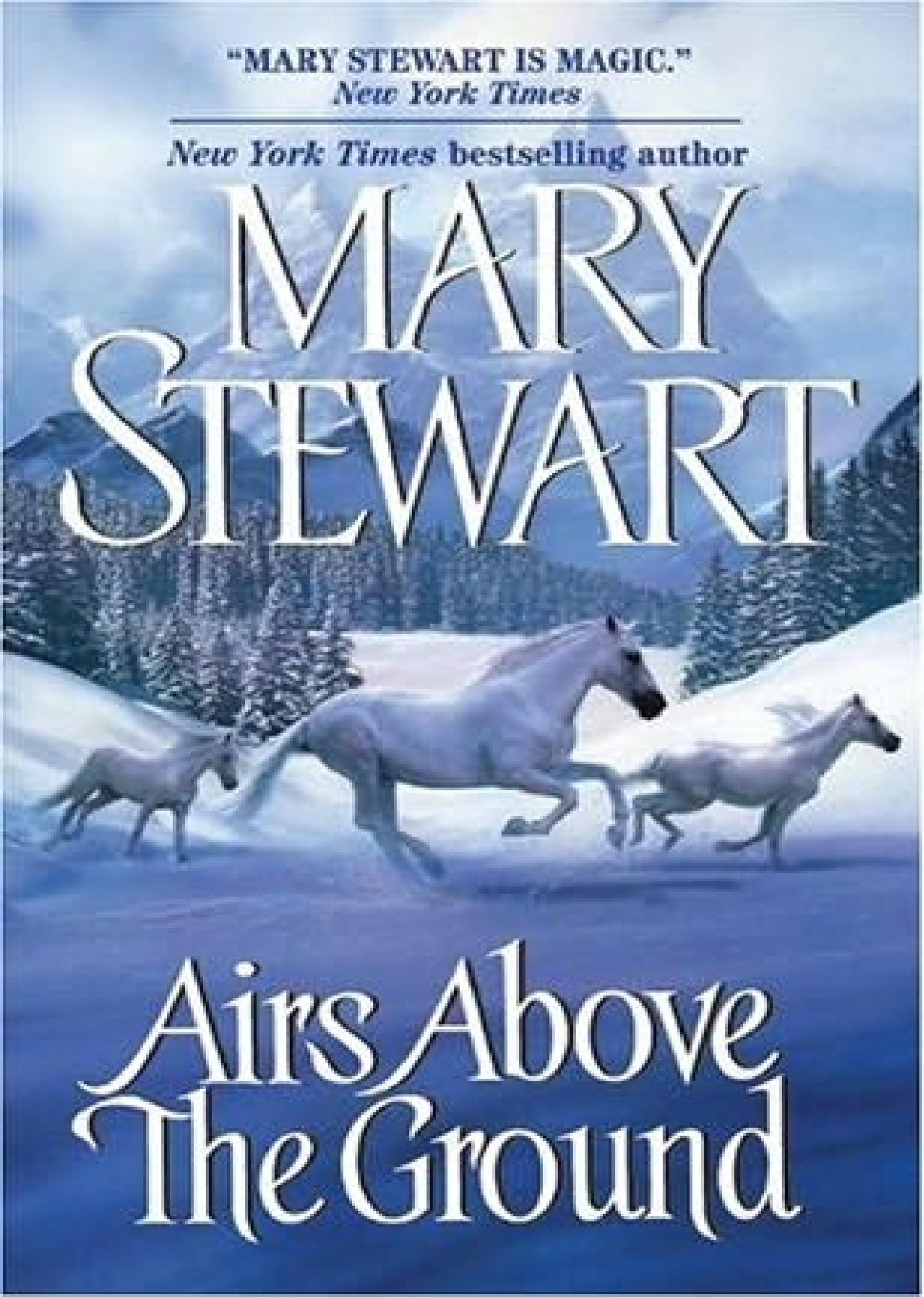


"MARY STEWART IS MAGIC."
New York Times

New York Times bestselling author

MARY STEWART

A photograph of three horses running through a snowy field in a mountainous landscape. The horses are in motion, galloping from left to right. The background shows snow-covered mountains and evergreen trees under a bright sky.

Airs Above
The Ground

AIRS ABOVE THE GROUND

Mary Stewart

CHAPTER ONE

Nor take her tea without a stratagem.

edward young: *Love of Fame*

Carmel Lacy is the silliest woman I know, which is saying a good deal. The only reason that I was having tea with her in Harrods on that wet Thursday afternoon was that when she rang me up she had been so insistent that it had been impossible to get out of; and besides, I was so depressed anyway that even tea with Carmel Lacy was preferable to sitting alone at home in a room that still seemed to be echoing with that last quarrel with Lewis. That I had been entirely in the right, and that Lewis had been insufferably, immovably, furiously in the wrong was no particular satisfaction, since he was now in Stockholm, and I was still here in London, when by rights we should have been lying on a beach together in the Italian sunshine, enjoying the first summer holiday we had been able to plan together since our honeymoon two years ago. The fact that it had rained almost without ceasing ever since he had gone hadn't done anything to mitigate his offence; and when, on looking up "Other People's Weather" in the *Guardian* each morning, I found Stockholm enjoying a permanent state of sunshine, and temperatures somewhere in the seventies, I was easily able to ignore the reports of a wet, thundery August in southern Italy and concentrate steadily on Lewis's sins and my own grievances.

