

## National Velvet

*Enid Bagnold*

[...] The Browns lived in a small village by the sea. Mr Brown was a butcher, he had an assistant called Michael (Mi) Taylor; Mrs Brown managed the till at the village shop. They had five children: Edvina (Ed), seventeen, Malvolia (Mally), sixteen, Meredith, fifteen, Velvet, fourteen, and Donald, four. The Browns loved each other deeply, from the back of the soul, with intolerance in daily life. All the girls loved horses; but Velvet was crazy about them. She made history and caused a scandal by winning the Grand National steeplechase on a piebald horse under an assumed male name. She participated in the race with the moral and financial support from her mother and with the assistance of My Taylor. Below is a description of a typical enough family scene which starts with Velvet arriving home shortly before supper.

It takes place well before Velvet's triumph. The Browns and Mi Taylor do not always speak standard English. Miss Ada is the Browns' pony.

[...] Velvet passed to the third cottage, stopped at the door, opened it, let a gush of light on to the pavement, closed it and walked inside. Edwina, Malvolia and Meredith sat in their father's, Mr. Brown's, sitting-room just before supper time. It was dark outside and hot inside. There was an oil stove in the corner of the sitting-room and lesson books on the table. The ceiling was low and sagged. An Albert lamp with a green glass shade lit the table. There was no electric light. Edwina, Malvolia and Meredith were all exactly alike, like golden greyhounds. Their golden hair was sleek, their fine faces like antelopes, their shoulders still and steady like Zulu women carrying water. Velvet had short pale hair, large, protruding teeth, a sweet smile and a mouthful of metal. At this particular moment she wrenched at the gold band that bound her teeth back and laid it down. "Father'll be in in a minute," said Edwina warningly. "It's going in again directly I hear a sound," said Velvet and sitting down she swept the plate into her lap. "You've got ten minutes. Don't let father see. . . . Mind your plate! It's fallen!" Velvet dived under the table, picked it up, and examined it anxiously. Opening her mouth she worked it painfully in with both hands. "S'bent a bit," she gasped. "It's a hell plate ..." A door at the other end of the sitting-room opened and Mrs. Brown came in. She stood and looked at the daughters for a moment – an enormous woman who had once swam the Channel.

Towering over the Albert lamp she threw her shadow across the books and up the wall. She said: "Lay supper." And went out. "Meredith," said Edwina mechanically without looking up. Meredith got up and began to collect the books. When all the books were gone the two sisters sat tilting their chairs back so that Meredith could get the white cloth over the edge of the table past their knees. When this was done all their chairs came forward again. Kneeling by the Victorian sideboard Meredith pulled out plates, bread-knife, platter, sugar, knives and forks and salts and peppers. "Larder," said Mrs. Brown who had come in. Velvet disappeared. The others sat in silence till she came back with the tray. Cold ham, jam, butter were placed on the table, and a dish of radishes.

Mr. Brown came in by the slaughter-house door. He passed through the room on his way to wash for supper. Velvet and the three golden greyhounds sat on in brooding silence. A smell of liver and bacon stole in from the kitchen.

The two doors, that on the street and that on the kitchen, opened suddenly together. Out of the black hole of the street came Mi Taylor, brushed up for supper. Mrs. Brown came in from the kitchen carrying the liver and bacon. The room filled with smells. Mr. Brown came in putting on his coat. Everyone sat down, Mi last of all, pulling up his chair gingerly. "Well . . ." said Mr. Brown, and helped the liver round. Meredith went out and fetched in the jugs of coffee and milk. They ate, sleek girls' heads bent under the lamp. Mr. Brown and Mrs. Brown square and full and steady, Mi silent and dexterous with his red hair boiling up in curls on his skull.

As the girls ate a private dream floated in Velvet's mind. ... It was a little horse, slender and perfect, rising divinely at a jump, fore-feet tucked up neatly, intelligence and delight in its eager eye, and on its back, glued lightly and easily to the saddle . . . she, Velvet . . . Gymkhana Velvet. As she took the visionary jump in dream her living hand stole to her mouth. She pulled out the torturing plate and hid it in her lap. Mi's eyes were on her in a flash, he who never missed anything.

"Be windy for the Fair Thursday," said Mrs. Brown. "It's coming in wild from the southwest," said Mr. Brown. "Always does when it comes in at all," said Mrs. Brown. "Three-day gale." All the trees in the dark village outside attested this. They were blown like fans set on one side

"Put that in again, Velvet," commanded Mrs. Brown. "She got it out again?" asked Mr.

