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Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Hesse  
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# **Boy Woodburn A Story of the Sussex Downs**

Alfred Ollivant

# Imprint

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FOUR-POUND-THE-SECOND

"Look at that head-piece. He's all the while a-thinkin', that hoss is.  
That's the way he's bred."



TO  
THE MOTHER  
OF  
LAUGHTER



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## **PART I**

### **THE GIRL AND THE FOAL**

#### **BOOK I**

##### **OLD MAT**

#### **CHAPTER I**

##### **The Trainer**

The Spring Meeting at Polefax was always Old Mat's day out. And it was part of the accepted order of things that he should come to the Meeting driving in his American buggy behind the horse with which later in the day he meant to win the Hunters' Steeplechase.

There were very few sporting men who remembered the day when Mat had not been a leading figure in the racing world. For sixty years he had been training jumpers, and he looked as if he would continue to train them till the end of time. Once it may be supposed he had been Young Mat, but he had been Old Mat now as long as most could recall. In all these years, indeed, he had changed very little. He trained his horses to-day at Putnam's, the farm in the village of Cuckmere, over the green billow of the Downs, just as he had done in the beginning; and he trained the same kind of horses in the same kind of way, which was entirely different from that of other trainers.

Mat rarely had a good horse in his stable, and never a bad one. He kept his horses in old barns and farm-stables, turning them out on to the chalk Downs in all seasons of the year with little shelter but the lee of a haystack or an occasional shed.

"I don't keep my hosses in no 'ot-house," he would say. "A hoss wants a heart, not a hot-water bottle. He'll get it on the chalk, let him be."

But if his horses were rough, they stood up and they stayed.

And that was all he wanted: for Mat never trained anything but jumpers.

"Flat racin' for flats," was a favourite saying of his. "'Chasin' for class."

And many of his wins have become historic; notably the Grand National in the year of Sedan – when Merry Andrew, who had three legs and one lung, so the story went, won for him by two lengths; and thirty years later Cannibal's still more astounding victory in the same race, when Monkey Brand out-jockeyed Chukkers Childers, the American crack, in one of the most desperate set-to's in the annals of Aintree.

There is a famous caricature of Mat leading in the winner on the first of these occasions. He looked then much as he does to-day – like Humpty-Dumpty of the nursery ballad; but he grew always more Humpty-Dumptyish with the years. His round red head, bald and shining, sat like a poached egg between the enormous spread of his shoulders. His neck, always short, grew shorter and finally disappeared; and his crisp, pink face had the air of one who finds breathing a perpetually increasing difficulty.

In build Mat was very short, and very broad; and his legs were so thin that it was no wonder they were somewhat bowed beneath their load. Far back in the Dark Ages, when his body was more on a par with his legs, it was rumoured that Mat had himself won hunt-races.

"Then my body went on, or rayther spread out," he would tell his intimates, "while me legs stayed where they was. So Mat become a trainer 'stead of a jockey."

And Mat's legs were not the only part of him that had stayed as they were in those remote days. He wore the same clothes now as then; or if not the identical clothes, as many averred, clothes of the identical cut. Younger trainers, who were fond of having their joke with the old man, would often inquire of him,

"Who's your tailor, Mat?"

To which the invariable answer in the familiar wheeze was,

"He died reign o' William the Fo'th, my son. Don't you wish he'd lived to show *your* Snips how to cut a coat?"

Mat indeed was distinctly early Victorian in his dress. He always wore a stock instead of a tie, and the felt hat with a flat top and broad-curved brim, which a rising young Radical statesman, for whom Mat had once trained, had imitated. He walked with a curious and characteristic lilt, as of a boy, rising on his toes as though reaching after heaven. And his eye underlined, as it were, the mischievous gaiety of his walk. It was a baffling eye: bright, blue, merry as a robin's and very shrewd; "the eye of a cherubim," Mat once described it himself. When it turned on you, grave yet twinkling, you knew that it summed you up, saw through you, was aware of your wickedness, condoned it, pitied you, comforted you, and bade you rejoice in the world and its crooked ways. It was an innocent eye, a dewy eye, and yet a mighty knowing one. Whether the owner of the eye was a saint or a sinner you could not affirm. Therefore it bade you beware what you said, what you did, and not least, what you thought, while its mild yet radiant beams were turned upon you. One thing was quite certain: that blue eye had seen a great deal. More, it had enjoyed the seeing. And its owner had a way of wiping it as he ended some tale of rascality, successful or exposed, with his habitual cliché—"I wep a tear. I did reelly," which made you realize that the only tears it had in fact ever wept were in truth tears of suppressed laughter over the foolishness of mortals. It had never mourned over a lost sinner, though it had often winked over one. And it had profound and impenetrable reserves.

And the trainer's ups and downs in life, if all the stories were true, had been amazing. At one time it was said that he was worth a cool £100,000, and at another a minus quantity. But rich or poor, he never changed his life by an iota, jogging soberly along his appointed if somewhat tortuous way.

