The Literature of Three Delectable Kentucky Vices
Part I: Racing

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William S. Ward

Kentucky has owed much to the peculiar quality and properties of the land of the Bluegrass region. It was this land that caused the Indians to set the area aside as their hunting ground, a sort of game preserve and our first national park. It was the fertile land and the lush growth of the Great Meadow that attracted the first settlers and caused it to be hailed as a new Garden of Eden. It was the lush meadows of bluegrass growing out of limestone soil and the fresh-running streams of water flowing through layers of limestone that led to the tradition that no racehorse can have the bone structure or fleetness of a winner unless he drinks from Elkhorn Creek or one of its tributaries. This same tradition has attached itself to the making of bourbon whiskey. No matter that adjoining states have their outcroppings of limestone and their limestone springs, it was to be Kentucky’s plenteous supply that has made the name of Kentucky synonymous with bourbon whiskey. And it was the soil and a mutation in plant development that made the area the burley tobacco center of the world. Thus have the land and tradition made their contribution to Kentucky as the seat of three of the nation’s delectable vices—racing, spirits, and tobacco—and a literature that reflects the colorful history of the Commonwealth.

Racing

It was in 1797—the same year the first English Thoroughbred stallion, Blaze, was brought to Kentucky—that a group of horsemen met in Postelwaite’s Tavern in Lexington and organized the Lexington Jockey Club. The purpose of the Club, then as later, was that “of improving the breed of horses by encouraging sports of the turf.” It was in this year also that the first one-mile circular race course, replacing the “race path” on South Broadway, was established at a site on West Main Street now occupied by the Lexington Cemetery. In 1828 the track was moved to northeast
Lexington at the end of Fifth Street where, under the auspices of the Kentucky Association, races were conducted through 1933. The Keeneland Race Course was established three years later.

It was, however, the Jockey Club’s desire “to improve the breed” rather than race courses that forecast Kentucky’s role in racing during the years ahead. The fact of racing, the number and elegance of race tracks in operation, and the number of racing days per year have never been the most important features of Kentucky’s participation in racing. Instead, it has been its breeding establishments and the one race which excels all others in prestige and color, the Kentucky Derby.

Despite the burgeoning of an affluent agrarian society interested in racing and the abundant limestone soil and water that help build the strong bones, the tendons, the elastic muscles, and the general stamina that make winners of Thoroughbreds, the production of Thoroughbreds did not come at once. Getting the stallions and broodmares and the accoutrements necessary to racing and breeding takes time—half a century or so of it; but in 1850 a break-through came that was to have far-reaching effects not only on Kentucky but also on racing generally. This was the foaling of the colt Lexington by Dr. Elisha Warfield. Bought by Richard Ten Broeck, who raced him with popular success, Lexington was retired to stud in Woodford County, where he sired a progeny of winners never equalled by any other stallion. In 1866 alone his offspring won 112 races.

Many stallions deserve mention here, but we must pass on to Domino, who despite his short life of six years (1891-1897) left his permanent mark on racing, for he came along at the time when the 4-mile heat race was giving way to the modern track and to the demand for speed and the ability to sprint. Racegoers were coming to prefer longer programs with shorter races. Domino, foaled in Fayette County, and raced by James R. Keene, was to be the first outstanding sprinter, and despite only two years at stud he affected American racing for half a century and beyond. Perhaps no horse ever won more stakes races in so short a time. His earnings were greater than those of any other horse and his record stood until it was surpassed by Man o’ War in 1920. When he died in 1897, the five get of his first year at stud were still sucklings; the fourteen of his second year were still unborn. Yet eight, or 42%, of these nineteen foals were stakes winners, against three percent for the breed. Among Domino’s progeny were Spy
Song, Bimelech, Blue Larkspur, Equipoise, Carry Back, and the undefeated Colin; but perhaps even more revealing is the fact that of 729 stakes winners in 1968 Domino’s name appears in the pedigree 638 times, or 87.5%.

