

The Cruellest Thing *in the World*

Gallant Horses Sent to Almost Certain Injuries or Death in Ambushed Traps; Thirty-two Brave Racers Start; But Only Three Reach Winning Post Without Falling



Above — A remarkable photographic scene at Becher's Brook, one of the deadly traps of the "Grand National." One horse is safely away; one is falling. The horse just topping the fence will break his leg when he lands and will be shot. In a moment another brave horse will come over and twist his neck in a spill. (Photograph by Illustrated London News.)

Below—Noble "Awbeg" down with a broken leg; "Wavertree," managing to avoid the fallen body which he saw when he came over the treacherous "Canal Turn," manages, too, to swing his forefoot aside just far enough to prevent killing "Awbeg's" scrambling jockey; but "Wavertree" could not save himself.



"Northbrook," one of the most famous of England's steeplechasers, landing on his neck after making two of the most dangerous jumps on the course. O'Fallon the rider, broke his collar bone in his fall. At the left is the reward of the winner in the "Grand National" the coveted cup.

JUST the other day thirty-two high bred horses, each one famed throughout Great Britain for its spirit, speed and all the other qualities that go to make up a marvelous race horse, stood quivering with excitement at the start of the famous Aintree steeplechase course near Liverpool, where each year for more than a century England's principal steeplechase event has been held. Atop each horse was a gentleman rider. Along the four and a half mile course there were gathered, waiting for the horses to pass in their mad flight, thousands upon thousands of England's gentility—fashionable debutantes, lords and their ladies, earls and their countesses, and even dukes and their duchesses. For the Grand National is the outstanding sporting event of the year in all the British Empire.

The thirty-two horses started, springing away with their heads out, nostrils extended, the coursing of their sporting blood plainly visible along the ridges made by veins that stood out beneath their tender skins. As the last of the horses flashed by the spectators grouped themselves or moved along the course waiting impatiently for the big news of the year—"Which one of these splendid horses would survive the four and a half miles—which one would keep to its feet to the end?" For it is not often that more than one or two horses ever reach the finish of the Grand National. And that is why even the sportsmen in England are crying that this great steeplechase event is the cruellest thing in the world.

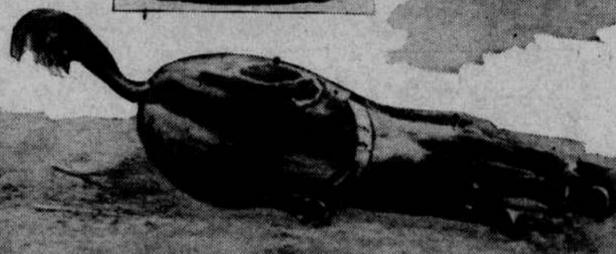
This year, of the thirty-two horses that started only three finished without accident. All the others fell. Only 75 per cent. of them succeeded in passing the Canal Turn Fence, the eighth jump on the course. The others fell later on. It has been the record of the Grand National for several years that one-third of all the horses who enter the race fall, sometimes injuring themselves for life, sometimes killing themselves outright, sometimes crippling their riders, within the first mile of the course.

This year it is not the injured riders who, after being carried off the field on stretchers or helped away by spectators, have attracted the most sympathy and have been responsible for the outburst of public opinion against the continuance of this famous steeplechase. For some reason the public this year turned its attention to the poor horses whose broken necks, twisted legs, and bruised bodies dotted the course for miles, while the solitary winner was being cheered and acclaimed.

The fact that only thirty-two horses started in the chase is accepted as evidence that in all England there were only thirty-two horses whose owners felt that they were brave and strong enough to successfully overcome even a portion of the obstacles which mark this famous course. And of these thirty-two horses none of their owners seems to have given much thought to the horse itself—only to the glory that is promised the winner.

In no other race event in the world have horses to jump so high or so often, or to travel so far. Each jump on the course is a great deal higher and wider than any jump to be found on any of the courses elsewhere in the country. Some of them are so wide and so dangerous that to drive a horse at them is almost certainly to threaten that horse with being crippled, at least, for the rest of his days.

