# To the Hilt Short Guide

## To the Hilt by Dick Francis

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# Contents

# Characters

"My mother's unvarying composure, I sometimes thought, stemmed from a genuine deficiency of emotion," Alexander Kinloch comments early in the book.

He never saw her cry, "never heard tears in her voice," not even when his father—her first husband—was killed in a shooting accident, a devastating loss to the seventeen-year-old boy. He recalls that, dry-eyed, she had advised him to pull himself together. A year later, when she remarries, Alexander reports that she was "cool at the ceremony." Although Vivienne Westering's cool correctness informs her relationship with everyone, not only her son, the disinclination to display emotion may reflect her upbringing rather than an innate absence of feeling. Late in the novel, when Ivan dies and Alexander rushes to Vivienne's side, he says: "My mother wept. I held her tight while she shook with near-silent sobs, the grief deep and terrible." He naturally wonders "if she had ever cried in the dark for my father, privately broken up under the public composure."

Indeed, soon after the emotional reaction to her son's return, Vivienne "stiffened her body, damped all movements, powdered her face and presented, at least to the world if no longer to me, the outward semblance of serenity."

This difference between private and public personae typifies many characters in To the Hilt, including Alexander, who also presents a calculated indifference to the world at large, though he fundamentally is warm and caring. He functions superbly in social situations, not at all betraying the awkwardness one would expect of someone who lives alone in a wilderness hut. Not just duty, more than a sense of responsibility to family, Alexander responds to calls for help with an intensity of commitment that clearly is propelled by deep-seated feelings. That he prefers to live alone (he cannot sustain a marital relationship though remains on friendly terms with his estranged wife) may reflect his artistic temperament rather than a misanthropic bent.

Alexander's relationship with his stepfather can most accurately be described as correct. Ivan "was not domineering; had been generous, even; but he disapproved of the way I lived. We were polite to each other." Ivan, however, had offered him an opportunity to work at the brewery, a chance Alexander predictably rejected; but when the business is in trouble and Ivan cannot cope with the crisis, he sends for his stepson. By turning everything over to him and rejecting his daughter and long-time business associates in the process, Ivan demonstrates not only confidence in Alexander's intellect and practical judgment, as well as total trust in his honesty, but a close personal attachment that he had not previously revealed.

Ivan's daughter Patsy Benchmark is portrayed as a harridan through much of the novel, dominating her husband Surtees, attempting to gain sway over her dying father, seeking control of the faltering brewery. Blatantly protective of her prospective fortune, she is openly jealous of her half brother, upon whom she looks as a rival, an interloper who apparently has usurped her place with her father and may do the same with her inheritance. Unlike the rest of the family, Patsy is overtly emotional; there is no

dissembling, for she totally reveals herself. Accustomed to controlling her husband and running her nuclear family, Patsy cannot understand why she is denied a third leadership role: as her father's surrogate in the business. Even after Ivan dies, and she learns that he has left the brewery to her, as he promised her he would do, all she displays to Alexander is triumph, not apology. Then she is struck another blow to pride and self-assurance when Alexander is revealed to be co-executor of Ivan's will with the Earl of Kinloch and Oliver Grantchester. When the Earl expresses bafflement at Patsy's reaction to Alexander's involvement, his nephew explains: "She's resented me for twelve years and feared I would cut her out with Ivan, and although she now knows I didn't, I'm sure she's wide open to the suggestion that I'm trying to find the brewery's millions in order to hide them away for myself." Although Alexander says that in her eyes he is a villain, he wonders whether she really believes it or simply is being led by someone, probably the party who killed Norman Quorn and is searching for the millions he embezzled: "Anyone who's looking for it, who wants her attention and ill will fixed on me. A bit of distraction, as in conjuring tricks—watch my right hand while I vanish your wallet with my left."

Patsy Benchmark is the most complex character in the novel, and her turning point comes when she unwittingly lures Alexander into a trap that results in his second life-threatening physical confrontation and is alternately horrified and bewildered at what occurs. When a policeman asks her if she knows the beaten and burned Alexander, this erstwhile implacable enemy replies: "Of course I know him. He's . . . he's my brother" And then she weeps. This first step toward reconciliation is followed by others, such as Alexander's invitation to her to participate in the attempt to find the missing millions. When he says, "I promise you they are trying everything they know to find your money," she responds with: "My father's money." And then she asks: "Everything you have done was for him, wasn't it?" When he says, "I would never have taken anything that was yours," she admits, "I thought you would. I did hate you." She then apologizes: "I'm sorry. I suppose that it's too late . . ." He closes the exchange with "Call it quits, if you 6589 like." Sister and brother, they can go just so far in effecting a reconciliation that requires complete sharing of emotions.

