

THE EDGE

DICK
FRANCIS



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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THE EDGE

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The villains in this story are imaginary. The good guys may recognize their own virtues!

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THE GREAT TRANSCONTINENTAL MYSTERY - RACE TRAIN

I was following Derry Welfram at a prudent fifty paces when he stumbled, fell face down on the tarmac and lay still. I stopped, watching, as nearer hands stretched to help him up, and saw the doubt, the apprehension, the shock flower in the opening mouths of the faces around him. The word that formed in consequence in my own brain was violent, of four letters and unexpressed.

Derry Welfram lay face down, unmoving, while the fourteen runners for the three-thirty race. York stalked closely past him, the damp jockeys looking down and back with muted curiosity, minds on the business ahead, bodies shivering in the cold near-drizzle of early October. The man was drunk. One could read their minds. Midafternoon falling-down drunks were hardly unknown on racecourse. It was a miserable, uncomfortable afternoon. Good luck to him, the drunk.

I retreated a few unobtrusive steps and went on watching. Some of the group who had been nearest to Welfram when he fell were edging away, looking at the departing horses, wanting to leave, to see the race. A few shuffled from foot to foot, caught between a wish to desert and shame at doing so, and one, more civic-minded, scuttled off for help.

I drifted over to the open door of the paddock bar, from where several customers looked out on the scene. Inside, the place was full of dryish people watching life on closed circuit television, life second hand.

One of the group in the doorway said to me, "What's the matter with him?"

"I've no idea." I shrugged. "Drunk, I dare say."

I stood there quietly, part of the scenery, not pushing through into the bar but standing just outside the door under the eaves of the overhanging roof, trying not to let the occasional drips from above fall down my neck.

The civic-minded man came back at a run, followed by a heavy man in a St. John's Ambulance uniform. People had by now half-turned Welfram and loosened his tie, but seemed to step back gladly at the approach of officialdom. The St. John's man rolled Welfram fully onto his back and spoke decisively into a walkie-talkie. Then he bent Welfram's head backward and tried mouth to mouth resuscitation.

I couldn't think of any circumstance that would have persuaded me to put my mouth on Welfram's. Perhaps it was easier between absolute strangers. Not even to save his life, I thought, though I'd have preferred him alive.

Another man arrived in a hurry, a thin raincoated man I knew by sight to be the racecourse doctor. He tapped the paramedic on the shoulder, telling him to discontinue, and himself laid first his fingers against Welfram's neck, then his stethoscope against the chest inside the opened shirt. After a long listening pause, perhaps as much as half a minute, he straightened and spoke to the paramedic meanwhile stuffing the stethoscope into his raincoat pocket. Then he departed, again at a hurry because the race was about to begin and the racecourse doctor, during each running, had to be out of the course to succor the jockeys.

The paramedic held a further conversation with his walkie-talkie but tried no more to blow air into unresponsive lungs, and presently some colleagues of his arrived with a stretcher and covering blanket, and loaded up and carried away, decently hidden, the silver hair, the bulging navy-blue suit and the stilled heart of a heartless man.

The group that had stood near him broke up with relief, two or three of them heading straight for the bar.

The man who had earlier asked me, asked the newcomers the same question. "What's the matter with him?"

"He's dead," one of them said briefly and unnecessarily. "God, I need a drink." He pushed his way into the bar, with the doorway spectators, me among them, following him inside to listen. "He just fell down and died." He shook his head, "Strewth, it makes you think." He tried to catch the barman's eye. "You could hear his breath rattling ... then it just stopped ... he was dead before the St. John's man got there ... Barman, a double gin ... make it a treble ..."

"Was there any blood?" I asked.

"Blood?" He half-looked in my direction, "Course not. You don't get blood with heart attacks. Barman, a gin and tonic ... not much tonic ... get a move on, will you?"

"Who was he?" someone said.

"Search me. Just some poor mug."

On the television the race began, and everyone, including myself, swiveled round to watch, though I couldn't have said afterward what had won. With Derry Welfram dead my immediate job was going to be much more difficult, if not temporarily impossible. The three-thirty in those terms was irrelevant.

