Prologue

FAIRLAWNE

THE MYSTERIOUS young Frenchwoman in the sealskin coat arrived at Fairlawne on a misty November afternoon in 1961. She came in a black Ford Zephyr saloon that turned in through the lodge gates about half past three. Cock pheasants were scuttling around in the undergrowth beside the drive and there was a smell of wood smoke in the air where some estate workers were making a bonfire of brush and old leaves.

The car came to a halt on the gravel apron in front of the big house and a young chauffeur, smartly suited and wearing a peaked cap, got out and rang the bell. After a while the butler, Bradbrook, came to the door. The chauffeur explained that his passenger was Mademoiselle Rosemarie Laumaine from Paris. She had met Major Cazalet at the races the previous week and had expressed an interest in sending him a couple of horses to train. They had talked on the telephone and the Major had suggested that, if she was ever passing, she should drop in and look around the yard. Mademoiselle was on her way to Dover to take the ferry back to France and this had seemed like the perfect opportunity. The butler, who was not expecting visitors, explained that the Major

and Mrs Cazalet were not at home and not expected back from Newbury until 6 p.m. at the earliest. But someone in the stable yard – which was down the hill to the left, out of sight of the main house – might be able to help. The chauffeur nodded politely and Bradbrook watched as the car drove slowly down the hill between the box hedges and into the stable yard at the bottom.

In Cazalet's absence his head lad Jim Fairgrieve had been left in charge and his staff were already busy with the routine chore of evening stables, feeding the horses and cleaning out their stalls. The chauffeur approached the tall, redheaded Scotsman and went through his story once again. The head lad later admitted that he found the details puzzling. The Major was a martinet who ran his stable on military lines. He had made no mention of a possible new owner who might drop by. But when the lady in question got out of the car and walked towards him, smiling warmly, hand outstretched, Fairgrieve's doubts were swept away. Mademoiselle Laumaine was stunningly attractive. She had dark brown bouffant hair and dark eyes and she wore red lipstick and a silk scarf around her neck. She carried a pair of black gloves and a black leather handbag and beneath her fur coat Fairgrieve caught a glimpse of what looked like an expensive suit and elegantly stockinged legs. She apologised for disrupting Fairgrieve's work and offered him a cigarette from her silver cigarette box. The head lad, who would have loved one, said that Major Cazalet didn't approve of smoking in the yard. Mademoiselle, who spoke English well though with a pronounced French accent, put her cigarette box away and said how excited she was to be at the famous Fairlawne. She would so love to have a brief look around if she could as she wasn't sure when she would next be in England though she would love to come back when the Major was at home.

Fairgrieve knew that Cazalet's last runner at Newbury, Jaipur, owned by Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, had been due to contest the Halloween Novices Chase at 3 p.m. The Major might still be on the course in the weighing room or the royal box or he might already have left. But, with no mobile phones available in 1961, there was no way for Fairgrieve to check Mademoiselle's story and in the circumstances it would have been awkward bordering on impertinent to refuse her request. The Sixties' satire boom had just begun and *Beyond The Fringe* was playing to packed houses in London's West End. But horse racing was still run on hierarchical and deferential lines and a mere stable employee, even a head lad like Fairgrieve, knew his place.

Besides, Mademoiselle Laumaine was such a charming and enthusiastic guest that it was no effort to give her a brief tour. So Fairgrieve showed her around the Queen Anne style stable block with the gabled roof and the small pond with the fountain in the middle and the pump house beyond. Estate cottages stood around the edge of the stabling area and there was a lads' dormitory on the upper floor above the tack room. Fairgrieve escorted Mademoiselle down a line of boxes, horses' heads looking out over the dark wooden doors and Mademoiselle patted a few heads and stroked a few manes and gazed inside at the whitewashed interiors with the high ceilings. Her chauffeur strolled along behind her, making notes as he went. They saw some of Cazalet's best steeplechasers including the Queen Mother's pair Double Star and Laffy, a five-year-old French-bred gelding purchased that summer by the Polish Colonel Bobinski and about to embark on a career over fences. Mademoiselle Laumaine seemed particularly interested in the box numbers and which horse was where although Fairgrieve explained that they moved them around quite often. As the tour

continued, Fairgrieve noticed her effect on the lads who were also smiling and patting their charges and generally scurrying this way and that, working that little bit harder and more conspicuously than might usually be the case on a dull Wednesday afternoon.

