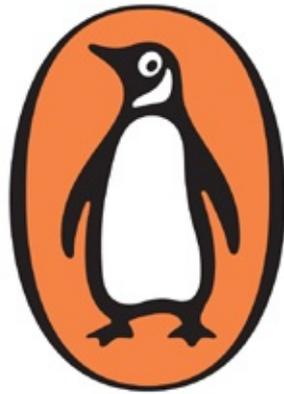


# F DICK FRANCIS

AND  
FELIX FRANCIS



# SILKS



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DICK FRANCIS AND FELIX FRANCIS

Silks

MICHAEL JOSEPH  
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*Our thanks to*

*Miles Bennett, barrister  
Guy Ladenburg, barrister  
David Whitehouse QC*

*Books by Dick Francis and Felix Francis*  
DEAD HEAT

*Books by Dick Francis*  
THE SPORT OF QUEENS (autobiography)

DEAD CERT  
NERVE  
FOR KICKS  
ODDS AGAINST  
FLYING FINISH  
BLOOD SPORT  
FORFEIT  
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SHATTERED  
UNDER ORDERS

## PROLOGUE

*March 2008*

‘Guilty.’

I watched the foreman of the jury as he gave the verdicts. He was wearing a light-coloured tweed jacket over a blue and white striped shirt. At the start of the trial he had also regularly sported a sober striped tie but perhaps, as time had dragged on, the ultra-casual dress of the other eleven had eventually made him feel uncomfortably formal and his shirt was now open at the neck. Unlike most of them, he was grey haired and upright in his stance. Maybe that was why he had been selected as their foreman. I imagined that he was a retired schoolmaster, well used to taking charge and keeping discipline in a classroom full of unruly youth.

‘Guilty,’ he said again rather nervously, but with a strong deep voice. He kept his eyes firmly on the robed and bewigged judge sitting slightly above him to his left. Not once did he look at the young man in the dock, who also sat slightly above him, but to his right. We were in number 3 court at the Old Bailey, which was one of the older, Victorian-built courtrooms of the Central Criminal Court, designed at a time when the process of the law was intended to be intimidating to the wrongdoer and a deterrent to others. However, for all its formality, the courtroom was small, no larger than a reasonably sized drawing room. The judge, sitting up high behind his long bench, dominated the space and all the other participants, defendant, counsel and jury were so close together that they would have been able to lean forward and touch one another, provided, of course, they had wanted to.

In all, the schoolmasterly foreman repeated the same word eight times before sitting back down with, I sensed, a small sigh of relief that the ordeal was finally over.

The jury had found the young man guilty on all eight counts, four of them for assault occasioning actual bodily harm, three of inflicting grievous bodily harm, and one of attempted murder.

I wasn’t really surprised. I was also certain that the young man was guilty, and I was his defence counsel.

Why, I asked myself, had I wasted my most favourite days of the whole year sitting in the Old Bailey trying to save such an undeserving character from a lengthy stretch in the slammer?

Well, for the money, I supposed. But I would much rather have been at Cheltenham for the racing festival. Especially as, this afternoon, I had been expecting to ride my

own twelve-year-old bay gelding in the Foxhunter Chase, also known as the Gold Cup for amateur riders.

British justice has, for the past five hundred years, held that a man is innocent until proven guilty. The courtesies of courtroom etiquette are maintained with the accused being referred to simply as the defendant. He is not required to prove his innocence, rather just to defend himself against allegations, allegations that have to be proven beyond a reasonable doubt. The defendant is addressed using the title Mister, Doctor or Sir, or My Lord, or even Reverend or, dare I say, Right Reverend or Your Grace, as is appropriate. However, once the jury has pronounced his guilt, the defendant instantly becomes 'the offender' and loses the right to such niceties. The mood changes from one of polite discovery and laying bare of the pertinent facts, to one of punishment and retribution for misdeeds now proven.

Almost before the foreman settled again in his seat, the prosecution counsel rose to inform the court of the previous convictions of the offender. And previous there were. Four times before he had been convicted of violent offences including two of malicious wounding. On two occasions the young man had been detained for periods in a young-offenders' institution.