One more stallion must be noted. This is Fair Play, from whom comes the staying power for the long race. He was foaled in 1905 by August Belmont II at the Nursery Stud in Fayette County. As a three-year-old he finished first and second in 15 of his 16 starts and set track records for 1-1/4 and 1-5/16 miles; but it was as a sire even more than as a runner that he excelled. Some 18% (against an average of 3% for the breed) of his offspring were stakes winners, and no sire’s name except Domino’s appears more often in the pedigree of winning horses for half a century. Of the 729 stakes winners in 1968, 65% descended from Fair Play. Man o’ War was Fair Play’s most illustrious son, but many illustrious names appear among his progeny, including those of War Admiral, War Relic, and Discovery in the male line and Jamestown, Nashua, Bold Ruler, Native Dancer, Swaps, and Kelso on the distaff side. When August Belmont died in 1924, Fair Play was bought by Joseph E. Widener, who continued him at stud on Elmendorf Farm until Fair Play’s death in 1929.

Enough has been said to establish the fact of Kentucky’s preeminence in breeding and the acknowledgment of it when the great racing blue-bloods of the East brought their own establishments to the Bluegrass. August Belmont and Joseph E. Widener have already been noted; Harry Payne Whitney will be cited shortly. Other new dynasties such as those of Warren Wright, Leslie Combs, and Arthur B. Hancock would soon rise, and Bull Lea, Nasrullah, and Bold Ruler would become leading sires. They would add a rich lustre to what already had a bright sheen, and from among their progeny the performance of Citation would stir memories of Man o’ War, and that of Secretariat would invite comparison.

The first Kentucky Derby was run in 1875, but the race did not become an important one until the middle of the second decade of the next century. This date is not unconnected with Kentucky’s achievement of a leadership role in breeding, but the coincidence seems to have been as much by chance as by cause and effect. That is to say, its emergence depends more upon the low estate into which racing had fallen between 1890 and 1910, on an Irish businessman and entrepreneur by the name of Matt J. Winn, and a
filly named Regret.

The flourishing state of racing between the end of the Civil War and the end of the century was tarnished by abuses that worsened during the 1880s and by the mid 1890s became virtually intolerable. The bribing of jockeys, the drugging of horses, the fixing of races, the shenanigans of bookmakers became commonplace. State after state banned racing, until finally only Kentucky and Maryland were left with big-time racing. Kentucky, however, had fallen upon evil days too, and opposition to the sport was considerable. In the latter 1890s Meriwether Lewis Clark and some of his racing friends in Louisville took it upon themselves to achieve some changes that would build the Derby into a major annual sporting event. The distance was changed from 1-1/2 to 1-1/4 miles in order to meet the common objection that the longer race was too great for an early-season race for three-year-olds; some ideas from the British Epsom Derby were adopted; and a new grandstand, with its twin towers, was built on land leased from Clark's uncles, John and Henry Churchill. Soon problems arose, however, and the new owners sought to get rid of Churchill Downs. It was to Matt J. Winn that they turned. "The prospect of ending the Derby appalled me," said Winn, who had witnessed every running of the Derby, and forthwith he formed a syndicate to purchase the new Downs. It was to Matt J. Winn that they turned. "The prospect of ending the Derby appalled me," said Winn, who had witnessed every running of the Derby, and forthwith he formed a syndicate to purchase the new Downs. It was to Matt J. Winn that they turned. "The prospect of ending the Derby appalled me," said Winn, who had witnessed every running of the Derby, and forthwith he formed a syndicate to purchase the new Downs. It was to Matt J. Winn that they turned. "The prospect of ending the Derby appalled me," said Winn, who had witnessed every running of the Derby, and forthwith he formed a syndicate to purchase the new Downs. It was to Matt J. Winn that they turned. "The prospect of ending the Derby appalled me," said Winn, who had witnessed every running of the Derby, and forthwith he formed a syndicate to purchase the new Downs. It was to Matt J. Winn that they turned. "The prospect of ending the Derby appalled me," said Winn, who had witnessed every running of the Derby, and forthwith he formed a syndicate to purchase the new Downs. It was to Matt J. Winn that they turned. "The prospect of ending the Derby appalled me," said Winn, who had witnessed every running of the Derby, and forthwith he formed a syndicate to purchase the new Downs. It was to Matt J. Winn that they turned. "The prospect of ending the Derby appalled me," said Winn, who had witnessed every running of the Derby, and forthwith he formed a syndicate to purchase the new Downs. It was to Matt J. Winn that they turned. "The prospect of ending the Derby appalled me," said Winn, who had witnessed every running of the Derby, and forthwith he formed a syndicate to purchase the new Downs. It was to Matt J. Winn that they turned. "The prospect of ending the Derby appalled me," said Winn, who had witnessed every running of the Derby, and forthwith he formed a syndicate to purchase the new Downs. It was to Matt J. Winn that they turned. "The prospect of ending the Derby appalled me," said Winn, who had witnessed every running of the Derby, and forthwith he formed a syndicate to purchase the new Downs. It was to Matt J. Winn that they turned. "The prospect of ending the Derby appalled me," said Winn, who had witnessed every running of the Derby, and forthwith he formed a syndicate to purchase the new Downs. It was to Matt J. Winn that they turned. "The prospect of ending the Derby appalled me," said Winn, who had witnessed every running of the Derby, and forthwith he formed a syndicate to purchase the new Downs. It was to Matt J. Winn that they turned. "The prospect of ending the Derby appalled me," said Winn, who had witnesses
the Derby of 1915 when Regret became the first filly to win the Derby—to be, in fact, the only one to do so until Genuine Risk won it in 1980. Widener was the epitome of the great dynasties of the East, his unbeaten filly had received great publicity as she prepped for the Derby, and when she won, Widener declared for the press, "You know, this is the greatest race in America at the present time, and I don't care whether she ever starts again." The Derby was made.

