

## Colourful Characters

### Hermit's Derby

This is the story of two characters who started off friends and became engaged in a bitter - and tragic - rivalry.

Henry Chaplin, a wealthy Lincolnshire squire, and Harry, Marquess of Hastings, were contemporaries at Christ Church, Oxford. Chaplin was a sophisticate and a friend of the Prince of Wales. The Marquess of Hastings, on the other hand came up to Oxford as an eighteen year old, having already earned the soubriquet 'King of the Plungers' for his wild gambling and drinking at Eton.

The two of them had two things in common: their love of horses and their love of beautiful women. After they had come down from Oxford, they met up in London again. At that time Chaplin's attention was focused on the reigning society beauty, Lady Florence Paget - 'The Pocket Venus'. But she also had the admiration of the Marquess who had even named one of his fillies after her. But no respectable young lady could contemplate marriage with the Marquess, so when Chaplin proposed, Florence accepted and the wedding date was set for early in August 1864.

Surprisingly, the Marquess did not seem put out. He remained on friendly terms with the engaged couple, and devoted himself to his main ambition, which was to win the Derby.

On Friday, July 15, 1864, Chaplin invited the Marquess to join him and his fiancée, Lady Florence in their box at Covent Garden. The next morning Lady Florence collected her wedding dress then went out again to do some more shopping. Or that was what she told her father. But instead, she went to St George's Church, Hanover Square, and married Henry Marquess of Hastings.

The elopement rocked the society of the time. The Marquess and Lady Florence were shunned whilst Chaplin was pitied. To take his mind off his friend's treachery, Chaplin also took up racing. He bought two three-year olds and entered them in the 1865 Derby.

The Marquess of Hastings took this as a personal challenge and countered by buying a new horse for 12,000 guineas, which he was certain would win that year's Derby.

All three horses came nowhere, but the competition between the two men continued.

The following year Chaplin outbidded the Marquess at 1000 guineas, for a chestnut colt called Hermit which was deemed by the racing world to be a good prospect for next year's Derby.

The Marquess' reaction was typical. He began to lay ridiculous odds against Hermit. With no entry of his own for the '67 Derby, the Marquess' greatest wish was to see Hermit lose, and he put every penny he had on the race.

Then just ten days before the great race it seemed that his wish would be fulfilled. Hermit broke a blood vessel and Chaplin was sure that the horse would be scratched. But his trainer, Captain Machell, refused to admit defeat. The result of the news was that the odds against Hermit had gone from 4-1 to 66-1. But the trainer was still convinced he had a chance.

Few can have shared his confidence when they saw Hermit in the paddock at Epsom. It was the famous 'Snowstorm Derby', and with snow falling on his ragged coat, the once-favoured chestnut looked a dejected beast indeed. The bookies were now offering 100-1 against him. The Marquess was delighted, sure now that his money was safe.

With the snow falling heavily and after ten false starts, the thirty horses were at last off. The long haul to the top of the course was covered without incident with Hermit well back in the pack. Then the cheers of the crowd turned to gasps of surprise. For 'coming along half as fast again as the rest' was Hermit, the horse they had all written off. Hermit passed horse after horse, and then began to narrow the gap to the leader. Ten yards out he levelled, and, at the post, Hermit was a neck in front.

The crowd was stunned, none more so than the Marquess of Hastings, who in that moment knew he had lost £120,000. To pay his gambling debts in full, he was forced to sell his Scottish

estates.

From now on it was all downhill for the Marquess. Heavy drinking was taking its toll and his kidneys were beginning to fail. Further debts meant selling all his racehorses. On November 10, he died, a twenty-six year old wreck in a wheelchair.

Henry Chaplin remained a bachelor until he was thirty-six, when he married another Florence, the elder daughter of the Duke of Sutherland, who bore him a son and two daughters.

Hermit won only two more races before Chaplin retired him to stud. He proved a great success as a sire. His progeny included two Derby, two Oaks and numerous other classic winners.