I watched the members of the jury as they absorbed the information. They had spent nearly a week in deliberations before delivering their verdicts. Now some of them were visibly shocked to discover the true character of the smartly dressed twenty-three-year-old young man in the dock who looked as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

I again wondered what I was doing here. Why, I asked myself for the umpteenth time, had I taken on such a hopeless case? I knew the answer. Because I had been urged to do so by a friend of a friend of the young man's parents. They had all pleaded with me to take him on, promising that he was innocent and that the charges were the result of mistaken identity. And, of course, because they were paying me handsomely.

However, I had soon discovered that the only thing mistaken in this case was the unshakeable belief of his parents that their little angel couldn't possibly have done such a nasty thing as to attack a family with a baseball bat. The only motive for the attack was that the father of the family had complained to the police about the young man using the road outside their house as a drag-racing strip each night until two or three in the morning.

The more I had learned about my client the more I had realized my error in accepting the brief. So clear was it to me that he was guilty as charged that I thought the trial would be over nice and quickly and I would be able to go to Cheltenham races with a light heart and a heavy wallet. That the jury had inexplicably taken so long to reach a conclusion of the bleeding obvious was just one of those things.

I had thought about bunking off to the races, claiming sickness, but the judge was a racing man and he had only the previous evening commiserated with me that I would be unable to ride in the Foxhunters. To have feigned sickness and then ridden in the race would likely have put me up before him on contempt charges, and then I could

kiss goodbye any aspirations I might have of promotion to QC, a Queen's Counsel – a silk.

'There will always be next year,' the judge had said with an irritating smile.

But one didn't just enter a horse in the Foxhunters, one had to qualify by winning other races, and this was the first time I had managed to do so in ten years of trying. Next year both horse and rider would be another year older and neither of us was in the first flush of youth. There might never be another chance for us together.

I looked at my watch. The race was due off in half an hour. My horse would still run, of course, but there would be another jockey on board and I hated the thought of it. I had played out the race so often in my head and now someone else would be taking my place. I should be in the Cheltenham changing room right now, pulling on the lightweight racing breeches and the brightly coloured silks, not sat here in pinstripe suit, gown and wig, far from the cheering crowd, in depression rather than anticipation.

'Mr Mason,' repeated the judge, bringing me back from my daydreaming. 'I asked you if the defence wishes to say anything before sentence.'

'No, Your Honour,' I said, half standing and then returning to my seat. As far as I could see there were no mitigating circumstances that I wanted to bring to the court's attention. I couldn't claim the young man was the product of a deprived or broken background, nor could I try to excuse his behaviour by reference to some past abuse. In fact quite the reverse was true. His parents were loving both of him and of each other, and he had been educated at one of the country's leading private schools, or at least he had until he was seventeen, when he had been expelled for bullying the younger boys and then threatening the headmaster with a broken bottle while being reprimanded for it.

'The prisoner will stand,' announced the court clerk.

The young man rose to his feet slowly, almost smugly. I stood up too.

'Julian Trent,' the judge addressed him, 'you have been found guilty by this court of perpetrating a violent and unprovoked attack on an innocent family including a charge of attempted murder. You have shown little or no remorse for your actions and I consider you a danger to society. You have previous convictions for violence and you seem unable or unwilling to learn the errors of your ways. I am conscious of my duty to protect the public. Therefore, you will go to prison for eight years. Take him down.'

Julian Trent simply shrugged his shoulders and was ushered down the stairs from the dock to the cells beneath by two burly prison officers. Mrs Trent in the public gallery burst into tears and was comforted by her ever-present husband. I wondered if a week of listening to the damning evidence in the case had made any changes to their rosy opinion of their little boy.

I had quietly hoped that the judge would lock young Julian up for life and throw away the key. I knew that in spite of the eight-year prison sentence it would be, in fact, only half of that before he was back on the streets, arrogantly using his baseball bat to threaten and beat some other poor soul who crossed his path.