When Matt J. Winn came to the end of his years, he must have thought to himself that everything had worked out about the way he hoped it would. The Derby was a quality event in the best tradition of racing. One side of his genius had seen to that, and the other side—his genius for promotion—had seen to it that the world knew about it, that celebrities received personal invitations, and that, as one turf writer put it, they had their pictures in the paper with mint juleps in their hands. Had Winn been alive when the 100th running of the Derby took place, he would have been well pleased that 163,628 people were in attendance, that more than three-fourths of all Derby winners had been bred in Kentucky, and that through the press, the radio, and television, people throughout the world who had never set foot in Kentucky or seen a horse race had, then as now, turned on their radio or television set, at home or at a Derby party, and that millions of them had mist in their eyes when the strains of My Old Kentucky Home announced that another running of the Kentucky Derby was about to take place.

Perhaps no Kentucky writers have written fiction about racing and breeding more often and with greater success than have Isabel McLennan McMeekin (1895-1973) and Dorothy Park Clark (1899-1983). For more than twenty years they carried on a popular and successful collaboration in which they wrote eleven novels and one volume of non-fiction together under the pseudonym of Clark McMeekin. During this period they were writing also under their own names: Mrs. McMeekin some eight volumes of juvenile fiction, verse, and non-fiction; Mrs. Clark three murder mystery novels, some puppet plays, and two operettas. Both were greatly interested in the past and wrote historical novels that dealt with pioneer and Civil War times, though they did not limit themselves to these eras. But they chose no subject more frequently than they did racing, which always appears in a historical context.
Show Me A Land (1940), a rousing novel beginning at the Aintree Fair in England, was the first volume on which the two collaborated. In it Dana Terrain, at sixteen, is attending the fair with her father, who has gone there from his Greatways plantation in Virginia in order to buy Thoroughbreds, and especially a stallion, so that he can improve the bloodlines of his stable. What follows, in the words of Stephen Vincent Benét,

is a ramping, unashamedly romantic romance, full of beautiful girls, handsome gentlemen, fine horses, moving accidents by flood and field, and quite a lot of vivid and historical detail. . . . It is a breathless tale and a dexterous one. It may be—and it is—melodramatic, but it makes good reading. . . . It unashamedly introduces Audubon, Lafayette, and Lincoln when and as convenient, but it does not make the mistake of letting prominent historical figures get in the way of the plot. . . . You are going to like this one. And what a movie it will make!

