

MAY 6, 1968LOUIS M. PRINCE

High on the list of subjects to be avoided at the Literary Club are those which invade the spheres in which certain of our members are expert. Few of us would dare write about Medicine, Architecture, or the history of Lytle Park, for instance, except the experts themselves.

I come, therefore, with humility and trepidation; an understandable combination, I should think, because my paper is about horses. The excuse is simply that I am very fond of horses, just as a great many people are, their good taste being evidenced in the profusion of such diverse paraphernalia as horse-shoe shaped jewelry, fox hunting prints, stories like Black Beauty, or the Daily Racing Form, which, indeed, is referred to by some as the Bible.

Let me begin by posing an inflammatory question: What is it about horses that makes men want to lose so much money?

The answer has more to do with the nature of the man than of the beast. The same answer probably satisfies this question too: What is it about horses that makes men want to drink so much? The same, except that the desire to lose money on purpose must have been born with the income tax deduction. Drinking is sometimes brought on by the income tax, but was certainly not originated thereby.

If the foregoing is not clear, we need not delay. Only women ask those questions, so there is nothing to be gained by answering them here.

When we think about losing money on horses, thoroughbred racing is usually the glamorous and exciting image which comes to mind. Trotting races, horse shows, and rodeos have their fans, but the thoroughbreds command by far the greatest share of public attention.

The mistaken idea that almost everyone loses money when they become involved with race horses is widely held, outside this clubhouse. Personally acquainted with eminent horsemen-by-avocation herein, our members may achieve a more or less sophisticated

racing enjoyment level, depending on the degree of involvement undertaken.

At Forest Retreat we will see one of the leading thoroughbred breeding establishments of the world. With the imagined approval of its owners, some of us have placed a wager now and then on the animal of our choice. So we will see and, I hope, have experienced the fact that financial success is the reward for skill and risk of capital.

Obviously thousands of people in and ancillary to the racing industry make their living from the sport. Isn't it comforting to know that your two dollar bet is helping to keep these people off the welfare roles? Perhaps the lowest on the ladder is the "stooper" who stoops surreptitiously in the grandstand litter, searching for a winning ticket which someone else may have discarded by mistake. The "stooper" hopes to find the windfall before the track police find him, since his activity is strictly illegal.

For those of us who fancy a participation further than the pari-mutuel window, purchase of a horse might be considered. The amount of capital required varies with the class of racing, which, in turn, varies with each individual race track. At Saratoga, for example, one attends a race meet for the finest horses in America; at River Downs, in contrast, the opposite is true. The fact that River Downs is low enough to be under the river at times is symbolic, since it is difficult for a horse to step downward from there. I apologize to the track management only for excessive candor, having participated there myself a few years ago.

I will never forget the strange experiences I had with three different horses that season, which began in this way:

After paying a purely social call at a friend's horse farm in Virginia one Spring, just as the Piedmont was bursting into bloom, I found myself quite unexpectedly the owner of a three year old filly. My friend's interest was confined to good horses, and the filly, something of a mishap among the progeny of the farm, was destined only for the lowest price claiming races.

A carrot colored chestnut of sturdy stature bordering on coarseness the filly was at least one generation away from breeding of any consequence. Her disposition, sly if not mean, was typified by her readiness to bite anyone within reach quite painfully, and to look utterly astonished when struck smartly on the neck in punishment. Her record in several races, at an obscure track in West Virginia, indicated that she was not the sort of animal which could conceivably increase in value except through a most extraordinary run of luck.

Who am I to exclude luck from the racing scene, I reasoned? Might her sturdiness not proclaim soundness? Might her oddities of temperament not disclose agility if not speed? The price had been right, but what appealed to me most, strangely enough, was her name, Gone Tomorrow. Just a fleeting glimpse of the backstretch was all I had in mind.

As I drove home from Virginia, towing Gone Tomorrow in a rented trailer, a piece of advice from a revered Kentucky horseman echoed in my ears: "Never buy a cheap filly". I had forgotten this.