"What are you scowling about?" asked Carmel Lacy.

"Was I? I'm sorry. I suppose I'm just depressed with the weather and everything. I certainly didn't mean to glower at you! Do go on. Did you decide to buy it in the end?"

"I haven't made up my mind. It's always so terribly difficult to decide . . ." Her voice trailed away uncertainly as she contemplated the plate of cakes, her hand poised between a meringue and an éclair.

"But you know what they're like nowadays, they won't keep things for you. If I wait much longer they'll simply sell it, and when that happens, one realizes one's really wanted it like mad all along."

And if you wait much longer, I thought, as she selected the éclair, it won't fit you any more. But I didn't think it unkindly; plumpness suits Carmel Lacy, who is one of those blonde, pretty women whose looks depend on the fair, soft colouring which seems to go on indestructibly into middle age, and to find a whole new range of charm when the fair hair turns white.

Carmel-whose hair was still a rather determined shade of gold-had been my mother's contemporary at school. Her kind of prettiness had been fashionable then, and her good-tempered softness had made her popular; her nickname, according to my mother,

had been Caramel, which seemed appropriate. She had not been a close friend of Mother's at school, but the two girls were thrown together in the holidays by the nearness of their families and by professional connections between them. Caramel's father had owned and trained race horses, while my grandfather, who was a veterinary surgeon, had been, so to speak, surgeon in attendance. Soon after the girls left school their ways parted: my mother married her father's young partner and stayed in Cheshire; but Caramel left home for London where she married

"successfully"; that is, she acquired a wealthy London banker whose dark, florid good looks told you exactly the kind of man he would be in his forties, safely ensconced in the Jaguar belt with three carefully spaced children away at carefully chosen schools. But the marriage had not worked out. Caramel, to all appearances the kind of soft maternal creature whom you would have sworn would make the ideal wife and mother, combined with this a possessiveness so clinging that it had threatened to drown her family like warm treacle. The eldest girl had gone first, off into the blue with a casually defiant announcement that she had got a job in Canada. The second daughter had torn herself loose at nineteen and followed her Air Force husband to Malta without a backward look. The husband had gone next, leaving a positive embarrassment of riches in the way of evidence for the divorce. Which left the youngest child, Timothy, whom I vaguely remembered meeting around his grandfather's stables during school holidays; a slight, darting, quicksilver boy with a habit of sulky silences, readily forgivable in any child exposed to the full blast of his mother's devotion.

She was moaning comfortably over him now, having disposed (as far as I had been able to follow her) of her dressmaker, her doctor, her current escort, her father, my mother, two more cream cakes and, for some reason which I cannot now remember, the Postmaster General. . . .

". . . And as a matter of fact I don't know what to do. He's being so difficult. He knows just how to get on my nerves. Dr. Schwapp was saying only yesterday-"

"Timmy's being difficult?"

"Well, of course. Not that his father wasn't just the same, in fact his father started the whole thing. You'd really think he'd have the decency to keep out of Timmy's life now, wouldn't you, after what he did?"

"Is he coming back into Timmy's life?"

"My dear, that's the whole point. It's all just come out, and that's why I'm so upset. He's been writing to Timmy, quite regularly, imagine, and now apparently he wants him to go and see him."

I said, feeling my way: "He's abroad, isn't he, your-Tim's father?"

"Graham? Yes, he's living in Vienna. We don't write," said Caramel with what was, for

her, remarkable brevity.

"And has he seen anything of Timothy since the divorce?" I added awkwardly: "I didn't know what the arrangements were at the time, Aunt Carmel."

She said with an irritation momentarily more genuine than any feeling she had shown up to now: "For goodness' sake don't call me that, it makes me feel a hundred! What do you mean, you don't know what the arrangements were? Everybody knew. You can't tell me your mother didn't tell you *every single detail* at the time."

I said, more coldly than I had meant to: "I wasn't at home, if you remember: I was still in Edinburgh."

"Well, Graham got access, if that's what you mean by 'arrangements.' But he went abroad straight away, and Timmy's never seen him since. I never even knew they were writing. . . . And now this!" Her voice had risen, her blue eyes stared, but I still thought that she sounded aggrieved rather than distressed.

"I tell you, Timmy just burst it on me the other day, boys are so thoughtless, and after all I've been to him, father and mother both, all the poor boy has . . . And all without a word to me! Would you believe such a thing, Vanessa? *Would you?*"

I hesitated, then said more gently: "I'm sorry, but it seems quite natural to me. After all, Timothy hasn't quarrelled with his father, and it seems a pity to keep them apart. I mean, they're bound to want to see each other now and again, and you mustn't think you mean any the less to him because he sometimes feels the need of his father. I-it's none of my business, Carmel, and I'm sorry if I sound a bit pompous, but you did ask me."

"But not to tell me! So underhand! That he should have secrets from me, his mother . . ." Her voice throbbed. "I feel it, Vanessa, I feel it *here*." She groped for where her heart presumably lay, somewhere behind the ample curve of her left breast, failed to locate it, and, abandoning the gesture, poured herself another cup of tea. "You know what it says in the Bible about a thankless child? 'Sharper than a something's paw it is,' or something like that? Well, I can tell you as a mother, that's *exactly* how it feels!