Little did I realize at the time that it would be a good deal sooner than four years, and that it would be me on the receiving end.

# PART I

Murder, Arrest and Remand  
*November 2008*

# Chapter 1

‘Hi, Perry. How’re you doing?’

‘Fine, thanks,’ I replied, waving a hand. My name isn’t actually Perry, it’s Geoffrey, but I have long since given up expecting the other jockeys in the changing room to use it. When one is a lawyer, a barrister even, with the surname Mason, one has to expect it. It’s like being a White in the forces: invariably the nickname Chalky is added.

I was secretly quite pleased that I was addressed at all by the professionals with whom I occasionally shared a moment’s contact. They were together, day in and day out, going about their daily work at the many racecourses around the country, while I averaged only a dozen or so rides a year, almost always on my own horse. An ‘amateur rider’, as I was officially defined, was tolerated, just, as long as he knew his place, which was next to the door of the changing room where it was always coldest and where clothes and towels were regularly trampled when the jockeys were called to the paddock by an official.

A few of the older changing rooms still had wood-burning stoves in a corner to provide comfort when it was wet and freezing outside. Woe betide some eager young amateur rider who took a seat near the heat, however early he might have arrived at the racecourse. Such comforts had to be earned and were the privilege of the senior jocks.

‘Any juicy cases, Perry?’ asked a voice from up the far end.

I looked up. Steve Mitchell was one of the elite, constantly vying over the past few seasons with two others for the steeplechase champion jockey’s crown. He was currently the reigning champion, having won more races in the previous year than any other, and he was lying third in the present campaign.

‘Just the usual,’ I said. ‘Kidnap, rape and murder.’

‘Don’t know how you do it,’ he said, pulling a white roll-neck sweater over his head.

‘It’s a job,’ I said. ‘And it’s safer than yours.’

‘Yeah, suppose so. But some guy’s life depends on you.’ He pulled on his breeches.

‘They don’t hang murderers any more, you know,’ I said. More’s the pity, I thought, for some of them.

‘No,’ said Steve. ‘But if you mess up, someone might go to jail for years.’

‘They may go to jail because they deserve to, no matter what I do,’ I said.

‘Does that make you a failure?’ he said, buttoning up his blue and white hooped jacket.

‘Ha,’ I laughed. ‘When I win I take some of the credit. When I lose I say that justice takes its course.’

‘Not me,’ he laughed back, throwing his arms open wide. ‘When I win I take all the credit, and when I lose I blame the horse.’

‘Or the trainer,’ piped in another.

Everyone laughed. Changing-room banter was the antidote to danger. Five or six times a day, every day, these guys put their lives on the line, riding more than half a ton of horse over five-foot fences at thirty miles an hour with no seat belt, no air-bag, and precious little protection.

‘Unless you stopped it.’ The voice had a distinctive Scottish accent. The laughter died instantly. Scot Barlow was, it was safe to say, not the most popular regular in the jockeys’ room. That comment from anyone else would have been the cause for renewed mirth but from Scot Barlow it had menace.

Like Steve Mitchell, Barlow was one of the big three and he currently led the title race by the odd winner or two. But the reason Scot Barlow was not the most popular of colleagues was not because he was successful, but because he had a reputation, rightly or wrongly, of bleating to the authorities about his fellow jockeys if they transgressed the rules. As Reno Clemens, the third of the big three, had once said to me by way of a warning, ‘Barlow is a snitch, so keep your betting slips out of his reach.’

Professional jockeys were not allowed to bet on horses. It expressly said so in the terms of their riding licences. Some of them did, of course, and it was reliably reported to me that Scot Barlow had been known to go through his fellow jockeys’ pockets to find the illicit betting slips to give to the stewards. Whether he had or not, I didn’t know, it was hearsay evidence only and might be inadmissible in court, but the others believed it absolutely.

Somewhat strangely, as an amateur rider, I was allowed to bet, and I did so regularly, but usually only on myself to win. Always the optimist.

