

JUST OUR LITTLE SECRET

One day just before lunchtime the telephone rang in the Buffer's Office at the RNAS Stretton of HMS Blackcap. I picked it up and for a laugh I put on my best Oxford English accent. A voice whom I failed to recognise enquired, "May I please speak to JR"? I just could not resist saying "It is he whom you are addressing". There was a silence before the voice again enquired "May I please speak to JR it is rather important".? Attempting desperately to finish eating a 'Stand Easy' custard cream biscuit I managed to splutter "It is JR here, how can I help you"? A rather relieved voice answered. "Hello JR, we haven't yet met but they told me at the Senior Rates Mess that you may be able to help me with a problem.

"Well, whoever it was in the Senior Rates Mess is quite correct, just how I can help"? I replied politely "I'm afraid I can't place your voice". I added a little cautiously. The caller spoke again "I'm awfully sorry, my name is Petty Officer Hall and I am the Captain's new Senior Steward". "OK PO how exactly may I help"? "Well, it is rather an unusual request so I was just hoping that". I interrupted "Well PO the improbable I can do almost immediately, the impossible might just take a couple of days if that helps you at all". A rather relieved PO Hall continued "Well JR, if I may call you that". "Please do PO, everyone else does, I never answer to anything else anyway.

" Well, then JR, the Captain has instructed me to arrange for his horse to visit the 'Smithy' tomorrow morning, does that make sense to you"? I chuckled "It certainly does PO, I've mucked out old Khan's stable a few times when I have been Under Punishment, the old boy and I are pretty good chums". Realising that might sound odd I hastily added "I meant the horse not the Captain". It was PO Hall's turn to chuckle this time. I should perhaps point out that the former Captain and Commanding Officer of the Air Station was an avid horseman of almost Olympic standard. He owned a magnificent stallion named 'Khan' who was kept in the stables at the rear of the old mansion house which formed part of the former Earl's vast estate and was formerly the shooting lodge. The house was on permanent loan to the Commanding Officer and the Estate was now run by a Manager.

Petty Officer Hall had been newly assigned as the Captain's Personal Steward and normally would have had two more Stewards to assist him in the huge house. It seemed however, that Annual leave and Defence cuts had taken their toll and the PO had to fend for himself. The former Captain of 'Blackcap' was a rather mysterious figure and unless you were up and around about 4 am, you would scarcely see him at all. There is no doubt that Khan and he were devoted to each other and it would be true to say that the villagers saw more of him riding his horse around the many country lanes than we did back at the base.

Petty Officer Hall continued with his conversation. "Well JR, the President of the Senior Rates Mess apart from thinking very highly of you, seems to think that as you know a little about horses, you may be able to help me out of a bit of a spot"? "Well PO' put it this way. I did work on a rather large Riding School when I was a youngster so there isn't much on four legs or two come to think of that I haven't been aboard, seriously though, if you want me to take old Khan down to 'Clinker' Moye's Smithy tomorrow is that correct"? "That's right JR you would be doing me a big favour, do you know Mr Moyes by the way"? He asked, sounding very relieved. I laughed aloud. "I certainly do, the old bugger, of course I'll do it".