After they'd seen the stables, Fairgrieve took Mademoiselle up the track that led to the parkland where they exercised the horses each morning. The Queen Mother frequently stood with Cazalet beneath those giant oak and horse chestnut trees – and once a shivering Noël Coward had stood there too – and watched her horses on the gallops. From the park there was a perfect view of the beautiful south-facing side of the house, of the cupola and bell tower and the glass-fronted conservatory and of the svelte green lawn where the Major sometimes played croquet with his royal patron. And behind the kitchen gardens they could see the deep woods of West Kent stretching away towards Ightham Mote and Knole.

Fairgrieve asked if Mademoiselle would like to go back up to the house and have a cup of tea before she left but his visitor regretfully declined, explaining that she'd already caused enough trouble and that she really ought to go. But she did say how much she looked forward to coming back to Fairlawne soon and meeting all the stable lads again and they agreed how much they all looked forward to seeing her again too.

The Ford Zephyr didn't go back up past the house but left by the service drive. Fairgrieve's last sight of Mademoiselle Laumaine was of her waving to him from the back seat of the car. The chauffeur turned left on to the A227 through the village of Shipbourne and within ten minutes they were on the outskirts of Tonbridge. The lights were on now in all the shops and schoolchildren were queuing for buses or trudging back across muddy rugger pitches

on their way to a boarding house tea. The quickest way to Dover would have been to take the A26 towards Maidstone and Ashford but, instead, the Zephyr turned right at the Star and Garter and took the main road north through Hildenborough and Sevenoaks. By the time the car had climbed River Hill the chauffeur and his passenger felt able to relax. The chauffeur had taken off his cap and she had lit them both a cigarette. Mademoiselle Laumaine unbuttoned her fur coat and stretched out comfortably in the back seat. She liked the role-playing and the dressing up and she felt a sense of physical, almost sexual, satisfaction about a job well done. Another stable visit. Another reconnaissance mission. She was the best spy in the business.

It was after 7 p.m. when Cazalet got back to Fairlawne. The Major, who always dressed for dinner, had stopped off in his office on his way to his bath when Jim Fairgrieve rang him from the stable yard and told him about the glamorous Mademoiselle. Cazalet exploded. He had met no such person as this Rosemarie Laumaine, not at Sandown or Kempton or anywhere else and he most certainly hadn't invited her to drop in to the stable whenever she was passing. But he had heard racecourse rumours about an extremely attractive young Frenchwoman who, as he now explained to a mortified Fairgrieve, was to be avoided at all costs.

By now the attractive young woman was safely ensconced in fifth-floor luxury in a penthouse flat in Stafford Court, overlooking Kensington High Street. The black Ford was locked away in a garage at the back of the building and the 'chauffeur' had hurried off to his bedsit in the seedier purlieus of Notting Hill. Mademoiselle Laumaine, whose real name was Micheline Emilienne Lugeon and who wasn't French but Swiss, was enjoying a celebratory drink with a deeply appreciative man who was old enough to be her father.

William John Roper – better known as Bill Roper or Mr Racing – was a bookmaker and professional gambler. In the summer of 1955 Micheline had come from Geneva to work as an au pair in Bill's marital home in North London. By 1961 Roper and Lugeon were lovers. They were also the central figures in one of the biggest doping and gambling conspiracies in the history of British racing.

Bill and Micheline didn't know it at the time but that seemingly successful visit to Fairlawne was to mark a turning point in their fortunes. Up until then almost all their bets had been winning ones. But within a month of the trip to the royal stable there would be a special Scotland Yard team on their trail. . . . and the police weren't the only ones interested in their activities.

