

Felicity's Show Flair



by Hilary Walker

FOR A FEW SECONDS I had an upside-down view of the stadium show jumps from between Crusader's hooves. Underneath his tummy and without reins, I was still in the saddle and clung on grimly with my calves. The starter bell had sounded and as we turned the corner to the first fence the saddle had slipped round—with me in it.

Feeling that I wasn't in the correct jumping position, Crusader braked sharply in front of the fence, propelling my whole body through his front legs. I flew between the top and bottom rails of the obstacle and landed on my back. Glaring sunlight stung my eyes. Quickly the blaze was shadowed by snorting equine nostrils as Crusader's head reached over the refused showjump from the take-off side, checking to see if I was O.K. I reached up to stroke his anxious muzzle. An aroma of horse sweat hovered in the August heat like a swarm of odorous bees.

Winded, I gasped, "What happened?"

Those two words convinced Crusader that he needn't worry about me any more and he nuzzled my pockets for tidbits. His powerful neck knocked down the pole it was leaning over, which fell with a loud clatter, missing my head by inches. Unperturbed, he realized the treats were now more accessible. I was perturbed, desperate to make a hasty retreat. I didn't have time to undo the girth and resaddle my horse: the next competitor was chafing at the entrance. So we left the arena in disgrace, saddle hanging underneath Crusader's belly, not having jumped even the first obstacle.

The loudspeaker crackled: "Felicity Applewaite and Crusader wisely retire. I'm sure Felicity will check her girth before the next class."

That last comment was uncalled for.

A loud snigger escaped from hateful Caroline Smidgean-Smythe, who for sure was focusing her zoom lens on the stirrups dangling down from my horse's midriff. She's had it in for me ever since I bought Crusader from under her nose. Everyone knew that Lord and Lady Ewesbutt were strapped for cash. They couldn't resist the extra five hundred pounds I offered for the beautiful bay geld-

ing.

Being the sports reporter for our local paper, the Much Middlesteeples Gazette, Carrie's moment of revenge had arrived. I just knew she'd taken humiliating shots of me out there with the horse she felt I didn't deserve. I could already see blown-up photos in the "Much Ado about Sporting" section of Monday's edition, with some withering caption like 'Fateful Felicity is Infelicitous.' Boy, she was going to have a field day!

Seething, I gave her a disdainful glance and walked Crusader to my trailer where I tied him to the side next to his haynet. My Great Dane, Blue, was on a long leash attached to the trailer hitch and gave a yelp of joy as I came into view. I patted his massive head, mentally sifting the events which led to my tumble. I now remembered loosening my girth after popping some practice fences and failing to rebuckle it before going into the ring. No wonder it swung under poor Crusader as we rounded the first corner!

The girth lay across his back where it didn't belong. I undid it and the saddle dropped from under his stomach to the ground with a resounding thud. The bay jumped back in fright, breaking his tether. Blue barked loudly, causing my horse to gallop off in the direction of the refreshment tent and threaten to bulldoze through it. I couldn't believe it! All I needed now was for that miserable reporter to spot Crusader and take another beastly photo. Forget the sports section, it would make the front page headlines. 'Felicity Falls Foul of the Law: Uncontrolled New Horse kills Diners in Death Dance at Local Show.'

But before Crusader reached the concessions tent, a slim man darted directly in front of him, stretching out his hand and saying something I couldn't hear. My horse stopped in his tracks and pricked his ears towards the stranger, nosing the proffered palm and eagerly wolfing the treat on it. Relieved the gelding hadn't caused any grievous harm for which I would be liable up to my ears, I approached this amazing person.

"Thank you so much," I began. "I don't know what would've happened if Crusader had made it to the tent."

"Glad to help," came the quiet reply as the man shook my outstretched hand. He peered at me. "Aren't you Felicity Applewaite?"

"Doesn't the whole showground know it?" I replied bitterly, as I retrieved my horse's lead rope from this dauntingly competent man. His tanned, rugged face looked at me kindly and specks of sunlight twinkled in his soft green eyes.

