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Opening extract from
Hazel

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CHAPTER I

*'Hey . . . Are you crazy or what? Come back!'
'What's she doing? What in the Devil's name is that
woman playing at?'*

'She must have taken leave of her senses . . . '

'Oh no . . . Oh, Cyril, I daren't watch . . . '

'It's heading straight for her!'

*'She's not budging. I can't believe she's . . . Oooof! Keep your
eyes closed, old thing. Lean on me, that's right, but whatever
you do DON'T LOOK! Ladies . . . all of you . . . Little girl, avert
your eyes.'*

Hazel Louise Mull-Dare, being very nearly thirteen years old, objected to anyone calling her a little girl. Under less shocking circumstances she would have fixed the man on her right—the Cyril one—with the evil eye. She might even have told him, in her iciest tones, not to be so rude. But it would be insensitive, she knew, to make an issue out of her relative grown-upness when someone had just been trampled by a horse. And trampled so badly, by the look of it, that she probably wasn't going to see the sun go down, never mind her own next birthday.

'Oh, Cyril! What's happening? Is it . . . ghastly?'

Hazel continued to stare at the woman lying out on the turf like a big, broken doll. It was ghastly, all right, and had

happened so *fast*. Too fast for her to make any sense of it until her pulse, and her thoughts, stopped racing.

Serves her right, was her eventual response followed, a bit later, by *poor thing*.

'She's not dead is she, Cyril?'

Hazel had never seen a dead body before, or anyone's blood but her own. It was . . . it was . . .

She raised herself up, on the tips of her new shoes, swaying with the effort to see.

The man on her left caught hold of her arm. Had the Cyril-person been so presumptuous Hazel would have stamped on his toes. Hard. But the man on her left was her father so it was all right.

'You're not going to faint, are you, pet?'

Hazel shook her head and settled back on her heels, only faintly ashamed of her desire to know precisely where the woman had been kicked, and if there were any bits of brain on her clothes.

Her own wits were recovering nicely—enough to recall, in some detail, precisely what had happened: she had nipped under the rail; a thin woman in a dark coat which had flapped as she strode out onto the course; then the horses had come—thundering round the curve one . . . two . . . three . . . And the woman in the coat could have got out of their way; could have ducked back under the rail, no harm done. But no. As calm as you like she had faced what was coming, one arm raised as if the thoroughbred galloping straight at her was a bus that would stop, or a donkey plodding wearily down a beach.

And in that tiny space of time—shorter than it would take to clear a throat, pick up a cup, or stroke a cat from

head to tail—Hazel had known for certain that this woman was in total command of what she was doing. That, for her, this was not a sudden act of madness but a moment of perfect glory.

Her own fault, then. Definitely her own stupid fault.

People behind began pushing and jostling, pressing Hazel's tummy up against the rail.

'Hey!' her father shouted back at them. 'Steady on.'

Then the crush eased as some of the people pushed all the way forward and ran, shouting, onto the course. None of them bothered to look right before they ran, or to listen out for the drumming of hooves. *Stupid twits*, Hazel thought. *Serve them right if a big old straggler came charging round that corner RIGHT NOW.*

'It may not be as awful as it looks, pet,' her father said. 'I think he's coming round.'

He was talking about the jockey, Hazel realized. The one whose horse had reared up and sent the woman flying with one brutal clobber of its hooves. The jockey had fallen, too, but more neatly than the woman, as if he had rehearsed it.

'You're right,' she heard the man called Cyril say. 'That's one lucky chappie out there. And that horse of his knew what to do: get up, avoid the bodies, and keep right on running. Could be it was lamed, though. You reckon they'll have to shoot it?'

Hazel's father said he didn't know. He squeezed Hazel's arm, in case the thought of a horse being shot was Too Much For Her Delicate Senses.

'Bad luck if they do,' said Cyril. 'Which one was it, by the way? I missed the colours in all the kerfuffle.'

Hazel's father said it had been the King's horse, Anmer, that had struck the woman, and thrown its rider to the ground. He sounded mournful, as if Anmer had been human, and a personal friend.

'Really?' Cyril whistled through his teeth. 'The *King's* horse. Bad luck . . . '

They were talking over Hazel's hat. It was a very pretty hat, with pink roses on the brim, but having it leaned over was making Hazel feel more like a garden hedge than a young lady.

She stood up on tiptoe again, partly to make herself less hedge-like, but mostly to keep up with what was going on.

People were swarming all over the course. Swarming and yelling and hiding the woman's body from view. Most of them looked, to Hazel, like ordinary spectators—from the lower classes, most of them, and with no clear idea at all of what to do for the best. Then two men appeared, carrying a stretcher. Just the one stretcher though, for just the one victim.