As Roper sipped his Scotch and admired Micheline walking across the bedroom in her underwear, he was trying not to think about his wife and sons in Mill Hill. And he was trying even harder not to think about the spiralling costs of his life and how to meet them. The only way, it seemed, was to send his gang back out to a stable in the dead of night – he never went himself – where they would wake up a sleeping racehorse, twist its upper lip with a tourniquet or 'twitch' and force barbiturates down its throat. The following day, the same horse would start favourite for a race with a small number of runners and Bill and his bookmaking associates would lay it at several points over the odds and back the second or third favourite to win the race or combine them in a reverse forecast. It was a dirty but extremely profitable business and Bill Roper and Micheline Lugeon had reached a point where to go back would have been even more dangerous than to carry on.

This is their story.

1

A COLOURFUL BUT CUTTHROAT WORLD

AS FAR back as he could remember, Bill Roper had always wanted to be a bookmaker. Bill was a South London boy, born in Catford in 1905 and brought up in a Victorian two-up two-down, in one of a grid network of streets built to accommodate the families of bookkeepers and clerks commuting to the City.

Roper got his formal education at the LCC School on Brownhills Road, and he was an able pupil. Attentive, bright and with a particularly good grasp of English and mathematics. Not that boys like Bill were expected to stay on at school and sit their matriculation certificate. They were expected to go out to work and help support their family and that's what Roper did in 1920 at the age of 15. He was employed, initially as an office boy, by the South London property developer and punter Bernard Sunley, and by the early 1930s he had been promoted to the role of office manager. But the dry recording of property surveys, contracts and accounts was far from the limit of Bill Roper's interest in financial affairs.

In 1942 Roper volunteered for the RAF. The 37-year-old was too old to join a bomber crew. But being six feet tall, fit and strong, he

was deemed a suitable recruit for the Military Police and he served as a redcap corporal and sergeant at bases in Lincolnshire until he was honourably discharged in 1946. A fine war record maybe, but Bill did have weaknesses and it was generally agreed that they revolved around money and women. By the mid-1940s Roper had married one woman and then fallen in love with another. The spouse declined to give him a divorce but in 1947 his new paramour, Doris Lillian Curd, changed her name to Roper and proceeded to live very happily as his wife and the mother of his two sons, born in 1951 and 1952, even though the couple were never officially married. Supporting and satisfying two women and dividing his time between their different households didn't seem to be a problem for Bill who flitted between them as charming as could be and still had energy to spare for his other consuming passion.

From the summer of 1922, when the 17-year-old saw Steve Donoghue win the Derby on Captain Cuttle, Roper had been fascinated by the speculative world of horse racing. The Bernard Sunley offices closed every year on the first Wednesday in June allowing their staff to head to London Bridge for the race specials down to Epsom and Tattenham Corner, the carriages humming with wit and banter and the traditional high spirits of Londoners embarking on their great day out. Roper loved the noise and passion of the crowds on Epsom Downs, the hurdy-gurdy of the funfair and the unforgettable sight of thoroughbred horses racing over the uniquely undulating course. But what really intrigued him were the smart clothes and confident manners of the men who laid the bets and the thick wads of the folding stuff he saw changing hands between them. If that's what a bookmaker and professional gambler looked like, Bill wanted to be one.

He got a further taste of racecourse excitement at Brighton in August. There were no Derby winners on show. It was holiday fare for a holiday crowd but the London bookmakers were there and the biggest of them were staying at the Metropole and the Grand. Bill, celebrating a winner with oysters and splash, thought this could become a way of life. Being a streetwise boy, he may also have noticed the gangsters in the backgound like the Sabini brothers who wielded cutthroat razors and extorted money from some bookies in return for letting them bet. Not that Bill had any intention of becoming a racketeer's stooge. Not then, at least.