Old Mat was nothing if not a character. And if he was by no means more scrupulous than the rest of his profession, he had certain steadfast virtues not always to be found in his brethren of the Turf. He never drank, he never smoked, and, win or lose, he never swore. A great raconteur, his stories were most amusing and never obscene. And when late in life he married Patience Longstaffe, the

daughter of the well-known preacher of *God-First* farm on the North of the Downs between Lewes and Cuckmere, nobody was much surprised. As Mr. Haggard, the Vicar of Cuckmere, said,

"Mat could always be expected to do the unexpected."

That Patience Longstaffe, the Puritan daughter of Preacher Joe, should marry the old trainer was a matter of amazement to all. But she did; and nobody had reason to think that she ever regretted it.

Patience Longstaffe became in time Ma Woodburn, though she remained Patience Longstaffe still.

Mat and his Ma had one daughter between them, known to all and sundry in the racing world as Boy Woodburn.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Boy Shows Her Metal**

The Polefax Meeting was small and friendly; never taken very seriously by the fraternity, and left almost entirely to local talent. Old Mat described it always as reg'lar old-fashioned. The countryside made of it an annual holiday and flocked to the fields under Polefax Beacon to see the horses and to enjoy Old Mat, who was the accepted centre-piece.

The Grand Stand was formed of Sussex wains drawn up end to end; and the Paddock was just roped off.

Outside the ropes, at the foot of the huge green wave of the Downs, were the merry-go-rounds, the cocoanut-shies and wagons of the gypsies; while under a group of elms the carts and carriages of the local farmers and gentry were drawn up.

There, too, of course, was Mat's American buggy, a spidery concern, made to the old man's design, seated like a double dog-cart, and looking amongst the solid carts and carriages that flanked it like a ghost amongst mortals. It was the most observed vehicle of them all, partly because of its unusual make and shape, and partly because that was the famous shay in which year after year Mat drove over the Downs from Putnam's behind the horse with which he meant to win the Hunters' Steeplechase.

That race, always the last item on the programme, and the most looked-for, was about to begin.

The quality in the Paddock were climbing to their places in the wagons. The voices of the bookies were raised vociferously. The crowd jostled about them, eager to back Old Mat's old horse, Goosey Gander. They believed in the old man's luck, they believed in the old man's horse, they believed in the old man's jockey, Monkey Brand, almost as famous locally as his master.

A boy slipped into the Paddock and began to bet surreptitiously behind the dressing-tent.

He was fair, slight, and horsey. His stiff, tight choker, his horse-shoe pin, the cut of his breeches, his alert and wary air of a man of the world, all betrayed the racing-lad. From the corner of his mouth hung a cigarette waggishly a-rake; and his billycock had just the correct and knowing cock. He kept well under the lee of the tent; and if he was brazen, it was clear that he was sinning and fearful of discovery: for he had one eye always on the watch for the Avenging Angel who might swoop down on him at any moment.

"What price, Goosey Gander?" he asked in a voice harsh and cracking.

"Give you threes," replied the bookie.

"Do it in dollars," replied the boy, with the magnificent sang-froid of one who goes to ruin as a man of blood should go.

"And again?" asked the bookie.

The answer was never forth-coming; for the Avenging Angel, not unexpected, swept down upon the sinner with flaming sword.

She was in the shape of a girl about the lad's own age and size, fair as was he and slight, a flapper with a short thick straw-coloured plait. She came round the tent swift and terrible as a rapier, her steel-gray eyes flashing and fierce. Such determination on so young a face the bookie thought he had never seen. For a moment he expected to see her strike her victim. And the boy apparently expected the same, for he cowered back, putting up his hands as though to ward off a blow.

"Got you, sonny," said the bookie, and bolted with a half-hearted grin.

The girl never hesitated. She leapt upon her victim, keen and direct as a tigress.

"Give me that ticket!" she ordered in a deep bass voice whose earnestness was almost awful.

The boy had recovered from his first shock.

"It were only -- --"

"Give me that ticket!"

Reluctantly the lad obeyed.

"Spit out that cigarette!"

Again he obeyed. The girl put her broad flat heel on the chewed remnant and churned it into the mud.

"Any others?"

"No, Miss."

"You have! -- I'll search you."

"Only a packet o' woodbines, Miss."

She pocketed them remorselessly.

"Leave the paddock!"

The boy went, slow and sullen. Then he became aware of people watching beyond the ropes and recovered himself with a jerk.

"Yes, Miss. Very good, Miss," he cried cheerfully, touched his hat, and began to run as on an errand.

It was a pretty piece of bluff. Boy Woodburn, in spite of her anger, marked it down to the credit side of the lad's account. When he was collared, Albert Edward kept his head. That would help him one day when he was caught in a squeeze in a big race and had to jockey to get through.

The roar from the crowd told her the race had started. She flashed back to the ropes, a slight figure, in simple blue serge, the radiant plait of her hair flapping as she ran.