The reasoning behind the advice, as I reconstruct it, is not the perversity of the female, but rather that there is usually a scarcity of suitable races. At any race track it is hard to win a race that isn't being run; and later on, a cheap mare can only be a liability in breeding. It occurred to me as we wound through the mountains, that if our relationship were a short one, and she really should be gone tomorrow, we might both be better off.

But she did not vanish during the night. Upon arrival at River Downs, I entrusted her to a trainer who was thoroughly at home with horses of her degree of racing proficiency. There was a short unsatisfactory interval during which Gone Tomorrow hollowed out her niche of mediocrity. She ran eighth or worse in fields of ten colts and geldings. Several times, then, I released her from the trainer's custody.

I had discovered meantime that I could train Gone Tomorrow myself. The requirements for obtaining a trainer's license at River Downs are minimal, the only significant one being that the applicant must have a

horse to train. This new arrangement, while necessitating an early arrival at the track and a few pleasant chores before breakfast, allowed me to participate in greater depth. I also was able to save the trainer's fee of eight dollars a day. I fed and exercised Gone Tomorrow myself each morning, and for a small stipend obtained the services of a part time groom to clean the stall and to feed her lunch and supper. At least a hundred other horses at the track were being trained by their owners in the same way.

Being somewhat younger than, I settled into the routine comfortably, and about every ten days I chose a race, usually the worst on the program, in which she could display her prowess. The same jockey rode her each time, and as the season wore on we discovered that her best efforts resulted when she stayed a few lengths behind the pace, and at a certain distance from the finish line was struck once with the bat on her left hindquarter. She would then spurt forward alarmingly and nearly win. If she was hit on the right side there was no effect; if hit more than once she would sulk and slow down to a canter. Better results might have been attained if an electric shock had been administered along with the crack of the bat, but such auxiliary equipment is frowned upon by the State Racing Commission, which maintains a desultory vigilance.

By the middle of the summer a race came along in which all the other entries were very bad indeed. It was obvious even in the Racing Form that Gone Tomorrow would have to win. Consequently in the betting she became the favorite. Shortly before the race our regular jockey became ill from something he had consumed previously and was forced to cancel his rides. This did not seem to be a misfortune, however, because, on the spur of the moment, I was able to obtain the services of the leading jockey of the meet, Bill Lucas, as a substitute. When the substitution was announced over the loudspeakers, the odds went down further, to almost even money.

Honored by Mr. Lucas' presence as I saddled Gone Tomorrow in the paddock, I gave him the instructions deferentially about just batting once, please, left handed.

"But I don't use the bat left handed. Never could", exclaimed Mr. Lucas, looking at me with astonishment that I shouldn't know his idiosyncrasies. "I don't reckon I could stay on a horse if I held the whip in my left hand; I'd lose my balance," he added, with a friendly grin.

Stunned by this development, I just stared at him. It was incomprehensible that a professional jockey, particularly the one who annually won the most races at the track, was unable to use his bat ambidextrously. Every baseball player is not a switch hitter, but every jockey must be able to switch his bat, often during the race.

The rest of the afternoon was far from memorable. Gone Tomorrow was third from last, the results being greeted with boos and catcalls. Apparently a large contingent believed that the race had been fixed. Lots of money was lost, but I like to think that it served them right, because they were betting on a sure thing.

Ten days later another race came up in which Gone Tomorrow got a second chance. Again the company was miserable and she was odds-on favorite. But this time the regular jockey was in the saddle. At the sixteenth pole she was a neck behind the leader who was fading fast. At this point the bat should have descended with a crack on her left rearend, but nothing happened at all. No crack, no bat. Sensing that something was amiss, Gone Tomorrow slowed down abreast of the tired horse beside her. She finished a polite second. As he dismounted, the jockey seemed genuinely contrite.

"What happened to the bat?"

"I dropped it," replied he gloomily.

This time the contingent which thought the race had been fixed included me.

Coincidentally, it was fascinating to watch Dancer's Image make his final move this past Saturday, and to learn that Ussery had also dropped his bat. Any similarity between the events ends here.

