

# “The Rocking-Horse Winner” Summary

## Type of Work

“The Rocking-Horse Winner” is a short story that incorporates elements of the fable, the fantasy, and the fairy tale. Like a fable, it presents a moral (although it does so subtly, without preachment). Like a fantasy, it presents chimerical events (the boy’s ability to foretell the winners of horse races, the whispering house). Like a fairy tale, it sets the scene with simple words like those in a Mother Goose story: “There was a woman who was beautiful, who started with all the advantages, yet she had no luck. She married for love, and the love turned to dust. She had bonny children, yet she felt they had been thrust upon her, and she could not love them. . . . There were a boy and two little girls. They lived in a pleasant house, with a garden, and they had discreet servants, and felt themselves superior to anyone in the neighbourhood.”

## Setting

The action takes place in England in the years just after the First World War. The places include a home in an unidentified locale in or near London; London’s Richmond Park; a car traveling to a home in Hampshire County, southwest of London; and Lincoln Racecourse in Lincoln, Lincolnshire. The narrator mentions major races in England well known to readers of the story when it first appeared in 1926. These races included the Grand National Handicap Steeplechase at the Aintree Racecourse in Liverpool; the Royal Ascot at Windsor, west of London; the Epsom Derby at Epsom Downs in Surrey, southeast of London; the St. Leger Stakes at Doncaster in South Yorkshire; and the Lincoln, at Lincoln Racecourse in Lincoln, Lincolnshire.

## Characters

**Paul:** Boy who knows that his mother does not love him or his sisters even though she outwardly shows affection and treats her children kindly. After Paul receives a rocking horse one Christmas, he rides it often and develops a strange intuitive power that enables him to correctly predict the winners of horses races. At racetracks, he wins thousands of pounds that

he sets aside to defray his mother's debts.

**Hester:** Paul's mother. She becomes dissatisfied with her marriage after her husband fails to make enough money to support the elegant lifestyle that has put the family deep in debt.

**Paul's Father:** Man who works in town and has promising prospects that never seem to materialize because, as his wife says, he is unlucky.

**Bassett:** The family gardener. He initiates Paul into the world of horse racing, and they becoming betting partners.

**Oscar Creswell:** Paul's uncle and his mother's sister. He provides Paul the money that the boy uses to make his first successful bet.

**Miss Wilmot:** The family nurse.

**Paul's Siblings:** Two younger sisters, one named Joan and the other unidentified by name.

**Chief Artist:** Woman who sketches drawings for newspaper advertisements placed by drapers. Hester works for her to make extra money.

## **Plot Summary**

A beautiful woman blessed with advantages marries a handsome man for love, but the love eventually runs dry. Feeling as if her three children—a boy and two girls—“had been thrust upon her,” the narrator says, she resents them in her heart. Outwardly, however, she behaves as if she loves them dearly, and people say she is wonderful mother. She does not fool the children, however. They know she does not love them, nor anyone else. They see it in her eyes.

The children and their parents reside in a nice house with “discreet” servants, but the mother and father never seem to have enough money to support their elegant lifestyle even though they both have incomes. At his office in town, the father has promising business prospects, but that is all they are—promising.

The parents try various schemes to increase their income, but financial success eludes them.

And so the house comes to be haunted by the unspoken phrase:  
*There must be more money!*

At Christmas, even the rocking horse, the teddy bear, the big doll in its pram, and the puppy hear the phrase.

One day, Paul asks his mother, Hester, why the family always borrows the car of her brother, Oscar Creswell, instead of getting one of its own. She explains that they lack the money to buy one. When her husband tries to make more money, he has no luck. If you're lucky, she tells Paul, you have money. That is why it is better to be born lucky than rich. When Paul asserts that he himself is lucky, his mother does not seem to believe him. Peeved at her lack of faith in him but wanting to prove himself to her, he goes off by himself wondering how to generate luck. In the following days, he rides his rocking horse in the nursery in a wild charge to nowhere while his sisters play with their dolls. Getting off, he commands the horse "to take me where there is luck," then remounts it and rides on, whipping the horse on the neck with a lash Uncle Oscar bought for him. Paul's nurse, Miss Wilmot, cautions him that his rough riding will break the toy, and his sister Joan says, "I wish he'd leave off!"

When Uncle Oscar visits him one day with his mother, the boy is riding hard as usual.

"Riding a winner?" the uncle says.

His mother tells the boy that he is getting too big to be riding a rocking horse. But Paul does not respond until he completes his ride. When he dismounts, he says, "Well, I got there." His mother asks where, and he says, "Where I wanted to go." When Uncle Oscar asks what he named the horse, Paul says he has different names. In the previous week, his name was Sansovino, after the name of a horse that won the race at Ascot. His sister explains that the family's gardener, Bassett, keeps Paul up to date on racing news. Bassett, who served as Creswell's batman (military officer's assistant) in the war (the First World War, known in author Lawrence's time as the Great War), loves horse racing and places bets for Paul. Later, when Creswell takes Paul for a ride through the countryside to his home in Hampshire, he asks the boy for advice on which horse to bet on in the Lincoln race. Paul recommends Daffodil.

"What about Mirza?"

Paul says, "I only know the winner."

When he began gambling, Paul says, he lost five shillings Bassett had given him. Then he started winning with ten shillings from Uncle Oscar and concluded that his uncle had passed luck onto him. At all costs, though, he wants his uncle to keep his betting a secret. After Creswell agrees to remain mum on the subject, he asks the boy how much he plans to bet on Daffodil. Paul's answer—three hundred pounds—stuns and amuses him.