We were in the jockeys’ changing room at Sandown Park racecourse, in Surrey, and I was riding in the fifth race, a three-mile chase reserved for amateur riders. It was a rare treat for me to be part of a big-race Saturday. Races for amateurs were rare these days, especially at the weekends, and I usually had to confine myself to such races as my weight had inexorably risen to what was considered natural for someone nearing his thirty-sixth birthday and standing five foot ten and a half in his socks. I tried my best to keep it down and regularly starved myself through the winter months to ride at the amateur riders’ days in the spring. At least the races reserved for the likes of me tended to have higher weights than those in which I would compete with the pros. There was no chance of me seeing ten stone again and the lowest riding weight I could now seriously consider was eleven stone seven, as it included not only my expanding body, but also my clothes, my riding boots and my saddle.

The jockeys were called for the third race, the main event of the afternoon, and there was the usual lack of a mad rush for the door. Jockeys are generally very superstitious and many of them like to be the last one to leave the changing room for luck, while others simply don’t want to spend any time making small talk in the parade ring with

the owner and trainer of the horse they are riding. Some even hang around polishing and re-polishing their already clean goggles until the get-mounted bell has already been rung and the officials are having palpitations trying to get them out. I had grabbed all my stuff from off the floor and I now held it close to my chest to protect it until even the last of the tardy bunch had exited, then I put my tweed jacket over my silks and went out to watch the contest on the weighing-room televisions.

The blue and white hooped colours flashed past the post to win by a head in a tight finish. Steve Mitchell had closed the gap on Barlow and Clemens with one more win.

I went back into the jockeys' inner sanctum to begin my mental preparation for the fifth race. I had discovered that I increasingly needed to get myself into the right frame of mind. If I wasn't properly prepared, the whole thing would seemingly pass me by, and be over before I was even ready for it to start. As I knew that my racing days were numbered, I didn't want to waste any of them.

I sat on the bench that ran all round the room, and went through again in my head where I wanted to be as the tapes went up, where I would be as we approached the first fence and where I hoped to be as we approached the last. Of course, in my mind's eye we would win the race and my apprehension would turn to joy. And that wouldn't be all that unexpected. My bay gelding and I would start as favourite. His win in the Foxhunters at the Cheltenham Festival in March would make sure of that.

Steve Mitchell came waltzing back into the changing room with a grin on his face wider than the eight-lane highway down the road.

'What about that then, Perry?' he said, slapping me on the back, bringing me out of my trance. 'Bloody marvellous. And I beat that bastard Barlow. You should have seen his face. Furious, he was.' He laughed expansively. 'Serves him bloody well right.'

'What for?' I asked innocently.

He stood still for a moment and looked at me inquisitively. 'For being a bastard,' he said, and turned away towards his peg.

'And is he?' I asked his back.

He turned round to face me. 'Is he what?'

'A bastard.'

There was a pause.

'You're a funny bloke, Perry,' he said, irritated. 'What bloody difference does it make whether he's a real bastard or not.'

I was beginning to wish I hadn't got into this conversation. Being a barrister didn't always help one to make friends.

'Well done anyway,' I said to him, but the moment had passed and he just waved a dismissive hand and turned his back on me once again.

'Jockeys!' An official put his head round the changing-room door and called the group of nineteen of us amateurs to the parade ring.

My heart rate rose a notch. It always did. Adrenalin pumped through my veins and I positively jumped up and dived through the doorway. No superstitious last one out of

the changing room for me, I wanted to savour every moment. It felt like my feet were hardly touching the ground.

I adored this feeling. This is why I loved to ride in races. This was my fix, my drug. It was arguably less safe than sniffing cocaine and certainly more expensive, but it was a need in me, a compulsion, an addiction. Thoughts of heavy falls, of mortal danger, of broken bones and bruised bodies were banished simply by the thrill and the anticipation of the coming race. Such was the feeling on every occasion, undiminished by time and familiarity. I often told myself that I would hang up my saddle for good only when that emotion ceased to accompany the official's call for 'jockeys'.

I made it to the parade ring without floating away altogether and stood excited on the tightly mowed grass with my trainer, Paul Newington.

