

THE STAR AND I  
CHAPTER 9: Audience with Her Majesty the Queen

In John Oxx's purposeful absence, John Clarke provided welcome distraction by recounting the story of that earlier Tully-bred Derby winner, exactly one hundred years ago.



Royal Ascot 100 years ago



Car racing 100 years ago

The 1909 Derby was won by Minoru and carried the colours of King Edward VII.



Minoru carried the colours of King Edward VII



Horse Racing played an important part in King Edward VII's life

Sensing my incomprehension, John went on to explain that Tully connection. Minoru had been bred at Tully by William Hall Walker, who later became Lord Wavertree. This wealthy Liverpool brewer was a firm believer in the influence of astrology on the potential of his foals.

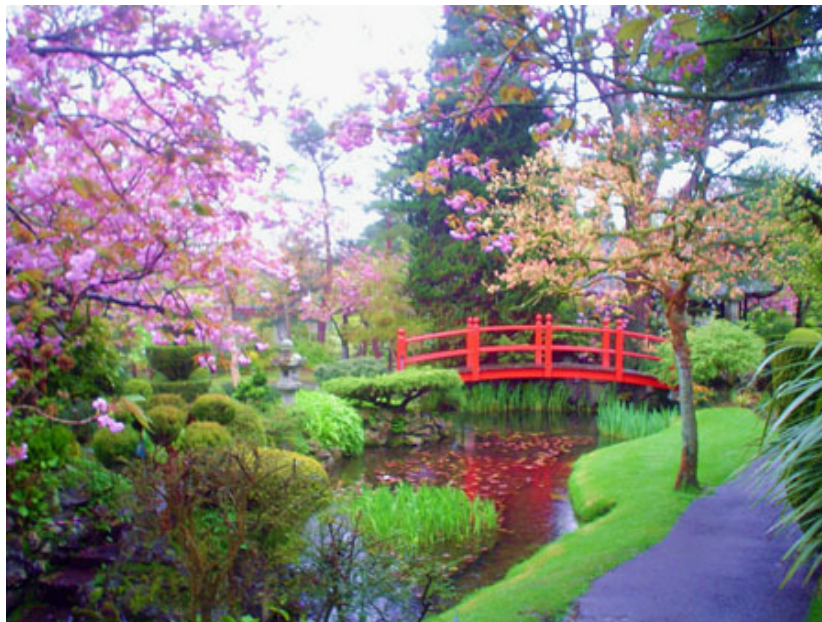


Walker's wealth made from the drinkers of beer



Walker believed in the influence of Astrology on the potential of his foals

Those with auspicious charts he retained for racing, selling those with less favourable charts. Minoru came into the former category. As to how he got his name, Walker had brought a gardener – Tassa Eida – over from Japan to create the now famous Japanese Gardens at Tully.



Japanese Garden at the Irish National Stud

Eida had with him his son named Minoru. On learning that Minoru meant 'light of my eye', Walker promptly named his colt after the Japanese youth. The coincidence was that my Chinese first name is Ka Leung which means "light of my family".



Tassa Eida and his son Minoru



Minoru means in Japanese "light of my eye"



Ling Tsui and her son, Christopher Ka Leung



Ka Leung means in Chinese "light of my family"

But if the colt was bred and owned by Walker, how did he come to win the Derby for the King of England? Enter Sophie Walker, his wife. She was on very close terms with her monarch, whose racing fortunes had plummeted since the glory days of Persimmon and Diamond Jubilee. To resurrect them, Sophie persuaded her husband to lease four yearling colts to King Edward for their racing careers.



The Life of King Edward VII by J. Castelle Hopkins

Three turned out very moderate. However, the fourth of this quartet happened to be Minoru. He went on to win the Two Thousand Guineas and then the Derby. In leasing Minoru to his king, Walker robbed himself of the distinction to which he most aspired – owning a Derby winner since Minoru did not carry his colours while winning those big races.



Minoru did not carry Walker's colours although he was the breeder of the colt

John Oxx, returned to report. Michael Kinane had found the ground – the 'going' in racing parlance –

riding faster than either he or John Oxx had dared to anticipate. It would suit Sea The Stars. But, the opposition? John Oxx knew immediately what was on my mind – the Ballydoyle battalions.



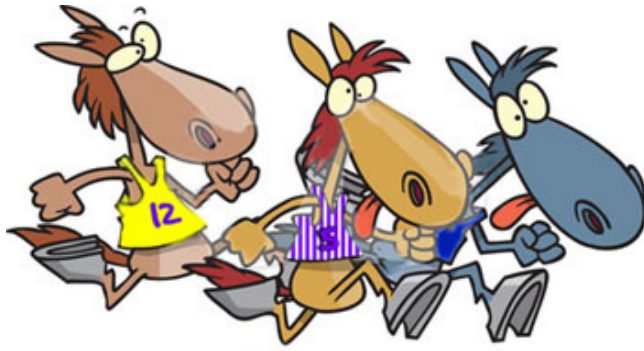
I shivered at the mention of the word battalion in my imagination

He had discussed this remarkable situation with my mother at length, mobile to mobile, across oceans and continents. My mother is a workaholic, whose business concerns see her travelling the globe. Her name, Ling, means 'spirit' in Mandarin same name as the stallion of the Cimarron.



