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## *The Guide*

Pat Reynolds

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# THE GUIDE

by

Pat Reynolds

For the first time, Paul stood by the Georgian window in Dr. Samuel's office. When his afternoon walks had taken him to the cast-iron palings, this window could be seen in its entirety, ground to guttering. It greenly reflected the bright lawns cloistered by the dark impaled woods.

When Paul reluctantly walked back up the hill to Lilac House, the floor which divided the window became apparent. The floor had been inserted into a fine Georgian ballroom to create offices for Drs. Samuel and Throne above Dr. Rivverton's office and the play-therapy room.

Now he was right up against the window, Paul could see down the gap, and hear the mumble of a patient below. Occasionally Dr. Rivverton would say something in her squeaky Liverpudlian accent. The patient would mumble on. Paul knew that he too was talking, in the very same "yes, he was feeling much the same" way as Dr. Rivverton's patient was mumbling, and, he assumed, Dr. Throne's patient was mumbling too.

Paul did not listen to Dr. Samuel, nor did he listen to himself. He was discovering that the perfect palladian proportions of this window were formed by panes of glass with hair-cracks and bubbles, held in by rusting frames.

The figure was blurred by a bubble, and he did not recognise Deirdre. But she saw him pressed up against the window, and waved her arms in huge clumsy arcs of greeting. Paul moved his head slightly so that he could see her clearly through unflawed glass. He smiled down a private recognition that she could not see.

Meeting her for the first time, on a drizzling November day, Paul had wondered how anyone could be so ugly. From her Trinidadian mother she had inherited a nose that was no bridge and all nostril, hair that was dull and black, and pre-disposed to frizz. From her Irish father came the pale skin that gave her a clownish appearance. She wore a dress that was both dirty and torn. The hem at

the back had come down. And she had stopped before him and said "Will you help me catch a goose?" That is how he had gone down to the stables.

When Lilac House had been a gentleman's residence, the stables had housed his horses, his coaches and gigs. When Lilac House became Hamtonshire County Sanatorium, the stables became the nucleus of a farm. The better patients; those only recently discovered to be coughing blood, and those nearly cured; were set to work there, providing the food for their dying fellows. Since 1934, Lilac House has been Hamtonshire's largest hospital for the mentally ill.

The farm was gradually abandoned, first the stock went, and it was run as a kitchen garden. One old man remained in charge, producing no more than he himself could eat. When this last gardener died in 1979, the post was advertised, but no-one wanted to work so near to Lilac House. Then Deirdre Poole took up residence in the tied cottage, and it was as if the stables were no longer part of Lilac House.

Deirdre found one of the ducks from the pond with it's wing broken. The man from the Royal Society For the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals thought a fox had probably had it. She was greatly relieved. She rarely saw any inmate of Lilac house, doctor, patient, nurse or auxiliary. All those she saw appeared worried, cold and tired. But to hurt one of God's creatures; could there be a mind that burnt so much it needed to be cooled in blood? When she timidly asked the RSPCA man if didn't he think so, he replied that he had only ever seen the cruelty of the sane.

The duck grew sleek under Deirdre's care. The RSPCA man came back to see the duck, and asked if she would care for another, which had lost half it's feathers in a pollution spillage. Deirdre smiled and held out her arms, with the huge pale palms willing to gather any creature into the sanctuary of the stables. The next creature was a Canada goose, brought straight from the reservoir, its beak and legs

ensnarled in fishing line, the hook biting deep into its throat.

The goose, both enraged and fearful, broke free of the RSPCA man's arm and half-flew away. It could only use one wing: the other was bound in line. Even so, it was soon disappearing up the path towards Lilac House. Deirdre chased after it and, turning a corner, almost fell over Paul. "Will you help me catch a goose?"

Paul waited for his treatment to finish, then he would go and see Deirdre. Afternoon came. Paul was loose again, and as usual, his steps took him down the hill to the stables. At the entrance to the stables, there is an arch with a stone that says 1819. Paul stood under the keystone which prevents the arch from falling, and waited for Deirdre to notice him. She was cleaning out a stable, and did not come out for some time. When she did, she went to the pump. She swung the handle down once, twice, and water gushed out into her bucket. When she picked the bucket up, her body twisted with left hand held far out to counter-balance the weight. She saw Paul out of the corner of her eye, and suddenly the left hand was not awkward, but a sweeping, beckoning motion which pulled Paul into the courtyard.