Following these two disasters, a little of my enthusiasm died. But it was soon rekindled by a long distance telephone call from a friend whose horses were running at Arlington Park, one of the better race tracks of the country. He described a horse of his which he thought would be a useful addition to my stable. The horse, moreover, was already in a van on its way to me, care of River Downs.

I was receiving an ancient gelding far into the evening of his racing career, it was revealed. His name, Don't Move, did not sound promising, even though I was assured that he had won good races at good tracks in times gone by. My friend suggested that it might be profitable to extend Don't Move's career with a race or two at River Downs, where cripples congregate. With a smothered remark about unsound knees, he hung up.

The financial arrangements were vague, but he had said something about letting him know Long Distance Collect when Don't Move was ready for a race.

When the van arrived and the door was opened, Don't Move surveyed River Downs with his head held high in arrogance. As I led him down the ramp and toward his stall, I saw that he was dreadfully lame, so I called the veterinarian at once.

Except for the lameness he looked strong and quite well made; at least smatterings of good breeding could be expected in his pedigree, I thought. Being quite large, he would, in better years, have fitted beautifully into an English hunting scene.

The veterinarian, after examining the pitifully enlarged front knees, prescribed cortisone and rest. After a week he would want Don't Move galloped slowly so that he could see the knees in action.

So, for a week I walked Don't Move for miles around the stable area at the end of a lead shank. Ample feed and vitamins along with the cortisone began to take effect. His coat brightened, and his arrogance became excitement, so that it seemed as if he wanted a race. His knees were permanently enlarged, however, and he still was noticeably lame.

On the seventh day we were ready for the vet. It was an unusually cool morning and a fog from the river hung over the race track. Since I was accustomed to galloping Gone Tomorrow myself each morning for exercise, I mounted Don't Move in similar fashion; he jogged expectantly through the stable area toward the track. I had not considered how long it might have been since he had last set foot on a race track.

When we reached the opening onto the track proper, Don't Move stood stock still for a moment, ears pricked forward taking in the muffled sounds of horses galloping. Nearby steaming horses loomed out of the mist heading back to the stables from their morning workouts. A stimulating smell of sweat, manure and liniment was mixed with the river fog.

Then, laying his ears back with a snort of exhilaration, Don't Move bounded forward in a great leap.

Clumsily grabbing his mane just in time to avoid being left behind in midair, I knew at once I had undertaken more than I could handle. Lamé or not, Don't Move was intoxicated with the feel, the sound, and the smell of the race track. I discovered as we picked up speed that I could neither slow him down nor steer him. The reins in my hand being of no use at all, I would have to try to stay on board merely as a passenger.

Lunging onward, we just missed a rear end collision in the fog with a slower horse. Consequently I tried to edge my horse over toward the inside rail where the fast workouts are always conducted. The slow gallopers by custom stay on the outside.

But Don't Move, much more experienced than I, knew the custom well enough. Anticipating my intention he dovesharp leftward. This maneuver threw us directly in front of another horse which was just extending itself for a dash down the stretch.

As we flew forward, Don't Move swerved in time to avoid running down each horse as it came into view, and I managed to stay on by clinging to the saddle and his flowing mane. More and more horses were left bucking and rearing behind us. Curses and foul language

receded with them.

"If I can only hold on 'til we circle the track once," I told myself, "he'll probably pull up of his own accord at the finish line." Indeed, Gone Tomorrow in her occasional exuberance had gotten away from me, but she had always stopped dead at the finish line. She knew the exact spot where she could stop running without incurring displeasure.

So, passing the grandstand on the second approach to the finish line, I tugged experimentally at the reins. Don't Move responded with a toss of his head as he sped around the Clubhouse Turn - again.

Most other horses had left the track by this time. My strength was nearly exhausted, but Don't Move's pace did not seem to slacken. A quarter of a mile further he jumped suddenly sideways to avoid something in the mist I couldn't see. I lost a stirrup iron, and a little further he changed leads roughly, an exhibition of dressage which caused me to step off. I landed on my head turning somersaults in the dirt, and Don't Move disappeared into the fog.

