THE CHAMPION STORYTELLER

DICK FRANCIS

UNDER ORDERS

Dick Francis

UNDER ORDERS

PAN BOOKS

First published 2006 by Michael Joseph,
an imprint of Penguin Books, London

This edition published 2007 by Pan Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-330-44833-8

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

UNDER ORDERS

Dick Francis has written more than forty international bestsellers and is widely acclaimed as one of the world's finest thriller writers. His awards include the Crime Writers' Association's Cartier Diamond Dagger for his outstanding contribution to the crime genre, and an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Tufts University of Boston. In 1996 Dick Francis was made a Mystery Writers of America Grand Master for a lifetime's achievement and in 2000 he received a CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours list.

Also by Dick Francis

Fiction

Dead Cert Nerve For Kicks Odds Against
Flying Finish Blood Sport Forfeit Enquiry
Rat Race Bonecrack Smokescreen Slay-Ride
Knock Down High Stakes Longshot Decider
In the Frame Risk Trial Run Whip Hand
Reflex Twice Shy Banker The Danger Proof
Break In Bolt The Edge Straight Comeback
Driving Force Wild Horses Come to Grief
To the Hilt 10lb Penalty Second Wind Shattered
Field of Thirteen Under Orders

Dick Francis Omnibuses

One Longshot Straight High Stakes
Two Forfeit Risk Reflex
Three Slay-Ride Banker Proof
Four Enquiry Rat Race Smokescreen

Sid Halley Omnibus

Odds Against Whip Hand Come to Grief

Non-Fiction

Autobiography The Sport of Queens
Biography Lester: the Offical Biography

This book is dedicated to my late wife
Mary

and to the memory of
Dr Jara Moserova
my Czech language translator and friend for forty years
who died the day this book was finished.

My thanks to

Andrew Hewson, literary agent
Alan Stephenson, Roehampton Rehabilitation Centre
Professor Alex Markham, London Research Institute
Dr Rosemarie Hutchinson, DNA specialist
Jonathan Powell, racing journalist
Edward Gillespie, Cheltenham Racecourse
Rodney Pettinga, Raceform Interactive
Catrina McDonald, RGN, nurse

And especially to my son
Felix
for everything

CHAPTER 1

Sadly, death at the races is not uncommon.

However, three in a single afternoon was sufficiently unusual to raise more than an eyebrow. That only one of the deaths was of a horse was more than enough to bring the local constabulary hotfoot to the track.

Cheltenham Gold Cup day had dawned bright and sunny with a fine dusting of a March frost showing white between the grass. The forecast for the day was dreadful, with heavy rain due to drive in from the west, but as I stood in my ex-father-in-law's kitchen looking through the window at the westerly sky, there was no sign yet of the warm front that was promised.

'There you are, Sid,' said Charles, coming into the kitchen in his dressing gown over striped pyjamas, with soft blue velvet slippers on his feet. Rear Admiral Charles Rowland, Royal Navy (retired), my ex-father-in-law, my confidant, my mentor and, without doubt, my best friend.

I still introduced him to strangers as my father-in-law although it was now some ten years since his daughter, Jenny,

my wife, had seen the need to give me an ultimatum: give up my job or she would give me up. Like any man at the top of his profession, I had assumed she didn't really mean it and continued to work day in and day out. And so Jenny left with acrimony and spite.

The fact that a crippling injury put paid to my chosen profession just a few months later was one of those little ironies from which there is no escape. Our marriage had been irreparably damaged and there was no going back. Indeed, by then, neither of us had wanted to go back but it still took many years and many hurtful exchanges before we were both able to move on. In time, Jenny and I had divorced and she had remarried, to a title and some serious wealth. Nowadays, we are civil to each other and I have a real hope that an arm's-length affection may be the end game of our tempestuous relationship.

'Morning, Charles,' I said. 'It's a good one, too.'