I left the bar in the general break-up after the race and wandered inconclusively about for a while, looking for other things that were not as they should be and, as on many days, not seeing anything. I particularly looked for anyone who might be looking for Derry Welfram, hanging around for that purpose outside the ambulance-room door, but no one arrived to inquire. An announcement came over the loudspeakers presently asking for anyone who had accompanied a Mr. D. Welfram to the races to report to the clerk of the course's office, so I hung about outside there for a while also, but no one accepted the invitation.

Welfram the corpse left the racecourse in an ambulance en route to the morgue and after a while I drove away from York in my unremarkable Audi, and punctually at five o'clock telephoned on my car phone to John Millington, my immediate boss, as required.

"What do you mean, he's dead?" he demanded. "He can't be."

"His heart stopped," I said.

"Did someone kill him?"

Neither of us would have been surprised if someone had, but I said, "No, there wasn't any sign of it. I'd been following him for ages. I didn't see anyone bump into him, or anything like that. And there was apparently no blood. Nothing suspicious. He just died."

"*Shit.*" His angry tone made it sound as if it were probably my fault. John Millington, retired policeman (chief inspector), currently deputy head of the Jockey Club Security Service, had never seemed to come to terms with my covert and indeterminate appointment to his department, even though in the three years I'd been working for him we'd seen a good few villains run off the racecourse.

"The boy's a blasted amateur," he'd protested when I was presented to him as a fact, not suggestion. "The whole thing's ridiculous."

He no longer said it was ridiculous but we had never become close friends.

"Did anyone make waves? Come asking for him?" he demanded.

"No, no one."

"Are you sure?" He cast doubt as always on my ability.

"Yes, positive." I told him of my vigils outside the various doors.

“Who did he meet, then? Before he snuffed it?”

“I don’t think he met anybody, unless it was very early in the day, before I spotted him. He wasn’t searching for anyone, anyway. He made a couple of bets on the Tote, drank a couple of beers, looked at the horses and watched the races. He wasn’t busy today.”

Millington let loose the four-letter word I’d stifled. “And we’re back where we started,” he said furiously.

“Mm,” I agreed.

“Call me Monday morning,” Millington said, and I said, “Right,” and put the phone down. Tonight was Saturday. Sunday was my regular day off, and Monday too, except in times of trouble. I could see my Monday vanishing fast.

Millington, in common with the whole Security Service and the Stewards of the Jockey Club, was still smarting from the collapse in court of their one great chance of seeing behind bars arguably the worst operator still lurking in the undergrowth of racing. Julius Apollo Filmer had been accused of conspiring to murder a stable lad who had been unwise enough to say loudly and drunkenly in a Newmarket pub that he knew things about Mr. effing Filmer that would get the said arsehole chucked out of racing quicker than Shergar won the Derby.

The pathetic stable lad turned up in a ditch two days later with his neck broken, and the police (Millington assisting) put together a watertight-looking conspiracy case, establishing Julius Filmer as paymaster and planner of the crime. Then, on the day of his trial, odd things happened to the four prosecution witnesses. One had a nervous breakdown and was admitted in hysteria to a mental hospital, one disappeared altogether and was later seen in Spain, and two became mysteriously unclear about facts that had been razor-sharp in their memories earlier. The defense brought to the witness box a nice young man who swore on oath that Mr. Filmer had been nowhere near the Newmarket hotel where the conspiracy was alleged to have been hatched but had instead been discussing business with him all night in a motel (bill produced) three hundred miles away. The jury was not allowed to know that the beautifully mannered, well-dressed, blow-dried, quietly spoken youth was already serving time for confidence tricks and had arrived at court in a black maria.

Almost everyone else in the court—lawyers, police, the judge himself—knew that the nice young man had been out on bail on the night in question, and that even though the actual murderer was still unknown, Filmer had beyond doubt arranged the stable lad’s killing.

Julius Apollo Filmer smirked with satisfaction at the “not guilty” verdict and clasped his lawyer in a bear hug. Justice had been mocked. The stable lad’s parents wept bitter tears over his grave and the Jockey Club ground its collective teeth. Millington swore to get Filmer somehow, anyhow, in the future, and had made it into a personal vendetta, the pursuit of this one villain filling his mind to the exclusion of nearly everything else.

He had spent a great deal of time in the Newmarket pubs going over the ground the regular police had already covered, trying to find out exactly what Paul Shacklebury, the dead stable lad, had known to the detriment of Filmer. No one knew—or no one was saying. And who could blame anyone for not risking a quick trip to the ditch?

