

LBRIS

We know
books

Also by K M Peyton:

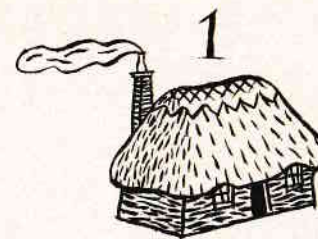
FLAMBARDS
FLAMBARDS DIVIDED
FLAMBARDS IN SUMMER
THE EDGE OF THE CLOUD
BLIND BEAUTY

SMALL GAINS

K M Peyton



David Fickling Books
OXFORD • NEW YORK



I was riding Tilly home from the village on a fine October day, my favourite time of year, and I was thinking good thoughts, not gloomy ones for a change. (We have a lot to be gloomy about in my family.) I had been talking to Nicholas, the vicar's son, who, in spite of being consumptive, always made me laugh, and Tilly had been admired by some strangers outside the Queen's Head.

'Is that the famous Garland's Tilly?' they had asked curiously, getting down from their cart behind steaming, over-driven horses.

'Yes.' I made her stand out to be admired, laughing to myself as I saw them trying to find something complimentary to say about her, and failing. She was a terrible ratbag to look at.

'Well, she's won me some money in her time.' The older man gave her neck a grateful slap and I caught the rein sharply to stop Tilly biting him. 'It's time you had her out again, and I can win some more.'

'She's too old now,' I said.

'They get better with age, these Norfolk trotters,' the other man said.

Not like you, I thought, and rode on.

Our farm was half a mile out of the village. The fields on either side were alive with birds in the stubble, gleaning, their voices shrilling in the clear autumn air. The ruby-chestnut breasts of the cock pheasants were like jewels in the sun as they strutted down the hedgerow, but the little pipits and dunnocks and sparrows were almost invisible, peasants to the kings. The hedges were shedding ditchfuls of golden leaves and starting to liven their branches with berries. I loved the changing of the seasons, save for the portents they brought with them – work, work, work. Winter was cruel for labourers working out in all weathers in a land where the wind came from the North Sea and Siberia beyond (so they said, I had no geography). But now was lovely, and I sniffed it in, the lovely distant smell of woodsmoke and the air cool and clear. The sky was cloudless from horizon to horizon, of a blue so pale it was hardly a colour, with an errant moon fading away over the windmill sails.

But coming towards me – my heart sank abruptly – was Nat Grover on his new horse, Crocus. From a distance I could see the horse was lame but it was typical of Nat Grover to take no notice. He was going to pass me by with an arrogant nod but I could not help myself pulling up and saying, 'Your horse is lame, sir.'

I could see by his look he thought I was completely out of place – I was only eleven after all – but he must

have been aware of the damage he was doing. He wasn't stupid. And Crocus was truly beautiful, one of the best I had ever set eyes on. My eyes were all over him.

He noticed, grinned, and slipped down. 'Take him home for me, if it concerns you so. I'll walk.'

He went to toss me the reins, but I declined angrily. 'Take him home yourself!'

He was so used to giving orders and being obeyed that I could see my refusal surprised him. He looked at me sharply. I knew my sister Margaret was sweet on Nat and at that moment I could see why, for he was undeniably as handsome as his horse. His arrogance gave him stature, somehow. He was tall anyway, but at eighteen still slender and lithe in his smart black cut-away coat and tight breeches, his cravat wound high and fashionably under the commanding chin. His hair was black and curling and his eyes very dark. They called him the gypsy Grover – all the others were fair. What a waste that he was so horrible.

He wasn't sure what to do after my rebuff, and I was half regretting my refusal for I would have liked to study his new horse more closely. But I wouldn't kowtow to a Grover. Luckily there were some labourers working on the road, filling in potholes a little farther down, and one of them was old Sim, who knew all there was to know about horses.

'Ask Sim. He'll see what's wrong and take him home for you.'

So Nat bawled for Sim and Sim came up slowly to take orders.

'Miss Clara here tells me my horse must go home.'

He spoke with heavy sarcasm, and threw the reins at Sim. 'Take him.'

With which he walked off.

'What a bastard,' said Sim.

We laughed. Sim was in his seventies, down on his luck if it had come to road-mending. His last employer, a country vicar, had died in a hunting accident and Sim was out of work.

Nat walked off, and Sim and I went on together. The horse he led was a chestnut trotter, as handsome as Tilly was ugly.

Sim said, 'They say he gave three hundred guineas for this one. A fortune! Only a three-year-old, but Mister Nat can't wait to match him, they say. He'll probably be challenging old Tilly here as soon as he's got him fit enough.'

'Ugh! I hate Nat. I couldn't bear for him to beat us.'