"Oh, you mean your accident? Come on, I've had much worse happen to me!"

"But not today, and not in front of Carrie Smidgean-Smythe."

"Who's she and why's that a problem?" The voice had a slight country accent to it.

“She’s the local sports reporter, who hates me and is going to print enlarged pictures of my foul-up in the local rag,” I confided with feeling.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that.” This lithe, jeans clad stranger possessed a soothing manner but immediately ruined it by adding, “By the way, I heard you need a groom.”

Of all the nerve! You’re involved in one little incident where you forget to retighten your girth, and the whole equestrian world thinks you need help getting your own horse ready.

Tartly, I replied: “No, thank you, I’m perfectly capable.”

“No offense meant, only a friend breathed a word in my ear about a possible job opening, that’s all.”

Despite my annoyance, I was curious. “Who was that, then?”
“Freddie Phorthwright.”

“Why would Freddie think I needed a groom?”

As if I didn’t know. He was always nagging me about the sloppy state of my barn, and after the fiasco today I suppose he thought I’d finally recognize the need for outside help. Fat chance!

But this guy tried to be tactful. “Oh, he said you’ve a lot on your plate at the moment and might like an extra hand with the horses.”

“Well, I wouldn’t,” I said unpleasantly and considered the conversation at an end.

Instead of a sour look, he gave me a charming smile and deferentially touched the rim of his flat cloth cap, the typical headgear of rural Englishmen. “Sorry to bother you. I’ll be on my way, then.”

He walked off, leaving me to wonder who he was, since I’d been too rude to ask. He was more mature than your average groom, who tends to be a twenty-something girl called Alison Geoffreys, really good with your horses at home and at shows, and then runs off with her new boyfriend. In the case of yours truly, this turned out to be my husband. I swore off grooms after that. But at least the divorce bequeathed me a house, thirty acres and three horses ...

This capable man wasn’t twenty but late thirty-something, a little older than me. Well-preserved, he hadn’t an ounce of fat: like a race jockey, but taller and healthy looking, not half-starved. Wonder where he was from?

Couldn’t worry about that, I had the next class to get ready for, so I led my spooked steed back to where his saddle still lay on the grass. At least no one had nicked it, something to be grateful for. I was show jumping again, my chance to prove to those comedians for judges I did know how to ride. Afterwards I needed to think up a plan for grabbing that film off Smidgy.

My competition was two rings away from one being used for a popular event in the village: the Muchmore Hunt Hounds Parade. It’s the one occasion when

non-horsey spectators at the show (fathers who'd rather be playing golf than watching young Priscilla on her expensive new pony, and brothers who can't wait to get back to their computer games) can enjoy the sight of non—equine animals showing off obedience to their masters.

Now safely aboard Crusader, with his girth so tight he could hardly breathe, I walked him past the arena where the Muchmore Hounds were gathered round the huntsmen, heeding the leather whips that swirled imperiously in the air above their heads. The sharp black and tan and white of the foxhounds became blurred as the animals milled around in waggy-tailed excitement. The hides of the tense grey, chestnut and bay hunt horses glistened in the summer sun: the red jackets of the huntsmen were impeccable examples of fine grooming, and the Master of Hounds' calls on his shiny horn stirred in everyone the thrill of centuries old tradition.

The exhilarating sounds and bright images of the hunt livened up my gelding as I rode to the collecting ring, where the practice fences were already raised to the new height of my next class.

In order to jump early, I'd taken care to have the steward chalk my horse's bridle number near the top of the competitors' list on the blackboard by the arena entrance. There were six horses entered ahead of mine, translating into about ten minutes wait for my round, so I cantered Crusader smartly towards the warm-up fences.

We jumped well, and were soon at the entrance, watching the horse ahead of us make its smooth way over the set of eleven jumps. The rider and her smart grey mare achieved a beautiful clean round and trotted to the exit amid loud ringside applause. The steward raised the rope and ushered them out and us in.