Next morning, after breakfast a quick glance at 'The Telegraph' my prestige newspaper, for obvious reasons. If an Officer saw you he was immediately impressed if anyone else saw you they became apprehensive. I made my way to the 'Mansion House' and Khan's stable, the old familiar smell of carbolic and freshly scrubbed cobblestones hung in my nostrils. Khan was waiting, magnificent as usual, saddled and ready to go. Holding his reins was the familiar figure of 'Old Rueben' a regular from my local 'The Thorn'. He had been the Head Ostler to the late Earl for donkey's years. "Hello Rueb you old bugger I thought you'd retired about 100 years ago"? "Morning JR, I'm just standing in for the Guvnor's Groom who has been called away suddenly" He said "I see you've managed OK so far then"? I grinned sarcastically. "You cheeky young sod, I was looking after horses before you were an ache in your Father's ball bag". Cackled Old Rueben. "By the way, when you see Clinker this morning remind him there is a Domino Match tomorrow night at the pub and to pick me up"? "Will do old son, will do". I promised. As I attempted to climb aboard Khan's broad back "You mount from the left you know just in case you've forgotten." Rueben cackled again. He held Khan's head as I put my foot in the stirrup, grabbed the saddle and reins. I hauled myself upright and swung my right leg across Khan's middle. As I settled down into the saddle he took a pace forward. "Whoah boy, whoah there, easy now" Whispered Rueben as he adjusted the girth and stirrups slightly. A gentle slap on Khan's rump and we were off, clop, clopping across the stable yard. "Don't forget" Shouted Rueben as I waved. "Don't let that old bugger Clinker get you in the pub or you will end up paying". Cackled Old Rueben as I waved again.

A leisurely plod along the country lanes on this lovely Summer's day made me think that I could really get used to this. It was about a mile and a half to Clinker's Forge and by nine thirty we were there. A short stocky little red faced man with shoulder like a barn door and arms like 'Popeye the Sailor' and dressed in a short sleeved shirt and moleskin trousers topped with a leather apron indicated I was at Clinker Moyes's Forge. The broad Birmingham accent merely confirmed it. "Are yo all roight JR, oi aint sin yo fer ages". He greeted me as I swung down from Khan's back. "Is that good or bad for me, how are you, you old bugger"? We shook hands and I almost cried out as a huge hand like a steak plate crushed my fingers in a vice like grip". Clinker grinned, showing gaps in his teeth like a NAAFI piano, one black, one white and one missing. "Before I forget, Clinker old son, Rueben asked me to remind you about the Domino Match tomorrow night and to pick him up as usual". Clinker looked skywards, as if for inspiration. Dominoes, Cribbage, Skittles, Bowls together with Whippet Racing and Pigeons were regarded as almost a compulsive religious pursuit in this part of the country and such matches were eagerly contested between rival public houses.

Clinker patted Khan and rubbed a gnarled hand gently across his nose "Do yo know oid know this orse anywhere, just giv im a drink an turn im out inter th paddock till oim reddy fer im". Said Clinker. Girths undone, saddle and bridle off a little slap and Khan was off to graze on the far side of the paddock. "Ays a luvly oss and thiz no mistake about that". Said Clinker admiringly. "Is little uns ud make a gud proice they wud an all". He said as he carefully took out a battered old tin from his waistcoat pocket. Carefully removing a previously rolled cigarette and walking towards his forge fire. Poking a paper spill into the glowing embers he lit his cigarette and blew a cloud of almost overpowering 'Churchman's Counter Shag' towards me. He thought for a moment, walking back towards me said. "As the Old Captain ever thort o breedin im"? "I honestly have no idea Clinker old son, no idea at all why do you ask"? Clinker looked up, "Lewk JR yo know mae and ar no yo, an az wae ar both men o the world wae buth on us loike ter mak a bob or tew along th way don't uz"? I

nodded. "I have to admit Clinker old son that is perfectly true what have you got in mind"? Clinker gave me an old fashioned kind of look and said. "There's a bloke wot I know lives only 10 minutes from this very spot wud giv three undred quid fer Khan ter cover iz two mares" I stared hard at him "That is damn good money and no mistake". I had to agree. As is to emphasise his point Clinker then said. "Just think how much it'd bay fer a thoroughbred race oss ter dew it then. "I'm already thinking Clinks old son, I'm already thinking". I repeated" Realising the distinct possibility that Clinker had maybe unwittingly, struck a chord nearest my heart by making a few quid. He pressed home his advantage by blowing another cloud of choking cigarette smoke towards me. "Now if yo wuz ter bugger off fer an hour yer wudnt ave ter no owt about it wud yer. After all, osses allus get up ter all sorts dunt they, an yo can't turn yer nose up at 300 quid a time can yer". He smiled triumphantly "An no bugger wud ever no uz it'd bay our little secret". I thought for approximately 5 seconds. "OK Clinker, cash in hand"? "What else but". Grinned Clinker spitting on his hand and extending it towards me. "Done" He said, and I had that sinking feeling that I may just have been." Perhaps old Khan might even enjoy it"? I consoled myself as I went into the nearby pub.

