Proprieties and Vagaries

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A Defense of Horse Racing

The Voice of the people is the voice of Hearst. One day among the sentiments supplied by his satellitic writers I was halted by a moral essay on horse racing. The author declared that "some people have low tastes and others have refined tastes," going on into a monograph on playing the races as a prime example of low tastes.

Here we have a

... vulgar amusement because it brings the player into contact with low and, in most cases, vicious people; it must be done surreptitiously, its purpose is to gain something on a gamble, the races are not always honest and the whole atmosphere of the transaction is usually sordid and unclean. Those who "play the races" regularly have low taste.
And this gamble is worse than other gambles. For you "know by instinct" that card games are in better taste than the races. Not only is the poker-player estimable in comparison but so also is the stock-gambler, "the Wall street magnet who risks millions in a stock deal." This is true especially since, "if both pursuits are immoral, the Wall street immorality does not bring one into contact with such terrible people as those who are interested in horse racing."

The day after the appearance of this essay the same paper in an editorial expressed the hope as almost too good to be hoped "that the police possibly have been made aware of the disturbance of business and the occasional defalcations caused by gambling on horse races," and that "we may, conceivably, be on the way of getting rid of the whole brood."

It would not be easy to find passages more tempting to criticism, and, even among the rapid wisdoms of daily syndication, more open to criticism, logical, factual, implicative. But my interest here is apologetic and encomiastic—not exegetically critical; the quotation a text not an object. For I am one of "those who play the races regularly"; and though I am not moved to attempt refutation of my "low tastes," I am moved to a bit of comment on the races, playing the races, and some of the philosophic suggestions of those activities and of the defenses thereof as well as the attacks upon them.

Now I am just a college teacher and not a "Wall street magnate who risks millions." Indeed I confess I
have never played the market and have had a sort of prejudice against the market as compared with the track, as a possible game for me, because it takes too much money; and as a game considered from the theoretical view of ethics because it does not display the variety, the color, and because it involves an element both of economic mischief and of hypocrisy in gambling with what is not primarily a game, namely the operating capital and consumption goods of the world. It is doubtless a good game, but its pawns have other uses and importance; and as a game it is not as good as racing.

It will be seen that my philosophic defense takes racing as a game. Those who find therein sufficient damnation unless it can be shown the game is needed for future projects may dismiss the present defense forthwith. My thesis is that the life of an actual man in this world is frequently, not always, better if it includes playing the races, and better irrespective of whether he thereby increases his or anyone’s wealth, position or material comfort; that this world is better in the eye of God with racing in it than without, and so not because God therein foresees more money in the banks tomorrow but because what he sees is pleasanter.

Racing is actual and therefore not immaculate. It has been worse. It may be made worse. Some real trepidation there might be lest the races become one of those good things made bad by attitude—as the saloon in too many instances became what its enemies said it was, as witchcraft may have become what Christianity reviled
it as being, and as how many lesser things and perhaps other greater and more essential and more gracious things than drink have been contaminated by opinionatively attributed shame.

If our Hearst author were by some curious fatality to find himself playing the races, he would do so with a social shame and a troubled conscience; there would be reticence if not subterfuge and even the temptation to lie; incertitude or hypocrisy might creep into the limpidity of his daily exhortation; from it all might develop bravado or shamelessness or hopelessness of salvation or permanent disease of conscience. I know of a man, respectable successful businessman he was, who went one afternoon to Pimlico but was miserable for fear he would be seen, especially be seen making his bet. Fortunately he had the social and business judgment not to continue in the way, and although a little later he tricked his employees and his bank in an ingeniously crooked device he did it in a large, almost Wall-Street, manner and apparently was not ashamed.

Now our columnist does not mention the official justification of racing—the improvement of the breed. And though there is no particular reason why he should, it is a pity he did not; for then we should have had the pitifullest aspect of the defense along with the illogic and falsity of the attack. Not that I deny what the protagonists of racing always urge on this subject. It is true. The testimony of military authorities is conclusive that if you want the army to have the best supply of horses
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you need the thoroughbred, and the thoroughbred is the product of racing. And the services of the thoroughbred and of current racing to the farmers is undeniable. Yet this argument is not only insincere (though not dishonest) since it expounds what is not the actual motive of those who for various motives maintain racing, but, at best, strikes one like the argument that urges the future lawyer or physician to spend years in Latin grammar and reading Homer so that he may be able to use the tags of Latin and Greek that still officiate in law and medicine.