At the sound of the starter bell we set off at a brisk canter towards the first fence. As I rode along the low rope border separating the rings from each other, I became aware of a loud shouting and whooping. Next door, the Pony Club's Best Turned Out Class was in progress, with a troop of darling little ponies and riders trotting prettily in a circle round the equally well turned out judges. But the Muchmore Hounds had interrupted the class. In full cry and pursued by the huntsmen, they were cutting a disorderly swathe through the middle of the children, scattering them. And the whole mob was heading for my ring!

Terrified kids screamed on alarmed ponies, while judges tried unsuccessfully to calm them down. I then noticed the hound in front: it was Blue. How...? I couldn't believe my eyes and neither could Crusader, who panicked and took off round the arena. Spotting us, Blue came running behind my horse's flashing hooves. The other dogs streamed under the rope with joyous yelps, merrily tracking my monster as he tracked me. After them came the hunt horses, which didn't look any more under control than the hunt pack as they sailed over the

flimsy cord to continue their gallop behind the foxhounds. Crusader gathered speed around the ring, trying to outrun his pursuers.

I'd never been in such a ridiculous situation! How on earth was I going to stop my horse?

The Much Middlesteple Gazette later chronicled how all the spectators from Ring One, viz. 'Parade of Muchmore Foxhounds', had run over to Ring Three, which was supposed to be 'Jumping: Three foot Six', but had now turned into 'Chase the Showjumper'. Apparently all the anti-hunt villagers, who thought the horse set were a bunch of stuck-up snobs, were thrilled. They clapped and cheered and wolf-whistled. No one paid attention to the other rings: the entire show-ground gathered to watch the impromptu display in Ring Three. They probably hoped my saddle would slip under Crusader again as an added bonus.

The judges were too astonished to switch off the loudspeaker. Even while I tried vainly to halt my terrified horse, I distinctly heard voices over the system saying things like: "My money's on the bay in front, bet you a fiver he outstrips the rest" and "Nah, I know the Master's horse, he'll overtake them all, raise you a tenner—" An unbelievable bunch!

Underneath me Crusader was still lively as ever. But we'd circuted the ring about five times and I'd had enough. How could I shake off the hounds, including my own? Here I was again, not having cleared one competition fence!

I decided to ride the course of fences. Maybe the hounds would continue around the outside of the ring and leave us alone, or perhaps follow Crusader and crash into something. That would stop them. I hoped there'd be no casualties, but I couldn't think of a better plan and maybe, by the end of this disaster, my horse and I would have negotiated at least one set of jumps today.

Crusader was surprised at the change of direction and I had trouble turning him towards fence number one. However, he quickly understood what was being asked of him and headed valiantly to the start. We were off!

Blue tried to swivel round and follow, but was too clumsy to make the corner. His hind legs gave underneath him and he sat down for a moment before raising his bulky frame to resume the race. As soon as he'd got up, the other foxhounds tumbled on top of him as they, too, noticed a sharp departure from the now familiar route. The huntsmen seized the moment and swiftly hauled their mounts into a tight ring around Blue and the disobedient hunting pack, like a wagon train circle. Whips cracked and the hounds, tired from their sprint, were happy to comply, with a bemused Blue sitting in the centre.

Crusader and I, meanwhile, were happily clearing fences. I was vaguely aware of a knot of dogs and horses somewhere between fences six and seven, but that only caused a few seconds' detour. Crusader flew over the penultimate fence, turning to find a good line to the last one, a three foot six inch wall. We were

about seven canter strides out when out of nowhere a huge, dark grey animal moved in front of the obstacle and loped towards us. Blue had broken away from the other dogs and I was going to hit him: I could not stop Crusader in time. I was frantically trying to check his canter when a human blur ran with incredible speed to intercept the dog and grab him out of danger. With immense relief I continued to the fence and my horse sailed over it with inches to spare. I didn't care that my round wasn't legitimate. I'd taken rather longer than the time allowed after the starter bell to begin the course! I was happy that we'd finally finished the course despite the distractions and bad luck that had impeded us. I leaned forward and patted the gelding's neck. White sweat foamed on his shoulders and flanks and a cloud of steam rose from his whole body.

