

A LAST RAMBLE IN THE CLASSICS

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HUGH E. P. PLATT

**A LAST RAMBLE
IN THE CLASSICS**

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AUTHOR OF 'BYWAYS IN THE CLASSICS'

'Persium non curo legere, Laelium Decimum volo'
LUCILIUS



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APOLOGY

A BOOK about books can rarely claim to be anything better than a necessary evil. The commentator sometimes elucidates, occasionally obscures, but generally depresses. And he intrudes everywhere. When Othello cries in his agony, 'My heart is turned to stone,' the commentator is ready with his note: '*stone*, A.S. *stán*; compare *bone*, A.S. *bán*.' None have suffered from annotation more than the writers of Greece and Rome. There is not one of them who is not

scribbled, crost, and cramm'd
With comment, densest condensation, hard
To mind and eye.

If you look at a German bookseller's list, you perceive that by the end of the twentieth century the mere names of editions and dissertations will in the case of some authors cover as many pages as the original work. With so appalling a prospect before us, how can I justify the production of this book? I can only think of two excuses, both bad ones. The first is the girl's excuse for her baby—'It is only a little one.' And the second is that this shall be my last offence. I will not be guilty of a succession of rambles among these byways.

A rambler has a right to be discursive ; but possibly a censorious reader may pronounce me worthy of the same fate as Aelius Lamia, who, according to Suetonius, was put to death by Domitian for repeating old jests, *ob veteres iocos*. But what is stale to one may be fresh to another. An elderly person must often think to himself, 'Nothing is new except what has been forgotten.' But if we let this reflection affect us too much, we shall be reduced to silence, as was the young man who began to tell a story when the late G. A. Sala was present. 'It is no good your telling us that story,' said Sala. 'If it is a proper one, we don't want to hear it; and if it is an improper one, we know it.'

Here and there in this volume an observation made in *Byways in the Classics* has been developed, but the matter actually repeated does not amount to more than a page. As this is not a textbook, I have doubted whether to add references, which in some degree spoil the appearance of the type. But it is only too common for writers on law, on history and archaeology, and on grammar, to make statements that go far beyond the evidence on which they are based; and indicating the sources helps to keep the writer straight, and enables the reader to correct him when he goes wrong. Where references have been supplied by modern books, I have followed Dr. Routh's famous advice and verified them; all, I think, except two, and *di me perduint* if I can recollect which those

two are. Verifying references is commonly regarded as irksome work, but to me it has been an occasion of enjoyment; for many a time after finding and examining the passage sought I have passed a pleasant half-hour dipping into the book, now renewing acquaintance with once familiar scenes in Homer or Herodotus, and now making a short incursion into the *terra incognita* of St. Jerome.

SPORT IN THE POETS

WHEN *Byways in the Classics* came out, a newspaper devoted to racing offered to review it. The publisher connected this proposal with the circumstance that Cicero had just won the Derby, while I thought that *Byways in the Classics* had been taken to mean tales of shady practices concerning the 'classic' races, as the Derby and St. Leger. The incident has suggested to me that a few notes on sport in the poets may interest some readers.

First as to horse-racing, which with the ancients meant chariot-racing. For this the Greeks appear to have valued mares as highly as horses. In *Il.* xxiii Eumelus drove mares (376), Diomedes drove stallions (377), and Menelaus a mare and a horse (295). Antilochus however twitted his horses with being beaten by a mare (409).

But reach Atrides ! shall his mare outgo
Your swiftness, vanquished by a female foe ?

POPE.

In the *Electra* of Sophocles the Aetolian drove fillies, while Orestes' beasts changed their gender three times in the course of the race : compare 703, 722, 734, 744.

With us horses have proved their superiority. Thus

in the St. Leger, though it is run in 'the mare's month,' and though fillies receive an allowance of 3 lb., yet in the last ten years Sceptre and Pretty Polly are the only fillies that have been winners.

For colour white horses were thought the best, at any rate by the poets. Homer, *Il.* x. 437, describes the horses of Rhesus as

Λευκότεροι χιόνος, θείων δ' ἀνέμοισιν ὁμοῖοι,

I saw his coursers in proud triumph go,
Swift as the wind, and white as winter-snow.

POPE.

and Virgil, *Aen.* xii. 84, describes the horses of Turnus as

Qui candore nives anteirent, cursibus auras;

lines to which Claudian, xxviii. 475, refers with the remark, *si qua fides argentibus omnia Musis*. Horace has *equis praecurreret albis*, *Sat.* i. 7. 8; and comp. Plaut. *Asin.* 279. In the face of these passages it is odd to find Virgil, *Georg.* iii. 82, pronouncing white horses the worst: *color deterrimus albis*. In the *Electra* it was the white team that ran away and caused the disaster. Late in the sixth century B.C. the white coursers of Cilicia were famous. One for every day in the year was supplied to the Persian king. Herod. iii. 90. Sir F. Doyle, in his *Reminiscences*, 125, records how in Viva voce for 'Greats' Mr. Gladstone was trapped by the question (a futile one), Which horses were the best in the army of Xerxes?

Mr. Gladstone replied, no doubt making a shot, 'the Arabians.' Now the Arabs were mounted on camels. Herod. vii. 86.

A white horse has never won a race in England. This, I suppose, may be explained by the fact that all our racehorses trace their pedigree to the Byerley Turk, the Godolphin Arabian, and the Darley Arabian, who were bays. My own knowledge of the horse is chiefly gained from contemplating the hind-quarters of that flatulent animal from the interior of a hansom cab; but my friends tell me that, while there are traditional fancies about colours, such as that a black horse is bad-tempered, most sportsmen are now agreed in the apophthegm, 'a good horse cannot be of a bad colour.' Xenophon appears to have held this opinion; for, when enumerating the points of a horse, he says nothing about the colour, though in his essay on Hunting he thinks it necessary to describe the colour of a good hound. In a team most people like the colours of the horses to match, but the chariot in Eur. *Iph. A.* 216 had the pair in the yoke piebald and the outriggers chestnut. Piebald horses seem to have been admired. Such was Podarces in the chariot race in the *Thebaid*, *variumque Thoas rogat ire Podarces* (vi. 466); while the sexless animals driven by Admetus 'resembled day and night, being white with black spots' (vi. 335). They would have looked grand in a circus.

Of late years the chariot races of old have been