And yet I think that, differently considered, the improvement of the breed is, surely not the only, but a large and basic and proper value justifying racing and not to be achieved otherwise. And why? Not because it speeds the plow; but simply because the thoroughbred is one of the most effective and beautiful things in the world. And I think if those who honestly support racing were to pass beyond their desperate military and agricultural utilities and speak of the joy which comes or may come from the thoroughbred horse, distinguishable from and additional to the joy of the race or of the gamble, they would have a juster argument, though perhaps not so weighty with legislatures.

And if the thoroughbred has a value in himself, he adds to that value in the race. For this came he into the world; for this his breed has been improved, and here he finds and shows the Aristotelian virtue, the worthy performance of one's own activity, the function of one's essence.
And in his virtue is his joy and a joy of the beholder. The bear may object to his baiting or the bull to the ring; the cock’s spurs are an episode and a pervertible instrument; to the human gladiator his contest is a profession; the thoroughbred is a racer and, except for the seldom one which by bad nature, bad treatment, or bad fortune becomes sour, he loves to race. Did you watch June Flower get away from the gate during her brief unbeaten career? Did you see Exterminator the day he won the Philadelphia Handicap at Havre de Grace? After six years of arduous campaigning against the best over all tracks and with high weights, he cantered down to the paddock, and when he heard the greeting to him which ran down the grandstand from the eighth pole to the clubhouse he turned and danced like a two-year-old. And then he came back from the paddock in parade and to the post the calm concentrated champion, oblivious of the crowd, watchful of the starter and the tapes, patient but wary of the impatient youngsters he was to beat.

Is it disputable that thoroughbreds running make the best of races? Is it contemptible that the race is perhaps men’s oldest dramatic interest? And if the stage as the figure for human life is a commonplace, so too is the racecourse, which in Thomas Hobbes is developed as a figure with splendid rhetoric and becomes more than a figure. At the racecourse is not artful simulation of humanity; in this is its great lack of the drama’s richness and possibility; but in its defect is virtue of purity and authenticity. Here, too, is relief from self; joy of
spectacle; endeavor made objective; catharsis by fear and pity; not only in shape and color and contest, spectacle and comedy; but also in achievement and frustration and tragedy.

Were you at Pimlico when Exterminator was defeated for his third Cup? Two miles and a quarter, the longest race of the year. Johnson is down with appendicitis; who will ride Exterminator? A little apprentice boy is put up; he has a string of successes at the meeting; this is the climax and the proudest moment of his life. But isn’t it foolish to trust him with a champion and in a cup race? The Big Hoss knows, he knows more than most jockeys anyway; he has won for many different riders. But one thing he cannot know; how far he is expected to travel; he has won this season at all distances from six furlongs up. Off they go and away at a suicidal pace. This apprentice’s only idea is to get to the front and stay there. To do this he must outrun Exodus, a crazy sprinter with a feather on his back. A half-mile, mile, mile and a half, Exterminator on the outside, head and head. Even I in the stand without a watch, I who never rode a race and have no judgment of pace, see what is happening. A mile and five eighths; Exterminator raises and drops his tail once, he stumbles and falters momentarily, then strides on, steadily and with the rhythm of perfected technique, but much more slowly and with evident painfulness. The heavy weight and the great distance today, the heavy weights and distances of unresting years behind, focused in the frantic driving pace of
this two-minutes, have finally conquered even his iron legs. But he has already put Exodus away. Exodus swerves, wobbles, and as his rider tries to pull him up goes quite crazy, bolts to the outside fence, staggers almost backward on the far turn. Captain Alcock and Paul Jones who have been kept far out of it by decent riding are now moving up. In the stretch they pass Exterminator still grimly drawing to the goal which is just beyond his leadership.

And did you see Billy Kelly beat Sir Barton and Mad Hatter in the fall of 1920? It was, I think, the finest race Sir Barton ever ran, a monument to the courage of the great thoroughbred and to the greatness of courage, though the time was slow.

In addition to the horses and their race as immediate perception are all the associations of each, the traditions of the race if it be a "classic," the personality, the history, the ancestry of the horses, and beyond these the jockeys, the trainers, the owners, all the human and institutional background. An erudite and acute professor once said to me that the race track was the most tiresome and uninteresting of places of supposed entertainment, that no one not fevered with gambling could go to enjoy it, that he had been there once. Well, there is such a thing as willingness of imagination, as knowing what's what. Packed in the moments between bugle and red board there is a wealth of experiential incident to fill a professor's course. And between races ("after one race" my professor said "one just waits half an hour to see
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another); before and after and between races, there is
the air and the spectacle, the faces and colors of the
jockey-house, the paddock and the variously individual
horses there, the smells and the sounds, the consult­
tations in the stalls, the saddling, the instructions to the
riders, the paddock call and the call to the post; and
always the crowd with its types and peculiars, touts and
come-ons, veterans and new enthusiasts and casuals,
handicappers and system players and followers of “in­
formation,” the crowd with its wisdom and its supersti­
tion and its veering fashions in opinion, its amazing
shrewdness and amazing human sheepishness.

