The Rocking-Horse Winner – Intermediate Level Story

There was a beautiful woman who started life with all the advantages, but she had no luck. She married for love, and the love turned to dust. She had lovely children, yet she felt they had been forced upon her and she could not love them.

They looked at her coldly, as if they had found a weakness in her character. She wanted to find a way to cover up this weakness, but did not know what it was. Whenever her children were present, she felt the center of her heart go hard. This troubled her, and in her manner she was all the more gentle and concerned for her children, as if she loved them very much.

Only she herself knew that at the center of her heart was a hard little place that could not feel love, no, not for anybody. Everybody else said of her: "She is such a good mother. She really loves her children." Only she herself, and her children themselves, knew it was not so. They read it in each others eyes.

There were a boy and two little girls. They lived in a pleasant house with a nice garden. They had good servants, and felt themselves better than anyone in the neighborhood.

Although they lived well, they were never totally happy in the house. There was never enough money. The mother had a small income, and the father had a small income, but not nearly enough for the social position which they had to keep up. The father worked in some office in town. But though he had good chances to be successful, this never came to anything. There was always the pressing feeling of not having enough money. However, the lifestyle was always kept up.

At last the mother said: "I will see if I can't make something." But she did not know where to begin. She tried hard to think of things to do, and did this thing and the other, but could not find anything successful. The failure made deep lines come into her face. Her children were growing up, they would have to go to school. There must be more money, there must be more money. The father, who was very handsome and expensive in his tastes, seemed as if he never would be able to do anything worth doing. And the mother, who thought highly of herself and whose tastes were just as expensive, did not succeed any better.

And so the house came to be filled with the unspoken words. "There must be more money! There must be more money!" The children could hear it at Christmas, when the expensive and wonderful toys filled the play-room. Behind the shining modern rocking-horse, behind the smart doll's house, a voice would say quietly, "There must be more money! There must be more money!"

It came whispering from the movement of the rocking-horse and even the horse, bending his wooden head impatiently to go faster, heard it. The big doll, dressed in pink and sitting and smiling in a knowing way, could also hear it. The foolish puppy was looking even more foolish than usual, for he heard the secret words all over the house. "There must be more money!"

Yet nobody ever said the words. They were everywhere, and therefore no one spoke them. Just as no one ever says, "We are breathing!" even though breaths are coming and going all the time.

"Mother," said the boy Paul one day, "why don't we keep a car of our own? Why do we always use uncle's or a taxi?"

"Because we're the poor members of the family," said the mother.

"But why are we poor, mother?"

"Well.. I suppose," she said slowly and bitterly, "it's because your father has no luck."

The boy was silent for some time.

"Is luck money, mother?" he asked, rather fearfully.

"No, Paul. Not quite. It's what causes you to have money."

"Oh!" said the boy. "Then what is luck, mother?"

"As I said, it's what causes you to have money. If you're lucky you have money. That's why it's better to be born lucky than rich. If you're rich, you may lose your money. But if you're lucky, you will always get more money."

"Oh! Will you? And is father not lucky?"

"Very unlucky, I should say," she said bitterly.

The boy watched her with unsure eyes.

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't know. Nobody ever knows why one person is lucky and another unlucky."

"Don't they? Nobody at all? Does nobody know?"

"Perhaps God. But He never tells."

"He ought to, then. And aren't you lucky either, mother?"

"I can't be, if I married an unlucky husband."

"But by yourself, aren't you?"

"I used to think I was, before I married. Now I think I am very unlucky indeed."

"Why?"

"Well... never mind! Perhaps I'm not really," she said.

The child looked at her, to see if she meant it. But he saw, by the lines of her mouth, that she was trying to hide something from him.

"Well, anyhow," he said in a strong voice, "I'm a lucky person."

"Why?" said his mother, with a sudden laugh.

He looked her again with eyes wide open. He didn't even know why he had said it.

"God told me!" he said, continuing the lie.

"I hope He did, dear!"

"He did, mother!"

"Excellent," said the mother, using one of her husband's favorite words.

The boy saw that she did not believe him. Or, rather, that she paid no attention to what he said. This angered him a little, and made him want to make her believe him.