The pub next door to Clinker's Forge was none other than the 'Half Way Inn' colloquially nicknamed by the lads at Blackcap as 'The Discontented Virgin'. It was a dark, gloomy, Dickensian type of building and reminded me of a mausoleum or at least an 'Undertakers Parlour'. The stark but scrupulously clean wooden furniture, would have been at home in the 17th Century. The stone flagstones and sombre meticulous ticking of a huge wall clock gave me the creeps. The main bar was deserted so I entered the 'Smoke Room' 'Smoke Room being the operative word for despite the bright sunshine outside there was a recently lit coal fire occasionally puffing plumes of smoke from a badly cleaned chimney. The rays of the sun through the window caused swirling shapes in the smoke from the fire. Apart from the Landlord polishing glasses behind the bar with a practised precision, there was no one else to be seen anywhere. The Landlord looked as though he had just stepped out from a Victorian melodrama, short, thin with a moustache and slicked down hair quite reminiscent of that period long ago. He had a starched white apron tied at the waist. A waistcoat and watch chain with what appeared to be a ruby and a gold medallion dangled from it.

The Landlord looked up. "You are a bit early but as there are not many customers this time of day, you are welcome to have a drink"? My first thoughts were that there probably hadn't been many customers since Queen Victoria's Funeral in 1901. I ordered a pint of best bitter and gazed around the room. There were sporting prints of every kind from Horse Racing to Bowls. Pictures of moustachioed players some with their foot on a football with their arms folded. There were prints of men with beards or long sideburns. Cases of stuffed freshwater fish and other relics from a bygone age adorning the brown nicotine stained walls. A strong smell of carbolic and wax polish filled the room which was spotlessly clean. It was just like stepping back into time and the pages of our Country's Social History. The Landlord saw me inspecting a highly polished brass oil lamp which hung above the bar. "Worth a lot of money is that"? He announced proudly as I took a long pull at my pint and was immediately impressed by the prime quality of the beer. "Converted that meeself from paraffin. Came off an old sailing barge did that" He smiled, obviously very pleased with himself. I complimented him on an excellent pint of bitter as one of the best I've ever had. That'll be one and ninepence he said casually"? Worth every penny too I thought. "You'd better take one for old Clinker too, he will be in directly". I suggested. The Landlord looked up at the big clock on the wall opposite, with almost meticulous precision took out a large pocket watch from his waistcoat pocket. "He won't be in for at least another hour". He

observed. He handed me my change which I placed in the 'Swear Box' on the counter. "But you haven't sworn yet"? He said, looking surprised. "I dare say I may well be tempted to when old Clinker comes in". "You know old Clinker then"? Said the Landlord. Obviously deciding to have some conversation with his only customer. I laughed. "Yes, I'm afraid I do, he's not a bad old bugger really". I replied. "Maybe not but the Brummie bugger is as tight as a gnat's chuff box". We both burst out laughing which broke the ice well and truly. "I agree with you, I've always thought old Clinker had very short arms and low pockets". We both chuckled again. "I see you're from the Navy Base then"? I found the remark did not call for a reply particularly as I was wearing No8's with my name over the breast pocket and a cap with HMS Blackcap on it so I merely nodded.