He is confident that Patsy "will make a great success of running the brewery," in part because she "can bend and manipulate people to achieve her own ends," and although he cannot articulate forgiveness to her for the past, someone points out to Alexander that it was in his voice.

The other characters are almost stereotypical. The Earl of Kinloch, a most likable chap, is an avuncular patrician with a common touch. Jed Parlane, manager of the Earl's estate, is a Lowland Scot of probity, reliability, and loyalty, who is completely indifferent to money. On the other hand, Oliver Grandchester, the family attorney, seems to possess all of these qualities, but is a masochistic scoundrel behind a facade of respectability.

Another admirable character is Emily Jane Cox, Alexander's estranged wife, a respected and successful horse trainer whose brisk, authoritative manner of speaking reflects the strong-willed person she is. Their marriage failed because her positive

energy drained Alexander's (as he saw it), and he found himself unable to paint, and she would not give up training race horses, not even for love. When they parted, her words were rough—"If you care more for bloody paint than you do for me, bugger off"—but Alexander recalls that her eyes "had begged me to stay." Five "tranquillising years later," she sees no need to follow through with a divorce, for she finds "it quite useful sometimes to be able to mention a husband, even if he's never around," but she no longer wants a live-in husband. Francis develops Emily in broad strokes, so she is neither as vital nor as credible as Patsy; rather, she simply fulfills her twofold function: to help Alexander hide Golden Malt and to provide a modicum of romance.

# Social Concerns

his crime novels—of which To the InHilt is the thirty-fifth—Dick Francis places admirable, sometimes even exemplary, heroes in unfamiliar and dangerous situations. Confronting a variety of intellectual, physical, and occasionally emotional challenges, the young men ultimately prevail: righting wrongs, exposing corruption, bringing murderers and other criminals to their reckoning. Having restored a portion of society to some semblance of normality, each of these men returns to life as he knew it. To a considerable extent, this basic plot outline is typical not only of Francis but of the crime or detective genre in general, so his novels are, to a degree, formulaic. Nevertheless, this former steeplechase jockey (all of his books feature horse racing) crafts distinctive plots with varied milieus and unexpected twists. Another reason he has maintained this freshness over the decades (he was dubbed a Grand Master in 1996 by the Mystery Writers of America) is that almost every book has a different hero-detective, for unlike most other whodunit writers, Francis has pretty much eschewed the series detective, and his skill at characterization is such that although the detecting heroes are similar in many ways, they are not clones of each other. Since a portion of each novel is devoted to developing the hero's character, he becomes a credible individual with whom the reader can identify and even empathize. Alexander Kinloch is the central figure of To the Hilt.

Born into nobility (his late father was the fourth son of an earl), Kinloch is an artist who lives in an isolated shepherd's hut (called locally a bothy) on the vast Scottish estate of his uncle, the family scion and present Earl of Kinloch, to whom Alexander pays annual rent of one painting. His stepfather, Sir Ivan George Westering, owns a large London brewery and is a pillar of the British Jockey Club.

When Sir Ivan has a heart attack, Alexander plans to go to London, but upon returning to his mountainside hovel to prepare for the trip, he is beaten unconscious by four thugs who also ravage the hut in an apparently futile search. Neither they nor Alexander at the time seem to know precisely what the missing "it" is, but the object turns out to be the King Alfred Gold Cup, a jeweled trophy. A copy of this valuable chalice is awarded to the owner of the winning horse in an annual steeplechase race, a promotional event Sir Ivan's brewery sponsors for King Alfred Gold beer. Among the prime contenders in that autumn's race is Golden Malt, Sir Ivan's own horse.

When Alexander, despite his wretched physical condition as a result of the beating, arrives in London, major problems loom, not the least of which is Sir Ivan's illness, which has heightened his daughter Patsy's concern that he might leave the brewery to his wife—Alexander's mother and her stepmother. She tells Ivan's lawyer, Oliver Grantchester, that if her father changes his will, she will contest it.

Her obsession is such that she looks upon Alexander as a rival, for both Ivan's affections and his fortune, and her paranoia is increased when Ivan gives his power of

attorney to his stepson. The action is an important move because the brewery went into bankruptcy when its missing finance director embezzled millions of pounds. Alexander, thus empowered to make all decisions concerning the fate of the brewery, also must keep the King Alfred Gold Cup and Golden Malt out of creditors' hands—for Ivan considers them his possessions, not brewery assets.