Where's hers? Hazel wondered, as the injured jockey got borne away.

The crowd around the woman had shifted, to let the stretcher-bearers through. They re-formed immediately, into a gaping huddle, but not before Hazel had noticed that the only people attending to the woman's injuries were policemen.

'Hello . . . what's happening now?' said one of the voices above her hat.

And there, no more than a couple of yards away, was a man going berserk. 'Are you satisfied?' he was bellowing, right into the face of a woman standing next to him. 'Are

you?’ And then he raised what looked like a truncheon and began striking the woman’s shoulders . . . her arms . . . her neck . . . the top of her head . . .

Hazel felt a thrill in her stomach which went away once she realized that the weapon being used was only a rolled-up newspaper. Such fury though! The man’s face was puce with it, and he was spitting for King and Country.

‘How far do you think this will get you, eh?’ he roared, bashing the woman with the day’s headlines again . . . and again . . . and again. ‘You and your lot? What possible good will it do your cause, you ignorant . . . misguided . . . *invert!*’

Cyril’s lady friend squeaked, just above Hazel’s ear. She had opened her eyes, finally, but was clutching her Cyril as if the whole world had gone barmy and she herself might be trampled on, hit, or called a nasty name any moment now.

Hazel waited, with growing interest, for someone to confront the furious man and make him stop. But nobody moved a muscle, unless it was to get a better view. The woman being attacked seemed almost resigned to it. Perhaps, Hazel thought, she was the man’s wife, although that didn’t really excuse him from lashing out at her in a public place, particularly when everyone watching had witnessed enough horror for one day. And what was the thing he had called her? She was sure she had heard it correctly, but it wasn’t a word she recognized. Not as an insult, anyway.

The woman raised her elbows, to protect her eyes.

And although being swiped with a rolled-up newspaper was nowhere near as dangerous as being kicked

by a fast-moving animal, it seemed to Hazel the more uncomfortable thing for people to have to watch—perhaps because it was lasting longer and because this man, unlike the King’s horse, could have controlled himself.

Suddenly, as suddenly as he had started, the man ran out of steam. ‘Go on,’ he spat, lowering the newspaper and jerking his thumb towards the nearest exit. ‘Clear off. You’re not wanted here.’

The woman’s hair was all messed up, whacked loose from its pins by a flurry of blows. Her face was chalky-white but oddly defiant as she scanned the faces of those closest to her in the crowd.

For a split second she looked straight at Hazel. And only then did she falter, her face flushing and her shoulders sagging as she admitted some private defeat and bent to pick up . . . what? Hazel couldn’t see. But whatever it was got bundled away under the woman’s coat before she began moving—scurrying—away through the crowd with her head down and pins poking like thorns through the disorder of her hair.

‘Good riddance,’ Hazel’s father muttered.

‘What?’

Hazel looked up so fast that her hat slid off her head, tightening the ribbon at her throat. It wasn’t like her father to be churlish, particularly towards women. It would have been more in his nature, surely, to have leapt to this one’s defence.

‘What do you mean, Daddy?’ she said. ‘Who is that woman? Do we know her?’

‘Never mind,’ her father replied, in a tone Hazel recognized as the one that Brooked No Argument. ‘And

put that hat on properly, pet. You don't want to catch the sun.'

The Cyril person and his lady friend were dithering over whether to get the next train back to London or wait for further announcements about the race.

'D'you think they'll write the whole thing off?' Cyril wondered. 'Out of respect?' It wasn't clear to Hazel whether he meant for the fallen horse, the injured jockey, or the trampled woman.

Hazel's father said he very much doubted it. He was looking glum, and so was Cyril, which Hazel took for a sure sign that the horses they'd backed had run about as fast and as well as clowns in baggy trousers.

'Come along, pet,' her father said. 'No point hanging around. Let's find the Old Girl and go home.'

By Old Girl he meant their motor car—his pride and joy. Most people, when he said this, assumed he was talking about his wife. Only Hazel understood that 'Old Girl', with its clear intimations of something homely and reliable, in no way described her mother.

She looked back at the course. The trampled woman had been taken away and there was nothing more to see.

The Cyril person tipped his hat as Hazel and her father took their leave. His lady friend was still all of a dither, but remembered her manners enough to smile and say: 'Goodbye, little child. I do *hope* you won't have bad dreams tonight.'

The look she got in return could have wilted a flower.

The Old Girl was hot to the touch and smelt of baking leather. For a while, as he followed the signs out of Epsom, Hazel's father was very quiet.

