

DISCRETION



by James Hadley Chase

There's a Horse on the Sofa

I MET this horse I want to tell you about in the lounge of a West End hotel. It was a well-groomed, nice looking animal and it sat on a sofa next to an old gentleman.

Even to a casual observer, it 'was obvious that something was preying on the old gentleman's mind. In fact, it seemed to me that, of the two, the horse was more at ease.

I only looked once at the horse. Then I walked as quickly as I could across the lounge to the bar. I ordered four inches of Napoleon brandy.

When the barman gave me my change I remarked that the hotel seemed exceptionally full. He agreed. But then he always did agree with everything I said. It was not because I am infallible, but because he did not listen.

"Extraordinary types you have in this hotel," I went on. "You'll be having horses in here next," and laughed to show him that I was joking.

"The trouble with horses," he said seriously, "is that they don't drink. It doesn't do the hotel any good if our clients don't drink a little something now and then."

"I suppose the---the horse out there doesn't drink either?" I said.

The barman shook his head. "It just sits. It won't touch a drop." He lowered his voice. "As a matter of fact, sir, the Directors offered it a '98 claret. Wouldn't even look at the label," and he went away to serve a large Guinness to a small pilot-officer.

So I finished my brandy and went back to the lounge. The horse was still sitting there, but the old gentleman had gone away.

The manager of the hotel told me later that the old gentleman had suddenly decided to go to an obscure north country town to help make screws for Spitfires. The manager said it was a nice gesture because the old gentleman was moving into his eighty-second year. He really was old and not just playing at it.

His friends, however, thought, it wasn't a gesture at all. It was because the horse had preyed on his mind and he didn't know what he was doing. It was a sad thing really, because the old fellow died on the way and caused a lot of inconvenience to his relations.

Well, there was the horse, sitting on the sofa in quite an ordinary way. It neither lolled nor sprawled, but sat nicely, with one hoof resting on the old gentleman's newspaper and its tail draped across its lap.

The hotel was busy and it was interesting to observe the various reactions of the people who came through the revolving door. It was also pleasing to notice that they did nothing to make the horse nervous.

They realised, as I did, that to leap at a horse when in a hotel lounge crying "Whoosh!" can only lead to bedlam and breakages.

Some ignored the horse. Some paused in mid-stride and clutched their companions. Others went immediately to the bar. One gentleman, wishing to sign the pledge, caused a lot of unpleasantness because the management was unable to supply him with the necessary forms.

My stare may have upset the horse or it may have felt tired and decided to turn in. Whatever it was, it stood up and strolled over to the lift.

There was a little confusion at this point as several people were already in the lift. But they suddenly decided to be patriotic and walk up the stairs, so no material harm resulted.



Two old ladies, recapturing the spirit of youth, did try to race each other up the stairs, but on the fifth floor their arteries hardened unexpectedly and I understand that they are likely to remain in bed for some time.

The attendant didn't really want to take the horse in the lift. You could see that by the expression on his face. But he was so well trained, and the horse was so quiet and refined that he had not the heart to hurt its feelings.

The lounge seemed quite colourless when the horse had gone.

I noticed that the hall porter was the only person who did not seem surprised by this little incident. He behaved with great dignity about the whole thing.

"Have you seen that horse before?" I asked, producing a half-crown which you should always produce if you talk to hall-porters.

"Why, yes sir," he returned, putting the half-crown in his pocket. "It has been here several weeks now, although this is its first appearance in the vestibule."

"Obviously a noble and intelligent beast," I said, hoping to draw him. "Would you say he was a thorough-bred?"

The hall porter stroked his moustache. "I did hear that he was by Rumour out of Duff Gen, sir. He is very refined, but you would be making a grave error if you thought he was intelligent. Believe me, sir, I have watched that animal. He is really quite stupid. So deceptive, if I may say so, sir, so unreliable and inaccurate. In spite of this, he has a very large circle of acquaintances."

"In what way is he unreliable and inaccurate?" I asked, wondering if I had spent my half-crown rashly.

"To appreciate his background, sir," the hall-porter continued, pausing only to help an old lady through the revolving door, "I should like to remind you of the campaign against careless talk which has been so ably organised. Careless talk, we have been told, sir, costs lives. Now this hotel is popular with members of the three Services.

It seems unavoidable that when these gentlemen get together they should wish to impress each other. To do this, sir, they exchange information which, I believe, sir, is described in the Press as valuable to the enemy. It is a pernicious habit, as they may quite easily be overheard. But rather than let their friends think that they are merely doing a 'stooge' job, if I may coin a phrase, they discuss their work, impart valuable information and even, I regret to tell you, verify rumours."

"All this is regrettable," I said. "I am not saying that this is not true. In your position, you no doubt overhear many conversations, but what has this to do with the horse?"

He hesitated a moment. "I have a theory, sir," he went on. "I may be wrong, of course, but when one of these gentlemen are about to divulge a particularly juicy morsel of information, they invariably begin by saying 'This is straight from the horse's mouth.' You may have caught yourself saying it at one time or another. I think, sir " he jerked his thumb to the lift, "that is the horse."