Millington had had more luck with the hysterical witness, now back home but still suffering fits and the shivers. She, the witness, was a chambermaid in the hotel where Filmer had plotted. She had heard and had originally been prepared to swear she heard Filmer say to an unidentified man, “If he’s dead he’s worth five grand to you and five to the hatchet, so go and fix it.”

She had been hanging fresh towels in the bathroom when the two men came in from the corridor talking. Filmer had been abrupt with her and bundled her out and she hadn’t looked at the other man.

She remembered the words clearly but hadn't of course seen their significance until later. It was because of the word "hatchet" that she remembered particularly.

A month after the trial Millington got from her a half-admission that she'd been threatened not to give evidence. Who had threatened her? A man she didn't know. But she would deny it. She would deny everything, she would have another collapse. The man had threatened to harm her sixteen-year-old daughter. Harm ... he'd spelled out all the dreadful program lying ahead.

Millington, who could lay on the syrup if it pleased him, had persuaded her with many a honeyed promise (that he wouldn't necessarily keep) to come for several days to the races, and there, from the safety of various strategically placed security offices, he'd invited her to look out of the window. She would be in shadow, seated, comfortable, invisible, and he would point out a few people to her. She was nervous and came in a wig and dark glasses. Millington got her to remove the glasses. She sat in an upright armchair and twisted her head to look over her shoulder at me, where I stood quietly behind her.

"Never mind about him," Millington said. "He's part of the scenery."

All the world went past those windows on racing afternoons, which was why, of course, the windows were where they were. Over three long sessions during a single week on three different racecourses Millington pointed out to her almost every known associate and friend of Filmer's, but she shook her head to them all. At the fourth attempt, the following week, Filmer himself strolled past, and I thought we'd have a repeat of the hysterics: but though our chambermaid wobbled and we begged for repeated assurances he would never know she had seen him, she stayed at her post. And she astonished us, shortly after, by pointing toward a group of passing people we'd never before linked with Filmer.

"That's him," she said, gasping. "Oh, my God, that's him. I'd know him anywhere."

"Which one?" Millington said urgently.

"In the navy with the gray sort of hair. Oh my God, don't let him know ..." Her voice rose with panic.

I could hear the beginnings of Millington's reassurances as I fairly sprinted out of the office and through to the open air, slowing there at once to the much slower speed of the crowd making its way from paddock to stands for the next race. The navy suit with the silvery hair above it was in no hurry going along with the press. I followed him discreetly for the rest of the afternoon, and only once did he touch base with Filmer, and then as if accidentally, as between strangers.

The exchange looked as if navy-suit asked Filmer the time. Filmer looked at his watch and spoke. Navy-suit nodded and walked on. Navy-suit was Filmer's man, all right, but was never to be seen to be that in public: just like me and Millington.

I followed navy-suit from the racecourse in the going-home traffic and telephoned from my car Millington.

"He's driving a Jaguar," I said, "license number A576 FDD. He spoke to Filmer. He's our man."

"Right."

"How's the lady?" I asked.

"Who? Oh, her. I had to send Harrison all the way back to Newmarket with her. She was half off her rocker again. Have you still got our man in sight?"

"yelp."

"I'll get back to you."

Harrison was one of Millington's regular troops, an ex-policeman, heavy, avuncular, near to pensioned retirement. I'd never spoken to him, but I knew him well by sight, as I knew all the other

It had taken me quite a while to get used to belonging to a body of men who didn't know I was there rather as if I were a ghost.

I was never noticeable. I was twenty-nine, six foot tall, brown-haired, brown-eyed, 165 pounds weight with, as they say, no distinguishing features. I was always part of the moving race crowd looking at my race-card, wandering about, looking at horses, watching races, having a bet or two. It was easy because there were always a great many other people around doing exactly the same thing as I was. I was a grazing sheep in a flock. I changed my clothes and general appearance from day to day and never made acquaintances, and it was lonely quite often, but also fascinating.