It was the custom in our county to match trotting horses one against the other, over twenty miles or more. The best horses were really valuable and Tilly was one of the best. But, alas, now she was in her late twenties.

Coming down the road, approaching the two properties which stood opposite each other – the Grovers' to the left, ours to the right – it was easy to see which was the rich property, which the poor. The contrast was painful. The Grovers' large newly-renovated house lay at the top of a freshly-gravelled drive lined with young lime trees and a neatly trimmed yew hedge. The farm buildings were laid out to one side of the house in neat yards, the roofs all sound, with the

hayricks beyond them in soldierly lines, perfectly thatched.

As for ours, a potholed right-of-way meandered off the road towards a distant wood, Gridswood, which belonged to the squire for his shooting. Our farm was halfway down on the right of the track, a tangle of ancient, leaking barns, cowsheds and stables. Our row of ricks was only roughly thatched and one or two were leaning slightly, giving a slightly drunken appearance. Our gates sagged too, and our hedges had holes filled in with the odd bedstead or broken plough. The house fronted the track, the back giving on to the yards, and although it was pretty enough with its pinkish old bricks and thick thatch, it was less than a quarter the size of the Grovers'. We had barely a hundred acres, and of that the water meadows between our place and the wood belonged to the squire.

I rode slowly up the drive, wondering if Margaret had bestirred herself to do some baking. I was hungry, not an unusual circumstance since Mother had died. Just to think of Mother's baking, and the pans of cream set out in the dairy, the cheeses waiting to go to market, the ham hanging on hooks in the kitchen . . . all memories now. No wonder the family had fallen so glum since her death, and our father aged far beyond his forty years. She had been so strong in their partnership, even when she was ill. I could still remember the strength of her will, the courage, the *life*, even when it was almost extinct. And her awesomeness in death when she had lain in her coffin on the big polished

table in the parlour looking so incredibly young and beautiful – a sight I could never get out of my head although it had happened three years ago now. She had been beautiful in the usual consumptive way – the disease for some reason conferred a fine-bloomed complexion with high colour in the cheeks and lips. With her mass of blonde hair, she had made what the villagers called with awe ‘a lovely corpse’. They had trailed in, all of them, young and old, to pay tribute and have a good look.

Margaret had inherited Mother’s beauty, but I had missed out. As well as the cloud of golden curling hair, Margaret is tall and lissom with long legs and a tiny waist, but I, her sister, am stocky and square. My hair is brown and fuzzy, my eyes grey, my mouth determined, my jaw likewise. I frown a lot, I am very strong. Am I jealous? I try not to think about it.

For I could not be jealous of Margaret, who as well as inheriting Mother’s beauty had inherited her disease as well, and was not likely to be with us for long.

No wonder I was an earnest, old child, who everyone said should have been a boy, and who worked as hard as a man with the horses. I knew what they said about me. I even rode astride when I was around the fields, in my breeches, although I used Mother’s side-saddle and riding apron to go out on the road. Smart Nat had seen me at my best, such as it was.

I put Tilly away in the stable and gave her a feed and went indoors. The smell of bread baking met me at the door and my heart lifted – so much so that I

pandered to Margaret and said, ‘I met Nat on the road.’

She was putting out plates and cold meat and dripping and onions for the men coming in shortly, and looked up sharply.

‘Did he – was he—?’

‘Coming this way? No. He is horrible, Margaret. You can’t possibly like him.’

‘He’s so handsome,’ she said dreamily. And smiled.

I thought there was probably more going on than I had noticed. I had seen Nat riding past at times, through the water meadows and into Gridswood. Perhaps he had been eyeing the water meadows for his father. There were rumours that his father Eb had approached the squire to buy them. But maybe that wasn’t his reason.

I put a loaf of the new bread on the table. The table was covered in candle grease and hadn’t been scrubbed for days. I didn’t say anything, but thought I kept my stables in a better state than Margaret kept the kitchen. The range was unpolished and even the fire only smouldered, when for Mother it had danced and sparkled on gleaming pans and shining glassware. The copper pans were now tarnished, the glasses dull, all the pretty cushions and rugs faded and torn and dirty. I tried to clean up sometimes, but my job was in the stables and with seven carthorses besides Tilly, it was heavy work. I had to do the washing too, because Margaret was too weak to wring out wet sheets and carry them out to the line.

Ellen, our younger sister, was only nine and kept

LIBRIS | We know books

herself out of the way at school. She was wild and out of hand but there was no one to teach her better. None of the rest of us, Margaret and Jack and myself, had been to school because Mother had taught us, and taught us better than old Crackpot, the village schoolmaster. Cheaper too, for it cost twopence a week each to go to school. Most of the villagers couldn't afford it, and sent their children to slave on Grover's farm to earn sixpence instead. We were an ignorant lot, all in all, but we could read and write and knew about the French Revolution and our fat King George.

