

THE STAR AND I
CHAPTER 8: Combination of Circumstances

DERBY DAY, 6th June 2009

When I woke on Derby Day I could see how wet the streets had become overnight.



Wet street in London on the 6th June 2009 morning

"Some days you wake up and immediately start to worry. Nothing in particular is wrong. It's just the suspicion that forces are aligning quietly and that there will be trouble." I do not know who wrote those words, but I could identify absolutely with their significance on Derby Day 2009.



Nothing particular is wrong



Suspicion that there will be trouble

John had been in charge of the Irish National Stud for as many years as I have been on this earth. Accustomed to soothing owners' jangling nerves, John strove to convey calmness. The Derby was just another race, really. Some you win and some you lose, and so on, for most of the car journey to Epsom Downs, home of the Derby since 1780.



John accustomed to Soothing owner'jangling nerves

For further reassurance John showed me his copy of that day's Irish Field, Ireland's weekly racing and breeding journal. The headline read 'Written in the STARS'.

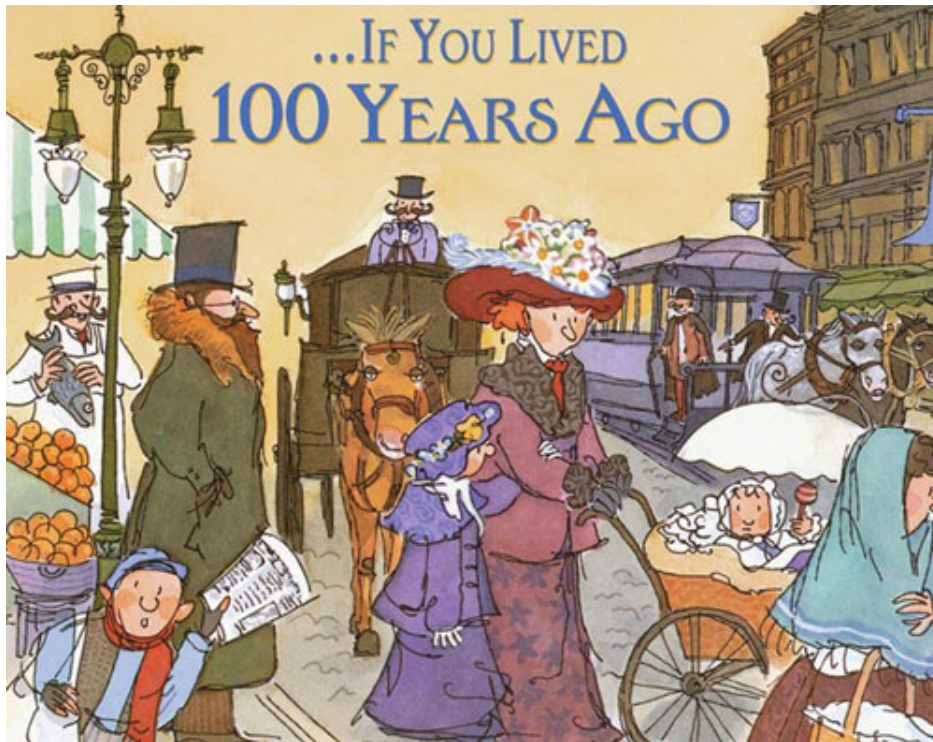


Elton John's song "
Written in the Stars "



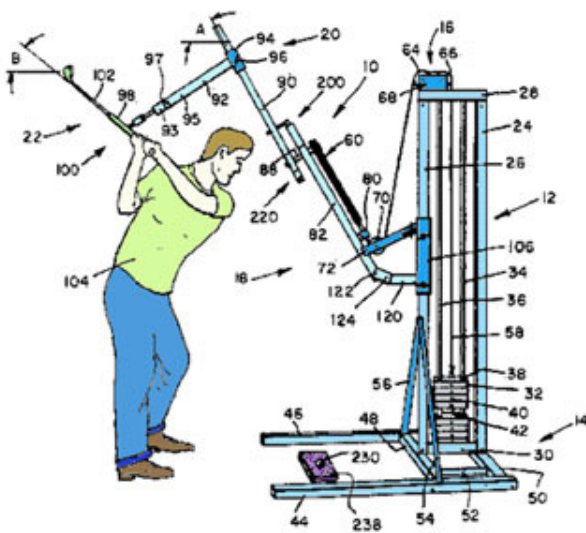
Virtuoso, playing " Written in the Stars "

Only as we pulled into the owners' car park did John's own nervous expectation betray him. "Christopher. It's exactly one hundred years since a Tully-bred horse won the Derby. Time to do it again!" How could a young person like myself from an IT generation relate to an event which happened 100 years ago ?



...If you lived 100 year ago

Mon Dieu, John was every bit as wound up as I was. I tried desperately to summon up those tricks I had been taught in that Florida golf academy. Mind over matter. This ball is going to drop into that hole. You're going to make it do so. Relax. Deep breaths. Compose yourself.