I knew by sight all the jockeys and trainers and very many owners, because all one needed for them was eyes and race-cards, but also I knew a lot of their histories from long memory, as I'd spent much of my childhood and teens on racecourses, towed along by the elderly race-mad aunt who had brought me up. Through her knowledge and via her witty tongue I had become a veritable walking data bank and then, at eighteen, after her death, I'd gone world-wandering for seven years. When I returned I no longer looked like the unmatured youth I'd been, and the eyes of the people who had known me looked vaguely as a child slid over me without recognition.

I returned to England finally because at twenty-five I'd come into the inheritances from both my mother and my father, and my trustees were wanting instructions. I had been in touch with them from time to time, and they had dispatched funds to far-flung outposts fairly often, but when I walked into the hushed book-lined law office of the senior partner of Cornborough, Cross and George, old Clement Cornborough greeted me with a frown and stayed sitting down behind his desk.

"You're not ... er ..." he said, looking over my shoulder for the one he'd expected.

"Well, yes, I am. Tor Kelsey."

"Good Lord." He stood up slowly, leaning forward to extend a hand. "But you've changed. You ... er ..."

"Taller, heavier and older," I said, nodding. Also sun-tanned, at that moment, from a spell in Mexico.

"I'd ... er ... penciled in lunch," he said doubtfully.

"That would be fine," I said.

He took me to a similarly hushed restaurant full of other solicitors who nodded to him austerely. Over roast beef he told me that I would never have to work for a living (which I knew) and in the same breath asked what I was going to do with my life, a question I couldn't answer. I'd spent seven years learning how to live, which was different, but I'd had no formal training in anything. I felt claustrophobic in offices and I was not academic. I understood machines and was quick with my hands. I had no overpowering ambitions. I wasn't the entrepreneur my father had been, but nor would I squander the fortune he had left me.

"What have you been doing?" old Cornborough said, making conversation valiantly. "You've been to some interesting places, haven't you?"

Travelers' tales were pretty boring, I thought. It was always better to live it. "I mostly worked with horses," I said politely. "Australia, South America, United States, anywhere. Racehorses, polo ponies, a good deal in rodeos. Once in a circus."

"Good heavens."

"It's not easy now, though, and getting harder, to work one's passage. Too many countries won't allow it. And I won't go back to it. I've done enough. Grown out of it."

"So what next?"

"Don't know." I shrugged. "Look around. I'm not getting in touch with my mother's people, s

don't tell them I'm here."

"If you say so."

My mother had come from an impoverished hunting family who were scandalized when at twenty she married a sixty-five-year-old giant of a Yorkshireman with an empire in secondhand car auctions and no relatives in *Burke's Peerage*. They'd said it was because he showered her with horses, but it always sounded to me as if she'd been truly attracted. He at any rate was besotted with her, as his sister, my aunt, had often told me, and he'd seen no point in living after she was killed in a hunting accident, when I was two. He'd lasted three years and died of cancer, and because my mother's family hadn't wanted me, my aunt Viv Kelsey had taken me over and made my young life a delight.

To Aunt Viv, unmarried, I was the longed-for child she'd had no chance of bearing. She must have been sixty when she took me, though I never thought of her as old. She was always young inside; and I missed her dreadfully when she died.

Millington's voice said, "The car you are following ... are you still following it?"

"Still in sight."

"It's registered to a Derry Welfram. Ever heard of him?"

"No."

Millington still had connections in the police force and seemed to get useful computerized information effortlessly.

"His address is down as Parkway Mansions, Maida Vale, London," he said. "If you lose him, tell me there."

"Right."

Derry Welfram obligingly drove straight to Parkway Mansions and others of Millington's minions later made a positive identification. Millington tried a photograph of him on each of the witnesses with the unreliable memories and, as he described to me afterward, "They both shit themselves with fear and stuttered they'd never seen the man, never, never." But they'd been so effectively frightened by both of them, that Millington could get nothing out of them at all.

Millington told me to follow Derry Welfram if I saw him again at the races, to see who else he talked to, which I'd been doing for about a month on the day the navy suit fell on its buttons. Welfram had talked intensely to about ten people by then and proved he was comprehensively a bearer of bad news, leaving behind him a trail of shocked, shivering, hollow-eyed stares at unwelcome realities. And because I had an ingenious camera built into binoculars (and another that looked like a cigarette lighter) we had recognizable portraits of most of Welfram's shattered contacts, though so few that identifications for less than half. Millington's men were working on it.