Francis thus establishes early a fundamental conflict in the novel: sibling rivalry propelled by diametrically opposed life styles and fed by a daughter's obsession with assuring her legacy. Alexander is content with the Spartan life, earning a decent income by producing golf course paintings on commission, living alone and liking it. Patsy Benchmark, born into wealth and social position, is determined to maintain both, for herself, her daughter, and her phlegmatic husband, whom she dominates and who utterly depends upon her. The granting of power of attorney to Alexander rankles her not only because it suggests her father's lack of confidence and trust, but also diminishes her power, seems to jeopardize her inheritance, and damages her pride. In fact, she fails to appreciate the seriousness of the brewery's financial status and cannot accept the fact of Alexander's selfless honesty. The trophy and horse become emblems of her distrust, and once Ivan and Alexander contrive to hide both from any predators until the day of the race, all of her suspicions and conflicts converge upon the cup and horse.

Whereas Alexander is striving to revitalize his stepfather's brewery because it is part of the family's tradition as well as a mainstay of the communal landscape, to Patsy it is just a business whose continued viability is essential for her to maintain an affluent life style. Whereas Alexander as Ivan's surrogate is trying to maintain the King Alfred Gold Cup—to him, a chalice—and Golden Malt—to him a champion thoroughbred—as part of the family's heritage, Patsy is allied with the corporate types who are concerned with gathering company assets—gold cup, money-winning racehorse, whatever—in order to regain solvency for the brewery.

And the latter group, aware of the stakes, plays hardball, including not only vicious beatings, but also murder, of which tactics Patsy is unaware.

Another element in the social dimension of the novel is a parallel action oc curring in Scotland that also involves different views of a family's patrimony.

The tide To the Hilt takes on several meanings as the novel progresses, but it refers most specifically to the gold hilt of a sword that belonged to Prince Charles Edward Stuart. In the course of his northward retreat, after he nearly succeeded in winning the British crown, Bonnie Prince Charlie took refuge in Kinloch Castle. Before departing for what became his last defeat at Culloden, he gave the hilt of his ceremonial sword to the Earl of Kinloch, his host. This ornate symbol of pomp and power (whose blade had been broken off in an accident) was passed down from the eighteenth century to the twentieth by each earl to his heir and had come to be known as the "Honour of the Kinlochs."

When the present Earl ceded his castle, its furnishings, and art treasures to the government because the costs of running it were prohibitive, he kept the solid gold,

jewel encrusted hilt, maintaining that it belonged to him, not the castle, although he permitted it to be displayed. The courts agreed with him, but after a series of thefts of valuables from the castle, the Earl hid the real hilt somewhere on his estate and replaced it with a replica. The castle's new administrators, who wanted custody of the hilt despite the courts' ruling, determined to find the real hilt.

They were joined by zealots led by an eighty-year-old retired professor of English, Dr. Zoe Lang, who fervently believed, with the castle custodians, that the Honour of the Kinlochs belonged to Scotland. The Earl and professor are determined to defend their positions, as he puts it, "to die hilt." In the event, Dr.

Zoe Lang's minions storm the area around Alexander's bothy, where they believe the Earl hid the hilt.

In this second siege of the artist's retreat, the searchers use metal detectors, spades, and pickaxes, digging and disinterring all manner of things that deserved to be left buried, despoiling the landscape, but failing to locate the hilt. The two sides, with their different attitudes— public versus private—toward tradition and heritage, seem to be at an impasse, when Alexander, in Scotland as in London, becomes pivotal. Unbeknown to Dr.

Lang, he has painted her portrait, which magically combines her present aged beauty with her dazzling charm as a young lady. When the search for the hilt takes her into the bothy, she comes upon the painting and is so affected by it ("You have made me immortal," she tells Alexander, "I will not fight you"), that she rounds up her search party and departs.

In the novel, then, Francis focuses upon how society is divided by different attitudes toward tradition and the past.

The resulting conflicts impinge upon the most basic social unit, the family, disrupting the normal order of things. Related to these concerns, and a causal factor, is the socially destructive role of money: dividing a family, destroying a career, and leading a pillar of society (and the law) to commit murder. London, seat of commerce, also is the venue of the malevolent force, in contrast to Scotland and its bucolic Monadhliath Mountains, where a traditional nobleman struggles to uphold the past, to preserve his almost unspoiled Eden, beset though it is by encroaching financial problems. Francis's ambivalence and concern about modern social conditions are brought to the forefront by his main character. Having turned his back on commerce, legacies, and the city, he ironically is the only one who (as his perceptive stepfather realizes) can orchestrate a plan to save the brewery, keep creditors at bay, and bring the fractious family together again.

