

An Event at Epsom

Chapter One

Mid-June 1810

En route to Epsom, Surrey

“I have always wondered why they call them ‘downs,’” Maria Sefton said, gazing at the rolling green countryside outside the carriage window. “Don’t they go up as much as down? Indeed,” she said, warming to her subject, “since they must go up in order to go down, why are they not called ‘ups’? It seems dreadfully arbitrary.”

Across from her, Annabel smiled. It was an exceedingly Maria-ish thing to say. “I don’t know, but ‘Epsom Downs’ sounds much better than ‘Epsom Ups,’” she replied.

“That’s true.” Maria’s brow wrinkled. “I shall ask Derby about it when I see him. If anyone would know, it is he.”

“Except I believe there are downs elsewhere and not only in Surrey,” Annabel couldn’t resist adding.

“Oh, dear. That does complicate the question.”

“Does Lord Derby know we’re coming?” Georgiana Bathurst, seated next to Maria, asked. She’d spoken barely a word since they’d left London and had spent the intervening hours wearing a slight frown as she gazed fixedly at nothing. Annabel had feared she was carriage-sick, but they’d not needed to pause for her to cast up her accounts in the hedgerow. The only other conclusion to be drawn was that something was troubling her.

“Of course he is expecting me. I don’t think he knows you’re coming,” Maria replied. “This investigation was Mr. Almack’s idea, not Derby’s. However, I am certain he would be monstrous glad of our help if it turns out that there is indeed something not-quite-right going on here.”

They were on their way to Epsom, site of two of the most hotly-contested (and lucrative) horse-races in England—the Derby and the Oaks Stakes—which had also become one of the more popular events of the season. Mr. Almack’s death had not blunted his keen interest in the Sport of Kings, and a curious story had come to him that made a man—er, ghost—of his experience sit up and take notice.

“Speaking of peculiar, there’s something verra odd going on in racing circles,” he’d announced at Monday’s Lady Patronesses meeting after they had discussed the incident with the Potamides at Eton. “Something that I think you ladies might want to look at.”

“Odd in what way?” Sally had asked, taking a fresh leaf of paper and dipping her pen.

The tale Mr. Almack had recounted had indeed been an odd one. Earlier that spring a new filly had appeared on the local race circuit around Newmarket and had won almost every race she ran. Her owner, a Sir Oswald Broxley, was known amongst the gentlemen of the turf as a not-very-successful amateur breeder and trainer. With this horse, however, his luck finally seemed to have turned the corner. When asked, Sir Oswald was not forthcoming about Maharahnee's origins; he would only smile smugly and say that she'd been bred and born on his family's estate.

Dorothea had snorted. "I do not see what is so mysterious about this as to be of interest to us."

"I'm getting to that part," Mr. Almack replied, a little testily. "What is of interest is that she's a verra intelligent horse; as far as anyone can see her jockey is more or less along for the ride whilst she chooses her own path. She also doesna seem to need to rest; she'll run one day and be at a race twenty miles away the next day, ready to go."

They'd all been silent, absorbing that. Sir Oswald was not known to possess a wagon capable of carrying horses, so how could this Maharahnee win a race one afternoon, then walk twenty miles to the next one in less than a day and be ready once again to race?

Sally had finally spoken. "Either this Sir Oswald has managed to tame a kelpie—"

"*Can* one tame a kelpie?" Frances interrupted, wide-eyed.

"Nae, it canna be. It's a filly, and most all kelpies are male." Mr. Almack sounded amused. "'Twould be difficult to hide that."

"Oh. Yes, it would." Frances blushed. "I beg your pardon, Sally. Pray go on."

Sally nodded and went on, "—or some poor horse has been put under a compulsion spell. I expect it must be that." She turned to Mr. Almack's empty—or rather, apparently empty—chair. "I presume the horse's owner is making a tidy profit in winnings?"

"Aye, he is. And from all accounts, he needs it—the man's known to have the worst luck—or judgment—in three counties." Mr. Almack's tone made it clear which he thought was the case. "The Oaks Stakes—it's a race for three-year-old fillies, ye ken—comes up at the end of this week at Epsom, and if there's somethin' not natural about one of the competitors, I think we should look into it."

"I expect we should." Sally looked down the table. "Maria, this would seem to be a matter you would best be able to get to the bottom of. Will you take it on?"

"It would not be any trouble at all, as Sefton and I had already planned to go to Epsom on Wednesday to stay with Lord Derby," Maria said. "If Georgiana isn't otherwise occupied, perhaps she would come as well. Georgiana?"

"Yes, I suppose, if my rheumatism does not confine me to bed." Georgiana sighed. "And so long as it isn't a kelpie."

And so Maria and Georgiana were undertaking the investigation, with Annabel to assist as needed with gathering information. A footman had been dispatched at once to secure accommodation for them at an inn in the vicinity. Annabel had doubted he would—rooms would be almost impossible to find in Epsom at this late hour. Fortunately for them he was an engaging fellow, and the fund Mr. Almack had left for the Lady Patronesses' expenses a deep one; comfortable rooms had been found for Annabel and Georgiana at the Horse and Oak, conveniently close to the racecourse. Maria of course would be a guest at Lord Derby's house.

Annabel watched the green hills ebb and swell through the dust raised by the carriages in front of them—the closer they got to Epsom, the more crowded the roads had grown—and could not help wishing that she could have spent these days alone. On Monday this had seemed as if it would be an amusing investigation to help with. But that had been Monday. Now it was Wednesday—and her life had turned upside down in the intervening day.

Not a great deal had actually *happened* on Tuesday, aside from the prodigious amount of shopping she'd done with Mama, which had cast her maid Winters into transports of joy. The part of Tuesday that had plunged her into such confusion had been, outwardly, a small one: the brief exchange she'd had with the Marquis of Quinceton whilst they drove in Hyde Park that afternoon.

Such a little thing on the face of it, those few words. Except that they had forced her to confront the fact that she *did* regard him differently than she had three months before—that she now found him more than a little attractive, more than a little...love-worthy.

When he had asked her—shyly, almost (fancy the haughty Marquis of Quinceton being shy!)—to call him Quin, she'd darted a glance at his face. There was a warmth in his eyes that made her look away again before he could see her discomposure. And his softly voiced, "Please?" had nearly undone her; she'd whispered, "Yes, Quin," so quietly that there should have been no way he had heard her above the jangle of harness and the clop of his horses' hooves.

But he'd heard her.

And now—what?

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