Millington had come to the conclusion that Welfram was a frightener hired to shake out bad debts from a rent-a-thug in general, not solely Filmer's man. I had seen him speak to Filmer only once since the first occasion, which didn't mean he hadn't done so more often. There were usually race meetings on three or more different courses in England each day, and it was a toss-up, sometimes, to guess whether either of the quarries would go. Filmer, moreover, went racing less often than Welfram, two or three times a week at most. Filmer had shares in a great many horses and usually went where they ran, and I checked their destinations every morning in the racing press.

The problem with Filmer was not what he did, but catching him doing it. At first sight, second sight, third sight he did nothing wrong. He bought racehorses, put them in training, went to watch them run, enjoyed all the pleasures of an owner. It was only gradually, over the ten years since Filmer had appeared on the scene, that there had been eyebrows raised, frowns of disbelief, mouths pursed in puzzlement.

Filmer bought horses occasionally at auction through an agent or a trainer but chiefly acquired them by deals struck in private, a perfectly proper procedure. Any owner was always at liberty to sell his horses to anyone else. The surprising thing about some of Filmer's acquisitions was that no one would have expected the former owner to sell the horse at all.

I had been briefed about him by Millington during my first few weeks in the Service, but then only as someone to be generally aware of, not as a number-one priority.

"He leans on people," Millington said. "We're sure of it, but we don't know how. He's much too slow to do anything where we can see him. Don't think you'll catch him handing out bunches of money for information, nothing crude like that. Look for people who're nervous when he's near, right?"

"Right."

I had spotted a few of those. Both of the trainers who trained his horses treated him with caution and most of the jockeys who rode them shook his hand with their fingertips. The press, who knew what wouldn't answer questions, hardly bothered to ask them. A deferential decorative girlfriend jumped when he said jump, and the male companion frequently in attendance fairly scuttled. Yet there was nothing visibly boorish about his general manner at the races. He smiled at appropriate moments, nodded congratulations to other owners in the winners' enclosures and patted his horses when they pleased him.

He was in person forty-eight, heavy, about five foot ten in height. Millington said the weight was mostly muscle, as Filmer spent time three days a week raising a sweat in a gym. Above the muscle there was a well-shaped head, large flat ears and thick black hair flecked with gray. I hadn't been near enough to see the color of his eyes, but Millington had them down as greenish brown.

Rather to Millington's annoyance I refused to follow Filmer about much. For one thing, in the end he would have been certain to have spotted me, and for another it wasn't necessary. Filmer was a creature of habit, moving from car to lunch to bookmaker to grandstand to paddock at foreseeable intervals. At each track he had a favorite place to watch the races from, a favorite vantage point overlooking the parade ring and a favorite bar where he drank lager mostly and plied the girlfriends with vodka. He rented a private box at two racecourses and was on the waiting list at several more where his aim seemed to be seclusion rather than the lavish entertainment of friends.

He had been born on the Isle of Man, that tax-haven rock out of sight of England in the stormy Irish Sea, and had been brought up in a community stuffed with millionaires fleeing the fleecing taxes of the mainland. His father had been a wily fixer admired for fleecing the fled. Young Julius Apollo Filmer (his real name) had learned well and outstripped his father in rich pickings until he'd left home for wider shores; and that was the point, Millington said gloomily, at which they had lost him. Filmer had turned up on racecourses sixteen or so years later giving his occupation as "company director" and maintaining a total silence about his source of considerable income.

During the run up to the conspiracy trial the police had done their best to unravel his background further, but Julius Apollo knew a thing or two about offshore companies and had stayed comfortably unraveled. He still officially lived on the Isle of Man, though he was never there for long. During the Flat season he mostly divided his time between hotels in Newmarket and Paris, and in the winter he dropped entirely out of sight, as far as the Security Service was concerned. Steeplechasing, the winter sport, never drew him.

During my first summer with the Service he had bought, to everyone's surprise, one of the most promising two-year-olds in the country. Surprise, because the former owner, Ezra Gideon, was one of the natural aristocrats of racing, a much-respected elderly and extremely wealthy man who lived for his horses and delighted at their successes. No one had been able to persuade him to say why he had

parted with the best of his crop or for what price: he bore its subsequent high-flying autumn, in brilliant three-year-old season and its eventual multimillion-pound syndication for stud with an unvaryingly stony expression.