He was cleaning the stable for her, and putting sharp gold straw down and filling the hay-rack with hay. Paul put his nose into the thin dried grass, seeing for the first time the seeds and blades. As he pushed the hay into the rack, it released the smell of summer. Deirdre said Paul should rest now, and offered him a can of Red Stripe. They sat together on the mounting-block and shared the can. The beer too smelt like summer. It tasted a little bitter, and something like hay smells, the sharp taste of grain.

Deirdre was enjoying the sun. She was glad of Paul's help. "I've got a horse coming," she explained. The RSPCA man says he's been maltreated, some idiot bought him as a pet, and kept him in a garage, and only fed him when he felt like it. The RSPCA man says he doesn't even know if he'll live, but I said I'll give it a go." The sun shone, and the honey-coloured stone and magnified the light as if it was smiling. Indeed, as if the stable-yard was pleased at the return of the horse.

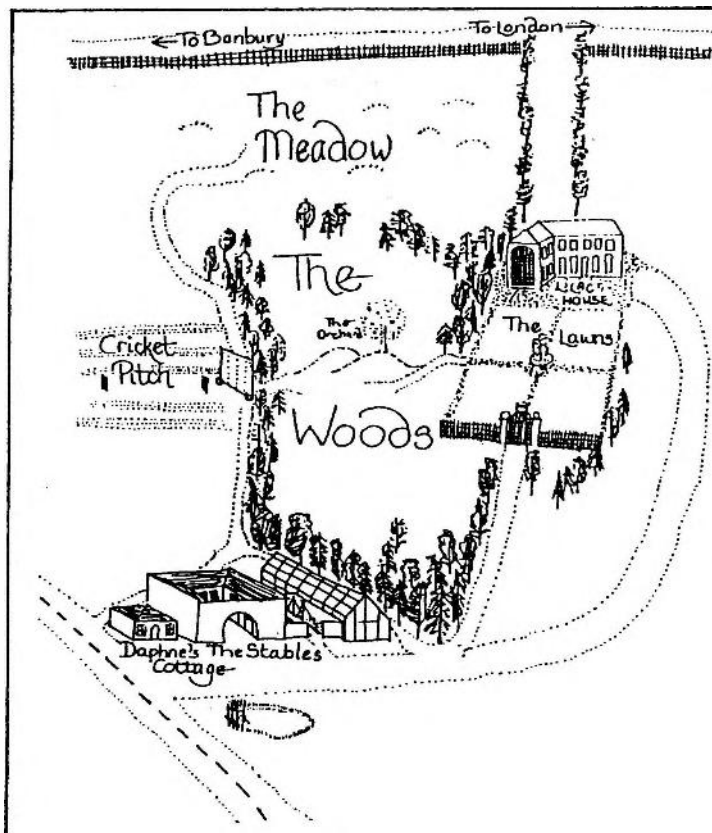
After a while Deirdre spoke

again, "It hasn't even got a name. The bastard who owned it didn't bother. What do you think we should do? Should we have a name to welcome him with, or find one to suit him when we've seen him? After all, he might not be a Dancer or Star or whatever. I do know that he's brown, so perhaps something brown, like Molasses, or Vandyke?"

Paul considered this, and said, "How about using the old name?" Deirdre looked puzzled. "What do you mean" she asked. "Come and see" he said, and they went into the stable. Paul showed her where some stable boy had carved into the beam above the manger 'Philosopher, county Point-to-Point champion 1857'. "Well I never!" said Deirdre, "I never knew that was there, shows how well I clean, doesn't it. You're right! That's the name: Philosopher."

Deirdre turned her head towards to the stable door. Her eyes were not focussed on the pump. "Wait here," she said, and plunged out into the sunshine once more. Hardly had her footsteps quietened than he heard them pounding back again. She came in, hugging a leather-bound ledger. Giving it to Paul, she said "It's the stud book. See if you can find out anything else about Philosopher, the old Philly I mean."

Paul took the book and walked back towards Lilac House. His feet





slowed as he came back to the Georgian window. At the point where the dividing floor became apparent he stopped. Then he veered away across the unown lawns until he came to the trees. He pushed his way through the first wilderness of dark cypresses until he came to the fruit trees. The model orchard was now all wild tangles of shrubs and stunted trees, briars and brambles.

There Paul sat with his back against an apple tree. It's branchlets were heavy with pink flowers. They reached down into stands of nettles and grass. Butterflies and bees tapestried the scene.