Sharper than the whatever-it-is. . . . But of course, I can't *expect* you to understand!"

The more than conscious drama which was creeping into Carmel's conversation had dispelled any pity which I might have been feeling for her and centered it firmly on Timothy. And I was wondering more than ever just where I came in. She had surely not telephoned me so urgently just because she needed an audience; she had her own devoted bridge set, with whom, doubtless, all this had already been gone over; moreover, she had managed to make it clear already that she didn't expect either sympathy or understanding from anyone of my generation.

"I'm sorry, I'm not being unsympathetic, I am trying to understand; but I can't help

seeing Timothy's side of it too. He's probably just wild to get a holiday abroad, and this is a marvellous chance. Most boys of his age would grab at any chance to go to Austria. Lord, if I'd had a relative abroad when I was that age I'd have been plaguing the life out of them to invite me away! If his father really does want to see him-

"Graham's even sent him the money, and without a *word* to me. You see? As if it wasn't hard enough to hold them, without him *encouraging* them to leave the nest."

I managed not to wince at the phrase. "Well, why not just be sweet about it and let him go? They always say that's the way to bring them back, don't they? I know how you feel, I do really; but Mummy used to say if you hang onto them too hard they'll only stay away, once they've managed to get free."

As soon as the words were out I regretted them; I had been thinking only of Timothy, and of somehow persuading Carmel to do what would in the end hurt herself and her son the least; but now I remembered what my mother had been speaking about, and was afraid I had cut rather near the bone. But I need not have worried. People like Carmel are impervious to criticism simply because they can never admit a fault in themselves. She could see no reference to her own triple domestic tragedy, because nothing would ever persuade her to believe that any part of it was her fault; any more than those people who complain of being unloved and unwanted ever pause to ask if they are in fact lovable.

She said: "You haven't any children, of course. Doesn't Lewis want them?"

"Have a heart. We've not been married all that long."

"Two years? Plenty of time to start one. Of course," said Carmel, "he's not at home much, is he?"

"What have my affairs and Lewis's got to do with this?" I asked, so sharply that she abandoned whatever tack she had been starting on.

"Only that if you had children of your own you wouldn't be so gay and glib."

"If I had children I hope I'd have the sense not to put fences round them." That I still spoke sharply was not entirely due to exasperation with Carmel; the trend of this futile conversation was, minute by minute, reminding me of the fences that only a short while ago I had been trying to put round Lewis. I added:

"Besides, Timothy isn't a child, he's- what?-seventeen? I think it's you who don't understand, Carmel.

Boys grow up."

"If they didn't grow *away* so. My baby son, it seems only yesterday-

"When does his father want him to go?"

"Whenever he likes. And of course he's wild to go." She added, with a spite that sounded suddenly, shockingly genuine: "As a matter of fact I don't mind him *going*. I just don't want him to feel he owes it to Graham."

I counted ten and then said mildly: "Then send him off straight away, and let him think he owes it to you."

"I might, if I thought-" She checked herself, with a quick look I couldn't read. She was fiddling rather consciously again with the bosom of her dress, not her heart this time, but what lay more or less directly over it, the very beautiful sapphire and diamond brooch that had been one of Graham Lacy's guilt offerings to her. Then she spoke in quite a different tone: "As a matter of fact, Vanessa, I'm sure you're right. I *ought* to let him go. One ought to make oneself realize that one's babies grow up and that one's own feelings hardly matter. After all, they have their lives to live."

I waited. It was coming now, if I was any judge of the signs.

"Vanessa?"

"Yes?"

She pricked her finger on the brooch, said a word which one never imagines that one's mother's generation ever knew, blotted the bead of blood on her table napkin, and met my eyes again, this time with a steely determination which didn't quite match the suppliant's voice she used. "I did wonder if you could help me."

"I? But how?"

"I really do agree with all you've said, and as a matter of fact it would suit me quite well to have Timmy away for a little while just now, and I really *would like* to let him go but, you see, Timmy is such a *young* seventeen, and he's never been away from home before, except to a school camp, and that's different, isn't it? And I can't go with him myself, because it would be quite *impossible* . . . meeting Graham ... I don't mean I wouldn't *willingly* sacrifice myself for him, but he was really quite rude when I suggested it, and if he did go off with Graham, then *I'd* be on my own, and I hate foreign countries, they're so uncomfortable, besides not speaking English, and you can say what you like, I'm not going to let that child go alone among foreigners. So then I thought of you."

I stared at her. "Now I really don't understand."

"Well, it's quite simple. I knew you'd been going on holiday with Lewis this month, and then he had to go on business instead . . ." Being Carmel, she couldn't, even when she wanted a favour from me, quite repress that look of malicious curiosity. "But I did think you'd probably be joining him later, and if you were, then if you and Timmy could travel together it would solve everything, don't you see?"

"No, I don't. If Graham's in Vienna, I can't see how I-

"The thing is, you'd be *there*, and you've no idea what that would mean to me. I mean, just letting him go off like that to meet Graham, with no idea of what their plans were or anything, and Timmy never writes, you know what boys are, and of course I'd sooner not be in touch with Graham myself, at *all*. But if I knew you and Lewis were somewhere around-I mean, Lewis must know his way about in foreign countries by now, and I expect he's fairly reliable on the whole, isn't he?"