Roper was intelligent and ambitious with an inborn business instinct. If he had been growing up in New York instead of South London, the dynamic nature of American society might have permitted him to become a Wall Street banking tycoon, or a bootlegger, or both. If he had been a young man in London in 1987, the Big Bang might have transformed him into a budding Nick Leeson and striped jacketed trader on the floor of the Financial Futures Exchange. But in the Britain of the 1920s and '30s, class and economic barriers made it almost unthinkable for a Catford boy to work in the City in anything other than a clerical capacity. The quick-witted world of gambling and bookmaking, however – which in the view of one unsentimental old timer 'was fundamentally not about horses and dogs but about buying and selling money' – presented no such obstacles.

In post-war Britain, off-course cash betting was officially illegal (and had been since 1853) but punters with the means to do so could have telephone credit accounts with as many bookies as they wished. Some of them sent bets and cheques in the post or relayed their selections by telegram. But working-class punters who were not creditworthy, and couldn't afford the time or the money to

go racing, were still dependent on their local illegal street bookie. It was a business that was technically forbidden and yet widely tolerated and the police and judiciary generally adopted a benign, not to say comically two-faced, attitude to the booming trade. 'You was nicked by appointment,' says the former bookmaker's clerk Bobbie Edwards. 'The other 364 days of the year they just looked the other way.'

Bill Roper had done a bit of street bookmaking in Catford before the war. He carried on laying the odds in the RAF and then again in South London after he was demobbed. He had soon discovered that he preferred to be the man who sets the odds than the man who takes them. But what Bill really wanted was to branch out into the altogether more exotic world of the racecourse and before the end of the decade he got his chance. Bill had taught himself tic-tac – the ingenious language of hand signals and codes by which betting money used to be shunted around a racetrack – and in 1948 he was taken on as a tic-tac and 'outside man' by the diminutive Max Parker who owned one of the biggest credit bookmaking firms in the country. Maxie was an East Ender and his main office was in Whitechapel on the Commercial Road. It was from there that he kept in touch with his representatives on course, using the specially installed bookmaker's telephone service or 'blower' and they phoned back, relaying bets and information. Bill Roper rarely had to go to the office in person. His new workplace was Epsom, Ascot, Newmarket and Hurst Park and he loved every minute of it.

The popular impression of Britain in the late 1940s is of an exhausted, bombed-out and bankrupt country in the grip of austerity and shortages. But on the racecourses life wasn't like that at all. The late Geoffrey Hamlyn, a *Sporting Life* starting price reporter

for 56 years and one of the Turf's most cherishable observers, used to say that the 1940s and '50s were a golden age of horse racing and gambling. The tracks were awash with great bundles of black market money and, with no betting duty or levy or costly overheads to worry about, the bookmakers played for high stakes.

The public, longing for entertainment and distraction after six years of war, flocked to the big meetings in unprecedented numbers. An estimated crowd of 200,000 turned out at Aintree for the 1946 Grand National and at Chester in May 100,000 came to watch the Chester Cup. It was a similar story a month later when a teeming mass of humanity, many of them just glad to be alive, cheered home Airborne, the appropriately named 50-1 winner of Epsom's first post-war Derby.

Not everyone was happy. The new Labour government toyed with the idea of closing racing down for a while due to the disastrous state of the nation's economy and Nye Bevan, the fiercely socialist health minister, was in favour of a permanent shutdown. Fortunately for the Turf, Lord Rosebery was on hand to fight its corner. The sixth Earl, who had won every classic race and twice owned and bred the Derby winner, had served briefly in Churchill's outgoing cabinet that had allowed racing to continue even at the height of the hostilities. He was also an enthusiastic punter and he was incensed when he heard of Labour's plans. He went straight to see the Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, and demanded that the proposal be scrapped. Attlee complied although big races like the Derby were temporarily moved to a Saturday and Rosebery persuaded the editor of *The Sporting Life*, Ben Clements, not to publish detailed betting reports in the paper until 1950 as it was felt that racing's image would be damaged if the full scale of the massive wagering that was taking place could be read every day.

The dominant figure in the betting ring was William Hill who bet on the racecourse in person from 1941 to 1955 and regularly accepted four- and five-figure wagers. Max Parker was Hill's biggest rival and Bill Roper's new guvnor and his clan had a reputation as the craftiest bookmakers of them all. There were four brothers: Harry, the eldest, born in 1895 and sometimes referred to as Dick but more often as Snouty, Max, Jack and Isaac. Their parents were Russian Jewish émigrés who had settled in London in the late-nineteenth century and their family name was Stein.