All this aside from betting. The two most memorable
and remembered races I have seen were without financial
interest to me. And a number of times I have got to­
gether enough cash to take me to the track when I could
not get wherewithal to bet. But I have no desire to leave
the betting out. It is not merely that it heightens all that
I have spoken of, heightens its color and intensity as
present experience and that it is indeed to the betting
we owe the spurring on of our lazy faculties to the
astonishing knowledge we have about horses and races;
gambling may be worth while in its own right, and the
race track offers the finest of all gambles.

Just why is gambling looked upon so darkly? I know,
of course, that it seems generally supposed that “money
is gambled away.” So our elder advisers tell us, and so
the newspapers imply when they recount after each de­
falcation that the errant cashier played the thousands or
hundreds of thousands on the races. The only logical solution of this cashier anomaly is either that for every reported case there are ten or twenty cashiers playing someone else’s money on the races and not losing so extraordinarily or else that there is something peculiar about a cashier which makes him able to pick so appallingly many losers.

The money that goes into a bet must come out somewhere not as blue smoke. To be sure when we play in a game which is cut, it behooves us to be aware thereof; and the races are cut. But the cut of the mutuels is very small (and should be smaller), and we should not object to paying for the upkeep of the institution we use. But in the end there are, I think, just two real objections to gambling (and I do not deny that they are legitimate but do deny they are conclusive): that it uses time but is nonproductive; that it is an intoxication and dangerous.

We need not dwell upon the extreme importance given to accomplishment, and especially economic accomplishment. We may admit the good of productive accomplishment and we may admit that pure gambling, though it almost as frequently as not increases the individual’s money, does so only by taking from someone else; it creates no capital, and hence from a social point of view is waste of capital or of time that might have produced capital.

But just so far the gambling-place might claim to be little, if any, worse off than many another more repu-
table place—than the theater or the tennis court or even the grocery store. The trouble is that from the productive point of view gambling has peculiar defects or dangers as compared with the other places. When one goes to the theater there is on the one hand some check upon continuance in growing tired (though theater-going itself easily becomes a habit-drug) and on the other hand there is no delusion but that the expense is definite and steady. Gambling carries the hope and possibility of paying its own way or more, thus tending to set itself up as itself instrumental to direct money-getting that is at the same time not capital-making; and its intoxicating power is much more direct and constant. The first of these aspects of gambling, although it validates the social distrust of its waste of time, is in itself for the individual a good, and it probably makes gambling, considered just quantitatively and despite the violent superstition to the contrary, the cheapest of all the world's amusements. Note that to the basic charge that playing the races is gambling and hence nonproductive the reply is that all goodness in the end is nonproductive; that doubtless much time is spent over form-sheets and before mutuel windows which might be better spent but that the same is true of sleeping, eating, listening to lectures, and reading the Bible; that all those employed in carrying on racing, from the newspaper selectors to the judges in the stand, are productively employed in the same sense that the philosopher and the contortionist and the farmer are: that of those who only play the
races the one real and complete case is against the professional gambler who plays the races and does nothing else, and that even this almost mythical personage is not to be too harshly judged even from the merely social point of view, since no one knows how bad a preacher or lawyer is spared the world in his being a gambler.

The question of intoxication, inebriation, ecstasy, whatever word may be chosen, is too large to be dealt with here. But it is at least safe to say that the case against it has never been sufficiently made out, on the utilitarian grounds that seem the chief modern basis for its derogation or on any other, to justify complete taboo. And if we are prepared to oust it root and branch, then art and religion at least must go with racing and drink. I would not maintain that the possession of an intoxicative aspect is sufficient justification of anything. I am not a morphia-addict. For one thing it would interfere with my playing the races. But I am persuaded that the fact that race track gambling may intoxicate is not condemnation but merit, and that among intoxications racing may hold up its head. There is a certain surreptitiousness, though surprisingly little, about it, and the badness which goes with that: but herein the fault is of the laws, not of the races.

Few persons place bets who have not sometimes been in the open-air magic and imaginatively lingering atmosphere of the track, almost none who does not have some knowledge of the actual animals and more-than-monetary interest in their performances. The conductor
and the waiter who leave their fifty-cent bets with a runner, the dentist and the lawyer and the merchant who call in over the phone at lunchtime, even the packer who takes a bit of his employer’s sacred time to find out the fate of his hunch or his tip or his handicap selection—are they all in the grip of a fatal and debasing debauch?