Sometime later, he takes Paul to the Lincoln races, where Oscar bets

on Mirza and gives Paul money to place a bet.

"The child had never been to a race-meeting before," the narrator says, "and his eyes were blue fire."

Daffodil wins and Mirza finishes third.

Uncle Oscar then asks Paul whether he is telling the truth about the amounts of money that he bets. Paul affirms that he is and says his uncle can become partners with him and Bassett if he is so inclined. But the boy again asks him to keep everything a secret.

One afternoon, Creswell takes Paul and Basset to Richmond Park (a recreation area in London). There, Bassett tells Creswell that he and Paul lose only when they are in doubt about a horse. But they always win when Paul regards a particular horse as a sure thing.

"It's as if he had it from heaven," Bassett says.

Bassett keeps all of Paul's winnings for him under lock and key except for twenty pounds held in reserve in the deposit of the Turf Commission.

In another race, Paul is sure about a horse named Lively Spark when odds are ten to one against it. Paul wins ten thousand pounds, Basset five thousand, and Uncle Oscar two thousand. When Creswell asks Paul about his plans for his winnings, the boy tells him he is reserving it for his mother, who has no luck because his father has no luck. After his mother gets the money, the house will stop whispering that the family is short of money, Paul says.

Paul gives his uncle five thousand pounds to deposit with the family lawyer. The lawyer in turn is to give Paul's mother a thousand pounds each year on her birthday but is not to reveal the source of the money except to say that a relative had reserved it for her.

His mother, meanwhile, had begun to earn extra money sketching figures of women in the latest fashions. An artist friend for whom she works sells the sketches to drapers for their newspaper ads. However, because her wages are meager—far less than her artist friend makes—Hester remains unhappy.

On her birthday in November, she receives her first thousand of Paul's winnings. However, she asks the lawyer to give her the rest of the money to defray her mounting debts. That afternoon, Uncle Oscar informs Paul of his mother's request, leaving it up to him whether she should get the full amount.

"Oh, let her have it," Paul decides, saying he can get more when he bets on the Grand National, the Lincolnshire, or the Derby.

In the following months, Paul's mother outfits the house with luxurious furnishings and flowers, hires a tutor for Paul, and enrolls him in Eton (prestigious secondary school in Berkshire) for autumn. But the house voices do not stop. Instead, they become incessant: "There must be more money . . . more than ever!" They scare Paul.

Although he studies Latin and Greek with his tutor, he spends most of his time discussing horses with Bassett. Unfortunately, he receives no flashes of inspiration, as before, and he loses a hundred pounds at the Grand National and another hundred at Lincolnshire.

"He becomes wild-eyed and strange," the narrator says.

Desperate, Paul says, "I've got to know for the Derby!"

His mother tries to persuade him to take time off and go to the seaside to calm his nerves, but Paul says he prefers to remain at home until after the Derby. She assents to his wishes, but makes him promise not to preoccupy himself with the races.

"You needn't worry," he says.

The reason the boy does not want to go away is his rocking horse, which is now in his bedroom.

Two days before the Derby, Paul's mother attends an evening party. Suddenly, she becomes terribly uneasy about the boy, as if something bad is happening to him, so she calls home and asks Miss Wilmot whether Paul is all right.

"He went to bed as right as a trivet," she tells Paul's mother. "Shall I run up and look at him?"

Paul's mother, satisfied that the boy is in no danger, tells the nurse not to bother. Besides, she says, she and her husband will return home soon.

When they arrive at about 1 o'clock, Paul's father makes himself a drink and his mother goes upstairs to check on the boy. Outside his room, she hears a noise—"soundless, yet rushing and powerful"—coming from inside. When she enters the room and turns on the light, she sees Paul riding the rocking horse in a frenzy.

"What are you doing?"

In "a strange, powerful voice," the narrator says, Paul cries out, "It's Malabar!"

He then falls from the horse and lies unconscious. His mother runs to him.

Afflicted with "some brain-fever," the narrator says, "he talked and tossed, and his mother sat stonily by his side."

Paul shouts, "Malabar! It's Malabar! Bassett, Bassett, I know! It's Malabar!"

During the next three days, Paul remains in a stupor. Neither his father nor mother knows what Malabar means, but Oscar informs them that it is the name of a horse entered in the Derby.

Oscar and Bassett later confer, and Oscar bets a thousand pounds on Malabar at odds of fourteen to one. Bassett places a bet for Paul.

On the evening of the third day, Oscar does not return, but his mother allows Bassett to enter the room in hopes that he might say something to revive Paul.

“Master Paul,” he says, “Malabar came in first all right, a clean win. I did as you told me. You've made over seventy thousand pounds, you have; you've got over eighty thousand.”

Paul says, “I call that lucky, don't you, mother? Over eighty thousand pounds! I knew, didn't I know I knew? Malabar came in all right. . . I never told you, mother, that if I can ride my horse, and get there, then I'm absolutely sure—oh, absolutely! Mother, did I ever tell you? I am lucky!”

“No, you never did,” said his mother.

During the night, Paul dies.

As he lies before her, Hester hears the voice of her brother: “My God, Hester, you're eighty-odd thousand to the good, and a poor devil of a son to the bad. But, poor devil, poor devil, he's best gone out of a life where he rides his rocking-horse to find a winner.”