Slowly I became aware of a ripple of ringside clapping. Whom was it for? I looked nervously round. It occurred to me that the judges and huntsmen might not have taken kindly to the way I took matters into my own hands.

The voices over the loudspeaker, which had been vigorously betting earlier, now resumed their normal dead-an tone. "We regret to announce that jumping rules don't permit a five minute gap between the ring of the starter's bell and the competitor's commencement of the course. However, since Felicity Applewaite and Crusader were battling with unusual odds in the fulfillment of their round, we would like to award them a special rosette for perseverance and entertainment."

Loud cheers followed this statement. I beamed. Maybe today wasn't such a big disaster. I grinned at the crowd, then noticed the would-be groom holding Blue and talking to Carrie Smidgean-Smythe. What was going on? And why did they have my dog? As I walked Crusader over to the entrance the judges applauded the huntsmen, whose hounds now stood obediently to attention, tails too tired to wag. "And I'm sure you would all like to join me in congratulating the Muchmore Hunt on a spectacular exhibition of speed and endurance across not only their own designated show area, but also those of two other classes."

A roar of laughter rose from the ranks of spectators. The huntsmen accepted the tongue-in-cheek accolade in good grace and doffed their hats to the judges' box with broad smiles. All eyes now turned towards the tattered remnants of the Best Turned Out Class, which was doing its utmost to resume. Mothers were bustling to soothe their ruffled offspring, rearranging the tousled curls, ribbons and pony braids that slipped awry during The Great Hunt Chase. The loudspeaker cackled once again: "Let's see a final round from the Muchmore Hunt before they leave the arena and allow our jumping class to continue!"

Crusader, now out of the ring, leapt at the sound of the horn as the hounds went on the move again. He was not about to let me stop to solve the mystery of the groom, my dog and Smidgy. I fleetingly wondered what pictures she'd taken

of my hot pursuit around the ring and decided I wouldn't mind that particular publicity ...

All this messing about had cost me valuable time: I was entered for one more class today and really wanted to ride in it. Not jumping but dressage, and it started in fifteen minutes. That was no time at all to adjust my horse's thinking from clearing fences to an exhibition of flowing paces on the ground. I rode back to the trailer and changed saddles, figuring Crusader would calm down before I took him back to Ring Three and accost Smidgy and the man who had my dog.

I swung aboard my horse for the third time that day and was moving off to reclaim Blue when the dog appeared, still attached to the groom. I gave his handler my fiercest look, but he disarmed me with a charming smile and said: "Hi Felicity, here's your dog. I'm sorry if I scared you, darting in front of you like that to catch him. By the way, well ridden! Everyone's really impressed. Your enemy Caroline took some good shots, hoping you'd fall off, so she'd better publish those instead of the other ones."

So he was the sprinter who'd saved me from a tight spot, and not for the first time today. This was getting embarrassing. "Th...thanks a lot," I mumbled. "So you were talking to her about printing the good shots?" Maybe he wasn't in league with Smidgy after all.

"Yes," he replied. "Anyway, I can see you're off to another class, so I'll give back your Dane. Bye."

He handed over Blue's leash and disappeared.

Who on earth was he? After this next class I really had to find out.

The recent exertion of our jumping class saved Crusader from needing much warming up. It was more a case of fishing the dressage sheet out of my pocket and making sure I remembered all the test's movements, before encouraging my horse to move "with freedom and regularity" and prepare to show the judge that he "accepted the bridle".

Our bracing experiences in the last two classes had us both on our toes as the judge rang the starting "bell," which in reality was the horn of her red car at the far end of the 40 x 20 meters sand arena. An assistant sat in the passenger seat next to her, poised to write down her neighbor's weighty pronouncements on my performance.

What was going to happen next? Could we make it through the entire four minute sequence of movements without mishap?