She made it sound a rather doubtful quality. Just then Lewis was at rock bottom in my estimation, but I defended him automatically. "Naturally. But I can't go with Tim, I'm afraid. . . . No, Carmel, please listen.

It isn't that I wouldn't do it like a shot if I were going to Vienna, but we're going to Italy for our holiday, and besides-

"But you could join him in Vienna first. It would be more fun, wouldn't it, and salvage a bit of the holiday you've missed?"

I stared at her. "Join him in Vienna? But-what do you mean? We can hardly ask Lewis-

"If it's the fare, dear," said Carmel, "well, since you'd be sort of convoying Timmy, I'd expect to take care of that."

I said with some asperity: "I think I could just about manage it, thank you."

It was one of Carmel's more irritating characteristics to assume that everyone else was penniless and that Lewis, who made what seemed to me a very good thing indeed out of his chemical firm, would hardly have been able to afford a car if it hadn't been run on an expense account. But then, my standards were not Carmel's. I said dryly: "I expect I'd be able to swop the tickets, thank you."

"Then why not? What's to stop you joining him out there, once his business is finished? It would save him having to come back here for you, and you'd get the extra time, and a bit of extra fun too. I mean, I'd be happy to stand you both the difference in the fares. But you can see that it did seem the most marvellous piece of luck that Lewis was in Austria and you might be thinking of joining him? As soon as I knew, I rang you up."

"Carmel. Look, stop these wonderful plans and just listen, will you? I'm not likely to be going to Vienna, now or later, for the simple reason that Lewis is not in Austria. He's in Sweden."

"In Sweden? When did he leave Austria?"

"He didn't. He's been in Sweden all along. In Stockholm, if you want to know. He

went on Sunday, and I heard from him on Monday."

I didn't add that the only message in four days had been a very brief cable. Lewis was as capable as I was of holding tightly to a quarrel.

"But you must be wrong. I'll swear it was Lewis. And Molly Gregg was with me, and Angela Thripp, and they both said, 'Oh, that's Lewis March!' And it was."

I said: "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Well, yesterday." She made it sound as if I was merely being stupid, as I had been over Timothy. "We were shopping, and there was an hour to Angy's train and we wanted somewhere to sit, so we went to the news cinema, and there was something-a disaster or something, I simply can't remember what-but it was Austria somewhere, definitely, and Lewis was in it, as plain as plain, and Molly said to me, 'Oh, that's Lewis March!' and Angela said, 'Yes, look, I'm sure it is!' And then the camera went closer and it was, I'm quite certain it was. So of course I thought straight away of you, and I thought you might be going there too, any day, so when Tim got too maddening and sulky about it, I rang you up."

I must have been looking more stupid even than she had been implying. "You're telling me you saw Lewis, my husband Lewis, in a newsreel of something happening in Austria? You can't have done, you must be mistaken."

"I'm never mistaken," said Carmel simply.

"Well, but he can't be-" I stopped. My blank protestations had got even through Carmel's absorption in her own affairs; in her eyes I could see the little flicker of malicious curiosity flaring up again. In imagination I could hear Angela and Molly and Carmel and the rest of them twittering over it. ... "And he's gone off and she didn't know, my dears. Do you suppose they had a row? Another woman, perhaps? Because she obviously hadn't the *faintest* idea where he was. . . ."

I glanced at my watch. "Well, I'll have to be going, honestly. I wish I could help you, I do really, but if Lewis has been in Austria somewhere it would just be a flying trip down from Stockholm. You wouldn't believe the way they push him about sometimes. I never quite know where he'll turn up next. ..." I pushed back my chair. "Thanks awfully for the tea, it was lovely seeing you. I must say I'm intrigued about this newsreel. . . . Are you absolutely certain that it was Austria? Whereabouts, do you remember? And can't you remember what was happening? You said-a disaster . . ."

"I tell you, I can't remember much about it." She was rather pettishly fishing in her bag for her purse. "I wasn't really noticing, I was talking to Molly, and it was only when Lewis came on ... Well, that's that, I suppose. If you're not going, you're not going, and Timmy can't go either. But if you change your mind, or if you hear from him, you'll let me know, won't you?"

"Of course. If you're right, there may be something waiting for me at home." I hesitated, then said, I hoped casually: "Which cinema was it, did you say?"

"Leicester Square. And it was him, it really was. We all recognized him straight away. You know the way he has."

"I know all the ways he has," I said, more dryly than I had meant to. "At least, I thought I did. And you really can't remember what was happening?"

She was busy applying lipstick. "Not really. Something about a circus, and a dead man. A fire, that was it, a fire." She put her head to one side, examining the curve of her rouged lips in the tiny mirror. "But it wasn't Lewis who was dead."

I didn't answer. If I had, I'd have said something I'd have been sorry for.

The news theater was dark and flickering, and smelt of cigarettes and wet coats. I made my way blindly to a seat. At this time of day the place was half empty, and I was glad of this, as it meant that I could slip into a back row where I could sit alone.

A coloured cartoon was in progress, with animals quacking and swaggering across the screen. Then came some sort of travelogue; Denmark, I think it was, Hans Andersen's country, but I sat through it without seeing it. It seemed a long time before the news came round, and longer still before we had done with the big stuff, the latest from Africa, the Middle East, the Grand Prix, the Test . . .

