

THE STAR AND I
CHAPTER 10: Seeing Stars

Coping with a barrage of questions in the wake of Sea The Stars' stunning success at Epsom, Mr Oxx announced that the Eclipse Stakes, one week later at Sandown Park, near London, was a very real alternative to the Irish Derby. It hadn't stopped raining in Ireland the past two summers and our 'Star' had to have good to fast ground. East England is much drier as I remember from my CASS years.



Summer in Ireland

What had I thought? Well, really just whatever Mr. Oxx felt was best for the horse. That has always been our way in the matter. He is our 'Bole' and 'Bole' is the constellation that watches over Pegasus in the heaven of Chinese mythology.



'Bole' is the constellation that watches over Pegasus in the heaven of Chinese mythology

This time, I arrived in London just the day before the race. It was warm and sunny, with temperatures in the 30s, perfect for my 'Star'. Superstition took me straight to Harrods for my customary pizza, the best in London. You may find this strange, even cheapskate, but I simply adore pizza.



Am I a cheapskate?

During our time in Canada, I discovered the perfect pizzeria. It was so heavenly that I would sit there with my sister composing odes in praise of its pizzas. Dinner on the eve of the Eclipse was shared with John and Monica Clarke and M. Lesbordes. No, not pizza this time. I do appreciate that not everybody shares my obsession and it is not my life's mission to recruit converts!



You
made
me
love
you!



I discovered the perfect pizzeria in Vancouver My sister and I, composing odes in praise of pizza

It was so hot at Sandown Park that men were mopping their brows and women fanning themselves with their race cards. Like the Irish, the English love to talk about the weather, which is always too much one way or the other, rarely just right to enjoy.



Men were mopping their brows



Ladies were urged to wear light clothing and employ Japanese fans

I began to regret my tee-shirt with its 'lucky' guitars logo. But to have gone there without it was simply unthinkable. Of course I was wearing that 'lucky' red tie and had that photo of Clement safely in my pocket. Superstitious, moi? I'm Chinese for heaven's sake.



I was overheating in my tee-shirt with its guitars logo

We roasted in the parade ring, hats being removed and replaced every minute or so.



Mr. Balding had dashed off to get me some water.
I am in his debt



The applause that was so rightfully to his. And
his adoring owner ?

I wondered how Michael Kinane could bear the heat under that big safety helmet jockeys have to wear, until I remembered he has ridden in just about every country on earth, hot, cold, temperate, with similar success. Actually, what I did notice was that amidst all the sweaty, fidgeting horses and humans in that parade ring, the 'Star' alone seemed totally self-composed. This, his department declared, was his kingdom. He was the king.



I did notice all the sweaty, fidgeting horses in that parade ring.
The "Star" alone seemed totally self-composed



He was the self-composed King of his kingdom

Minutes later, he had once again claimed the crown, accelerating to repel the late, determined challenge of Rip Van Winkle. John Clarke and I hurried down to intercept him on his return to the enclosure, my tee-shirt by now stuck to my torso. It is quite a long way down to the end of the horse walk at Sandown.



Sea The Stars ,winning the Eclipse with calm



Sea The Stars, winning the Eclipse Stakes with a royal posture

While awaiting the Star's return, John introduced me to Mr Ian Balding, father of BBC TV's team leader Clare Balding and also of trainer Andrew Balding, whose career got off to such a spectacular start with his Oaks heroine, Casual Look, in 2003. In his own right Mr Balding had trained the marvellous Mill Reef, winner of both the Derby and the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe back in 1971.