'Bloody forecasters,' he replied, 'never have the slightest idea.' He leaned towards the window to get a better view of the weather vane on the garage roof. 'South-westerly,' he remarked. 'That front has still to arrive. Better take an umbrella with us.'

I didn't doubt that he was right. A life at sea had given him the uncanny ability to predict the future simply by sticking a wet finger into the air. However, on this occasion, I think it may have been more due to his listening to the radio in his bedroom. His years afloat had also left him with a preference for all-male company, there being no female personnel on ships in his day, and a slow but determined approach to a problem. As he had often told me, it takes many miles to turn round an aircraft carrier and it is better to be sure in which direction you need to go before you start zigzagging all over the place and showing everyone what a blithering idiot you are.

We went to the races in his Mercedes, with raincoats and umbrellas stacked on the back seat. As we drove west from his home in the Oxfordshire village of Aynsford across the Cotswold Hills towards Cheltenham, the sun began to hide behind high cirrus clouds. It had disappeared altogether by the time we dropped down from Cleeve Hill to the racecourse and there were spots of rain on the windscreen as we parked but the racing festival at Cheltenham is one of the world's great sporting occasions and a little rain couldn't dampen our spirits.

I had ridden so often round this course that I felt I knew each blade of grass as an old friend. In my dreams I still rode here, surging down the hill towards the home straight, kicking hard into the downhill fence when others would take a hold to steady themselves at this notorious obstacle. Here, many a partnership would come crashing to the turf if not foot perfect, but winning was the important thing and, while taking a hold might have been safer, kicking your horse hard could gain you lengths over the fence, lengths the opposition may not be able to regain up the hill to the finish line.

It had been a racing fall that had ended my riding career. It should have been easy. My young mount, stumbling while landing over the second fence in a novice chase, had failed to untangle its legs from underneath his neck and went down slowly to our right. I could have almost stepped off but chose to move with the falling animal and roll away from his flailing hooves. It was just unfortunate that a following horse, having nowhere else to go, had landed with all its weight on the outstretched palm of my left hand. But it was more criminal than unfortunate that the horse had been wearing an old racing shoe, sharpened by use into a jagged knife-edge, which had sliced through muscle, sinew, bone and tendon, leaving my hand useless and my life in ruins.

But I shouldn't complain. I had been Champion Jockey for four consecutive years having won more jump races than anyone else, and would probably, by now, have had to retire anyway. At thirty-eight, I was well past the age at which even I thought it would be considered sensible to inflict the continuous battering on a human body.

'Sid,' Charles said, snapping me back to reality, 'remember, I'm the guest of Lord Enstone today and he asked me whether you'd be coming up to his box for a drink later.'

'Maybe,' I said, still half-thinking about what might have been.

'He seemed quite insistent that you should.'

Charles was pressing the point and I knew him well enough to know that this was his way of saying that it was important to him.

'I'll be there.'

If it were important to Charles, I would indeed be there. I owed him a lot and paybacks such as this were cheap. At least, that is what I thought at the time.

We joined the throng pouring into the racecourse from the car parks.

'Hello, Mr Halley,' said the gateman. 'What do you fancy for the big race?'

'Hello, Tom,' I replied, reading the name on his badge. 'Oven Cleaner must have a good chance, especially if we get much more of this rain. But don't quote me.'

He waved me through with a laugh and without properly checking my badge. Ex-jockeys were a thorn for most racecourses. Did they get free entry or not? And for how long after they'd retired? Did it depend on how good they had been? Why wouldn't they go away and stop being an embarrassment,

always carrying on about how much better it had been when they were riding and that the jumps were getting too easy and hardly worthy of the name.

If Tom had studied my badge more closely, he would have seen that, like me, it was getting a bit old and worn. I had simply not returned my jockey's metal badge when forced to retire and I had been using it ever since. No one seemed to mind.

Charles disappeared with a wave to make his way to the private luncheon boxes high in the grandstand while I walked unchallenged to the terrace in front of the weighing room next to the parade ring.

