

THE FINAL STRAIGHT

Scaramouche felt the sand give way beneath his hooves. The mist from his nostrils mingled with the spray from the waves. The air was crisp and its coolness brushed his flanks, producing a gentle tingling which he found exhilarating. It was the last workout before the Big Day.

Back in the stables, Scaramouche found Lady Godiva leaning against him. He looked at her beautiful nose – a nose that had won her many a race. She nudged him softly.

“It’s a pity we have to share these stables with those international upstarts. Look at that nag over there – Belle Poitrine. She thinks she’s above the rest of us simply because some wealthy Arab has brought her here. The race should only be for good Aussie horses,” Lady Godiva snorted.

“The race will sort her out,” Scaramouche replied. “Her legs are not as good as yours.”

Lady Godiva exposed her teeth in an expansive grin. She had enjoyed Scaramouche’s company for the past two years. She did not mind that he was a gelding. His calm nature appealed to her. The stallions were rough and frisky and she often had to resist their advances.

They lived for the race-track. There was nothing like the dash down the straight, crossing the finish line ahead of every other horse. Tomorrow would be the biggest day of all – the Melbourne Cup.

Scaramouche enjoyed the special preparation. Of particular pleasure was the rubdown from the strapper, a teenage girl who whispered in his ear as she caressed him with the brush against his upper body.

In the stables that night, the horses showed different aspects of their personalities. Scaramouche thought about the riding techniques of various jockeys. Some used the whip harshly. Others used the whip sparingly whilst speaking quietly into the horse’s ear. These were the ones who did not see riding as merely a job, but as a union between human and horse.

The Melbourne Cup had arrived. After the preparation, they all headed for the starting barrier and were pushed into their individual starting gates. Belle Poitrine was the last in; her petulance ensuring all attention was focussed on her..

They were off. Scaramouche was somewhere in the middle of the field. He was running freely and was moving toward the inside rail. He could feel that most of the other horses were now behind him.

Midway down the straight, Scaramouche found himself near the rails. He was blocked in. Belle Poitrine edged closer, then pushed him. He hit the rails and fell. His legs gave way and he heard the distinct crack of a bone.

Scaramouche saw movement around him. From a distance, muffled sounds came in waves upon the wind. Curtains were closed around where he lay.

There was cheering and adulation for the winning horse. People lifted glasses of champagne or clutched the tickets that would bring unexpected rewards.

No-one heard the solitary shot that brought Scaramouche to the finish line.