I put out the ale and glasses. Father came in at twelve, crosspatch as usual.

'What's this talk about Eb Grover wanting to buy our water meadows?' he growled at me. 'You hear anything about it down in the village?'

'Not today. I've heard it said though.' I nearly said, Ask Margaret, but bit my tongue back in time.

'So where does this gossip come from? There must be some truth in it.'

'Jack will know,' I said.

Jack came in five minutes later with Martin, his friend. They had both been clearing a ditch where an old elm had fallen across it, and were covered in wood chips and lichen. Mother would have made them wash in the scullery but her nice habits had been forgotten. The fresh bread and dripping and jug of ale were too much for them. They fell on it like wolves and I got up to fetch a second loaf. Margaret moaned to see it go so fast.

Father asked Jack.

'It's alehouse talk, Father. But probably true. Those water meadows, if they're drained, would be useful to the Grovers.'

'Aye, to us too!'

But we couldn't afford to drain them. We rented them quite cheaply from the squire and would be in trouble without them, our own land being so small.

'The squire wouldn't sell to the Grovers,' my father said.

I saw Jack and Martin exchange glances. Martin was Jack's friend, our friend, from childhood, as good as family. They got about, Jack and Martin, and knew everything.

'No. Probably not,' Jack said affably. It was cruel to encourage even more doubts in our father, Sam, who, with age, bereavement and rheumatism, was beginning to wonder where life was leading him.

Jack dropped the subject with a laugh. 'Alehouse talk is all about a match between Tilly and that new horse of the Grovers.'

At this, Father perked up. 'Aye. Nat Grover challenged me, thinks that new colt of his can beat Tilly over twenty miles. And the little beast hardly three years old!'

'Yeah, twenty-five years younger than Tilly!'

'It'll go out like a light after ten miles.'

I butted in. 'The Grover horse is lame.' I told them (proudly) how I had challenged Nat.

Jack laughed. 'Good for you! Picked up a flint probably. Yeah, Nat told me he wanted a match.'

LIBRIS | We know books
Saturday week he said, but I said Tilly was past it.'

'Rubbish,' Father said shortly. 'She'll go.'

'Tilly'll drop dead at the post, Father, the way you treat her! You're going to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.'

'She's not past it! Two hundred pounds at stake. We need it.'

It was true that our Norfolk trotting horses improved with age, and matches were often wagered between horses in their twenties. But Father had wagered Tilly too often and now she looked like a scarecrow. People scoffed when we pulled her out, the ones that didn't know. But later when after twenty miles she came home flying, ears pricked, eyes blazing, their laughter turned to amazement. They lost their money. We made ours.

'It was Nat as made the challenge, not me,' Father said.

'Yeah, well, he's no more sense that you have. Ruin both of 'em, ours too old and Nat's too young and the ground coming either frost-hard or deep mud the next few months.'

Jack could talk like that to our father, but we both knew he would have to do what Father said. Jack rode Tilly in her matches since Father had got so rheumatically, and if Father said go, Jack went. Jack was fifteen, a dear boy with a heart of gold. He loved the horses too, but had far more sense than Father, who gambled on them and lost nearly as much as he made. Between them, they were saving for a new horse to take over from old Tilly. There was a pot of money

under the kitchen floor. Our poor farm was well named Small Gains. While Small Gains fell apart, the pot was filling. Slowly.

'Win a match against Nat Grover and with a good bet we'll make enough to go to the horse fair and bid with the big boys,' Father promised.

Jack looked at me and winked. It should have made him despair, Father's crackpot optimism, but it just made Jack laugh.

'Aye, Father, we'll give it a go then. But when it comes to the match I'll not thrash her, she can choose her own pace.'

'She knows how to judge a race better'n you'll ever learn,' Father growled.

You could crack him one sometimes, for being so daft. But I suppose he had ridden Tilly for over twenty years and knew her better than he had ever understood his son. The passion of his life was matches between trotting horses. They talked about it for hours in the alehouses, how Old Shales trotted twenty miles in the hour carrying seventeen stone, how Fireaway could trot two miles in five minutes, how Paulson put his farm mare to a blood stallion descended from Flying Childers and got a horse that could trot fifteen miles in fifty minutes carrying twenty stone . . . the stories got taller and taller.

But Tilly in her prime had trotted a hundred miles in twelve hours, that was the truth. It was unlikely that we would ever find another so good with the money we had in the pot. That was my opinion, but of course I kept it to myself. We lived on dreams in