Helmet askew but unhurt, I walked ignominiously off the track and pondered Don't Move's potentialities. After he was caught by some outriders and brought back to me, I saw that he had become docile and was scarcely breathing hard at all. With considerable resentment since I was still out of breath myself, I made up my mind to retaliate. On the strength of this workout, I entered him in a race to be run the next day.

The track management meanwhile, ever in need of filling races, ignored the complaints about our morning's gallop.

Next day, after the veterinarian had given an appropriate but supposedly legal injection, Don't Move limped into the paddock. His Past Performances, listed in the Racing Form, showed a creditable record in better races at better tracks, but nothing at all over the last six months. Understandably the odds board indicated that Don't Move was being overlooked in the betting. The race was the second half of the Daily Double.

While I saddled him, I recalled that conventional training requires weeks and weeks of work building up to the first race. Don't Move had completed only one workout, a very strange one at that. But it was too late to scratch him. I decided to limit the family wager to one two-dollar win ticket.

After boosting the jockey up, I bought the ticket and climbed to a good place in the stands. From there I saw Don't Move limp placidly into the starting gate. A moment later the gates flew open and they were off.

Don't Move was a leisurely last out of the gate, and he dropped steadily back as the leading horses reached the turn. I did not need my binoculars to follow him since he was all by himself well in the rear, where he stayed all the way around the turn.

Confused by the angle of the oncoming pack as they entered the stretch, I was unable to see just where Don't Move decided to move. But a slackening of the cheers, and finally almost dead silence in the stands, alerted me in time. In disbelief I watched a streak of red and yellow, our racing colors, come up on the outside. We were fourth, then third, then second. And with a wild charge, which seemed nearly to unseat the jockey, we sped past the leader, and the finish line, in front by a head.

The board flashed our number up, but the good news failed to bring the usual applause. I was absorbed myself in the fact that the jockey could not seem to stop the horse. It seemed probably that Don't Move would run around the track a second time, when a mounted official finally managed with some difficulty to grab his bridle and lead him back to the Winner's Circle.

Most noticeable in the photograph is the look of bewilderment on the jockey's face.

As Don't Move limped back to the stable, we collected \$227.50 for the family two-dollar ticket, which had suddenly become my wife's. The Daily Double, which we did not hold, still stands as one of the highest in River Downs history.

The friend at Arlington Park, whom I had forgotten to notify by Long Distance Collect, was more than disgruntled; but his bookie stayed out of the red.

Owner-trainers at a track like River Downs are sometimes called "gyps". It could be short for "gypsy", but, more likely, some racing fans first used the nickname when they considered themselves "gypped".

Long before Labor Day in my long hot summer at the Downs, the "gyps" had begun to leave, for one reason or another. The Racing Secretary was having trouble rounding up enough entries from the cripples remaining to fill up the daily program of eight or nine races. At times the calibre of racing deteriorated in these last weeks to depths beyond conception.

Toward the end, by special request of the Racing Secretary, I ran each of my horses twice in three days. We were moderately successful but the horses were very tired. The track management paid the jockey fees and thanked me cordially for my cooperation. They assured me that I would be more than welcome in future years, an invitation which, respecting the wishes of my family, I have not yet accepted.

Of the "gyps" who stayed to the end, many were nearly bankrupt. Never well advised financially, and with a minimum of resources, they could only break even by winning one of the paltry purses at intervals. To make a living it was necessary for them to go to the betting window as well, with all their available cash. Frequently, as we have seen, an expected win might come in out of the money, so that their losses were often compounded.

So, in the twilight of the season, there were understandably dozens of horses which could be bought for the price of the feed bill, as low as \$40. Included among the prospective purchasers on the grounds were representatives from the best canned dog food companies.

Always on the lookout for a riding horse for the winter, I became interested in a very large quiet horse which was for sale at a very modest price. A three year old gelding, the horse had raced only a few

times, showing a decided lack of aptitude for the sport. I looked at him several times, liked him and shipped him right home.