When I acquired my first horse some fifteen years ago, Paul had been thought of as the 'bright young up-and-coming trainer' in the sport. Now he was considered to be the man who never quite fulfilled his potential. He was originally from Yorkshire but had moved south in his late twenties, headhunted to take over from one of the grand old men of racing who had been forced into retirement by illness. Far from being up-and-coming, he was now in danger of becoming down-and-going, struggling to fill his expansive training establishment in Great Milton, just to the east of Oxford.

But I liked him, and my own experience of his skills had been nothing but positive. Over the years he had bought for me a succession of sound hunter-chasers that had carried me, for the most part, safely over hundreds of miles and thousands of fences. Mostly they had been steady rather than spectacular, but that had been my brief to him when buying. I wanted to be in one piece more than I wanted to win.

'I think you should beat this lot,' Paul said, loosely waving a hand at the other groups in the parade ring. 'Fairly jumping out of his skin, he is.'

I didn't like being expected to win. Even when defending in court I was generally pessimistic about my clients' chances. That way, winning was unexpected and joyful while losing wasn't too much of a disappointment.

'Hope so,' I replied. My apprehension grew as an official rang the bell and called for the jockeys to get mounted.

Paul gave me a leg-up onto my current pride and joy. Sandeman was the best horse I had ever owned by a long way. Paul had bought him for me as an eight-year-old with a mixed history of fairly moderate results in hurdle races. Paul had reckoned that Sandeman was too big a horse to run over hurdles and that he would be much better as a chaser and he had been right. The horse had quickly learned the skill of jumping the bigger obstacles and was soon shooting up the handicap. So far we had won eight races together and he had won five others without me in the saddle, including that victory in the Foxhunter Chase at Cheltenham.

This was his first run since the summer layoff. He would be thirteen on the first of January and, consequently, he was close to the twilight of his career. Paul and I had planned that he would race just twice before the Cheltenham Festival, before what we hoped would be a repeat victory in the Foxhunters.

I had first been introduced to steeplechase racing by my uncle Bill when I was twelve. Uncle Bill was my mother's younger brother and he was still in his early twenties when he had been delegated to take me out for the day and keep me out of mischief. I had been staying with him and his parents, my grandparents, while my own mother and father were away together on holiday in South America.

I had clambered eagerly into the passenger seat of his beloved open-topped MG Midget and we had set out for the south coast and the planned day at Worthing in West Sussex.

Unbeknown to me, or to his somewhat austere parents, Uncle Bill had no intention of spending the day dragging his young nephew across Worthing's steep pebble beach or along its elegant Victorian pier so I could be entertained by the amusement arcades. Instead he drove us about fifteen miles further to the west to Fontwell Park racecourse, and my abiding passion for jump racing was born.

At almost every British racecourse it is possible for the spectators to stand next to a fence, to experience the thrill of being so close up as half-ton horses soar over and through the tightly bound birch, to hear the horses' hooves thumping the turf, to feel the earth tremble, and to sense the excitement of being part of the race. But at Fontwell the steeplechase course is a figure of eight and one can run between the jumps that are near to the cross-over point and be close to the action twice on each circuit, six times in all during a three-mile chase.

Uncle Bill and I spent much of the afternoon running across the grass from fence to fence, and by the end of the day I knew for certain that I wanted to be one of those brave young men in their bright coloured silks fearlessly kicking and urging his mount into the air at thirty miles an hour with hope in his heart, trusting that the spindly legs of the Thoroughbred racehorse beneath him would save them both from crashing to the ground on the other side.

Such was my conviction that I could think of nothing else for weeks and I begged my uncle to take me with him to the races whenever I could get away from more mundane things like school and studying.

I enrolled at a local riding stables and soon mastered the art, not of dressage as they would have preferred, but of riding at speed over jumps. My teacher tried in vain to get me to sit upright in the saddle with my heels down. However, I was determined to stand in the stirrups crouching over the animal's withers just as I had seen the jockeys do.