He slowly turned the pages. For a while, he struggled to find Philosopher's name, but he had forgotten the date on the beam and did not know where to look. The writing was thick and thin, black and white, and it tired him. After a while he gave it up and closed his eyes. The book, still open, slid from his knee.

He woke, but did not open his eyes. The branches gave and swang with green drippy rustles as someone came down the path. Paul made himself very still. He did not want to leave the apple tree and the sunny afternoon. He did not want to be found. As the person came closer, he realised with a start that it was a horse and rider. "Deirdre!" he said, and opened his eyes. But the horse was not brown, and the rider was not Deirdre. Already they were past him. The horse was white, no grey he corrected himself. And the rider was white, with red hair that tumbled like living water down her straight white back. She turned her head and smiled. A little shaky, Paul stood up, and as he did, she brought her heels down firmly against the mare's sides. The mare sprang forwards, over the brow of the hill, and they were gone.

Bemused, he followed the path she had ridden down. At every step he increased his speed, urgency growing in his mind. The sound of leaf against leaf, and the play of light and shade on the path lead him to suppose that if he ran fast enough he would catch sight of her again. But the path gave a final treacherous turn back on itself and opened onto the cricket pitch.

She was not there. There was no-where for her to be. Paul turned to his right and followed the gravel path back up towards Lilac House. He

was surprised when the path opened into to a part of the grounds he had never visited before, a meadow which lay beside the London-Banbury road. It was open to the view of everyone who was not in Lilac House. For that reason it was avoided by everyone who was in Lilac House. And Deirdre was there. And a thin brown colt, who must be Philosopher, on a long rope, was going round in ill-proportioned circles. Deirdre waved her hand at him, then grabbed at the rope again, as Philosopher got bored with walking in circles. Paul was going to call and tell Deirdre about the other rider, but thought it might scare Philosopher to have a man shout, so he continued and followed the path back to Lilac House.

In the middle of the night, he was woken by thunder and fear in a cold sweat. His pyjamas stuck to his back and arms so that he could move. Not far away, rain tried to get through the window. He was straightjacketed by fear and confusion. For a time he knew that something was wrong, but could not say what, and then his mind cleared, and he remembered he had left the stud book under the apple tree.

The straightjacket loosened. He got up and walked to the window. It was not so very far to the ground. Yet the drop winded him, and for a moment he lay, every muscle tense, and his lungs crushed. He drew a sickening shallow breath, and then another. He sat panting, the rain scratching his face. The first alarm was ringing as he raced across the lawn towards the trees. There they found him, protecting the ledger from the rain, shielding it with his own body.

Dr. Samuel would not let Paul look out of the window. Paul had to lie on the couch and look at the ceiling while Dr. Samuel asked questions. Paul couldn't remember what the answers should be. Underneath the whitewash on the ceiling were cherubim, playing triangles and double-flutes. Deirdre would be interested, but he was not going to see her again. Dr. Samuel said so. Paul stopped looking at the ceiling, and sought the answers. But all he could remember was a pattern of two horses, one brown and the other white. One a silly colt, the other a sleek, fit mare. One haltered and linked by a line to a woman, the other ridden by a woman who rode without reigns or saddle.

And although everything seemed to have ended, Paul continued to

continue. The pattern of the days established itself with the regularity of a trip-hammer. Routines gradually became more complex, or were better understood. Dr. Samuel said he was recovering, returning to normal, but Paul thought of it much as he had thought of learning French at school: that it was not natural, and that there was a means of expression much truer, but he could not use it.

Paul was allowed into the garden again, to sit quietly and enjoy the late summer sun. The gravel parterre said "shove shove shove", so he went on. He did not see the wooden benches with the brass plates 'In memory', but walked towards the trees.

And he sat down again, under the same apple tree. The trunk was familiar to his back, and the light was familiar to his eyes. He was trying, very hard, to get the top level of his mind, at the very least, to believe that he would not see her ride past again. But his mind kept playing tricks on him and using every suggestion of movement in the shadows of trees and flashes of green light through leaves to give him the impression that she was approaching from just beyond the scope of his vision.

He pictured the way the long mane of her hair looked as it fell over her left shoulder, and the way the light played across that shoulder. Freckles testament to previous sunny days. Naked then, funny, he hadn't remembered that, but her shoulder had been bare, but for the swoop of hair.