All at once there it was. "Circus Fire in Austrian Village . . . Sunday night . . . Province of Styria ... An elephant loose in the village street . . ." And the pictures. Not of the fire itself, but of the black and smoking aftermath in the grey of early morning, with police, and grey-faced men in thick overcoats huddled round whatever had been pulled from the wreck. There was the circus encampment in its field, the caravans, mostly streamlined and modern, the big top in the background, and behind it a glimpse of a pine-covered hill, and the glint of a whitewashed church tower with an onion spire. In the foreground was a screen-a sort of temporary hoarding-with advertising matter pasted on it; a photograph I couldn't see, some man's name, and something about "*Eine absolute Star-Attraktion*," and then a list of prices.

Then something must have shoved against the screen, for it fell flat on the trampled grass.

Yes, it was Lewis. He had been standing in the shelter of the screen, and for a moment, obviously, had no idea that the cameras were now on him. He was standing quite still, on the edge of the crowd that was watching the police, staring, like all of them, at the burnt-out wreck, and at something which lay still hidden from the cameras. Then he moved his head in the way he had-oh yes, I knew that way-and, amazingly, I saw the expression on his face. He was angry. Quite plainly and simply angry. I was all too recently familiar with that anger . . . but there, where every other man wore the same expression either of solemn respect or of shocked horror, the anger was somehow

incongruous and disturbing. And this quite apart from the fact that this was certainly Austria and not Sweden, and that on Monday morning I had had a cable from him from Stockholm. . . .

There was a girl beside him. As she moved, I saw her beyond him. A blonde, young and rather more than pretty in that small-featured, wide-eyed way that can be so devastating, even in the early morning and dressed in a shiny black raincoat with a high collar. Her hair hung in long fair curls over the glossy black collar, and she looked fragile and small and lovely. She was pressed close to Lewis's side, as if for protection, and his arm was round her.

She looked up and saw the cameras on them both, and I saw her reach up and touch him, saying something, a quick whispered word that matched the intimate gesture.

Ninety-nine people out of a hundred, in that situation, would glance instinctively at the camera, before either facing it self-consciously or turning out of its range. My husband didn't even look round. He turned quickly away and vanished into the crowd, the girl with him.

In the same moment the circus field vanished from the screen, and we were inside a sagging canvas tent, where an elephant rocked solemnly at her moorings, apparently muttering to herself.

". . . The two dead men. The police continue their investigations," the commentator was saying, in that indifferent voice, as the picture changed again to a bathing beach on the south coast of England.

The *Mirror* had it—a dozen lines at the bottom corner of page six, under the headline: circus blaze riddle.

Police have been called in to investigate a fire which caused a night of terror in a small Austrian village near Graz. Elephants ran amok when a caravan belonging to a travelling circus took fire, knocking down and injuring a six-year-old girl, and causing havoc in the village. Two men who had been sleeping in the van were burned to death.

The *Guardian* gave it eight lines just above the bridge game on page thirteen.

Two men were burned to death on Sunday night when a wagon belonging to a travelling circus caught fire. The circus was performing in the village of XlhalfWfen, in the Styrian province of Austria, near Grab.

Next morning, Friday, I did hear from Lewis. It was a note in his own handwriting, dated on Monday and postmarked Stockholm, and it read: *Have almost finished the job here, and hope to be home in a few days' time. I'll cable when You can expect me. Love, Lewis.*

That same morning I rang up Carmel Lacy.

"If you still want a courier for your baby boy," I told her, "you've got one. You were quite right about Lewis . . . I've had a letter, and he's in Austria, and he wants me to join him there. I'll go any time, and the sooner the better. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy; as a squash is before 'tis a peascod, or a codling when 'tis almost an apple: 'tis with him in standing water between boy and man. He is very well-favoured, and he speaks very shrewishly: one would think his mother's milk were scarce out of him.

Shakespeare: *Twelfth Night*

Timothy Lacy had changed, in that startling way children have that one ought to expect but never does.

He had grown into a tall boy, resembling as far as I could see neither parent, but with a strong look of his grandfather, and a quick-moving, almost nervous manner which would weather with time into the same wiry, energetic toughness. He had grey-green eyes, a fair skin tending to freckles, and a lot of brown hair cut fashionably long in a style which his mother had deplored loudly but which I secretly rather liked. The expression he had worn ever since his mother had officially handed him over in the main lounge at London Airport-much as she had handed over her spoilt spaniel in my father's surgery-had been, if one put it kindly, reserved. If one put it truthfully, he had looked like a small boy in a fit of the sulks.

He was fumbling now with his seat belt, and it was obvious from his unaccustomed movements that he had never flown before; but I dared not offer to help. After Carmel's tearful- and very public-handing over of her baby, it would have seemed like tucking his feeder round his neck.

I said instead: "It was clever of you to get these seats in front of the wing. If only there's no cloud we'll have a marvellous view."

He gave me a glance where I could see nothing but dislike. The thick, silky hair made a wonderful ambush to glower through and increased the resemblance to a spoilt but wary dog. He did mutter something, but at that moment the Austrian Airlines Caravelle began to edge her silky, screaming way forward over the concrete, and he turned eagerly to the window.