During the very afternoon of his arrival at home, I tried him out by riding him through the woods near our house. He acted as though he had never been anything but a quiet old hack. He certainly did not behave like a young race horse. On the way he even jumped most promisingly over some low fallen tree trunks. Affectionate and evidently intelligent, he was, by nighttime, accepted as part of our family. We still call him Hot Springs, a pseudonym we chose later.

Next morning, the first in three months that I was not at the track, I received an excited telephone call from the Racing Secretary. The final program of the meet on the following day, Labor Day, was, he confessed, disastrously short of horses.

Through some extraordinary circumstance, Latonia had just begun its race meet, so that there were two race tracks operating in our metropolitan area at the same time. The New York Racing Commission never feels that there are enough people or horses for two tracks to run at once in New York, but this was Cincinnati. To get customers, one track planned to start at ten in the morning with such inducements as free tickets and trapeze acts, while the other would give away an automobile.

We horsemen were pleased to find ourselves the center of a struggle between the two rival racing secretaries who were trying to fill the races with any kind of a horse that could walk to the starting gate.

Over the early morning telephone, therefore, the River Downs secretary proposed to me that at the track's expense they would van Hot Springs back to the track, shoe him, supply a groom and a jockey, if I would only let him run in one of their Labor Day races. Since I had nothing to lose except possibly the horse, I accepted.

After he had been returned to River Downs, I checked on what kind of races Hot Springs had run previously. I found that he had never finished a race.

"Bolted", "ran out", and "wheeled" were the words used to describe his three past performances. He was also a little difficult to saddle in the paddock, I was told. A lead pony was required to escort him briskly around the paddock while the trainer ran alongside throwing the saddle cloth, saddle and girth over him as the opportunity presented itself.

I did not wait to hear how the jockey might mount; instead I notified the Racing Secretary that in addition to the van, the blacksmith, the groom and the jockey, he would also be required to supply a trainer for Hot Springs. His compliance made my presence agreeably unnecessary, so I left town that evening for an unplanned stay at the Homestead in Hot Springs, Virginia. My family was most appreciative, noting on the way down that some of the best vacations begin on the spur of the moment.

Upon my return I was not surprised to hear recounted a series of misfortunes concerning our horse, Hot Springs. The substitute trainer suffered injuries in the paddock while throwing the jockey up into the saddle. When Hot Springs was finally forced into the starting gate by the combined efforts of all the starting personnel, the jockey, terrified, was battered about inside. As the bell rang and the gates sprung open, Hot Springs made a very good start, on top, but unfortunately without the jockey, who was still holding on to the overhead railings inside the gate.

Hot Springs, free at last, ran a beautiful race for the first half mile; but the performance was marred as he returned to his stable by fly-jumping over the outside rail, more than four feet high.

The management was loathe to refund any bets, because even though Hot Springs did not finish the race, he had certainly begun it. The Racing Secretary had at least filled the race; I presume he was satisfied, because I have not heard from him since.

It is often the best of race horses that break down. The bad ones stay sound much longer; some say its because they never try.

Hot Springs came home to us in perfect condition,

and he remains to this day a good horse for jumping fences and cross country riding to hounds, sports which he appears to enjoy. His behaviour on the race track was a great contrast. When criticizing or complimenting the intelligence of a horse such as this, we should remember after all that a horse's brain is only the size of a walnut.

Don't Move likewise came home. He was turned out to pasture for two years during which time his knees came down to a reasonable size. Fat, lazy, and very old, he subsequently became the pet of a little girl from whom he learned to accept nothing but nourishment and loving kindness. He still meanders over the bridle trails, seldom exerting himself to more than a slow jog. The girl could probably manage him with silk threads instead of reins, as the saying goes, so responsive is he to her commands.

Gone Tomorrow I sold to a Kentucky horseman, from Newport. Last summer even at her advanced age she was still racing in the same kind of race, week after week. Apparently still sound, she is a proven model of mediocrity. It was she who introduced me to racing so I do feel some affection for her. I am sorry in the knowledge that because of her endlessly bad record and poor pedigree, she cannot undergo a traditional cure for bad female disposition: That is, she will never be covered by a good stallion.

Louis M. Prince

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