'Sid Halley!' I turned with a smile. 'How's the sleuthing business?'

Bill Burton, ex-jockey and now a mid-rank racehorse trainer whose waistline was getting bigger rather more quickly than his bank balance.

'Fine, Bill.' We shook hands warmly. 'Keeping me in mischief.'

'Good, as long as you keep your nose out of my business.' He said it with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

We had ridden against each other regularly over many seasons and both of us knew that he had never been totally averse to a little extra cash for ensuring that his horse didn't get to the line first. He would adamantly argue that he would only 'stop' those who had no chance anyway, what crime was there in that? I could read in his face, I thought, that he had probably not changed his ways in moving from the saddle to the saddling box.

Shame, I thought. Bill was not a real villain but rumours were beginning to circulate that he was not fully honest either. As

always, it was much easier to get such a reputation than to lose it. Bill couldn't see that he was never going to be the leading trainer as he had hoped, not because he didn't have the ability but because he would not be sent the best horses by the most knowledgeable of owners.

'Do you have any runners today?' I asked.

'Candlestick in the first and Leaded Light in the fifth. But I wouldn't risk your shirt on either of them.'

I wasn't sure whether he was warning me that they might not be trying their best. My doubts saddened me. I liked Bill a lot. We had been good friends and racing adversaries for many years.

He seemed to sense that I was looking deeper into his eyes than was prudent and briskly turned his head away.

'Sorry, Sid,' he said in my ear as he pushed past into the weighing room, 'got to go and find my jockey.'

I stood watching him disappear through the door and then looked up in the paper who his jockey was. Huw Walker. One of the sport's popular journeymen. He'd never yet made it to number one but had been consistently in the top ten over the past eight or nine years with numerous rides and plenty of winners. Son of a Welsh farmer with, it was said, a fondness for fast women and fast cars in that order. I hadn't heard that he was ever suspected of 'pulling' – horses, that is.

In one of those strange almost supernatural moments, I looked up to find Huw Walker coming towards me.

'Hello, Huw,' I said.

'Hi, Sid. Did you get my message?' He looked far from his usual cheery self.

'No,' I replied. 'Where did you leave it?'

'On your answering machine. Last night.'

'Which number?'

'A London number.' He was clearly anxious.

'Sorry. I'm staying with my father-in-law in Oxfordshire for the Festival.'

'It doesn't matter. I can't talk here. I'll call you again later.'

'Use my mobile,' I said, and gave him the number.

He then rushed off, disappearing into the weighing room.

Even though it was still well over an hour to the first race, it was beginning to be rather crowded on the weighing room terrace, not least because everyone was getting close to the building to protect themselves from the rain that had begun to fall more intensely.

There was the usual mix of officialdom and Press, bloodstock agents and the media, trainers and their jockeys, both present and past. Here the gossip of the week was swapped and dirty jokes were traded like currency. Juicy rumours spread like Asian flu: who was sleeping with whom, and who had been caught doing so by a spouse. Divorce was rampant in the racing business.

I wandered among the throng with my ears open, catching up on events in racingland.

'Such a shame about that Sandcastle colt,' said someone in a group over my left shoulder. 'Didn't you hear, bought for half a million at Newmarket Sales last October as a yearling, put his foot in a rabbit hole yesterday morning and broke his hock so badly he had to be put down.'

I moved on.

'Useless jockey, flogged my horse half to death just to get a third place.' A large duffel-coated trainer, Andrew Woodward,

was in full flow in front of a small group. 'Damn idiot got himself banned for four days. I'll give him excessive use of the whip on *his* bloody arse if he does that again.'

His fan club chuckled appreciatively but I believed him. Having once found his teenage daughter canoodling with an apprentice jockey in the feed store, he had held the hapless young man down over a hay bale and thrashed his bare buttocks raw with a riding whip. Some accounts say his daughter got the same treatment. It had cost Woodward a conviction for assault but it had won him respect.