By the time I was seventeen and learning to drive a car, I could navigate my way around the country not by the positions of the major cities but by the locations of the racecourses. Maybe I couldn't find my way to Birmingham, or to Manchester or to Leeds, but I knew unerringly the quickest route from Cheltenham to Bangor-on-Dee, or from Market Rasen to Aintree.

Sadly, by then I had come to terms with the fact that I was never going to earn my living from race riding. For a start, despite my best efforts in refusing my school dinners, I had grown too tall and was already showing signs of becoming too heavy to

be a professional jockey. Coupled with that was an apparent gift for academic success, and the fact that my future career in the law had been planned out to the *n*th degree by my father. He had decided that I would follow him to his old college at London University, then, like him, to the College of Law in Guildford and, finally, into the same firm of high-street solicitors that he himself had joined some thirty years previously. I would spend my life, like his, conveyancing property from seller to buyer, drawing up last wills and testaments, and untying the knots of failed marriages in south-west London suburbia. The promised boredom of it all had filled me with horror.

I had been twenty-one and in my third year of a Bachelor of Laws degree at UCL when my darling mother had finally lost her long battle against leukaemia. Her death wasn't a surprise to me, in fact she had lived far longer than any of the family had expected, but, perhaps for the first time, it brought home to me the fallibility and transitory nature of the human state. She died on her forty-ninth birthday. There had been no cutting of cake with blown-out candles, no singing of 'Happy Birthday to You'. Just despair and tears. Lots and lots of tears.

The experience made me resolve to do what I really wanted and not what everyone else expected of me. Life, I suddenly decided, was too short to waste.

I had duly completed my degree, as it had somehow seemed a mistake to give it all up at such a late stage, but I had absolutely no intention of becoming a solicitor like my father. I had written to the College of Law to withdraw my application for the Legal Practice Course, the next step on the solicitors' ladder, and, much to my remaining parent's horror and anger, had arranged instead to go to Lambourn as unpaid assistant and amateur jockey with a mid-ranking racehorse trainer.

'But how will you afford to live?' my father had demanded in exasperation.

'I will use the legacy that Mum left me,' I'd replied.

'But...,' he had blustered. 'That was meant to be for the down payment on a house.'

'She didn't say so in her will,' I had said rather tactlessly, sending my father into a tirade about how the young these days had no sense of responsibility. This was not an uncommon rant in our household, and I was well used to ignoring it.

So I had graduated in June and gone to Lambourn in July, and had used my mother's legacy not only to pay my living expenses but also to acquire a seven-year-old bay gelding that I could ride in races, having correctly supposed that I was unlikely to get any rides on anyone else's horses.

I didn't tell my father.

August had mostly been spent getting fit. Each morning I would ride my horse in the stable string to the gallops on the hills above the village and then, each afternoon, I would run the same route on foot. By mid September both horse and jockey were showing signs of being ready for the racecourse.

Quite by chance, or was it fate, my first ride in a proper race had been at Fontwell in early October that year. The whole experience had seemed to pass me by in a blur with everything happening at once. Such was my naivety and nervousness that I nearly

forgot to weigh out, had been unprepared and badly left at the start, had struggled for a full circuit to get back to the other runners before fading badly due to my own lack of stamina towards the end. We had finished eleventh out of thirteen, and one of the two I had beaten only because he had fallen in front of me at the last. It had not been an auspicious beginning. However the trainer had seemed relatively satisfied.

‘At least you didn’t fall off,’ he had said on our way home in his car.

I had taken it as a compliment.

My horse and I had raced together five more times that year and on each occasion we had fared slightly better than the time before, finishing a close second in an amateur riders’ steeplechase at Towcester races the week before Christmas.

By the following March I had ridden over fences a total of nine times and I had also had my first racing fall, at Stratford. However, it had been my ego that had been more bruised than my body. My horse and I had been well in front with just one fence left to negotiate when the excitement of the moment had become too much for me and I had made a complete hash of it, asking my mount for a mighty leap while he had decided to put in an extra stride. The result was that we had ploughed through the top of the fence, ending up in a crumpled heap on the ground watching ruefully as the others had sailed past us to the finish.