After Filmer's acquittal, Ezra Gideon had again sold him a two-year-old of great promise. The Jockey Club mandarins begged Gideon practically on their knees to tell them why. He said merely that it was a private arrangement: and since then he had not been seen on a racecourse.

On the day Derry Welfram died I drove homeward to London wondering yet again, as so many people had wondered so often, just what leverage Filmer had used on Gideon. Blackmailers had gone largely out of business since adultery and homosexuality had blown wide open, and one couldn't sell an old-fashioned upright Ezra Gideon as one of the newly fashionable brands of transgressor: an insider trader or an abuser of children. Yet without some overwhelming reason he would never have sold Filmer two such horses, denying himself what he most enjoyed in life.

Poor old man, I thought. Derry Welfram or someone like that had got to him, as to the witnesses, and to Paul Shacklebury dead in his ditch. Poor old man, too afraid of the consequences to let anyone help.

Before I reached home the telephone again purred in my car and I picked up the receiver to hear Millington's voice.

"The boss wants to see you," he said. "This evening at eight, usual place. Any problem?"

"No," I said. "I'll be there. Do you know ... er ... why?"

"I should think," Millington said, "because Ezra Gideon has shot himself."

The boss, Brigadier Valentine Catto, director of Security to the Jockey Club, was short, spare, and commanding officer from his polished toecaps to the thinning blond hair on his crown. He had all the organizational skills needed to rise high in the army, and he was intelligent and unhurried and listened attentively to what he was told.

His motto, often repeated, was “Thought before action: if you’ve got time.”

I met him first on a day when old Clement Cornborough asked me again to lunch to discuss in detail, as he said, the winding up of the trust he’d administered on my behalf for twenty years. A small celebration, he said. At his club.

His club turned out to be the Hobbs Sandwich Club, near the Oval cricket ground, a Victorian minimansion with a darkly opulent bar and club rooms, their oak-paneled walls decorated with endless pictures of gentlemen in small cricket caps, large white flannels and (quite often) side-whiskers.

The Hobbs Sandwich, he said, leading the way through stained-glass paneled doors, was named for two great Surrey cricketers from between the wars, Sir Jack Hobbs, one of the few cricketers ever knighted, and Andrew Sand-ham, who had scored 107 centuries in first-class cricket. Long before I was born, he said.

I hadn’t played cricket since distant days at school, nor liked it particularly even then: Clement Cornborough proved to be a lifelong fanatic.

He introduced me in the bar to an equal fanatic, his friend Val Catto, who then joined us for lunch. Not a word about my trust was spoken. The two of them talked cricket solidly for fifteen minutes and then the friend Catto began asking questions about my life. It dawned on me uneasily after a while that I was being interviewed, though I didn’t know for what; and I learned afterward that in conversation one day during the tea interval of a cricket match Catto had lamented to Cornborough that what he really needed was someone who knew the racing scene intimately, but whom the racing scene didn’t know in return. An eyes and ears man. A silent, unknown investigator. A fly on racing’s wall that no one would notice. Such a person, they had sighed together, was unlikely to be found. And that when a few weeks later I walked into Cornborough’s office (or at least by the time I left it) the lawyer had suffered a brainwave, which he passed on to his friend Val.

The Hobbs Sandwich lunch (of anything but sandwiches) had lasted through a good chunk of the afternoon, and by the end of it I had a job. I hadn’t taken a lot of persuading, as it seemed interesting to me from the start. A month’s trial on both sides, Brigadier Catto said, and mentioned a salary that had Cornborough smiling broadly.

“What’s so funny?” the Brigadier asked. “That’s normal. We pay most of our men that at the start.”

“I forgot to mention it. Tor here is ... um ...” He paused, perhaps wondering whether finishing the sentence came under the heading of breaking a client’s right to confidentiality, because after a short while he went on, “He’d better tell you himself.”

“I accept the salary,” I said.

“What have you not told me?” Catto asked, suddenly very much the boss, his eyes not exactly suspicious but unsmiling; and I saw that I was not binding myself to some slightly eccentric friend or cricket nut, but to the purposeful, powerful man who had commanded a brigade and was currently keeping horseracing honest. I was not going to be playing a game, he was meaning, and if I thought :

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