Paul opened his eyes, and found that she was before him, laughing at him for having dreamt away the joy of her approach. He struggled to his feet in the uncoordinated, head-pained way that comes with having slept in the middle of the day. Already she was passed him. Her face hidden. He would run and catch up, but his feet had gone to sleep. He would shout and call her back.

But he didn't. He stood and watched until she was out of sight. The he followed. There was no expectancy. As before, the path reached the cricket field.

This time, Paul was not alone. The bowler told him to clear out of his line. The umpire, Dr. Rivverton, said something about the screen. He waved at Paul, go along to the right there, sit in the pavilion, enjoy the cricket. In the pavilion the

visiting team was enjoying the cricket. Paul moved to the left.

The gravel path brought him back to the stable. He fled back to the lawns of Lilac House, but not before Deirdre had seen him, and she ran after him a little way and shouted "Thank's for saving the stud book! Come and help me exercising Philly!" But Paul kept his head down and did not stop until he got back to his ward.

He dreamt that night, that she was again passing him again on her horse, and laughing at him. But this time, he did not stand still, he leapt after her, and caught her trailing hand, as if to pull her off. She was stronger than he had expected. Her hand locked around his forearm as his hand locked around hers. He had to run to keep up with her. The pain in his arm was the only thing which kept his grip firm. She pulled harder, pulling him to her. He pulled on her arm, using her strength to jump clear of the hooves. As he leapt, she pulled again, and he mounted behind her.

Rough white sheets held his body down, and it was six-o'clock cup of tea time again.

Paul told Dr. Samuel that he had seen Deirdre. It seemed such a little error compared with his dream. Dr. Samuel was capriciously pleased, spoke of "normalising relationships", and positively encouraged Paul to visit the stables once more. There Deirdre welcomed him, and Paul was impressed by the size and condition to which she had brought Philly. But when he told her so she demurred, shaking her dark hair over her pale face.

She had him hold Philly's halter, and he did not understand why. He opened his mouth to ask her, but already she was running to her cottage. She came out again, blinking and carrying her sketch pad. "Philly's been like a good-luck charm," she said, "I sent my publisher a few sketches and an idea for a story line, and he gave me the biggest advance I've ever had."

"I didn't know you wrote books."  
"I don't. Someone else does the words after I've done the idea of a story and the pictures." She worked in silence, and then asked if Paul would mind leading Philosopher up and down, so that she could sketch him walking.

Philosopher decided that he liked this quiet young man with the pocket full of oats, and was content



to walk obediently after him. Deirdre kept making false starts, drawing a line and then realising the line was not what she wanted. She then decided that a sketch of Philosopher trotting, not walking was what she really wanted, but she would not let them run on the treacherous cobbles. So Paul lead Philosopher to the meadow by the Banbury-London road. As she followed, Deirdre dropped fragments of charcoal, pencils, erasers and sketches. As they approached the cricket pitch, these losses were so great that they came to Deirdre's attention. She waved Paul and Philosopher on, and retraced her steps. At the screens, Philosopher spooked, so Paul took him up the orchard path.

She had dismounted. She stood upon the hillock under the apple tree. The white horse was grazing at her feet, her hand was caught in a lock of the white mane. Paul was acutely embarrassed, and tried to back down the path. Philosopher, behind him, lowered his head and forced Paul up the path.

He stood before her. She was not as tall as him but, she was standing higher on the hill, so he could look directly into her eyes. They were blue, and knotted like burwood, as a hoes eyes are. She

loosened Philosopher's halter, and held that hand which held the line. The halter dropped, but she kept hold of his hand in a grip strong as pain. It helped him mount the tall side of the white horse. She was behind him, her hands around his hands. Slowly they rode down through the wood. Philosopher followed as meekly as if he had been halter-lead. He had not thought there were so many large paths in the wood, for they rode always on a broad green way, with no low branches to scratch a rider's face.

He could hear Deirdre, crashing through the orchard. If she called, he would call back to her. He would bring her into the wood and let her share in his new-found madness, if madness it were, for with every twist of the path the way seemed straighter, more direct, more true.

And Deirdre was in the middle of the way, back to them, bending down to retrieve another piece of lost equipment. Without thinking, Paul slipped from the horse's back, and patted it saying, "walk-on". He ran on and helped Deirdre up, and they both turned to look as a woman on a horse rode past. But her eyes, blue as a wave breaking on the shore, reflected nothing.