More specifically, the story tells of Dana and her father's return to their Virginia estate, the ultimate removal of the family to Kentucky and the Bluegrass, the affluent development of the new land during ante-bellum days, the development of the culture of the horse, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and, finally, the running of the first Kentucky Derby on 17 May 1875. As for the love interest, Dana has married Eben Coates, a young Scottish minister, but she has never forgotten the dashing young Irishman Rike Calphine, whom she met at the Aintree Fair. Eventually Rike shows up in Kentucky, though he too has married. By the time of the last scene at the Kentucky Derby Dana and Rike are seventy, but as one critic puts it, "They're still as brisk and handsome as you can ask for."

During the unfolding of the story there are glimpses and vignettes that give the flavor of the times: the cholera epidemic in Lexington, tobacco auctions, slaves in the fields, duels, balls, Lexington as the Athens of the West, Henry Clay with his mighty voice, John Hunt Morgan, the famous racehorse Lexington of Dr. Elisha Warfield, and, of course, Price McGrath's little red horse, Aristides, who wins the first Kentucky Derby. Looking on are not only Dana and Rike but also, perched in a tree, Matt J. Winn, then a boy. The thread that runs through the whole novel and
holds it together is, of course, the breeding and racing of fine Thoroughbreds; its theme is summed up by Ergo, the little Irish trainer: “Show me a land where men wants none o' horses an' I'll show you a land where there ain't no men, by God!”

Mrs. Clark and Mrs. McMeekin did not again write a racing story that made the best-seller lists as Show Me A Land had done, but both Red Raskall (1943) and The Fairbrothers (1962) can be classified as racing novels. The first of these, Red Raskall, is an adventure story of Tidewater, Virginia, in 1816. In it Lark Shannon, an English girl, sails for America and is shipwrecked on an island off the shore of Virginia. Another survivor of the shipwreck is the Thoroughbred stallion nicknamed Red Raskall that becomes a charge of Lark and unexpectedly leads her to finding contentment and happiness in rural Virginia. The novel qualifies almost equally well as a historical novel or as a horse and racing story.

In The Fairbrothers, the last novel written in collaboration by Mrs. Clark and Mrs. McMeekin, the breeding and racing of horses is a part of the life of a Kentucky family. The scene is the family farm and home near Louisville just three years after the Civil War. Times are hard and everyone is trying to cope with the financial problems of the new era. Major Frank, a gentleman farmer who copes poorly with money problems, and his capable wife “Miss Kizzie”; Tolly, who fought for the South and now gives up farming to learn more about racing; Jenny, the pretty, empty-headed widow of the elder son, who was killed in the Union Army; Zion, who tries unsuccessfully to pass herself off as a French teacher but becomes a member of the family; and Fleecy, the cook—these are the members of the Fairbrothers family who seek to regain financial security. There is the abortive effort to run a school for girls, the tobacco crop, the health spa, and the effort to build up Thoroughbred racing both in the Fairbrothers family and in the Commonwealth. Most of all there is the interplay of character, especially between Tolly and Zion, for Tolly finds that Zion shares his excitement about racing his dead brother's mare, and later her colt. The day of the first Kentucky Derby is the novel's grand finale and opens up new horizons for all the Fairbrothers.