We took off exactly on time. The Caravelle paused, gathered herself, then surged forward and rushed up into the air in that exciting lift that never fails to give me the genuine old-fashioned thrill up the marrow of the spine. London fell away, the coast came up, receded, the hazy silver-blue of the Channel spread out like wrinkled silk, then the parcelled fields of Belgium reeled out below us, fainter and fainter with distance as the Caravelle climbed to her cruising height and levelled off for the two hours' stride to Vienna. Clouds flecked the view below, thickened, lapped over it like fish scales, drew a blanket across it. ... We hung seemingly motionless in the sunlight

in front of our whispering engines, with the marvellous pageant of clouds spread, at no more than the speed of drifting surf, below.

"Angels' eye view," I said. "We get a lot of privileges now that only the gods got before. Including destroying whole cities at a blow, if it comes to that."

He said nothing. I sighed to myself, gave up my attempts to take my own mind off the situation ahead of me, and opened a magazine. Lunch came, and went, temptingly foreign, with *Apfelsaft* or red wine or champagne, the boy beside me so pointedly refraining from comment on what was obviously a bursting exciting experience for him that I felt a flicker of irritation pierce my own preoccupations. The Caravelle tilted slightly to starboard; Nurnberg must be somewhere now below that cloud, and we were turning southeast for Passau and the Austrian border. The trays were cleared, people stood, stretched, moved about, and the trolley of scent and cigarettes was wheeled up the aisle in nice time to block the passengers' access to the lavatories.

The pretty stewardess in her navy uniform bent over me. "Would you care for cigarettes, madam?"

Perfume? Liquor?"

"No, thank you."

Her eye went doubtfully to Timothy, who had turned back from his window. "Cigarettes, sir?"

"Of course." He said it promptly, and rather too loudly, and I caught the edge of a glance at me. "What kind have you?"

She told him, and he made his choice and fumbled for the money. As she handed him the statutory packet of two hundred, I saw his eyes widen, but he successfully hid dismay, if that was what he was feeling, and paid. The trolley moved on. With some panache, but without another glance at me, Timothy tucked the cigarettes down into his airline holdall and got out a paperback mystery. Silence hovered again, conscious, ready to strike.

I said: "You know, I couldn't really care less if you want to smoke all day and all night till you die of six sorts of cancer all at once. Go right ahead. And as a matter of fact, the sooner the better. You have the worst manners of any young man I ever met."

The paperback dropped to his knees, and he looked at me full for the first time, eyes and mouth startled open. I said: "I know quite well that you're perfectly capable of travelling alone, and that you'd prefer it.

Well, so would I. I've got troubles enough of my own, without bothering about yours, but if I hadn't said I'd go with you, you'd never have got away. I know you're sitting there fuming because you've had a kind of nursemaid tagged onto you, but for

goodness' sake aren't you adult enough to know that there are two sides to everything? You know you'd get on fine on your own, but your mother doesn't, and there's no sense in making gestures to reassure oneself, if they're only distressing other people. Surely all that really matters now is that you have got your own way, so why not make the best of it? We're stuck with each other till I get you-or you get me-safely into Vienna and you meet your father. Then we're both free to go about our own affairs."

Timothy swallowed. The action seemed to use the muscles of his whole body. When he spoke his voice cracked infuriatingly back for a moment into falsetto.

"I-I'm sorry," he said.

"I didn't want to make you talk if you'd rather read or watch the view," I said, "but as a matter of fact I always get nervous on take-off, and if one chatters a bit about things it takes one's mind off it."

"I'm sorry," said Timothy again. He was scarlet now, but his voice had got back to the norm required of a young man who could comfort a nervous woman on take-off. "I hadn't realized you were feeling like that.

I was so-that is, it's all been so ... I couldn't think how I was going to . . ." He stopped floundering, bit his lip, then said with devastating simplicity: "The cigarettes were for Daddy."

As an *amende honorable* it was superb. It also had the effect of taking the wind right out of my sails.

And he knew it. I could see the glint in the grey-green eyes.

I said: "Timothy Lacy, you have all the makings of a dangerous young man. I'm not in the least surprised your mother's afraid to let you out alone. Now tell me what to call you. I know your mother calls you Timmy, but it sounds a bit babyish to me. Do you prefer Timothy or Tim?"

"I'll settle for Tim."

"Well, mine's Vanessa."

"That's an awfully pretty name. Are you called after Vanessa Redgrave?"

I laughed. "Have a heart, I'm twenty-four. I don't know where they got the name from, probably just something my mother found in a book. As a matter of fact it's a butterfly, or rather a family of butterflies, rather pretty ones, peacocks and painted ladies, and so on. Fair and fickle, that's me, born to flit from flower to flower."

"Well," said Timothy, "that's a bond between us, anyway. They used to call me Mothy for short at my prep school. I say, you can see a bit now through the clouds. There's a river. . . . Do you suppose it's the Danube?"

"Could be. We more or less follow it the last part of the way."

"If you're going to be frightened when we land," he said kindly, "I'll hold your hand if you like."

"Isn't she beautiful?" asked Timothy.

The clouds we drifted across now, a mile above our own shadow, were Austrian. They looked just the same. Timothy, slightly crumpled-looking, and melting minute by minute into relaxation, had got to the stage of showing me photographs. This one was of a girl on a grey pony. It was an oldish print, fading a bit, and in the girl, plump and fair and sitting solidly in the saddle, I was a bit startled to recognize Carmel.