They swear at the horses and that not seldom. There is nothing more intricately, perfidiously, and inexhaustibly exasperating. But there are many who have no profits to show who are more than secretly grateful, and many more who should be. I came out from the first day’s racing at Bowie in April and on the train took a seat beside an old gentleman who presently burst into speech. He had gone broke after the fifth race. For forty-one years he had played the races regularly every spring. For forty-one years he had lost. That was not so bad; he always hoped he might win, but he did not really expect it. Every year he worked through the winter and put aside a little capital, then started in the spring and played as long as he could. Usually he could last almost through the season; but he was great on doubling up on his losses and sometimes he would play it all and lose. But this year he had gone broke the first day—before the end of the first day. That did hurt his feelings, and he had come out to sit in gloom in the train. Yes, it is very well that most of us are not so extreme in our devotion.

Doubtless these conductors and waiters and lawyers
and teachers and bootleggers and housewives and clerks would do better to read Shelley or listen to Bach or meditate God from the top of the mountain or by the sea. Some of them do at times. But there is some advantage in availability, some in variety, some in artificiality, some even in a certain crudeness of intoxication. And not all are ready for the heights nor are the heights perhaps always best.

The defalcations and the absconding cashiers, of which we hear so much, are a sort of vivid combination of the two general arguments: the positive injury to economic life and to social morality through individual allurement by the races. And this I should be disposed to grant. I doubt most of the specific instances and the universal assertions, but I should be grieved to doubt the power of the glory of race track gambling. Such dangerousness is almost the measure of a thing's value. For all good things must be dangerous in a world where all things may be used as instruments and where the keener the edge the deeper the wound. Socrates was fond of saying that the physician is best not only at saving but at taking life. When the churchman is shocked by the Epicurean eloquence of Lucretius's line "To such damned deeds religion urges men," it may be pointed out that therein is tribute to the greatest and most abiding intoxication man has known. And if men steal to play the races they also steal for wives and children and women who are not wives. To be sure, it has been proposed that we abolish wives and children. But then women also steal for men.
And now it may be said we are left with the "terrible people" with whom one who plays the races must associate. Well, I deny it, and I do not know that much argument is relevant. One curious conjuncture of ideas might be noticed: that between racing and crookedness, racing people and dishonesty. Curious, because where in the world at any time can one find a business of one-hundredth the volume of that which is carried on every day about the races, largely by phone, and without signatures, guarantees, security except mutual honesty? In the sense of personal honesty about money commend me to the racing-man and the gambler. Is that strange? Do we not usually trust him who has been through the fire? That there is some, even considerable, of what is meant by "crookedness" in the actual racing of the horses is doubtless true.

There is an occasional trainer somewhat of the temper of him who muttered at the Fair Grounds in New Orleans, "I'll teach the damn' public to play my horses"; jockeys have been known to ride curious races; several races a year are run the night before. Yet to anyone who for some time has known this most closely scrutinized of sports the astonishing thing is how little crookedness there is and how little it affects the player. There is less than there is in ordinary business. And it need scarcely be said that racing is far more honest than the plots of most movie and magazine stories. There is also the man who goes to the track and is not a gambler; who loses a bet he thinks he should have won, and is forever convinced that he was wronged and all races
arranged to cheat him. Likewise he who is told to play certain horses, sees them win, and therein finds proof that all races are fixed.

At the track one finds a humanity almost as various as humanity. It is one of racing’s charms. Yet there is a singleness and simplicity of direct aim which makes access common without violation of intimacy. At the track I can feel always at home, never intruding, never intruded upon. I can companion carelessly with the darky rubber in the paddock and the owner in the club. And when I am most disgustful of company and resentful of lonesomeness I can find at the track a populous solitude which is neither alienly engrossed like that of Broadway nor personally exacting like that of society. Those who play the races regularly have largely recovered from that careful and fearful respectability which palls so much of society.

Terrible people? I have been in academic seminaries and faculty clubs, student organizations, gatherings of the socially proper, or artists, chess-players, athletes, and of business and professional men, even of newspaper men and columnists. And from time to time I have been tempted to feel that each was of “terrible people.” But far less often, I think, at the race track than elsewhere. And—perhaps more significant if less logically valuable—from time to time in all of these surroundings I have been tempted to feel that I myself am a “terrible” person; but less often than elsewhere, I am persuaded, at the race track.