He went off feeling confused and, in a childish way, looking for the secret to "luck." Thinking of nothing else, taking no notice of other people, he went about keeping to himself, looking for luck. He wanted luck, he needed it. When the two girls were playing dolls in the play-room, he would sit on his big rocking-horse and ride it madly with such energy that worried the little girls. Wildly the horse rode on, the waving dark hair of the boy going up and down, his eyes with a strange fire in them. The little girls were too scared to speak to him.

When he had ridden to the end of his mad little journey, he climbed down and stood for a long time in front of the rocking-horse, looking into its face. It looked wild with its red mouth slightly open and wide and bright glass eyes. "Now!" he would silently command the horse. "Now, take me to where there is luck! Take me!"

And he would hit the horse on the neck with the little whip he had got from his Uncle Oscar. He knew the horse could take him to where there was luck, if only he forced it. So he would get on again, and start on his wild ride, hoping at last to get there. He knew he could get there.

"You'll break your horse, Paul!" said the nurse.

"He always rides like that! I wish he'd stop!" said his sister Joan.

But he only looked angrily down on them in silence. The nurse gave him up. She could make nothing of him. Anyhow, he was growing too old to be in her care.

One day his mother and his Uncle Oscar came in when he was on one of his rides. He did not speak to them.

"Hello, you young jockey! Riding a winner?" said his uncle.

"Aren't you growing too big for a rocking-horse? You're not a very little boy any longer, you know," said his mother.

But Paul's fierce blue eyes, set rather close together, looked straight ahead. He would speak to nobody when he was riding at full speed. His mother watched him with a worried look on her face.

At last he suddenly stopped riding his horse and got down.

"Well, I got there!" he said excitedly, standing with long legs apart.

"Where did you get to?" asked his mother.

"Where I wanted to go!" he said rudely.

"That's right, son!" said Uncle Oscar. "Don't you stop till you get there. What's the horse's name?"

"He doesn't have a name," said the boy.

"Gets on without one all right?" asked the uncle.

"Well, he has different names. He was called Sansovino last week."

"Sansovino, eh?" said the uncle. "Won the big race at Ascot. How did you know his name?"

"He is always talking about horse racing with Bassett," said Joan.

Uncle Oscar was delighted to find that his small nephew was up with the latest horse racing news. Bassett, the young gardener, had been wounded in the left foot in the war. He had served under Oscar in the army, and got the gardening job through Oscar. Bassett knew a lot about horse racing. He lived for horse racing, and the small boy lived it with him.

Oscar went and talked to Bassett.

"Master Paul comes and asks me about racing, so I can't do more than tell him, sir," said Bassett. His face was terribly serious, as if he were speaking of religious matters.

"And does he ever put anything on a horse he thinks will win?"

"Well, I don't want to give him away. He's a young sport, a fine sport, sir. Would you mind asking him? He sort of takes a pleasure in it, and perhaps he'd feel I was giving him away, sir, if you don't mind."

Oscar could see that Bassett was very serious. He went back to his nephew, and took him off for a ride in his car.

"Say, Paul, old man, do you ever put any money on a horse?" the uncle asked.

The boy watched the handsome man closely.

"Why, do you think I oughtn't to?" he answered.

"Not a bit of it! I thought perhaps you might give me a tip for the Lincoln races next weekend."

The car sped on into the country, going down to Uncle Oscar's place in Hampshire.

"Do you promise you won't tell anyone?" said the nephew.

"I promise, son!" said the uncle.

"Well, then, Daffodil."

"Daffodil! I doubt it, sonny. What about Mirza?"

"I only know the winner," said the boy. "That's Daffodil."

"Daffodil, eh?"

The uncle said nothing more for a moment. Daffodil was a largely unknown horse.

"Uncle!"

"Yes, son?"

"You won't let it go any further, will you? I promised Bassett."

"Bassett be damned, young man! What's he got to do with it?"

"We're partners. We've been partners from the first, Uncle. He lent me my first five shillings, which I lost. I promised him that it was to only be between me and him. Remember when you gave me that ten shilling note. I started winning with that, so I thought you were lucky. You won't let it go any further, will you?"

The boy looked at his uncle from those big, hot, blue eyes, set rather close together. The uncle moved in his seat and laughed uneasily.

"Right you are, son! I'll keep your tip private. Daffodil, eh? How much are you putting on him?"