Spirit, the stallion of the Cimarron has the same name as my mother

Mother knew from the press that some betting firms had some doubt on the unproven stamina of Sea The Stars. His passage might also possibly be obstructed at vital stages in the Derby.



Did my "Ling" horse have stamina?



Could my "Ling" Horse's get a free passage?

John Oxx was at his most calm, reflecting that Michael Kinane was supremely confident that Sea The Stars would prove his superiority, whatever the circumstances, just as he had in the Two Thousand Guineas.



Sea The Stars' superiority in the 2000 Guineas

Nearing his fiftieth birthday, Michael Kinane, multiple Irish champion jockey, knew what it takes to win the Derby. He had won it on Commander In Chief back in 1993. Better still, he had ridden Galileo to victory in 2001, when first jockey to the all-powerful Ballydoyle stable. When that relationship ended, John Oxx had moved quickly to secure his services, adamant that Michael Kinane was still the greatest big race jockey in Europe.



Michael Kinane, nearing his fiftieth birthday

I began to wish that my mother was there with me. After all, the honour and glory of a Derby winner belonged rightfully to her. She had put her faith in French trainer Jean Lesbordes, rewarded with that Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe with Urban Sea, when I was still a child. Hey, who should it be approaching but M. Lesbordes! No longer a trainer in Chantilly, M. Lesbordes is now a racing journalist with Paris -Turf. Just as it was great to have his company on Derby Day, there was no need to enquire the reason for his presence.



M. Lesbordes is now a racing journalist with Paris Turf

How could he ever admit that a son of Urban Sea had won the Derby in his absence? For luck he gave me a photograph of his son Clement riding Urban Sea before his tragic car accident which killed him in 1997. I put it in my pocket and it has been there ever since.



Clement, riding Urban Sea in morning training 1992 in Hong Kong

As the runners paraded in the paddock below the towering grandstand, Sea The Stars stood out. He was, as racing people say 'the pick of the paddock'. He exuded an air of calm superiority. Could he prove that physical, spiritual superiority in the Derby itself? Clare Balding, head of the BBC's outside broadcast television team, seemed to think he could. As we left the parade ring, she came up to me saying: "Good luck. I hope you win. He is the best looking horse here!"





Clare Balding, the world renowned TV racing presenter

In Michael Kinane's experienced, masterful hands, Sea The Stars did just that. He didn't just win, he walloped them! The Derby was unlike any race I have ever watched. As the drama unfolded, my limbs began to lose all feeling. When he made his winning challenge, the adrenalin rush was overwhelming, impelling me to scream "Come on!", deafening the unfortunate woman immediately in front of me.



My limbs began to lose all feeling



I could remember only how loud I had screamed "Come on! Come on!!!"

As my horse passed that hallowed winning post in front, I just fell into M. Lesbordes' arms, completely overcome. Then, it seemed as if the whole world was showering congratulations on me. It was an effort to realise that they were glad for me that my 'ling' horse had fulfilled the hopes of so many by winning the greatest flat race on earth – the Derby. He had proved himself the champion we always felt he was destined to become. Only much later did it dawn on me that Ballydoyle horses had occupied the next four places behind Sea The Stars.



The whole world was showering congratulations on me



He had proved himself to be the champion



Was he not born to be the Little Prince of the cosmos?

If the Two Thousand Guineas had been great, the Derby was fantastic. Our horse – our baby – had come of age, proving himself a true champion. In winning both the Guineas over a mile and the Derby over a mile and a half, he had done what no other horse had managed to do since the great Nashwan all of twenty years before.



Sea The Stars won the 2000 Guineas 2009 with pride



Sea The Stars won the Epsom Derby 2009 in style

Would Sea The Stars now attempt to complete the Triple Crown by winning the St Leger at Doncaster? No horse has done that since the imperious Nijinsky in 1970. John Oxx was once again the soul of diplomacy, ruling nothing out, ruling nothing in. As for me, I was simply glad to enjoy the moment, savouring the bizarre circumstances whereby a twenty-seven-year-old Hong Kong Chinese chap had won the Derby with a son of Urban Sea.