"Er, yes." Nothing that her son had told me up to now- and he had poured out a good deal about the Lacy menage which I was sure Carmel would prefer me not to have heard- nothing had led me to expect the enthusiasm with which Timothy now held out his mother's photograph. I asked rather lamely: "How old was she then?"

"Pretty old when that was taken. About fifteen. You can tell by the tail."

"You can tell by the what?"

"The tail. Actually that pony's of the Welsh Starlight strain, and they're pretty long-lived; they don't start to look old till they're dying on their feet." Then he recollected himself. "Gosh, listen to me telling you! As if you didn't know all that, being practically a vet."

"Not so much of the 'practically,' please. I qualified just before I was married."

"Did you? I hadn't realized."

"If it comes to that," I said, "I was 'practically' a vet, as you call it, before I even started at the Dick Vet-that's the veterinary college in Edinburgh where I went. You can't be brought up all your life in a veterinary surgeon's house and not learn a heck of a lot about the job."

"I suppose not. . . . It'll be like me, getting sort of brought up with the horses at my grandfather's place.

Did you ever practise?"

"Officially, only for about six months, but in actual fact you do a lot of practical work as a student, especially in your final year. You travel out to farms, and handle the animals, and you learn to make your own diagnoses, use X rays, assist operations-the lot. After I got my diploma I started work as Daddy's assistant, but then I met Lewis and got married."

"What exactly does he do, your husband?"

"He's employed by Pan-European Chemicals. You'll have heard of it; it's not as vast as I.C.I., but it's getting on that way. Lewis is in the sales department. He's planning to change over now to another branch, because his job takes him abroad too much-he used not to mind, but we hardly seem to have seen each other since we were married. To begin with I used to go home while he was abroad, and work with my father, but then I started helping out now and then at the P.D.S.A.-that's the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals-near where we live in London, and that keeps my hand in."

"Gosh, yes: I'm sorry about the 'practically,' it was a howling insult." He sat quiet for a moment, riffling through the remaining photographs in his hands. I saw that they were mostly of horses. He seemed completely relaxed now and at ease, his random remarks and silences coming as easily as among his contemporaries. Which, in fact, I now felt myself to be: oddly enough, this was the effect which my schoolmistressy outburst had produced in both of us, as if we had quarrelled and now had made it up on equal terms, with a licence to say what we felt.

He said suddenly: "I hate London. It was all right when Grandfather was alive, I was allowed to go there a lot in the hols. Mummy didn't seem to want me around so much then, when the girls were still home. If only she'd kept the place on ... got somebody in to manage it ... not just sold it . . ." He snapped the photographs together into a pack, pushed them into their envelope, and tucked them decisively down into the holdall. "And now that I've left school it just looked as if it was going to be London all summer, and I felt I couldn't stick it. So I had to do something drastic, hadn't I?"

"Like harrying your poor mother into parting with you? I shouldn't worry; she'll survive it."

He gave me a quick, bright glance and seemed about to say something, but thought better of it. When he did speak, I felt sure this was not what he had been going to say. "Have you ever been to Vienna before?"

"No."

"I wondered if you were interested in the Spanish Riding School. You know, the team of white Lipizzan stallions that give those performances of *haute ecole* to music. I've wanted to see them all my life."

I said: "I know of them, of course, but I can't say I know much about them. I'd certainly love to see them.

Are they in Vienna now?"

"They live in Vienna. The performances are put on in a marvellous building like a big eighteenth-century ballroom, in the Hofburg Palace. They perform every Sunday morning, only, I'm afraid, not in August.

They'll begin again in September. . . ." He grinned. "If I know anything about it, I'll

still be here. But one can go into the stables any time and see them there, and I believe you can get to the training sessions and see the work actually going on. My father's been in Vienna now for six months, and I'm hoping he'll know a few of the right people by now, and get me in behind the scenes." He glanced away out of his window.

"I think we're beginning to lose height."

I looked thoughtfully at his averted profile. Here was yet another change. Now that he was launched on something that appealed to him, that genuinely mattered, his voice and manner had lost the remaining touches of awkward youth. This was a young man talking about his subject with the air of knowing far more about it than he was bothering to impart. But not quite, yet, with the air of knowing exactly where he was going: there was a lurking trace of defiance still about that.

I asked, to keep him talking: "Why is it called the 'Spanish' Riding School?"

"What? Oh, because the Lipizzan stud was founded originally with Spanish horses. I think it's about the oldest breed of horse we've got-they go right back to the Romans, Roman cavalry horses in Spain being crossed with Arabians and so on, and they were the best war horses you could get, so they were sold right, left, and center all over Europe in the Middle Ages, and when the Austrian stud was founded at Lipizza they bought Spanish stock for it."

"Hence the name Lipizzan. . . . Yes, I see. Didn't Austria give up Lipizza to Italy after the first war, or something?"