"All except twenty pounds," said the boy. "I keep that in reserve."

The uncle thought it a good joke.

"You keep twenty pounds in reserve, do you, you young dreamer? What are you betting, then?"

"I'm betting three hundred," said the boy seriously. "But it's between you and me, Uncle Oscar! Promise?"

The uncle laughed loudly.

"It's between you and me all right," he said. "But where's your three hundred?"

"Bassett keeps it for me. We're partners."

"You are, are you! And what is Bassett putting on Daffodil?"

"He won't go quite as high as I do, I expect. Perhaps he'll go a hundred and fifty."

"What, pennies?" laughed the uncle.

"Pounds," said the child, with a surprised look at his uncle. "Bassett keeps a bigger reserve than I do."

Between wonder and amusement Uncle Oscar was silent. He said no more, but decided to take his nephew with him to the Lincoln races.

"Now, son," he said, "I'm putting twenty pounds on Mirza, and I'll put five pounds for you on any horse you fancy. What's your pick?"

"Daffodil, uncle."

"No, not five pounds on Daffodil!"

"I should if it was my own five pounds," said the child.

"Good! Good! Right you are! Five pounds for me and five pounds for you on Daffodil."

The child had never been to a race meeting before, and his eyes were blue fire. He pursed his mouth tight, and watched. A Frenchman just in front had put his money on Lancelot. Wild with excitement, he raised his arms up and down, shouting "Lancelot! Lancelot!".

Daffodil came in first, Lancelot second, Mirza third.

The child, with red cheeks and with eyes shining, was strangely calm. His uncle brought him four five pound notes, four to one.

"What am I do with these?" he cried, waving them before the boy's eyes.

"I suppose we'll talk to Bassett," said the boy. "I expect I have fifteen hundred now; and twenty in reserve; and this twenty."

His uncle studied him for some moments.

"Look here, son!" he said. "You're not serious about Bassett and that fifteen hundred, are you?"

"Yes, I am. But it's between you and me, uncle. You promised!"

"I remember, son! But I must talk to Bassett."

"If you'd like to be a partner, uncle, with Bassett and me, we could all be partners. Only, you'd have to promise not to let it go beyond us three. Bassett and I are lucky. And you must be lucky, because it was your ten shillings I started winning with."

Uncle Oscar took both Bassett and Paul into Richmond Park for an afternoon, and there they talked.

"It's like this, you see, sir," said Bassett. "Master Paul would get me talking about racing events, telling him stories, you know, sir. And he was always wanting to know if I'd made money or if I'd lost. It's about a year since, now, that I put five shillings on a horse for him. And we lost. Then his luck turned, with that ten shillings he had from you. We put that on Singhalese. And since that time, it's been pretty much the same, all things considering. What do you say, Master Paul?"

"We're all right when we're sure," said Paul. "It's when we're not quite so sure that we go down."

"Oh, but we're careful then," said Bassett.

"But when are you sure?" smiled Uncle Oscar.

"It's Master Paul, sir," said Bassett in a secret, religious voice. "It's as if he had it from heaven. Like Daffodil, now, for the Lincoln. That was as sure as eggs."

"Did you put anything on Daffodil?" asked Oscar Cresswell.

"Yes, sir. I made my bit."

"And my nephew?"

Bassett said nothing, looking at Paul.

"I made twelve hundred, didn't I, Bassett? I told uncle I was putting three hundred on Daffodil."

"That's right," said Bassett, nodding.

"But where's the money?" asked the uncle.

"I keep it safely locked up, sir. Master Paul can have it any minute he likes to ask for it."

"What, fifteen hundred pounds?"

"And twenty! And forty, that is, with the twenty he made on the course."

"It's amazing!" said the uncle.

"If Master Paul offers you to be partners, sir, I would, if I were you; if you'll excuse me," said Bassett.

Oscar Cresswell thought about it.

"I'd like to see the money," he said.

They drove home again, and sure enough, Bassett showed him the fifteen hundred pounds in winnings plus the twenty pounds reserve.

"You see, it's all right, uncle, when I'm sure! Then we go strong, for all we're worth. Don't we Bassett?"

"We do that, Master Paul."

"And when are you sure?" said the uncle, laughing.