Trying to focus on the task ahead, I trotted Crusader confidently up the middle line of the little stadium towards the judge's car and turned right, demonstrating "harmony" and "lightness of the forehand."

The gelding was relaxed and supple and I stopped holding my breath. This

was truly enjoyable after our awful experiences earlier. The one time when I wished Carrie Smigdean-Smythe were taking close-ups, she was nowhere to be seen. Crusader and I, now in perfect unity, would look stunning on that sporting page, I just knew.

It happened during the canter. My leg groped for the suddenly missing left stirrup dangling uselessly down Crusader's side. I didn't know what to do! Should I stop riding or should I continue, knowing that we would lose marks like crazy? Suddenly I was glad of Smidgy's absence.

It's easier to ride with no stirrups than with just one and I lost my balance. Poor Crusader! Although only half-way through the test, there was no point our carrying on. I trotted back up the middle line as best I could and halted before the judge. I bowed, looked her in the eyes, and smiled. She got out of her car and smiled back.

"Bad luck," she said kindly, understanding that I hadn't lost my way, but was retiring from the contest. "It can happen to anyone, and you were both doing such a lovely test. See you at the next show perhaps?"

"Hope so!" I replied as cheerily as I could, but feeling thoroughly depressed. Absolutely nothing had gone right for us today. I exited the arena and hopped off Crusader to find the cause of the loose stirrup: the leather had broken in two where it slid into the saddle and the stirrup iron had caught on the buckle. Loath as I was to admit it, this was a classic case of not cleaning my saddlery properly. The leather was dry and cracked and waiting to snap at the pressure points.

Why were these disasters happening to me?

Having reached my lowest point since the divorce, I was leading Crusader away, when I caught sight of Smidgy on horseback. She circled the arena, about to perform the same dressage test as me. I hadn't realised she was competing today in addition to reporting on the show. I know it was uncharitable of me, but I couldn't help wishing some frightful calamity would befall her. Not that it would do me much good, since I had no camera on me to record and send the enlarged results to 'Much Ado about Sporting'. But I could have gloated and felt better. The judge blew her horn for Smidgy to enter. I sighed hugely and set off for my trailer and a miserable trip home.

I'd led Crusader about three yards when I heard a scream of surprise behind me. I turned around, horrified to see Smidgy's horse buckling underneath her. Having had a pony do the same thing to me once, I recognised that her mount was sinking to the ground for a good roll, rider or no rider. And this, right before going into the dressage test! Luckily for her, Smidgy managed to jump off as her mare groveled round in the dirt, grunting in satisfaction as she rubbed filth into her round and sweaty body, well, the bits of it that weren't covered in saddle. The last thing we riders need is for our horses to roll completely over with the

saddle on their back: it breaks the tree, that very expensive frame on which the whole shebang is built. Smidgy's horse didn't care, she was having fun. Her owner wailed in disbelief and anger, shouting at 'Pride of Smythe' to "jolly well get up, now, this instant!"

Where's a camera when you need one? This exhibition was almost worth all the trouble I'd been through. If only I could blackmail her with the photographic evidence!

I needn't have worried: once again, the man-who-would-be-groom emerged, complete with a camera looking suspiciously like Smidgy's. How'd he get it? He was vigorously recording the naughty mare's antics shot by shot. Oh, how I wished I could get my paws on that film now! More so than at the beginning of the day.

Was it my imagination, or did the photographer turn and wink at me?

Smidgy finally got Pride of Smythe back on her feet. Not so proud now! Her chances at the dressage were shot: she'd exceeded the one minute time limit allowed between the starting "bell" and the competitor's entrance into the arena. In any case, the duo would not have presented a particularly smart appearance and Smidgy was too flustered to even try.

She spotted me and began berating her horse with pretty fruity language out of sheer mortification that I'd been present at her debacle. To save her horse more misery I sloped off, hoping she'd calm down if I weren't present. The self-appointed new chronicler of riding disasters caught up with me as Crusader and I made our way back to the trailer.