He nodded. "One gathers it was a marvel the horses didn't disappear altogether, when the Austrian Empire broke up. I suppose when the Republic was started nobody was much interested in a relic of, well, high life, but then they started giving public performances-they'd become state property, of course-and now the Austrians are frantically proud of them. The stud had a pretty ropy time at the end of the last war, too, when Vienna was bombarded; Colonel Podhajsky, the Director, got the stallions safely out of Vienna, then the mares were rescued from Czechoslovakia by the American Army, and the stud was set up in some barracks or other at Wels in the north, before they got resettled at Piber."

"Yes, I knew that. Piber, was it? Where's that? Somewhere in the south, isn't it?"

"It's down in Styria, not far from Graz. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Go on. Tell me about the stallions."

He looked at me for a moment as if to see whether I was genuinely interested or not, then he went on, his manner a rather touching blend of didacticism and boyish enthusiasm.

"Well, they're bred at Piber, then when they're four the best of them go to Vienna to be

trained. The others are sold. The ones at Vienna take years to train. I suppose one of the things that makes the performance so exciting isn't just that it's beautiful, but that-" He glanced at me again, hesitated, then said almost shyly: "Well, don't you think there's something a bit thrilling about the-the *oldness* of it all, movements and figures passed down right from the year one, right from Xenophon, you know, the *Art of Horsemanship*- isn't it rather marvellous to think of the idea of *haute ecole* going right back to the fifth century B.C.? But with the Lipizzans it isn't even ordinary *haute ecole*; after all, you can see normal dressage anywhere at shows. . . . What's so beautiful is the way they've blended the dressage movements in to make the 'figure dances' like the School Quadrille, and then of course the 'airs above the ground.' "

"The what? Oh, you mean those marvellous leaps the horses do."

"Yes, they call them the *Schulen uber der Erde*," said Timothy. "They're as old as the hills, too. They were the old battle movements all the war horses had to learn if they were to be any good-I mean, if you were using both hands for shield and sword or what not, you had to have a horse that would jump to order in any direction at a moment's notice. Half a minute-if you'd like to look at these . . ."

He bent to fish in his holdall. We were coming down through cloud, steadily losing height, and already here and there people were making small movements of preparation for landing. But even the novelties of flying seemed lost on Timothy now.

He straightened up, slightly flushed, eagerly producing a book heavily illustrated by photographs.

"See, there they are, these are the different figures." He pushed the hair back out of his eyes and spread the book open on my knee. "All the stallions can learn to do the ordinary dressage movements-like the *piaffe*, that's a sort of high trot on the spot; and that lovely slow trot they call the Spanish trot-but I believe only the best of them go on to the actual leaps. There, see? They're terribly hard to do, and some of the horses never do manage them. They take years to train, and develop terrific muscles for it. ...Look at that one there . . . he's doing the *levade*, it looks just like rearing, except for the way he bends his hocks, but I believe it's a terrific effort to hold."

"It looks it. That's like the pose you see in all the old statues, and old battle pictures and so on."

"That's exactly what it is! If somebody took a swipe at you in battle your horse was supposed to get between you and him, poor thing."

"Well, I hope it had armour, that's all," I said. "These are lovely, Tim. Oh, he's a beauty, isn't he? Look at that head, and those wise eyes. He knows a thing or two, that fellow."

"I'll say," said Timothy. "That's Pluto Theodorosta; he was the absolute tops, I believe; he died just recently. He was the Director's favourite. I don't know which is the top

stallion now, I think it's Maestoso Mercurio. There, that's him, and that one's Maestoso Alea-you can see their heads are similar, coming from the same strain. . . . That's Conversano Bonavista-he was a favourite of the last Director's. Look, isn't this a marvellous photograph? That's Neapolitano Petra doing the *courbette*; I believe it's the most difficult leap of the lot. There was some story, I think it was about him; they were going to present him to some Eastern potentate or something, for a compliment, but his rider killed him, and then shot himself so they shouldn't be parted."

"Good heavens. Is it true?"

"I don't know. They don't put that sort of thing in any of the books about the stallions, but I heard quite a lot about them from an Austrian trainer who was in England for years and used to visit my grandfather.

I've probably got the story wrong, but actually, I wouldn't be surprised: You know how you can get to feel about horses. . . . And when you've worked as these men do, every day with a horse for-oh, lord, for twenty years, perhaps ..."

"I believe you. There's a dark one, Tim. I thought they were all white?"

"He's a bay, actually, Neapolitano Ancona. They used to be all colours, but they've gradually bred the colours out, all except the bay, and now there's always one bay in the show by tradition."

"Where do they get their names? That's two Neapolitanos and two Maestosos."

"They all come from six original stallions. They take their first name from the stallion and the second from their dam."

I said, with genuine respect: "You seem to know an awful lot about them."

He hesitated, flushed, and then said flatly: "I'm going to get a job there if they'll have me. That's why I came."

"Are there really six sorts of cancer?" asked Tim. "Are there what?" After his last bombshell, I had not felt called upon to make, or even capable of offering, any comment, and a pause had ensued, during which the flight hostess announced in German and English that we were approaching Vienna, and would we kindly fasten our seat belts and extinguish our cigarettes.

We dropped out of cloud, and-it seemed close below us now-flat, cropped stubble fields of Austria unrolled and tilted. Somewhere ahead in a hazy summer's evening was Vienna, with her woods and her grey, girdling river.

And now Timothy appeared to be distracting me with cheerful small talk from the approaching terrors of landing.

"I meant the six sorts of cancer you can get from smoking."