"Oh, well, sometimes I'm absolutely sure, like about Daffodil, said the boy. "And sometimes I have an idea, and sometimes I don't have any idea, do I, Bassett? Then we're careful, because we mostly go down."

"You do, do you! And when you're sure, like about Daffodil, what makes you sure, sonny?"

"Oh, well, I don't know," said the boy uneasily. "I'm sure, uncle; that's all."

"It's as if he had it from heaven, sir," Bassett said again.

"I should say so!" said his uncle.

But he became a partner. And when the Leger Cup was coming on, Paul was "sure" about Lively Spark, which was not highly thought of. The boy insisted on putting a thousand on the horse, Bassett went for five hundred, and Oscar Cresswell two hundred. Lively Spark came in first, and the betting had been ten to one against him. Paul had made ten thousand pounds.

"You see," he said, "I was absolutely sure of him."

Even Oscar Cresswell had made two thousand.

"Look here, son," he said, "this sort of thing worries me."

"It needn't, uncle! Perhaps I shan't be sure again for a long time."

"But what are you going to do with your money?" asked the uncle.

"Of course," said the boy, "I started it for mother. She said she had no luck, because father is unlucky. So I thought if I was lucky, it might stop whispering."

"What might stop whispering?"

"Our house. I hate our house for whispering."

"What does it whisper?"

"Why... why...," the boy said nervously, "why, I don't know. But it's always short of money, you know, uncle."

"I know it son, I know it."

"You know people send mother legal papers for money we owe, don't you, uncle?"

"I'm afraid I do," said the uncle.

"And then the house whispers, like people laughing at you behind your back. It's awful, that is! I thought if I was lucky..."

"You might stop it," added the uncle.

The boy watched him with big blue eyes, that had a strange cold fire in them, and he said never a word.

"Well, then!" said the uncle. "What are we doing?"

"I don't want mother to know I was lucky, said the boy.

"Why not, son?"

"She'd stop me."

"I don't think she would."

"I don't want her to know, uncle."

"All right, son! We'll manage it without her knowing."

They managed it very easily. Paul, at his uncle's suggestion, handed over five thousand pounds. The uncle gave this to the family lawyer. The lawyer was then to inform Paul's mother that a relative had put five thousand pounds into his hands for her. He would tell her that this money was to be paid out a thousand pounds at a time, on the mother's birthday, for the next five years.

"So she'll have a birthday present of a thousand pounds for five years," said Uncle Oscar. "I hope it won't make it all the harder for her later."

Paul's mother had her birthday in November. "The house had been "whispering" worse than ever

lately, and, even in spite of his luck, Paul could not bear up against it. He was very worried about the effect of the birthday letter, telling his mother about the thousand pounds.

Paul was now too old to eat with the young children. When there were no visitors, he took his meals with his parents. His mother went into town nearly every day. She had discovered that she was good at drawing dresses, so she worked secretly in the office of a friend who was the chief "artist" for a leading dress maker. She drew the figures of ladies in fine clothes for newspaper advertisements. Her friend earned several thousand pounds a year, but Paul's mother only made several hundred. She was unhappy about this. She really wanted to be first in something, and could not even succeed in drawing dress making advertisements.

She was down to breakfast on the morning of her birthday. Paul watched her face as she read her letters. He saw the lawyer's letter. As his mother read it, her face hardened and became more expressionless. Then a cold, determined look came on her mouth. She hid the letter under the pile of others, and said not a word about it.

"Did you have anything nice in the post for your birthday, mother?" said Paul.

"A little bit nice," she said, in a cold voice that showed no excitement.

She went away to town without saying more. But in the afternoon Uncle Oscar appeared. He said Paul's mother had had a long meeting with the lawyer. She asked if the whole five thousand could not be paid to her at once, as she owed many people money.

"What do you think, uncle?" said the boy.

"I leave it to you, son."

"Oh, let her have it, then! We can win some more with the rest of the money," said the boy.

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, young man," said Uncle Oscar.

"But I'm sure to know for the Grand National; or the Lincoln; or else the Derby. I'm sure to know for one of them," said Paul.