The Landlord squinted at my name tag " Ah, yes, JR, I've often heard old Clinker mention you, by the way call me Harold"? He said extending his hand. "May I buy you a drink Harold"? I enquired. "That is very kind, if I may I will have a small Barley Wine"? I handed him my glass. "I will also have another pint of your delicious ale". I grinned. We spent the next hour or so completely uninterrupted discussing practically everything from sport to the hitherto unmentionable pub taboos of Politics and Religion. It was well past 11 o'clock when we heard old Clinker stomping into the Bar with the usual beam on his red face. "Hey up Arrol, arm just about bloody parched to death"? He grumbled as Harold handed him his beer and from which he took a huge gulp before replying again. "Oi've ad a right old mornin I ave and no mistake." Nudging me and winking, he handed me a folded newspaper. "Yo can ave yer paper back now oi've finished wi it". Said Clinker, loudly. He took another large gulp at his beer, drew his finger along the outside of the glass and wrote the figures 600 on the bar top. Harold had his back to us and did not see the gesture so Clinker quickly wiped it away. "Well JR he's reddy fer yer trust moi"? Harold sniffed audibly. "I wouldn't trust him if he sat on the Altar with a Crucifix up his arse" He scoffed to which Clinker replied "Oi, Arrol yo swore, that's a penny in th box that is"? Draining his pint he led me outside "Cum on oive got me werk tew dew, see yer in a bit Arrol"? He called over his shoulder.

Khan was already saddled and bridled and tethered to the top rail of the paddock gate. I noticed that there were another half dozen horses in the paddock awaiting Clinker's attention. Khan seemed a little edgy and kept tossing his head and pawing the ground. "Its cos it's an ot day, tak it easy wi im an eel be foine"? Said Clinker to reassure me. I saw that he had done his usual good job and even tarred and leaded Khan's hooves for good measure. "E want's ter bay orf an I've got loads ter dew yet so tarra ter yer"? Clinker waved "Don't forget Rueben tomorrow night"? I reminded him. As we walked Khan kept tossing his head. Just for a brief moment I thought of something. No, it couldn't be. I immediately checked the contents of the folded newspaper which Clinker had given me. Sure enough there was £600 in £20 notes inside which I placed in both pockets of my No 8's shirt. Funny, I just had a strange feeling like someone just stepped on my grave. Plodding up the hill caused Khan to puff and pant, surely two mares hadn't tired the old boy out, he was in his prime I thought. Reaching the top of the hill I looked back down towards Clinker's Forge. The paddock was now completely empty, how very strange. I knew that Clinker was one of the best Blacksmiths in the entire County but shoeing six horses in less than half an hour that is quite impossible, he couldn't possibly. Wait a minute, the penny dropped at last. Those bloody horses were all mares. The craft old bugger, he's only got Khan to service six mares at £300 quid a time and he gave me £600 for only two. That old 'Brummie Bugger' has done me like a kipper for £1200 notes. You just wait, you old sod, you just bloody wait.

Khan and I were walking slowly back, this time downhill. The old bugger, I reluctantly had to admire him as it was probably the sort of scam that I would have tried myself. I chuckled quietly and patted old Khan. "Did you enjoy yourself old son, I wonder"? I found myself thinking. I just don't believe that I've been well and truly done by a bigger bloody rogue than myself. I was already plotting my revenge and the opportunity to exact retribution was not long in coming. It seemed that quite a number of locals had, over the years, also been hapless victims of old Clinker's 'Roguary' and were only too willing for the chance to return the favour. With the help of the 'Buffer's Party' lads and a 'Pusser's' five tonner and a borrowed 'Furniture Van' our chance came one afternoon when old Clinker was taken to the Races as a 'Special Birthday Treat'. We completely dismantled his entire Forge, tools, equipment, everything and drove them to a farm several miles away where a willing owner locked them in an old barn. We left a Birthday Card nailed to Clinker's Forge door together with a Map Reference and wishing him a Very Happy Birthday.

REVENGE NEVER TASTED ANY SWEETER THAN THIS