Isabel McMeekin’s first piece of juvenile fiction was Kentucky Derby Winner, a Junior Literary Guild selection in fiction for 1949, a fictional but historically accurate story of the first Kentucky...
Derby winner, Aristides. On that historic day owner Price McGrath had hoped to win with Chesapeake, for on 10 May Aristides had lost to Ten Broeck in the Phoenix Hotel Stakes, which for forty years had been the initial test of the season for three-year-olds. Ten Broeck was entered in the Derby, too, but when Chesapeake got off to a bad start, his stablemate, the little red Aristides, was given the role not only of competing with Ten Broeck (who finished fifth) but also of overtaking the leader, Volcano, which he did, and won by a length, setting a new American record of 2:37 3/4 for 1-1/2 miles. From this beginning Aristides went on to become the champion three-year-old for the year, winning not only the Derby but also the Breckinridge, the Withers, and the Jerome Stakes. He came in second in the Belmont Stakes when McGrath chose to win with Calvin. So formidable was Aristides' record by the time he was a four-year-old that, as noted above, only Ten Broeck was entered against him in a sweepstakes meet that McGrath arranged for Aristides' four-year-old debut on 10 May 1876.

In Kentucky Derby Winner the build-up and excitement surrounding the Derby are, of course, an essential feature of the story, but the novel also gives fascinating pictures of the day-to-day life of a racing establishment—from the day "Risty" was born and learned to stand on his wobbly legs until he overtook and defeated Volcano, 17 May 1875. Interesting also is the depiction of the temper and atmosphere of the Bluegrass country following the Civil War. More important to the story and the plot, however, are the two human characters upon whom so much of the success of the story depends, little Jack Sprat and his grandfather. There are, too, authentic and interesting characters that make their contributions to the story, as also do real-life persons and places. Among the latter are H. Price McGrath, owner of McGrathiana, and the boy Matt Winn.

Three years after she published Kentucky Derby Winner, Isabel McMeekin published Ban-Joe and Grey Eagle (1952), a novel that gets its title from a banjo-playing orphan and the horse he came to have the care of when he went to Louisville and found a job in a livery stable. The horse, Grey Eagle, was foaled in Lexington in 1836 and won acclaim as the greatest horse in Kentucky when at the age of three he won a two-mile race in the fastest time ever recorded in America and then a week later won another spectacular victory. Thereupon Grey Eagle was entered in a
sweepstakes for all ages at the Ashland Course at Magnolia and Seventh Streets in Louisville. Among the horses entered in the race was Wagner, a five-year-old that had a long string of victories throughout the South as a four-mile racer. Grey Eagle had never run a four-mile race and not surprisingly lost to the seasoned five-year-old, though by a small margin. Supporters of Grey Eagle demanded a re-match and this time Grey Eagle won the first heat, Wagner the second by a neck; but in the final heat Grey Eagle broke down and never raced again. So widely had the match attracted attention that notables came many miles to see it, among them Henry Clay and the editor of the prestigious New York sporting magazine, *Spirit of the Times*.

Such are the backgrounds for the famous race of 1839 for which Isabel McMeekin creates the orphan Ban-Joe for the role of Grey Eagle’s jockey. The novel was well received by readers and critics alike, but it never managed to be quite as exciting as *Kentucky Derby Winner*, though the characters are flesh-and-blood and the portrayal of life at a race track in Kentucky in 1839 is both interesting and convincing.

James Robert Sherburne (1925-), best known for his historical novels dealing with Kentucky during the Civil War, is also the author of a historical murder-mystery novel, *Death's Pale Horse: a Novel of Murder in Saratoga in the 1880s* (1980). In it Isaac Burns Murphy, perhaps the greatest jockey who ever lived, is one of the principal characters. Murphy, a black, was born in Lexington in 1861 and was buried in 1896 in a Lexington “negro” cemetery that was later abandoned. Here his body lay in an overgrown grave until 1967 when Frank and Betty Borries located it and had the remains reburied at the Man o’ War Park, close by Man o’ War. Ten years later the remains of both Man o’ War and Murphy were reinterred at the new Kentucky Horse Park on Ironworks Pike.

Murphy’s list of racing accomplishments is a remarkable one. He rode in every great stakes race in the country except the Futurity. He won three Kentucky Derbies (1884, 1890, 1891), a record that stood until Earl Sande equalled it on Gallant Fox in 1930 and Eddie Arcaro surpassed it in 1948 on Citation. His lifetime record was 628 wins in 1412 races, a remarkable 44% that to this day is far from being challenged.