So Uncle Oscar signed the agreement, and Paul's mother received the whole five thousand. Then something very strange happened. The voices in the house suddenly went mad, like the sound of hundreds of frogs on a spring evening. There were new furnishings, and Paul had classes with a private teacher. He was going to Eton, his father's school, in the following autumn. There were flowers in the winter, and a show of the rich life Paul's mother had been used to. But the voices screamed and seemed to shake the house among the flowers and the new furniture. "There must be more money!" they cried. "Oh! There must be more money. Now, now... now! There must be more money. More than ever!"

It frightened Paul terribly. He studied away at Latin and Greek with his private teachers, but his busiest hours were spent with Bassett. The Grand National had come and gone by and he had not "known." He lost a hundred pounds. It was soon summer, and he looked worried as the time came for the Lincoln. But even for the Lincoln he didn't "know". He lost another fifty pounds. He looked even more worried and started to act strangely, as if something was going to explode in him.

"Let it alone, son! Don't you bother about it!" said Uncle Oscar. But it was as if the boy couldn't really hear what his uncle was saying.

"I've got to know for the Derby! I've got to know for the Derby!" the child said again, his big blue eyes shining with a sort of madness.

His mother noticed how nervous he was. "You'd better go the seaside for a holiday. Wouldn't you like to go to the seaside? I think you'd better," she said, looking at him with a worried look on her face.

But the child lifted his strange blue eyes.

"I couldn't possibly go before the Derby, mother!" he said. "I couldn't possibly!"

"Why not?" she said, her voice becoming heavy when she was opposed. "Why not? You can still go from the seaside to see the Derby with your Uncle Oscar, if that's what you wish. No need for you to wait here. Besides, I think you care too much about these races. It's a bad sign. My family was a gambling family, and you won't know till you grow up how much damage it has done. It can cause a lot of problems. I shall have to send Bassett away, and ask Uncle Oscar not to talk about racing to you unless you promise to be reasonable about it. Go away to the seaside and forget it. You're all nerves!"

"I'll do what you wish, mother, so long as you don't send me away till after the Derby," the boy said.

"Send you away from where? From this house?"

"Yes," he said.

"Why, you strange child, what makes you care about this house so much, suddenly? I never knew you loved it."

He looked at her without speaking. He had a secret within a secret, something he had not told anyone, even Bassett or his Uncle Oscar.

But his mother, after standing undecided with an unhappy look on her face for some moments, said: "Very well, then! Don't go to the seaside till after the Derby, if you don't want to. But promise me you won't let your nerves go to pieces. Promise you won't think so much about horse racing and events, as you call them!"

"Oh, no," said the boy as if the horse races were unimportant. "I won't think much about them at all, mother. You needn't worry. I wouldn't worry, mother, if I were you."

"If you were me and I were you," said his mother, "I wonder what we should do!"

"But you know you needn't worry, mother, don't you?" the boy repeated.

"I should be awfully glad to know it," she said in tired voice.

"Oh, well, you can, you know. I mean, you ought to know you needn't worry," he insisted.

"Ought I? Then I'll see about it," she said.

Paul's secret of secrets was his wooden horse. He was now old enough to not have to spend all day in the play-room being watched by the nurse. So he had had his rocking-horse removed to his bedroom at the top of the house.

"Surely, you're too big for a rocking-horse!" his mother had said at the time.

"Well, you see, mother, till I can have a real horse, I like to have some sort of animal about," had been his answer.

"Do you feel he keeps you company?" she laughed.

"Oh, yes! He's very good, he always keeps me company, when I'm there," said Paul.

So the horse, now starting to look a little worn, stood in the boy's bedroom.

The Derby was drawing near, and the boy grew more and more tense. He hardly heard what was spoken to him, he was very weak, and had a strange look in his eyes. His mother started to really worry about him. Sometimes, for a short time, she would feel a sudden anxiety about him that was almost painful. She wanted to go to him at once, and know he was safe.

Two nights before the Derby, she was at a big party in town. She had one of these feelings of anxiety about Paul while she was there. She could hardly speak and fought with the feeling, for she believed in common sense. But it was too strong. She had to leave the dance and go downstairs to telephone to the house. The children's nurse was surprised to be called in the night.

"Are the children all right, Miss Wilmot?"

"Oh, yes, they are quite all right."

"Master Paul? Is he all right?"