In spite of this disaster, and even though I had not yet ridden a winner, I still loved the excitement of the actual races, but I had begun to be rather bored by the time between them. I was missing the intellectual stimulation that I had so enjoyed during my time at university. And my mother’s legacy had started to show major signs of exhaustion. It was time to put my fantasy back in its box and earn myself a living. But as what? I remained steadfast in my aversion to being a solicitor, but what else could I do with my law degree?

*Not all lawyers are solicitors*, I remembered one of my tutors saying during my first weeks at university. *There are barristers as well.*

To someone who was expecting, and expected, to become a general practice high-street solicitor, the world of the barrister was mysterious and unknown. My choice of optional study topics in my degree had concentrated on those areas I could mostly expect to encounter: conveyancing, family, employment and contract law. I had tended to avoid advocacy, criminal law and jurisprudence as much as possible.

I had researched the differences between barristers and solicitors in the local library in Hungerford and had learned that barristers were advocates, standing up and arguing, while solicitors generally did the legal paperwork in the background. Barristers tended to spar verbally across courtrooms with other barristers, while solicitors drew up contracts and litigation alone in quiet offices.

All of a sudden the prospect of becoming a stand-up-and-argue barrister had excited me hugely and I had eagerly applied for a return to legal matters.

So here I was some fourteen years later, well established in the world of horsehair wigs, silk gowns and courtroom protocol, but still trying to master this racing lark.

‘Jockeys! Walk in.’ The starter’s call brought me back to the matter in hand. How careless, I thought, to be daydreaming at such a time. Concentrate! I told myself sharply.

The nineteen of us walked up slowly in a straggly line, the starter pushed the lever, the tape flew up and we were off. Not that it was easy to tell as no one seemed keen to make the running. The pack slowly went from walk to trot, and then to canter as the race began in almost sedentary style.

The three-mile start at Sandown is on the side of the course just after the bend at the end of the home straight, so the horses have to complete almost two full circuits jumping a total of twenty-two fences. The first, which comes up very soon after the start, looks fairly innocuous but has caught out many an amateur and professional rider in its time. The landing side is some way below the take-off point and the drop tends to pitch horses forward onto their noses. The slow initial pace of this race, however, gave even the most inexperienced jockey, riding the world’s worst jumper, time to haul on the reins to keep the animal’s head up. So all nineteen runners were still standing as the pace picked up and we turned right-handed into the back straight to face the most famous seven-fence combination in steeplechasing. Two plain fences and an open-ditch fairly close together, then a slight gap to the water-jump, then the famous Railway fences – three plain fences very close together, closer than any others in British racing. It is always said that if you jump the first one well then all will be fine, but make a hash of the first and then horse and rider will be lucky to get to the far end intact.

Three miles is a long way, especially in November mud after a wet autumn, and none of us was making the mistake of going too fast too early. Consequently all nineteen runners were still standing and fairly closely bunched as we swung out of the back straight and round the long curve to the Pond fence and then up in front of the watching crowds for the first time.

The thing that struck me most when I started riding in races was the apparent isolation in which the participants find themselves. There may be thousands and thousands of eager gamblers in the grandstands, each shouting on their choices, but, for all the jockeys can tell, the stands may as well be empty and deserted. The sound of horses’ hooves striking the turf, the same sound that had so excited me as a boy that first day at Fontwell Park, was the main noise that filled the senses. And obviously, unlike for the stationary spectator for whom it comes and goes, the noise travels along with the horses. There are other sounds too: the slap of the reins or whip, the clicking together of hooves, the shouts of the jockeys and the clatter of hoof or horseflesh on birch and wood as the animals brush through the top few inches of each fence. All of these together make the race a noisy place to be, and they exclude any utterances from outside this bubble. No word of encouragement can penetrate, not a single phrase of commentary can enter. Quite often, afterwards, the jockeys are the least informed about the triumphs and disasters of others. If it occurs behind them, they will have no idea that, say, the red-hot favourite has fallen, or a loose horse has caused mayhem in