He was a very good trainer but he had a well-deserved reputation as a hater of all jockeys. Some said that it was simple jealousy; he had always been too heavy to be a jockey himself. I had ridden for him a few times and more than once had received the lash of his tongue when results did not pan out as expected. He was not on my Christmas card list.

I drifted over nearer to the steps down to the parade ring where I had spotted someone that I *did* want to talk to.

'Sid, my old mucker!' Paddy O'Fitch was a fellow ex-jockey, shorter than I by an inch or two but a walking encyclopaedia on racing, especially steeplechasing. He spoke with a coarse Belfast accent and revelled in all things Irish, but the truth was that he had been born in Liverpool and christened Harold after the prime minister of the day. The surname on his passport was just Fitch. He had added the O' while at school. He had apparently never forgiven his parents for emigrating across the Irish Sea to England just two weeks before his birth.

'Hello, Paddy,' I said, smiling.

We shook hands, the camaraderie between us as ex-jocks being far greater than that between us when we were competing day by day.

After retiring from the saddle six years before, Paddy had turned his knowledge into a business. He wrote brief but wonderfully entertaining histories of racecourses and races, of racing characters and of great horses, and then sold them as slim booklets in racecourse car parks around the country. The booklets built up into an extensive history of the sport and soon were selling so fast that Paddy had employed staff to do the selling whilst he busied himself with the writing.

He had for years been the keeper of his own unofficial racing archive when, with due reverence from the Jockey Club, the post had been made official and he had been invited to coordinate all the material and documents held in various racing museums around the country. But it was the histories that were his fortune. The slim, cheaply produced black-and-white booklets had given way to glossy colour, a new edition every month. Leather-bound holders for the booklets were a must-buy present for every racing enthusiast each December.

Paddy was a mine of both useful and useless information and, since I had taken up investigating as a career, I had frequently referred to him for some fact or other. In racing terms, Paddy could out-Google Google. He was the best search engine around.

'What chance do you think Candlestick has in the first?' I asked him casually.

'Could win. It depends . . .' He stopped.

'On what?' I prompted.

'Whether it's trying.' He paused. 'Why do you ask?'

'I thought I might have a bet.' I tried to make it sound normal.

'Bejesus! Now did ya hear dat!' He addressed no one in particular. 'Sid Halley's having a bet. And pigs may fly, I s'pose.' He laughed. 'Now if you told me dat you were having a third eye up ya arse, I might more believe ya.'

'OK, Paddy, enough,' I said.

'Now don't be telling ya Uncle Paddy lies, Sid. Now, why *did* ya ask about Candlestick?'

'What makes you think it may not be trying?' I asked instead of answering.

'I didn't say dat,' he said. 'I merely said dat it could win *if* it was trying.'

'But you must think it may not be, else why say it?'

'Rumours, rumours, that's all,' he said. 'The grapevine says dat Burton's horses are not always doing their best.'

It was at this point that the first of the day's deaths occurred.

At Cheltenham, one end of the parade ring doubles as the winner's unsaddling enclosure and there is a natural amphitheatre created by a rise in the ground. A semicircular concrete-and-brick stepped viewing area rises up from the rail around the parade ring. Later in the day, this area would be packed with a cheering crowd as the winner of the Gold Cup returned triumphantly to be unsaddled. This early on a wet afternoon a few hardy folk stood under umbrellas watching the comings and goings at the weighing room and waiting for the sports to begin.

'Help! Help! Somebody help me!'

A middle-aged woman, wearing an opened waxed jacket over a green tweed suit, was screaming from the bottom of the stepped area.

All eyes swivelled in her direction.

She continued to scream. 'For God's sake, someone help me!'

Paddy and I ran over to the rail on the inside of the parade ring from where we immediately could see that it was not the woman but the man she was with who was in trouble. He had collapsed and was lying at her feet up against the four-foot high