# Techniques

Because Alexander Kinloch is the narrator of To the Hilt, everything that transpires in the novel is seen through his eyes. The young man's fundamental honesty and artist's sensitivity assure that events he relates and people he tells about are recorded and portrayed faithfully, accurately, and consistently; that he is a likable chap increases the effectiveness of the first person narrative point of view. The device also assures immediacy and total involvement on the part of the reader, particularly since one quickly comes to admire the narrator and empathize with him. The two violent attacks he endures at the beginning and later in the novel have greater impact upon the reader when told by the victim as he undergoes the torment, than if an omniscient or third person narrator reported them. Francis's choice of narrative technique also helps him to maintain suspense, since the reader is misled, makes missteps, confronts questions, and yearns for enlightenment along with Alexander Kinloch.

Francis adds substance to the novel by including the Scottish plot; although it does not involve murder or any real criminality, the search for Bonnie Prince Charlie's gold hilt is similar to that for the King Alfred Gold Cup, and Alexander's hiding of the national treasure parallels his moving of Golden Malt to a safe haven. The Scottish plot also has overlapping thematic concerns, including the conflicts that threaten family ties. Important, too, is the fact that it provides a second venue for the action, thereby creating an opportunity for a more complicated chase motif and inevitably increasing tension and suspense.

Another technique that Francis uses to add depth to To the Hilt is his use of the past as it impinges upon the present. Old grievances, hallowed traditions, family heirlooms, even history itself, influence relationships, spur action, and make people more insightful. Recovering from the torture that Grantchester directed at him and waiting for the climactic trophy race, Alexander is riding Golden Malt upon the Downs, perhaps at the very spot where King Alfred once rode. He recalls this singular ruler, England's only monarch to be dubbed "Great," and thinks that in his time, more than eleven hundred years ago, "villainy wore its selfsame face but nothing much else was familiar." Reconsidering the thought, Alexander reflects that ale was the one thing that had changed the least: "The brewery named for the king still flowed with the drink that had sustained and comforted his people." He concludes, too, that "the perspective of time could cool any fever if one gave it a chance" and that one could learn "that failure was bearable: make peace with the certainty that all wasn't enough."

# Themes

Plotting is the most important aspect of detective fiction, with character next in order of significance. Thematic content normally is at a minimum, except for the omnipresent conflict between good and evil, the central role of acquisitiveness as a cause of the downfall of people, and the evil or trouble that lurks behind a facade of civilized morality. All of these generic themes are present in To the Hilt, with the usual Francis variations upon them, but the third is a focal one.

Throughout the novel, the truth, people, and objects are hidden, disguised, or missing; in addition, people and things are not what they seem to be. Sir Ivan desperately wants the King Alfred Gold Cup race to be run so the public and his customers would not suspect that his brewery is insolvent and on the verge of collapse. He stashes away the real trophy for safe-keeping and to keep it from his creditors, and he makes replicas for presentation to winners. Golden Malt is removed from his regular stable and secretly transferred to a presumably safe haven to await his day at the races. Norman Quorn, a trusted paragon of rectitude as the brewery's finance director, absconds with his employer's money, aided and abetted in his crime by Oliver Grandchester, the family's longtime legal advisor and a respected social icon. Surtees Benchmark, wimpy husband of Ivan's strong-willed daughter Patsy, patronizes a prostitute whom he can dominate. There also is a ubiquitous detective that Alexander hires, primarily to spy on people. A master of disguise, the private eye (who works alone but calls himself Young and Uttley) is a refreshing leitmotif throughout the novel, surfacing unexpectedly in different identities of both sexes. Providing comic relief, he also helps Alexander pursue his cause in a variety of ways.

Another prevalent theme revolves about Alexander's personal conflict. Long ago having turned his back on a businessman's life in the city, he covets his freedom and individuality, and he revels in the simple artist's life he enjoys in the highlands (albeit he paints "nice-looking golf scenes" which sell faster than he can produce them). Duty to family takes precedence, however, so he reluctantly assumes the mantle of surrogate patriarch, negotiating bankruptcy relief with bankers and a solvency practitioner, mollifying creditors, and trying to calm his displaced half sister. That he succeeds not only in saving the brewery but also in restoring the disrupted family can be attributed to his intelligence and artist's sensitivity.