Sherburne’s *Death’s Pale Horse* draws upon the low estate into which racing was falling in the 1880s and 1890s to create a good yarn. It also initiates a series of murder-mystery novels that
involve Paddy Moretti, Sherburne's detective. In *Death's Pale Horse* Paddy, the lovable, bumbling but resourceful, Manhattan sports journalist, travels to the Saratoga track to witness an important race between two great Thoroughbreds, Tenstrike and The Mogul, the latter ridden by Paddy's buddy, jockey Isaac Murphy. Murphy himself, Sherburne says, "was a real straight arrow guy. He didn't throw races. He didn't booze. He didn't do bad stuff. He didn't have women. He just won races." The derring-do, therefore, has to come from other quarters: card cheats, race fixers, fraudulent mediums, as well as other rascals and swindlers. In working the plot out, Paddy discovers three murder victims, including a suspicious racetrack tout, a con-man, and an unpleasant journalist. Murphy enters the story in his role of jockey, of course, and into the plot in that he helps Paddy untangle the complicated skein of scams, price-fixing, and murder that make up the story.

Though all but forgotten today, no piece of Kentucky literature dealing with racing comes close to matching Charles T. Dazey's *In Old Kentucky* as a popular success. Though Dazey (1855-1938) was born in Illinois, his parents were Kentuckians, and he visited at length with his grandparents in Bourbon County when he was a boy. He also entered Transylvania College in 1872, and after an experience of ill health and irregular attendance he left Transylvania for Harvard in 1877, just as John Fox, Jr., who entered in 1878, was to do in 1880. Dazey graduated from Harvard in 1881 as class poet, but what was more important, he had tried his hand at dramatic composition and after graduation became a full-fledged playwright. He was quite prolific and most of his plays were acted on the stage. Despite his successes, however, Dazey became discouraged with his prospects for earning a living as a playwright. Then came a commission from Katie Putnam to write a play for her. Thus encouraged, Dazey "began a careful quest for the proper story for my new play. After long thought, it appeared to me that the Cinderella legend possessed the widest and surest appeal." The "variation" Dazey chose was based on "a famous race—the Ashland Oaks." Basic to his plot was bringing into sharp contrast two very opposite types "—one a young Kentuckian, a veritable Prince Charming, born and bred in the Bluegrass region—the other a little mountain lass, uncultured, ignorant, of low birth, but
sweet, true, and womanly." Besides these main characters—Frank Layson and Madge Brierly—there were, among others, Colonel Sandusky Doolittle, a great speculator and horseman; Barbara Holton, the contrast to Madge Brierly; Joe Lorey, a young mountaineer; Aunt Althea, Frank Logan's aunt; other kinfolk and assorted jockeys, stableboys, bookmakers, touts, hustlers, and spectators. Thrown in for good measure is a mountain feud, but the happy climax of the play comes when the brave little heroine, risking her reputation, dons the hero's colors and rides his horse, "Queen Bess," to victory in place of the regular jockey, whom the villain had made hopelessly drunk.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Katie Putnam returned the play to Dazey with "a curt note" stating that she did not consider it a suitable role for her to play. Whatever disappointment Dazey may have experienced must have been short-lived, for In Old Kentucky was to become what apparently has been the second most performed play in American theatrical history, being second only to Uncle Tom's Cabin, which was in part also a Kentucky story. It was first performed in St. Paul in 1892, went on tour in 1893, and ran for twenty-six more seasons in the United States, sometimes with several tour-companies on the road at the same time, and for twenty years in England. It has been estimated that the play was seen by well over seven million people during this period. In addition to a silent screen version around 1920, there was also the well-known version of 1936 in which Will Rogers played the leading role. According to Dazey in 1937, some thirty million people saw In Old Kentucky either as a play or as a movie.

Almost always the play was staged in lavish fashion, but surely the most spectacular of all must have been the production reported in the Courier-Journal on 25 September 1933, as having just taken place at Quincy, Illinois. Ordinarily, the Courier reported, the victory of Speedy Bess had been only a behind-the-scenes simulation of hoofbeats. But for the Quincy production, the seventy-six-year-old Dazey came out of retirement to direct a performance in which a half-mile track was a part of the stage and the heroine rode her horse, "coming from behind in the stretch to win the race, confound the villain who doped the regular jockey, and nestle in her sweetheart's arms at the final curtain."