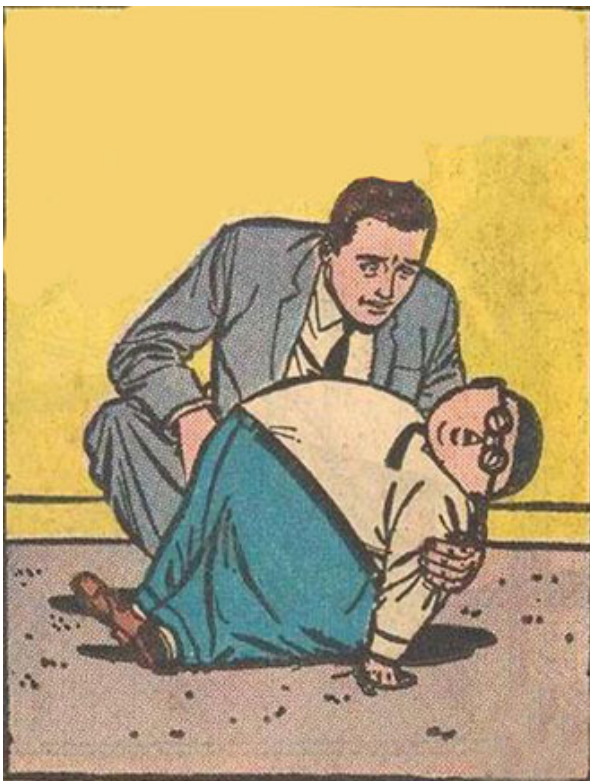


Ian Balding, trainer of Mill Reef, winner of the 1971 Derby



Andrew Balding, trainer of Casual Look, winner of the Epsom Oaks

Oh no! It cannot be happening, happening at such a glorious moment as this. That occasional, awful, dizzying sensation began to overcome me. Two familiar, ominous, inescapable black spots began to rush towards me, one heading to each eye, growing bigger and bigger as they neared. I was going to pass out, crumple in a heap in public, see stars. Loss of face? Yes, but loss of consciousness first. John and Mr Balding caught me as I began to collapse, breaking my fall. I think I saw Zarkava winning her Arc. Why Zarkava and not Urban Sea? Some sort of omen? Didn't know, then.



If I were not that skinny, this would be me



Why did I see Zarkava?

Meanwhile, as I later learned, Mr Balding had dashed off to get some water to bring me round. I am in his debt. As I lay there, Sea The Stars must have walked in past me, blowing a bit. He was entitled to be a bit short of puff. Had he not just broken a course record that had stood for nearly thirty years? But he was still able to stroll back in to face the applause that was so rightfully his. And his adoring owner? Prostrate, practically beneath his passing hooves.



Mr. Balding had dashed off to get me some water.
I am in his debt



The applause that was so rightfully his. And his adoring owner?

As I regained consciousness I could hear John repulsing the para-medics, hell-bent on bundling me into an ambulance. They meant well, of course they did. But John knew his man and felt confident that I would recover my faculties in sufficient time to attend the presentation and receive the trophy. Thank you, John.



John repulsing the para-medics, hell-bent on bundling me into an ambulance.

Actually, there was a compromise. They put me in a wheelchair and pushed me up to the grandstand, where a lift was available to take me to the medical centre.



While I was in a wheelchair, a fairy touched me with her magic wand

By the time I got that far, I felt well enough to go and greet my 'Star' in the winner's enclosure. I was John's responsibility, they said. So be it. However, by that time, the winner's enclosure was surrounded by a crowd six or eight deep, so deep that neither John nor I could find the entrance to that hallowed circle. To his eternal credit, John bellowed out: "Make way for the winning owner, please!"



The winner's enclosure was surrounded by a teeming throng

The crowd parted round the entrance, just as I imagine the Red Sea parted for Moses to lead his people to safety. We made our entrance, celebrities both. However, there was still only one true star on that sun-baked Saturday at Sandown Park – Sea The Stars.



Attendance at the presentation ceremony was crucial, even if it called for oxygen masks



Presentation of the Coral Eclipse Stakes trophy: Smiling, my ordeal completely forgotten!!!

Inevitably, the press made a meal out of my collapse, the French press suggesting that an operating theatre be readied in Longchamp in the event of the 'Star' running in the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe. Victory there, they surmised, could so easily induce cardiac arrest for young Christopher Tsui.



An operating theatre at Longchamp for my own use!!!

I was not sure whether to be amused or annoyed by such comments, until I recalled my father's immediate reaction when Urban Sea won the Arc. He had headed straight to the bar, ordering an urgent whiskey to avert his threatened heart attack!



After Urban Sea won the Arc 1993, Father went straight to the bar for a whiskey before the presentation

For her part, my practical mother has always believed that prevention is far better than cure. How often has she said to me: "Eat an apple, drink more water, if you don't want to faint again."



An apple a day keeps the doctor away

Anyway, for the present, the Arc remained only a possible target for the 'Star'. As Mr Oxx pointed out to the media, it is rare indeed to get the fast ground that Sea The Stars requires at Longchamp on the first Sunday in October. From what I could gather, the "guitars" tee-shirt needed to be washed and ready for York in August and then for Leopardstown in September. Nor should I forget the red tie and that precious, talismanic photograph of my late, lamented friend Clement.



Could my star get a sunny day such as this in October at Longchamp?



Get my tee-shirt cleaned and ready for York in August!!

One day, maybe, when I am old and full of honours, I will get to show the photographs and press cuttings of my salad days with the 'Star' to wondering grandchildren. However, some of those Sandown Park images will be missing from that scrapbook. Every man may want to safeguard his self-esteem.



Glorious scrapbook, but with only pleasing pictures