Brown, looking up sharply. "It aches me an' aches when I eat," said Velvet.

"Ache or no, argue or no, that plate cost me four pound ten and it's solid gold an' it goes in," said Mr. Brown. "I'm not going to have a child like a rabbit if I can help it. You girls have got your faces for your fortunes and none other. I've told you often enough." The three golden greyhounds sat up straighter than ever and Velvet fumbled with her teeth. "It's got hooked up." "Unhook it, then," said Mr. Brown. He sat back, satisfied, commanding and comfortable, and pulled the radshes towards him. Then he passed the dish around. "Take a radish, Velvet." "Couldn't bite a radish!" "Go without then," said Mr. Brown happily. Velvet kept her plate in and swallowed whole. The kidneys went down like stones. Mrs. Brown sat solid and silent. She did not talk much. But she knew all about courage and endurance, to the last ounce of strength, from the first swallow of overcome timidity. She valued and appraised each daughter, she knew what each daughter could do. She was glad too that her daughters were not boys because she could not understand the courage of men, but only the courage of women. Mr. Brown was the head of the family. But Mrs. Brown was the standard of the family. When Velvet had fallen off the pier at the age of six her mother went in thirty feet after her, sixteen stone, royal-blue afternoon dress. A straight dive, like the dive of an ageing mammoth. The reporter from the West Worthing News came to make a story of it and said to Edwina, "Your mother swam the Channel, didn't she?" Edwina nodded towards her mother. "Better ask her." "What's past's past, young man," said Mrs. Brown heavily and shut her mouth and her door. Ed and Mally and Meredith behaved themselves at the wink of one of her heavy eyes. Velvet would have laid down her stringy life for her.

Donald ate his food well and said gently some six or seven times, "Is it castle puddings?" Nobody knew. His question was not insistent but soft. Sometimes he said it through his food. "Yer spitting, Donald," said Mi. "I said," said Donald dreamily. Mrs. Brown looked at him. "It is," she said. "You never used to tell us!" said Velvet. "Times," said Mrs. Brown, "I don't do what I always did." Malvolia cleared the plates. Mrs. Brown fetched in a city of castle puddings and a jam-pot full of heated jam. She served Donald, the baby, first. Two castle puddings and a dab of jam on the plate. He looked at his two puddings and began to examine them. He drooped his Hollywood head like a smiling angel. "Fiddling again," said Mi ominously. "You wanted 'em too much." "Yore

putting it into his head,” said Mally. “Get on, get on,” said Mrs. Brown to Donald. “I am gettin’ on,” said Donald, and opened his mouth to show that it was full. “Bin turning round and round,” said Mi. “Give a swaller.” “Can’t swaller,” said Donald, “ ’t isn’t slidy.” “Isn’t he lovely!” said Velvet, coming out of a dream quite suddenly and looking as though she had seen him for the first time. “Shall I teach you to ride, Donald?” “You’ve put him off proper,” said Mrs. Brown. Donald opened his eyes and struggled with his mouth. Then he leant over his plate and spat out the revolving mass. “Yes,” he said, when he was empty, “yes, when? Now?” Mrs. Brown rose slowly, took her own empty plate away to the sideboard, moved calmly and without anger round to Donald. “You’ll finish alone,” she said, and gathered him up. Donald and his plate sailed into the back kitchen. “Well, really, Velvet,” said Edwina. “He doesn’t care,” said Velvet. “Wouldn’t he be lovely in the under six?” “On Miss Ada?” said Mally. “She’s too wide really. You want a little narrow thing like Lucy’s Rowanberry.” “Could we start him, father?” said Velvet. “Eh?” said Mr. Brown, struggling to leave his page of “Meat Fancier” “Teach Donald. So’s he could be ready for the under six?” “Under what?” said Mr. Brown. “The under what?” “Gymkhana,” said Velvet. “The class for children under six. Six years.” “Ask your mother,” said Mr. Brown, and returned to his page. “Then that’s that,” said Velvet, rising happily. “Can I get down?” There was no answer. “F’whatayave received thank God,” said Velvet to no one in particular, and disappeared into the kitchen. “F’whatayave received thank God,” said Meredith and shot from the room. Mr. Brown pushed back his chair. “You girls said your grace?” he said, getting up. “F’whatayave received thank God,” said Edwina. And the meal was finished. The candle in the scarlet-painted candlestick was burnt low and had a shroud. “Box,” said Mr. Brown, indicating the sideboard. Edwina rose and brought him his small cigar. The shadows whirled. Mr. Brown was finishing his “Meat Fancier” as he smoked.