A twenty-seven-year-old Hong Kong Chinese boy won the Derby 2009

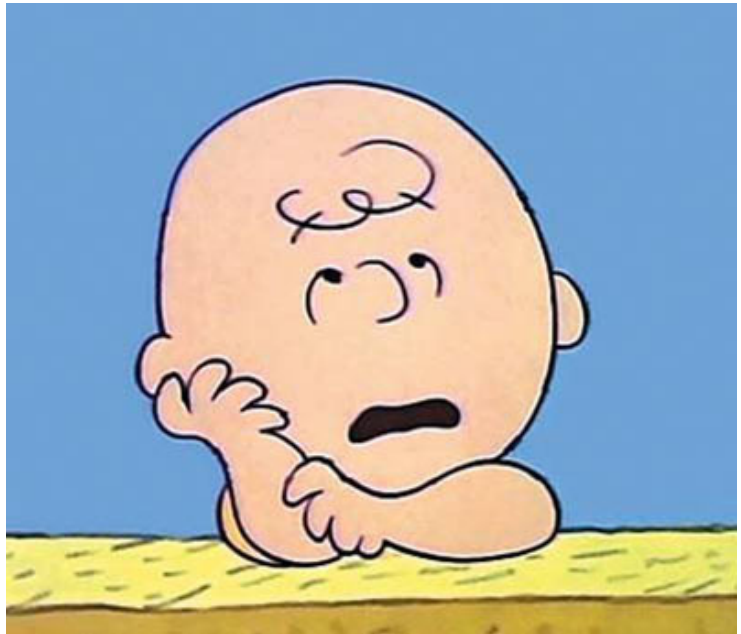


Christopher leading in Sea The Stars after his victory in the 2009 Derby

Struggling to regain some composure, I got through the presentations and the interviews. Somehow, the press got the misinformed idea that I was a night club proprietor. I will never know why. Perhaps, it came about because of my habitual reluctance to talk at all! Or possibly due to my participation in an university music association with friends from Imperial College and CASS.



I will never know why I was described as a night club proprietor



My silence betrayed me

Perhaps it arose because my thoughts were really with our beloved Urban Sea, who had made all of this come to pass for me and my family, of which she had so long been a much loved member. She might have passed over from this world but I knew Urban Sea had witnessed her son's triumph from somewhere in the cosmos. That I felt sure.



Urban Sea witnessed her son's triumph from where she was

It became an absolute certainty when I was presented with the Derby winner's trophy. It was a bronze sculpture of a man and two horses. But it wasn't just an elegant work of equine art. It had a much, much deeper significance.



The trophy was a bronze sculpture of a man and two horses

The man was owner-breeder and trainer Arthur Budgett, holding his two home-bred Derby winners – Blakeney and Morston. Guest of honour on Derby Day 2009, 93-year-old Arthur Budgett had sent out Blakeney to win the Derby in 1969 and Morston to do likewise in 1973. And this was the uncanny part of this trophy.



93 year-old Arthur Budgett is the he only man to have trained and bred two Derby winners out of the same mare

Blakeney and Morston were out of the same mare, Windmill Girl. Stranger still, they had been by different sires, just like Galileo and Sea The Stars. Maybe it was as well the two Johns had forgotten about Windmill Girl beforehand. I might have been obliged to listen to the Derby from the safety of the gents'

toilets!



Blakeney won the Derby in 1969



Morston won the Derby in 1973

When that enjoyable ordeal was over, word came that Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth had very kindly summoned us to the royal box. The royal command! Any perception I might have had of Her Majesty being rather reserved and distant could not have proved more wrong.



The most regal and respected monarch in the world

Her Majesty immediately put me completely at ease, congratulating me on becoming the youngest owner to win the Derby, to her knowledge anyway. And what a knowledge of racing and breeding Her Majesty turned out to possess. She knew all about Urban Sea, her racecourse successes and her wonderful record as a broodmare. Sadly, Her Majesty's quest for success in either the Derby or the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe remained unfulfilled. And I am only twenty-seven.



Her Majesty is so knowledgeable and passionate about horse racing and breeding



I will never forget that warm and hearty royal welcome

Her Majesty then asked me how I had become so involved in horse racing. I explained that my mother had started it all when I was not much more than a child. The Queen of England was moved that at such a young age, I was already so passionate about horses and had such deep understanding of pedigrees.



Christopher is a young but wise bird

When Her Majesty asked me where Sea The Stars was reared, John Clarke intervened to mention that it was exactly one hundred years since Minoru had won the Derby for Her Majesty's great-grandfather, emphasizing that both Minoru and Sea The Stars had been born and reared in Tully Stud. I remembered the official's caveat – one may only speak to royalty when the conversation is initiated by royalty. At least that caution prevented me from blurting out: "Your Majesty, you have made my day!"



Your Majesty, you have made my day!!

The return flight to Hong Kong passed much more pleasantly – mission accomplished. Nevertheless, it provided an opportunity to reflect on Urban Sea and the extraordinary, emotional effect she continued to exert on me and my family. She had gone to her reward in March, leaving Sea The Stars to write her epitaph. And hadn't he done that in style!



Urban Sea and her new born Sea The Stars on the 06 April 2006



Urban Sea had gone to her land of bliss, leaving Sea the Stars to write her epitaph

However, racing is a transient process. As a gambling medium it is focused more on anticipation than achievement. The thought occurred to me as the flight brought me ever closer to my Hong Kong home that Sea The Stars deserved to have his real story narrated, but by whom? As I drifted off to sleep, an old, old adage floated into my semi-consciousness: 'If you want a job done, do it yourself'. Here goes.





Here goes the true story of "The Star and I"