"Racing and Chasing"

By Alfred E. T. Watson. Longmans, Green & Co.

British sporting stories from the time of Charles Lever to this day, excepting when Trollope has entered the field, have presented an incongruous mixture of lively episode and literary slush. "Jack Dasher" rides a "dark horse" and backs him heavily. We are taken to the post and shown real horses, fretting to get off. We are made to feel the excitement of a real steeplechase. We are compelled to admire the cool nerve of Mr. Dasher, and we exult when he shoots past the favorite and wins by a head. But then Dasher has to embrace the paper-doll heroine, traditionally his first cousin, and Lord Broadacres must withdraw his objections and settle a competence upon the "radiant pair." Other puppets variously labelled, "Mr. Slippery Sly," the "gentleman rider," "Lord Saphead" and "Colonel Toddy" and their friends fill in the story.

Why, with such wealth of action to draw upon, no one has discarded the marionette method is a mystery, for there are many men in England who can write well and who would be profitably employed in the study of manly sports. Perhaps the British sporting public prefers its dolls; or perhaps the work has been foreordained for the latter days of Mr. Kipling. At any rate it has not been foreordained for Mr. Alfred E. T. Watson, although he has made an interesting and what, among horsey people, should be a popular book. "Racing and Chasing" is a collection of tales of the turf and hunting field, done in the good old manner, and judged by the standards which prevail in this branch of literature, highly meritorious. For one thing Mr. Watson knows about sport and sporting people, and that, after all, is the main essential. He was at Epsom and saw Pretender and Pero Gomez round Tattenham Corner in the great Derby, the issue of which is still disputed; and he has lived in the world of sport and sportsmen ever since. Moreover, when he describes things which he has consciously seen—the finish of a race, a horse taking a hurdle, the right and wrong ways to ride a horse,—he writes vividly and well. Passages like the finish of the Meadshire Handicap—and the volume has many of them—have a rapidity of movement and an effectiveness rare even in the works of those who sit in the high places. Ashdown has telegraphed his betting commissioner to back Roquelaure to a tune that means 17,000 pounds if he wins; and if he loses bankruptcy and the colonies.

"'Coming a deuce of a pace, aren't they?' Cranleigh said, his glasses following the field; but Ashdown could not answer. He felt the thumps of his heart, almost heard them; a casual movement of Leighton's elbow sent a tremor through him—he thought Roquelaure was beaten half a mile from home as they were, and that the jockey had already begun to ride; but his better judgment at once negatived the suggestion and told him that Hermitage, going at full stretch, could have no chance, for Roquelaure strode along close up to him, with his head in his chest, and the leader in hoops was already done with—she was now head and head with Hermitage, now half a length behind and so passed out of the race. On they came, Maid of the Mist, her jockey in vivid red, well up with the leaders; St. Christopher, too, improving his position. 'The favourite wins!' is the cry, as her head reaches Roquelaure's girths, Hermitage dropping back, not because he is going any slower, but because the pace has improved. 'The favourite wins!' her backers cry. 'Wins! She's beaten now!' is the counter shout. 'Look there! St. Christopher walks in!' is the answer from one of his supporters, and there seemed reason, for the favourite's jockey had got out his whip and in a moment more was using it vigorously.

"'It's all right, my dear boy, old boy. We win!' Cranleigh murmured under his breath."

They did not win, for Roquelaure was beaten out by a rank outsider, Projectiles. But the tale being conceived in the old style which regards the happiness of heroes, comes out all right. Ashdown's handwriting was bad and made "Roquelaure" look so much like "Projectiles" that the telegrapher sent the message that way and consequently the money was bet on the winner after all.

Mr. Watson's pictures of the hunting field, while not instinct with the magic of Kipling's animal stories, are nevertheless lifelike. This is his description of the working of hounds after a lost scent at a check:—

"No one doubts that the fox has made for the withy beds, but the master is a great believer in letting hounds work out their own problems for themselves, and he shakes his head as he sees his huntsman waiting for a signal to make a cast. All eyes are turned to the hounds at the right, where suddenly Dairymaid joyfully gives tongue. She is in her first season, but has before now demonstrated her trustworthiness, so that, though she is feathering down the other side of the hedge, wide to the left, away from what everyone supposes to have been the fox's line, her assertion is respected. Ranger, a grave old dog who hunts with 'the ladies' and who never makes a mistake, jumps through the hedge to see whether Dairymaid is to be believed, and in a moment he opens up with a warm confirmation. Damsel again lifts up her voice, though she is far away from the drag, and cannot possibly know if the others are correct; the master makes a mental note concerning her, as he hastily turns his horse's head."

This is a sketch of hound character which everybody who takes his eyes with him into the hunting field will recognize as true. And the book has many such passages which bring the sportsman who reads it into close sympathy with the sportsman who wrote it.

Perhaps, after all, it is hypercritical to lament Mr. Watson's "General Truffles," the gourmand, and his "Starchley," the bore. Perhaps it is the sign of a neurotic and decadent generation to refuse to be entertained with the dear old healthful jokes. In the sporting prints we take for granted half-ton horses galloping over green baize hills upon pipe stem legs, and no realist would dare to jeer them. It may be, indeed, that a sporting story would be a misnomer without a "Jack Dasher." Nevertheless, even a meek critic is forced to make a stand against the time-honored practice of marrying heroes to their first cousins when carried to the length adopted by Mr. Watson. Four tales open with this formula:

The hero: "I have wasted my fortune to a beggarly bank balance of 2068*l.* 12*s.* 4*d.* I have placed this all on 'Runhard' at the opening price of 100–5. If I lose I am ruined and must go to the colonies." The Hero's friend: "Will not your uncle aid you?" The Hero: "Alas, no. And he will break off my engagement to my cousin"—on page 61, Edie; on page 184, Violet; on page 214, Ethel; on page, 252, Florence. By the time we come to Florence, our faith in coincidences is strained, and it is hardly mollifying that "Runhard" invariably wins and makes the hero and these beautiful and good girls happy.

The volume is well illustrated by men who know how to draw horses and the kind of men who ride them. To be sure, on page 150 the artist arms a gentleman who is going deer-stalking, with a double barrelled shotgun; likewise the Scotch keeper, who is so melancholy that one suspects he is conscious of the mistake.