"Hello again," he said. "That was really bad luck back there. You ride very well, but—"

"Don't tell me, I need to check my tack more often, and look after it better, etc., etc., etc." I knew I was being ungracious, but didn't feel up to a lecture on stable management. I'd been through all that at Pony Club and knew the theory.

"I was only going to say that I don't think you take yourself seriously enough and it shows in your preparation for competitions."

Oh brilliant, a male chauvinist wanting to be my groom and my personal shrink! Was he laughing at me?

He held out the camera he'd been using. "This is Smidgy's. It's digital and I've deleted all the compromising photos of you. But I've left the good shots of you and the ones of her horse rolling. Plus she knows I saw her let your dog off his leash so he'd run into the middle of the hounds."

"What!" I cried. "So that's how he got loose!"

"Yup. I don't think she'll give you any more trouble."

He doffed his cap again and walked off, presumably to give Smidgy back her camera.

I was speechless. This man had been helping me all day and I'd been nothing but rude to him. There he was, walking off, and I hadn't even thanked him for deleting those photos and catching Smidgy out with my Dane.

And I still didn't know his name!

I couldn't run after him with Crusader in tow, but I resolved to find him after I'd put my horse away. Wandering back to the trailer, I thought about his analysis of my 'attitude'. He'd said in a perfectly nice way, if I was honest with myself. He meant to help me, not put me down. Maybe there was something in it: perhaps my husband running off with Alison had punctured my self-image in more areas than I realized. I needed to sit down with a large glass of wine tonight and mull it over properly. I only hoped that nothing more would go wrong while I was on the showground. Please, God, get me home without mishap!

Crusader was back in his transport and I'd collected my "special" rosette. Not wanting to run into Caroline Smigean-Smythe I did, however, want to thank my rescuer, so I set off to find him. I couldn't. The sun was setting in the late summer sky and I needed to get back. Maybe one of the regular competitors would be able to tell me at a later date who the man was. It would have to wait.

Usually the trip home took half an hour. But not tonight. As I bowled along the motorway I was waved at by several passing cars before I understood that something serious had happened. I brought my Range Rover to a halt and got out to check all around the car and trailer. Sure enough, I had a slow puncture on the trailer tire.

I panicked: I'd never changed a tire on the thing before and it was now dusk. I wondered whether I could drive the next twenty minutes home without destroying the wheel. But Crusader was heavy and it would surely buckle under his weight.

Back in the car, I wondered whom I could phone on my mobile. A car pulled up on the hard shoulder and I was scared it was a mugger or a horse hater ...

Looking in my side mirror I saw a familiar flat capped man walking towards me and got out of the Range Rover.

"How do you do it?!" I asked him.

He laughed. "Don't know, but it's a good thing I do, isn't it?"

"Could I at least know who you are before you help me again today?"

"Of course. I'm Randolph Geoffreys."

"Alison's ex?"

I knew her divorce had been bad and she was bitter about her husband leaving her. It appeared to have prompted a need in her to take someone else's. This had definite possibilities... Yet was it really a coincidence that he'd suddenly shown up in my vicinity?

Not caring to look a gift horse in the mouth, as it were, I held my hand out to

him: “I do need a groom. Are you still interested?”

“I’m interested in finding you a groom,” came the crushing answer. My face must have registered my disappointment. “You didn’t think I was applying for the job, did you?”

Well, yes I did. How else was I supposed to interpret his behaviour? Lamely, I responded: “But you’re so good with horses, that’s why I thought you— “

Randolph laughed gently. “Thanks for the compliment. But no, I run an agency which finds jobs for grooms and grooms for jobs. I’m just visiting friends in the area, but I’d be happy to help you.”

I smiled ruefully. The revenge would have been too sweet. Oh well, at least he got back at Smidgy for me.

“Could you find me an ugly groom who won’t run off with any future boy-friends of mine?”

“Gladly. How about discussing it over dinner tonight?”

THE END