Dad has spent his life learning golf tricks to improve his skills



I have also used golf tricks to make sure that this ball is going to drop into that hole

But instead I sought comfort in coincidence. When Urban Sea defeated the best in Europe to win the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe in 1993 she carried number 12 (6 x 2). At the beginning of May, when Sea The Stars won the 2000 Guineas at Newmarket, he had carried number 18 (6 x 3). Today, for the Derby, Sea The Stars was once again due to carry number 12 (6 x 2). How could that prove anything but auspicious?



Number 12 is EASY in Cantonese, stork represents eternity, rats are symbols of productivity and wealth

This Chinese superstition I kept to myself. Actually, I kept every emotion that tumbled through my mind to myself. That is my way, particularly when I am wound up, nervous, juggling the expectation of victory with the awful spectre of defeat.



I was juggling the expectation of victory with the awful spectre of defeat

My family find me strange in this regard, especially as Christine is sociable and extrovert. People must wonder how we could spring from the same parents. The family sometimes remind me of my anti-social silence at a Chinese New Year dinner, at which relatives were present from France, America and Beijing for this most important of family reunions. Throughout that evening of celebration of family unity I had uttered one sentence, to the waitress: "One more Coke, please."



" One more coke, please."

Here was an old owl lived in an oak.
The more he heard, the less he spoke:
The less he spoke, the more he heard.
O, if men were all like that wise bird!



But I am a young owl who travels from one big city to another.

As the Derby was the fifth race of the afternoon, John suggested a leisurely lunch, at which we were joined by his wife Monica, Mr. Jean Lesbordes together with our trainer John Oxx, his wife Caitriona and their two children Aoife and Kevin. If I thought the two Johns looked peculiar in morning dress, I can only imagine what a figure of fun I must have appeared in similar attire.



From left to right, John Clarke, Caitriona Oxx, Christopher, John Oxx, Monica Clarke, Jean Lesbordes, Aoife and Kevin Oxx

John and Caitriona were no strangers to the tensions of Derby Day. John had won the greatest race in the world with Sinndar, for HH Aga Khan IV, in 2000. Sinndar had gone on to win the Irish Derby on his

local course and then the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe.



John Oxx accompanying Sinndar to the winner's enclosure after he won the Epsom Derby 2000

Three years later John had tried again, this time with Alamshar, likewise owned by the Aga Khan. Alamshar had finished third to Kris Kin, swiftly going on to gain compensation in the Irish Derby.



Alamshar, winner of The Irish Derby in 2003 and his trainer John Oxx

However, there were significant differences of background between John's two runners for the Aga Khan and Sea The Stars. The Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the Ishmaeli people, was a third generation owner breeder.



HH the Aga Khan, Spiritual leader of the Ismaeli people

His grandfather had won the Derby a record five times.



The late Aga Khan leading in Mahmoud after his victory in the 1936 Derby

The present Aga Khan IV - had increased his family's Derby tally by a further four triumphs ; Shergar in 1981, Shahrastani in 1986, Kahyasi in 1988 and Sinndar in 2000.



HH Aga Khan leading Shergar after his win in the 1981 Epsom Derby



Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and His Highness the Aga Khan at Ascot after Shergar's victory in the King George VI Queen Elizabeth Stakes

How did the Tsui family history and tradition of racing and breeding compare? True, we had won the 1993 Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe with the fabulous Urban Sea, the only one from her intuitive purchase of a fleet of 45 racehorses that my mother had absolutely refused to sell.



Trophy presentations following Urban Sea's 1993 Arc win in David Tsui's colours

Urban Sea had more than repaid that act of faith and trust by producing Galileo, winner of the Derby, the Irish Derby and the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes in 2001. Galileo had since become a champion stallion, siring the 2008 Derby winner – New Approach.



HRH Princess Haya and HH Sheikh Mohammed leading in New Approach after his thrilling win in the 2008 Epsom Derby

My mother's vision and courage of her convictions had made so many dreams come true - so many glories, so much happiness and good fortune for so many people. Was she now about to become responsible for breeding the pride of a nation in Sea The Stars?



Mother's Vision and courage



Many dreams come through



Glory



Fortune

As the time of the first race drew nigh, John Oxx excused himself. Michael Kinane – John's stable jockey and the only man ever to partner Sea The Stars in my 'imperial' yellow colours and purple cap – had a mount in the first race. He would thus be able to assess and report the state of the 'going'. 'Going' – the degree to which a galloping horse's hooves penetrate the surface of the course – can often be crucial in determining how well a racehorse will be able to acquit himself, or herself.



Michael Kinane, the only man ever to partner Sea The Stars in my "imperial" yellow colour and purple cap



John Oxx assessing the ground's condition

Whereas Urban Sea proved her ability to handle very deep going when she won the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe at Longchamp on that magical October afternoon, Sea The Stars had long since convinced his shrewd trainer that he was an infinitely better performer on what they describe as either 'Good' or 'Fast' terrain. Indeed, John Oxx had repeatedly told the racing press that he was much more afraid of unsuitably soft 'going' than he was of Sea The Stars' eleven rivals.



We were hoping for rain in 1993
in Paris for Urban Sea



We were expecting sun in 2009 in London for Sea the Stars