FLYING CHILDERS.

Some Interesting Notes of Sport under the Georges.

(Thormarchy in the Gazette.)

THE two first of our four Georges were, I think, about the most uninteresting monarchs that ever sat on the throne of England. They were absolute foreigners, who found their English kingdom and subjects a horrible bore, and were never happy except when they could escape to their own beloved Hanover. Neither George the First nor George the Second had any real sympathy with English sports and pastimes. They both, however, liked hunting after their own fashion, though not after ours, and both knew something about horses. George the First, indeed, had so sound a knowledge of horseflesh that he could spot a winner after carefully scrutinising the competitors for a race.

It was told of him that when he went down to Guildford Races on the 5th of June, 1715, he surveyed the six starters for the Fifty Pound Plate, and pointing to a particular horse expressed his opinion that it would win. The horse won; and, what is more, it was his own horse, though he never set eyes on it before, for our old friend Tregonwell Frampton was Master of the Royal Stud, and ran what horses he pleased in the King's name, without troubling to consult His Majesty on the subject. In fact, George was content to do what his advisers told him was expected of him in these matters.

I do not know who advised him to discontinue the gold cups given by his predecessor, Queen Anne; but that the discontinuance of these prizes was not due to any dislike of racing or any motives of economy is proved by the fact that His Majesty gave several prizes of one hundred guineas in specie annually, to be run for on different racecourses throughout the Kingdom, and many owners and breeders preferred the hard cash to the plate. The sportsmen of Yorkshire, at any rate, had no cause to complain of His Majesty's liberality, for they were regular annual recipients of his bounty. Both at York and Hambleton Races His Majesty's prize of one hundred guineas in specie was the most popular event on the card. At Hambleton the King's hundred guineas was given for five-year-old mares carrying 10st., and in 1719 the race was rendered memorable from the fact that it brought to the post the largest field ever known up to that time. Thirty-two mares faced the starter, and the race was further remarkable from the victory of the Duke of Rutland's Bonny Black, who, though but a four-year-old, ran on level terms with the five-year-olds, and beat them all easily. A wonderful mare beyond doubt was Bonny Black, the like to which all Yorkshiremen swore had never been seen on the Turf before. Indeed, not even the phenomenal Flying Childers was thought good enough to beat her, for when the Duke of Rutland offered to match his famous mare against *any* horse, mare, or gelding *four times* over the Round Course at Newmarket, no one was found bold enough to take up the challenge.

The race for the King's Hundred Guineas at York, on July 31, 1721, was also one long remembered in the north, but for a very different reason. In this case the prize was for six-year-olds. There were two hot favorites in a field of a dozen, viz., the Duke of Rutland's Prosperine, and Mr. Tregonwell Frampton's un-named gelding. The betting was very heavy, for each horse was backed to win many thousands of pounds. But, when about a mile had been covered, both favorites unfortunately fell, and the jockeys, Edward Jackson and John Peirson, were so seriously injured that they had to be driven at once from the course to the hospital at Clifton, where both of them died a few weeks later from the effects of their injuries.

But the strangest incident of all was that which happened at the York August Meeting of 1718, in the race for a £40 Plate, for aged horses, carrying 11st. The favorite was Mr. Howard's white horse, Crutches, on whom very high odds against the field were laid. The race was considered a gift for him, and he would undoubtedly have won with the greatest ease had not his jockey, Thomas Duck, *held, curbed, and intentionally thrown himself off* at the distance post when he was leading by several lengths. Notwithstanding this, Crutches continued the race on his own hook, and came in first, though riderless. Of course, the horse was disqualified, but I can find no record of the punishment, if any, inflicted on the jockey. No doubt he swore that he fell off by accident, and possibly his excuse was accepted, for the Stewards were not particular in those days, probably for the very good reason that their own hands were not clean. But there are numberless incidents briefly and casually referred to in Mr. Orton's "Turf Annals of York," which, trifling though they look as there recorded, point significantly to the fact that the jockeys of that day were a very queer lot; reckless, unscrupulous, and defiant of authority. They frequently brought their horses in almost at a walk, neck and neck, to make a dead heat of it, and even when ordered to ride the race over again, contrived to introduce some foul play which "upset the pot." Foul riding was a subject of constant complaint, and fights between jockeys when a race was over were a common occurrence. It will be remembered that in a previous chapter I gave a specimen of one of these combats in which the jockeys nearly cut one another into ribbons with their whips.

Yorkshire was then the sporting Shire par excellence in England. No other county could show a head-roll of spirited and genuine sportsmen like hers. The Duke of Bolton, the Earl of Carlisle, Sir William Strickland, Sir Matthew Peirson, Sir Marmaduke Wyvill, the Darleys of Aldry, the Huttons of Marske, the Hartleys of Middleton Tyass, the Leedes of North Milford, the Childers of Carr House—what other Shire could boast of such a noble army of sportsmen, many of whom have left their names indelibly printed on the Records of the Turf? The Darley Arabian, the Leedes' Arabian, Hutton's Bay Turk and Grey Turk, the Hartley mares (Little and Large) are names familiar to every one who has pored over the Stud Book and is interested in the pedigrees of the famous heroes and heroines of the Turf.