‘Daddy—was it the King’s horse you had your money on?’ Hazel asked him. ‘Did you change your mind, at the last minute?’ He was always doing that—getting a sudden hunch, just before the race began, and betting accordingly. Sometimes he told Hazel he’d done it and sometimes he didn’t. Sometimes he cheered the right horse on, and sometimes he yelled for the one he’d changed his mind about, depending which one was in the lead. It meant that Hazel was never quite sure if they were on a winning streak or not. Most of the time, she couldn’t help thinking, they weren’t.

‘Never mind,’ she said, when her question went unanswered. ‘Some you win, some you lose. It’s all even-stevens in the end.’

He smiled, then, but winced, too, as if her words (which were originally his) had hurt as well as cheered him.

Then: ‘Best we say nothing to mother,’ he said. ‘About what happened back there.’

Hazel was waving, majestically, at two small boys standing up ahead on a garden gate.

‘Why not?’ she wanted to know.

Her father parped the horn, to amuse the small boys as the Old Girl slid past in a cloud of peppery dust.

‘It might worry her,’ he said. ‘And then *you* wouldn’t be allowed to go gallivanting around the countryside with me any more. In fact, best say nothing at all about where we’ve been today. We’ll pretend we went to the zoo. Minty sweet?’

Hazel put the humbug in her mouth. She knew full well, and wanted to say, that reports of people getting trampled and attacked at the Epsom Derby would barely

register with her mother—although she would certainly be upset about the injured horse. But she wasn't supposed to talk while sucking a sweet, in case it fell down her gullet and choked her to death. And it would be bad manners, she knew, to crunch.

By the time the sweet was finished her father was humming the 'Bees-Wax Rag' and parping the horn to the beat (*dum dah, dum dah, dumitty dum de dum dah PARP! Dum PARP dah, dum PARP dah . . .*). The horn was meant to sound like a trumpet and Hazel was supposed to giggle. She was in no mood, though, to play that old game, and her father's own heart wasn't in it either, she could tell.

'You'll have to say,' she said. 'About the zoo.'

'I will,' he replied. 'Don't worry, pet. I know it's a lie, but it's only a little one, and she probably won't even ask.'

'I hope not,' Hazel fretted, for she hated lies, even little ones, and dreaded the thought of being put on the spot.

'That woman,' she said, changing the subject, 'the one the King's horse banged into. Do you think she's dead?'

Her father sighed. Then he took a hand off the Old Girl's wheel and patted Hazel's arm.

'Try not to think about it,' he told her. 'What's done is done.'

Hazel looked out of the window, at hedges and trees, and at the smaller roads, winding off and away—*there and gone, there and gone, there and gone*. The Old Girl was picking up speed now that they were through the little villages and onto the London road. If someone were to step out in front of *them* right now it would be a terrible thing. A

dreadful, messy thing. Would that person bounce off the bonnet, Hazel wondered, or go under the wheels and end up like pastry—rolled flat?

‘I believe,’ she said, ‘that she did it on purpose, that woman. I believe she *threw* herself to her doom.’

‘Nonsense!’

Alarmed by the harshness of her father’s tone, Hazel swivelled round to look at him. His profile was as stern as a Roman emperor’s and both his hands were clenched tightly round the steering wheel as if to stop it spinning like a firework.

‘Most likely,’ he added, in a more normal voice, ‘she thought it was safe to cross. An unfortunate accident, that’s all it was, pet. A tragic miscalculation. So no more gloomy supposings; and definitely not a word to your mother about where we’ve been. All right? That’s the ticket. Another mint?’

He went back to humming his dance tune, only less merrily and without parping the horn.

Hazel closed her eyes. The mint she hadn’t wanted rasped against the inside of her mouth as she bullied it with her tongue and resisted the urge to crunch. She was right about the trampled woman. She knew she was. Not about her being dead, necessarily, but about it having been deliberate. Wilful.

In her mind she saw, again, the kick and the fall. The woman had resembled an ungainly bird, flying through the air like that with her black coat billowing. A stoned crow. A smashed rook. A blackbird hit by a pea-shooter. Just like all of those, except for a sudden flash of colours—green, mauve, and white—beneath the dark coat.

It was odd, Hazel thought, that the woman had worn a heavy coat on such a beautiful summer's day. Perhaps she had been ill with influenza, and feeling shivery. Perhaps she had believed the afternoon would turn chilly. And yet . . . the other woman—the one who'd been bashed with a newspaper and called a . . . what was it again?—*she* had been wearing a coat too. A big winter coat, all buttoned up. And whatever it was she had retrieved from the ground had been concealed, deliberately, beneath it.

There is more to know, Hazel told herself, swallowing the sucked-small sweet. *Much more*. And as her father revved the Old Girl's engine, approaching the home straight, she determined to find out what.

Even if it did prove Too Much For Her Delicate Senses.