In the 1920s and '30s, Snouty was a big deal in the street bookmaking fraternity and he had dozens of pitches in Whitechapel and Bethnal Green. He laid huge bets on the racecourse too and one of his biggest wins was on Royal Mail in the 1937 Grand National when he was said to have made nearly £100,000, the equivalent of £5million in modern money. But then Snouty, Maxie and their confreres were never short of readies. Norman Pegg, who for 35 years was 'Gimcrack', the racing correspondent of the *Daily Herald*, never forgot the sight of them playing cards in a first-class carriage on a train returning from Salisbury to Waterloo in May 1940. It was just before Dunkirk and the nation was facing the gravest peril but racing had continued all the same and Snouty Parker had made a killing backing the future Derby winner, Owen Tudor, first time out. 'They must have had hundreds of pounds worth of banknotes floating around on the table,' wrote Pegg. 'And every time you looked up, soldiers earning £1 a week had their noses glued to the windows of the compartment.'

Things went downhill for Snouty from that point on. In 1941 he was 'warned off' – or banned from all racecourse premises – for four years by the Jockey Club for allegedly paying a jockey for information. In 1945 he died of a heart attack just before

he was due to return. Max Parker had already taken over the business, keeping his brother's clients and the credit office on the Commercial Road, and it was Maxie that Bill Roper teamed up with three years later.

In the betting and racing culture that Bill was now a part of, information was the oxygen of the trade. The bookies gleaned intelligence from their customers who were often owners, trainers, jockeys – or their putters on – and stable lads as well as from the shrewder professional punters. Some stables were easy to penetrate but others guarded their secrets every bit as closely as the layers and cheated regularly with their runners until the day when the money was down. Not that either side complained unduly. There was no whining about 'transparency' or 'accountability' as there would be today. Geoffrey Hamlyn took the view that 'in matters of sin on the racecourse it was about a 50–50 split between the bookmakers on the one side and trainers and jockeys on the other'.[1]

Many of the top jockeys, although officially not allowed to bet, were regular and even compulsive gamblers. Mostly they did their best for their retained stable but sometimes they rode for a bookmaker or favoured their own money.

It was a colourful but cutthroat world and it made Bill Roper in its image. Max Parker shared Al Pacino's view as Michael Corleone in *The Godfather Part Two*, when he advises Frankie Pentangeli to 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer'; Maxie and Bill remained close to all the top gambling jockeys – providing them with cash, girls and hospitality – even when they suspected they'd stitched them up. Bill often organised private planes to take the

1 'We all knew they were at it,' recalls Charlie Maskey, a veteran associate of the Victor Chandler bookmaking firm, 'and they all knew we knew.'

jockeys to evening meetings in summer. The riders would be flown from course to course and then home again, all expenses paid by the Max Parker firm, and if they cared to chat about their prospects on the way, so be it. Bill and Max were equally close to the top gambling trainers and the whole circus of bookmakers, punters, owners, trainers, jockeys and racing correspondents would all congregate together whenever they went away from home for the big meetings.

The racing calendar in the 1940s and '50s had a rather different look to today and, outside of the classic races and Royal Ascot, was dominated by the big betting handicaps like the Lincoln and the Grand National which were known as the Spring Double. After hours it was all tremendously social and everyone – Bill Roper included – had the time of their lives. When they went up for the Lincoln in March they stayed at Woodhall Spa, for the St Leger they went to the Majestic in Harrogate, for Cheltenham they were at Droitwich Spa. Max Parker would take a suite and the trainers, jockeys and journalists would all be there too. They'd meet for drinks and dinner and then afterwards they'd go down to the billiard room and play chemin-de-fer for big money until the early hours.

'Racing was a wonderful life back then,' remembers Bobbie Edwards, 'if you treated it as fun, and for the first five or ten years after the war, bookmaking was a good way to make a living.'