A few other Kentucky writers of fiction wrote novels about racing in Kentucky, but none of them merits more than brief identification here. One was Charles Neville Buck (1879-1930),
who before moving to Louisville when he was fifteen lived in Woodford County and there gained some acquaintance with racing farms and racing. Two of his novels deal with racing: *The Rogue’s Badge* (1924) and *Sandollar* (1926), the latter dividing attention with Buck’s favorite subject, mountain feuds. *The Man from Jericho* (1911), by Edwin Carlisle Litsey (1874-1970), is another racing novel. It provides some good pictures of horse farms and racing, but the plot is implausible and in general the novel fails to measure up to Litsey’s usual level.

The race track and racing people have intrigued a number of murder-mystery novelists at the national level to try their hands at who-dun-its, but Kentuckian Foxhall Dangerfield (1887-1933), fell short of the excellence of his *Mrs. Haney* when he wrote *Silver Urn* (1927), and Dorothy Park Clark in *Poison Speaks Softly* (1948) is considerably below the level she achieved when she and Isabel M. McMeekin (as Clark McMeekin) wrote *Show Me A Land* and *The Fairbrothers*.

One more writer remains to be cited here. This is Joseph H. Palmer (1904-1952), who was by profession a turf writer rather than a writer of belles lettres; but Palmer was far more than just a journalist. He knew his facts, he did his grub work, he was a writer for and an editor of the *Blood-Horse* for twelve years, he compiled information that enabled him to write books with titles such as *Names for Pedigrees* (1934), *The Thoroughbred Horse* (1942), and at least three annual issues of *American Race Horses* (1944-1946); and during his peak years (1946-1952) he was racing editor of the New York Herald-Tribune, for which he wrote his column, “Views of the Turf,” and was Columbia Broadcasting System’s turf analyst. Impressive though such credentials may be, however, it is only “Views of the Turf” that has relevance here. A selection from these columns was published in 1953 with a foreword by Palmer’s close friend and neighbor, Red Smith, whom some observers have called the greatest of all sports writers, just as Palmer by many is regarded as the greatest of turf writers. The volume is called *This Was Racing*.

Palmer, who was born in Georgetown, had academic qualifications seldom found among sports writers. He took his A.B. and M.A. as a Phi Beta Kappa major in English at the University of Kentucky and stayed on as an Instructor in English for five years before going to the University of Michigan for
doctoral work in English. After two years, however, he left the academic world and entered the profession to which he was to be such a credit. Eighteen years later, struck down by a heart attack, he was to leave a half-finished column in a battered typewriter and go home to die the next day. Letters to the Herald-Tribune clamored for a volume in which Palmer's columns would be reprinted, many of the letters, as Red Smith points out, from readers who had never been to a race track and "would not recognize a horse without a milk wagon attached."

There are many reasons why Palmer appealed to the general reader as well as to turf followers. What he wrote was always relevant to racing and had at its core information that satisfied even the hard-bitten race enthusiast; but what delighted readers of all ilks were his excursions into unexpected back-roads and by-paths of the turf, or what Palmer called the "remaining half, or quarter, or eighth, which this onlooker finds most interesting"; but which, one must add, is not likely to be found anywhere else. Humor was constantly a characteristic of Palmer's writing. John McNulty, of New Yorker fame, says of Palmer, "I cannot recall seeing Joe at a time when his eyes were not smiling, no matter what the rest of his face was doing. And this book [This Was Racing] is like that too. What he is writing is basically informative, but always there is fortunately lurking only a sentence or two away, a bit of drollery to rowel the story gaily along."