"He went to bed as good as can be. Shall I run up and look at him?"

"No," said Paul's mother. "No! Don't trouble. It's all right. Don't sit up. We shall be home fairly soon." She did not want her son's sleep to be disturbed.

"Very good," said the nurse.

It was about one o'clock when Paul's mother and father drove up to their house. All was still. Paul's mother went to her room and took off her white fur coat. She heard her husband downstairs, mixing a whisky and soda.

And then, because of the strange feeling in her heart, she quietly went upstairs to her son's room. As she went along the corridor, she heard a faint noise. What was it?

She stood, unmoving, outside his door, listening. There was a strange, heavy, and yet not loud noise. Her heart stood still. It was a soundless noise, yet rushing and powerful. Something huge, in violent, quiet motion. What was it? What in God's name was it? She ought to know. She felt that she knew the noise. She knew what it was, yet she could not place it. She couldn't say what it was. And on and on it went, like a madness.

Softly, frozen with anxiety and fear, she turned the door handle.

The room was dark. Yet in the space near the window, she heard and saw something moving backwards and forwards. She watched in fear and amazement.

Then suddenly she switched on the light and saw her son, in his green pyjamas, madly going

backwards and forwards on the rocking-horse. She could see him clearly, as he pushed the wooden horse to go faster. And he could see her, in her pale green dress standing at the open door.

"Paul!" she cried. "Whatever are you doing?"

"It's Malabar!" he screamed in a powerful, strange voice. "It's Malabar!"

He looked at her with shining eyes for one strange and senseless second, as he stopped pushing his wooden horse. Then he fell with a crash to the ground. She, all her suffering motherhood rushing through her, ran to gather him up.

But he was unconscious, and unconscious he remained, with some kind of brain sickness. He talked and threw his body wildly from side to side on the bed, as his mother sat quietly by his side without showing any sign of emotion.

"Malabar! It's Malabar! Bassett, Bassett, I know! It's Malabar!"

So the child cried, trying to get up and again ride the rocking-horse that helped him to be sure.

"What does he mean by Malabar?" asked the mother.

"I don't know," said the father in a cold voice.

"What does he mean by Malabar?" she asked her brother Oscar.

"It's one of the horses running in the Derby," was the answer.

And, although he knew it was wrong, Oscar Cresswell spoke to Bassett and put a thousand pounds on Malabar at fourteen to one for himself.

The third day of the illness was the one the doctors had said was the most important. They were waiting for a change. The boy, with his long, curly hair, was moving his head from side to side continuously on the pillow. He did not sleep or become conscious again. His eyes were like blue stones and his mother sat beside him, feeling that her heart had also been turned into a stone.

In the evening, Oscar Cresswell did not come. However, Bassett sent a message, asking if could he come up for one moment. Paul's mother was very angry at this, but on second thought agreed. The boy was the same. Perhaps Bassett might bring him to consciousness.

The gardener, a short man with a little brown moustache and small, sharp brown eyes, walked quietly into the room. He touched an imaginary cap to Paul's mother, and went to stand beside the bed. With tears in his eyes, he looked at the dying child.

"Master Paul!" he whispered. "Master Paul! Malabar came in first all right, a clean win. I did as you told me. You've made over seventy thousand pounds, you have. Now you've got over eighty thousand. Malabar came in all right, Master Paul."

"Malabar! Malabar! Did I say Malabar, mother? Did I say Malabar? Do you think I'm lucky, mother? I knew Malabar, didn't I? Over eighty thousand pounds! I call that lucky, don't you, mother? Over eighty thousand pounds! I knew, didn't I know I knew? Malabar came in all right. If I ride my horse till I'm sure, then I tell you, Bassett, you can go as high as you like. Did you put all your money on it, Bassett?"

I went a thousand on it, Master Paul."

"I never told you, mother, that if I can ride my horse, and get there, then I'm absolutely sure... oh, absolutely! Mother, did I ever tell you? I am lucky!"

"No, you never did," said the mother.

But the boy died in the night.

As he lay dead, his mother heard her brother's voice. "My God, Hester, you're eighty thousand pounds to the good, and a poor son to the bad," he said. "But, poor, poor boy, he's best gone out of a life where he rides his rocking-horse to find a winner."