cotterel, Africa's owner, had originally been allotted the task, but at the last moment he'd pushed off to France, and such was the panic of finding a replacement that three other celebrities had been booked and accepted. The first was the Lady Mayoress, who'd opened the show and toured the exhibits and who had now been borne off to inspect the guides. The second was Miss Bilborough 1970, whose all-day-long make-up had not stood up to the heat. The third was a radio celebrity, with uniformly grey hair and a black treacle voice named Dudley Diplock. Having played a doctor in a long-running serial, he talked at the top of his

voice all the time in the hope that the public might recognize him. He had now commandeered the microphone for the junior jumping.

Fen felt her stomach getting hollower and hollower. The jumps looked huge. The first fence was as big as Epping Forest.

'Please, God, let me not have three refusals, let me not let Dandelion down.'

'Oh, here comes Tory,' she said as Jake helped her saddle up Dandelion. 'She went to a dance last night but I don't think she enjoyed it; her eyes were awfully red this morning.'

Jake watched the plump, anxious-faced Tory wincing over the churned-up ground in her tight shoes. She didn't look like a girl who enjoyed anything very much.

'Did you have a nice lunch? I bet you had strawberries,' shrieked Fen, climbing onto Dandelion and gathering up the reins. 'I'm just going to put Dandelion over a practice fence.'

'This is my sister, Tory,' she added.

Jake looked at Tory with that measure of disapproval he always bestowed on strangers.

'It's very hot,' stammered Tory.

'Very,' said Jake.

There didn't seem much else to say.

Fortunately, Tory was saved by the microphone calling the competitors into the collecting ring.

'Mr Lovell, I can't get Stardust's girths to meet, she's blown herself out,' wailed Pattie Beasley.

Jake went over and gave Stardust a hefty knee-up in the belly.

Fen came back from jumping the practice fence. Immediately Dandelion's head went down, snatching at the grass.

'You pig,' squealed Fen, jumping off and pulling bits out of his mouth. 'I just cleaned that bit. Where's Mummy?' she added to Tory.

'Going over the garden with Lady Dorothy,' said Tory.

'She must be bored,' said Fen. 'No, there she is over on the other side of the ring.'

Looking across, they could see Mrs Maxwell standing beside Sally-Ann Thomson's mother, while Colonel Carter adjusted her deck chair.

'Colonel Carter stayed last night,' said Fen in disgust. 'I couldn't sleep and I looked out of the window at about five o'clock and saw him go. He looked up at Mummy's bedroom and blew her a great soppy kiss. Think of kissing a man with an awful, droopy moustache like that. I suppose there's no accounting for tastes.'

'Fen,' said Tory, blushing scarlet. She looked at Jake out of the corner of her eye to see if he was registering shock or amusement, but his face was quite expressionless.

'No. 58,' called out the collecting ring steward.

A girl in a dark blue riding coat on a very shiny bay mare went in and jumped clear. Some nearby drunks in a Bentley, whose boot groaned with booze, hooted loudly on their horn.

'How was her ladyship's garden?' asked Colonel Carter.

'I think I was given a tour of every petal,' said Molly Maxwell.

'You must have been the fairest flower,' said the Colonel, putting his deck chair as close to hers as possible. 'My people used to have a lovely garden in Hampshar.'

The radio personality, Dudley Diplock, having mastered the microphone, was now thoroughly enjoying himself.

'Here comes the junior champion for Surrey,' he said. 'Miss Cock, Miss Sarah Cock on Topsy.'

A girl with buck teeth rode in. Despite her frenziedly flailing legs the pony ground to a halt three times in front of the first fence.

'Jolly bad luck, Topsy,' said the radio personality. 'Oh, I beg your pardon, here comes Miss Sarah Cock, I mean Cook, on Topsy.'