But the most celebrated horse of the early Georgian era was beyond all doubt Flying Childers, around whose name has clustered such a crop of legends that it is difficult now to decide how much is reality and how much romance. First let me take the known facts, as to which there is no dispute.

Flying Childers was a chestnut, with a light blaze in the forehead, and four white legs. He was bred by Mr. Leonard Childers, of Carr House, Doncaster, and was foaled in the year 1715. There can be no doubt whatever that his career on the Turf was a most remarkable one, and that he was never beaten may be accepted as a fact. But it must be borne in mind that the engagements of a racehorse were very few in those days, compared with those for which a first-rate horse in the present day would be entered. There were no handicaps, and no means of bringing together on equal terms horses of every degree of excellence. Consequently when a horse had established a reputation, no owner would compete against it, with the certainty before him of being beaten. Then, again, there were no facilities for conveying horses over long distances, and to walk a racehorse all the way from York to Newmarket was a thing not lightly to be undertaken, at a time when even the high roads were worse than the foulest, roughest, ruttiest country lanes of our own times. All these circumstances combined to limit the sphere of a racehorse's performances.

I do not know that there is any exact record of the exploits of Flying Childers in existence; if there be, I have never heard of it. But some astonishing stories of his speed have been handed down by tradition. For example, when a six-year-old, in 1721, Flying Childers, carrying 9st 2lb, beat Almanzor and Brown Betty over the Round Course at Newmarket, and is said to have covered the distance, 3m. 4fur. 93yds., in 6min. 40sec, or at the rate of 14½ sec per furlong. Now this rate of speed is the highest at which the Derby course has ever been covered in our own time. That is to say, we are asked to believe that Flying Childers, with 4lb more on his back than Kettledrum or Blair Athol carried, covered nearly three miles and a half at the same rate of speed which they maintained over a mile and a half! *Credat Judæus Apella!* You may tell that to the Horse Marines, but as I do not belong to that mythical body of amphibious cavalry, I emphatically decline to accept this story as anything but a myth. It is on a par with the marvellous tales of Robin Hood's skill with the longbow, and similar legendary marvels.

I am willing to believe anything in reason as to the *staying* powers of Flying Childers, for those were days when stoutness was regarded more highly than swiftness in breeding for the Turf. Moreover, there was no two-year-old and three-year-old racing at that time, and a horse did not commence his racing career until he was at least four, and generally five or six years old. There was, therefore, plenty of time given him to mature his powers. But when it comes to a question of *speed*, then I decline to believe these marvellous tales of Flying Childers. If we accept his time over the Round Course, why not accept also his reputed time over the Beacon Course, 4m. 4fur. 13yds. in 9min. 30sec.? Think for a moment what the latter means. It means that Flying Childers ran 4½ miles at a faster rate than the two flyers, Diophantus and Galopin, covered the Rowley Mile in the best time on record, 1min. 43sec. No racehorse of modern times has ever run a mile in less than that time, even when that was the limit of his journey. Yet we are asked to believe that a hundred and seventy years ago, when the scientific breeding of racehorses was in its infancy, there was a horse who could run four miles and a half at a rate of less than one minute forty-three seconds for each mile! The thing is so absurd that I cannot understand how there can be persons, calling themselves sane, in this present day who fling the apocryphal performances of Flying Childers in our faces as a proof of the degeneracy of the modern race horse.

All attempts at "timing" prior to the present century must necessarily have been mere guess work, for stop-watches were unknown, and the cumbrous chronometers of the day, in the hands of persons unaccustomed to "taking time," might play very strange pranks. In a previous chapter I showed that thirty years before Flying Childers was foaled it was considered a wonderful exploit for a horse carrying 10st to cover a four-mile course at the rate of a mile in two minutes and a quarter, and it is preposterous to suppose that in thirty years, with breeders still holding the theory that staying power was of more importance than speed, a horse should have been bred that could throw into the shade the best performances of the crack thoroughbreds of our own time, bred specially with a view to speed.

In connection with these fabulous feats of Flying Childers, it may be interesting to give some of the most remarkable exploits of modern horses. On the whole, perhaps, West Australian's performance as a four-year-old, when he won the Ascot Cup in 1854, is the best of modern days for he covered the distance, two miles and a half, carrying 8st. 5lb., in 4min. 27sec., and at the rate of 14½sec. per furlong. Whilst the most extraordinary three-year old performance is that of Mr. Tatton Sykes over the St. Leger Course (1 mile 6 furlongs 132 yards) in 180, when the time was 3min. 16sec., or as nearly as possible the rate of a furlong in 13⅓sec.

Of course, some marvellous "times" have been made in America, where notoriously "whips creation" in everything. On April 2, 1855, Lecomte ran Lexington, both four-year-olds, and carrying 7st. and 5lb., ran a match over four-mile course, which the winner, Lexington, covered in 7min. 19¾sec. or 13¾sec. for the furlong. On August 5, Fellowcraft, 4yrs., 7st. 10lb., ran four miles at Saratoga in 7min. 19¼sec., beating Lexington's time by a quarter of a second. These are the best records the nineteenth century can show, and they will want some beating, even a hundred years hence.

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