Francis could intend to show that a disinterested party, even an asocial loner, can bring a beneficial perspective to such problems. On another front, many of these circumstances and thematic motifs suggest decadence, a society in decline.

Even Alexander's doting uncle, the likable Earl of Kinloch, is struggling against the tide of history as he strives to preserve the remnants of his family's historic heritage. And Dr. Zoe Lang, who has "a comet tail of distinguished qualifications after her name," loses her professorial judgment in fanatical pursuit of a quixotic cause.

As epigraph to the novel, Francis uses the Anglo-Saxon poet Bede's "Death Song," which is engraved on the King Alfred Gold Cup: "Before that sudden journey no one is wiser in thought than he needs to be, in considering, before his departure, what will be adjudged to his soul, of good or evil, after his death-day."

The reckless actions of most people in To the Hilt support the Venerable Bede's adage, with the notable exceptions being Alexander, his dying stepfather, and the Earl of Kinloch, rare forces of stability in an otherwise uncertain, and sometimes dysfunctional world.

# Key Questions

Although all Francis novels include horse racing, the sport is not necessarily an essential or organic part of every plot, but by focusing upon such things as its practices, rules, and code of honor, Francis presents racing as a microcosm, a world in itself, and thus a standard by which other social units—family, commercial, political—can be measured. In other words, he does not limit his scope by utilizing a racing background; rather he uses it for much larger purposes. As New York Times critic John Leonard put it: "Not to read Dick Francis because you don't like horses is like not reading Dostoevsky because you don't like God" (1981). A useful start for group discussions would be a consideration of the thematic and symbolic function of the racing motif in To the Hilt.

1. A critic has described Francis's racing thrillers as seemingly modern but at heart exponents of Golden Age of Mysteries (between World Wars I and II) storytelling. To what extent do you agree with this judgment about Francis in general and To the Hilt specifically?

2. What is the purpose of the violence against the hero in To theHilt and other Francis novels? To increase tension? For titillation? To strengthen the hero's resolve?

3. What role does Alexander Kinloch's talent as an artist play in advancing the plot of To theHilt?

4. Many Francis novels focus upon the seamier side of the horse racing establishment. Is there any such focus in this book? What is the relative importance of racing in this novel compared with In the Frame, the other Francis book with an artist as hero?

5. A reviewer of To the Hilt wrote that although the novel opens well, it "begins to lose steam, rather than building off the promise of its opening chapters." To what extent do you agree or disagree with this criticism?

6. About the secondary characters in the book, a reviewer complained that it became hard to tell the difference between some of them, claiming that their malicious and greedy traits started to become indistinguishable. Do you see this as a weakness of the novel?

7. How credibly does Francis develop motivation in the novel to explain the actions of characters?

8. In many Francis novels, the hero at some point becomes the aggressor, usually for self-protection and retaliation. To what extent does this happen with Alexander Kinloch?

9. The absence or breakdown of trust is a recurring motif in Francis novels.

How does it function in To the Hilt?

# Literary Precedents

Like other Francis novels, To the Hilt is as much an adventure story as it is a detective novel or whodunit, and therefore it has a kinship with Ian Fleming's James Bond stories, which Francis has acknowledged as having read. His portrait of Alexander Kinloch, a solitary hero pursued by villains, is in the tradition of John Buchan, whose Thirty-Nine Steps (1915), also set in a sparsely populated area of Scotland, is a classic of the crime genre, and Geoffrey Household, whose Rogue Male (1939) and A Rough Shoot (1951) follow the Buchan pattern. There also are echoes in To the Hilt of John Wellcome's espionage novels—such as Run for Cover (1958), Stop at Nothing (1960), and Hell Is Where You Find It (1968), which include sophisticated chases, the hero as narrator, and horse racing, and multiple venues.

# Related Titles

Although Sid Halley and Kit Fielding are the only Francis detective-heroes who appear in more than one novel, each of his narrator-heroes is an admirable man with whom the reader quickly feels comfortable. For this reason, as well as the recurring presence of horse racing elements and various plot devices previously discussed, all Francis novels have obvious links to each other. One that has a special relationship to To the Hilt is In the Frame (1976), whose narrator-hero, Charles Todd, is an artist, a painter of equestrian subjects, whose first words are "I stood on the outside of disaster, looking in."

Like Kinloch, Todd reluctantly becomes caught up in a life-threatening situation for which neither temperament nor train ing has prepared him.

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