A wide-ranging knowledge is characteristic of Palmer's columns as he weaves and enriches a story or an article while never losing sight of the fact that his purpose is to expand his reader's knowledge and understanding of the turf. This knowledge, always lightly displayed, can appear anywhere in a column, but it is not uncommon—perhaps taking a cue from that early nineteenth-century essayist William Hazlitt—that Palmer uses it as an attention-getter in the opening sentence or paragraph. Thus he begins a column on the history of transporting horses by cargo planes as follows: "When Eohippos Auroris used to get cramps in his neck watching the pterodactyls flying overhead, it could hardly have occurred to him that he could get up there with them. The pterodactyls were the last featherless reptiles to fly. Then, after a long time, the Wright brothers made it. Then Elliott Roosevelt's dog. But 1946 was the year horses learned to fly." A column on the propensity of the Thoroughbred Club of America for having
dinner to honor someone he begins by alluding to the story of Don Marquis about a king who liked to have parties. "Somebody," Palmer writes, "could always think of a reason for having a party, because it was always somebody's birthday or anniversary, but finally a day arrived that just wasn't anything. The king was not stopped at all; he asked if anyone could think of a reason for not having a party. Nobody could, so they had one."

Even when the allusions to other matters are missing, however, there are first sentences that tease the reader's interest. Thus a column on the first use of aluminum horseshoes to lighten the weight of the shoe and increase the speed of the horse begins, "If you wanted a set of horseshoes, the chances are that Tiffany's wouldn't be the first place you'd try"; then Palmer tells how that is exactly what Peter Lorillard did. But now a few Palmer sentences about horses must close these extracts. "Racetrackers," he wrote, "save most of their affection for the Exterminators and the Stymies and the Seabiscuits, who do it the hard way in the handicaps, pounding out mile after bitter mile, giving weight and taking their tracks wet or dry, running for any jockey, and trying with what they've got, even when they haven't got enough." But it was Citation who most excited Palmer's enthusiasm. After Citation won the Kentucky Derby, he wrote, "At a mile and a quarter or thereabouts, Citation can win over slop, mud, dust, sand, goo, plowed fields, broken glass, or swampland. With Arcaro up he flows along in front with a smooth grace that is the admiration and despair of any man who ever saddled a horse."

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"I'll give you $200,000 for him," Palmer once told Citation's trainer, Ben Jones, "$40 of it in cash right now."

*This article on "The Literature of Three Delectable Kentucky Vices: Racing, Spirits, and Tobacco" is an outgrowth of the author's A Literary History of Kentucky, which was published in 1988 by the University Press of Tennessee. For any overlap between this article and that volume permission has been granted by the University of Tennessee Press. Because of the length of the article The Kentucky Review is publishing the segment on racing in this issue, that on Spirits and Tobacco in the next.

NOTES

1 "Rousing Romance," Saturday Review of Literature, 24 February 1940, 7.

Despite the abundance of detailed facts and figures in the foregoing pages, and those to appear in the next number of The Kentucky Review, most of the information they convey is in the public domain and is familiar to those who write about Spirits, Tobacco, and Racing. Few writers have advocated theories or developed theses peculiarly their own that bear their unmistakable trademark and require footnotes to acknowledge indebtedness. Yet a newcomer to the subjects discussed here has a heavy obligation to the books he reads and draws upon; but if he documented everything he had not known before he read them, he would produce a cumbersome thicket of footnotes. The titles which follow suggest the author's indebtedness and provide a reading list for anyone who wishes to read further.

Good books on thoroughbreds and racing are in plentiful supply. The Blood-Horse Press has published authoritative books by some of the best writers on the turf, among them The Great Ones (1970), by Kent Hollingsworth, and An Introduction to the Thoroughbred Horse (1949), by Joseph A. Estes and Joseph H. Palmer. Jim Bolus has written a volume on the first hundred years of the Kentucky Derby, Run for the Roses (1974); and Mary E. Wharton, Edward L. Bowen, and others, under the editorship of Bruce F. Denbo, have combined information with excellent pictures in The Horse World of the Bluegrass (1980). And Lawrence S. Thompson's Kentucky Tradition (1956), touches on all three of the matters dealt with in this article.