The treacherous Canal Turn Fence is photographed on this page. First, there is a ditch six feet wide and two feet deep, with a fence two feet high at the near bank of the ditch. It would seem almost cruel in itself to drive a horse with a heavy gentleman rider across a six foot ditch, with a



The barbarous "Canal Turn Fence." The horses, with their "Gentlemen Riders," must first clear a low fence, then lift over the hedge, the height of which is shown above. Few horses, indeed succeed at making this jump.

two foot space to clear at the very beginning of his leap. But for the spectators of the Grand National such a jump would be thought ridiculous. Therefore, there is added at the other side of the ditch a five foot foliage fence, which is more than three feet thick. Those who are familiar with steeplechasing know at once that the horse must clear at least fifteen feet in this one leap to avoid tripping. Few horses, indeed, have ever made the jump and remained on their feet when they landed. It is here that the majority of the magnificent animals entered in the Grand National come to grief, spilling themselves and their riders.

Most of the steeplechase riders know how, of course, to fall gracefully and to lessen the danger of seriously hurting themselves. The thoroughbred horses, too, have a way of taking their falls in some miraculous way that seems to protect them. There are few, however, who escape this jump without a broken leg or twisted tendon. Last year, of the thirty-one horses that entered the Grand National only nine were left when this jump was reached. Of these nine only four went on. Of the twenty-seven accidents more than a dozen were so serious as to virtually remove the horses from the racing field. Two were permanently crippled.

Then there are two other outstanding obstacles on the course, each one of which

undoubtedly is a cruel barrier to build before a beautiful horse. One is Valentine's Brook, the other is Becher's Brook. At Becher's Brook the fence is five feet six inches high with a two foot rail four feet in front of it. Before the horse has cleared these obstacles in his leap he must cover an ugly ditch, running with murky water four feet deep and several feet wide.

It was at Becher's Brook that the noted steeplechase horse Awbeg, one of the noble animals in Great Britain, fell to his knees, rolled over on his side, with his head under him, breaking his neck. Immediately behind Awbeg came the wonderful Wavertree, considered to be one of the best steeplechasers ever sent along the course. Wavertree, cheered by a shout from his jockey, lifted himself into the air just as Awbeg's heels disappeared beyond the fence. He was a splendid leap. As he raised for the fence, clearing the foliage by at least eight inches, his beautiful slender front legs curving gently to receive as with a spring his impact with the earth beyond the ditch, the gallant animal saw stretched on the ground, just where he himself would land, the quivering body of his predecessor at the leap. A few feet still beyond was Awbeg's rider scrambling to his feet, madly endeavoring to get out of the way. The spectators saw Wavertree's head, Wavertree's nostrils shoot out, they saw his body, even though it was poised in the air, twitch as if suddenly

reached away from the catastrophe confronting him, and his head veered around to follow, in sturdy effort to guide himself so that he might land at one side of the fallen Awbeg.

Partly he succeeded. His body cleared that of the horse, which had fallen in his path. But he could not clear Awbeg's rider, who was just getting on his knees. Wavertree's four feet seemed to land squarely on the fallen rider's shoulder. The calloused spectators closed their eyes and shuddered. It seemed as though horse and two riders were about to be tangled in a floundering mass. Somehow, though, Wavertree planted his feet in such a way that he missed the fallen rider completely, and the photograph on this page shows just how he did it. An instant after the photograph was taken Wavertree had fallen forward on his neck, giving it a bad twist from which he may never recover. His rider had had time to prepare for the spill, and walked off the course unhurt.

Just a few moments later another horse, St. Bernard, came over the fence, and spilled between Awbeg and Wavertree. He, too, was badly bruised, but also his rider, hearing the shouts before he took the leap, was prepared and rolled aside uninjured.

Just beyond this dangerous jump is another which is even worse, and the scene of even more accidents. This is Valentine's Brook. The fence is several inches higher and is built at the end of a long run

Another one about to be counted out of the race at the Fourth Fence.



racked with a spasm. Bravely he tried to change the course of his flight. His front legs stiffened, much as if they were hands and arms and he were trying to

over roughly plowed ground. Those who laid out the course, with their little regard for the lives of the horses doomed to make their gallant effort to come out safely, were not content that at this place the horse should lift his rider almost six feet in the air and carry him safely through a flight of sixteen feet, but insisted that the horse should reach the jump plagued and tired, by a hundred yard struggle over a rough ground that would trouble many horses to keep their feet.

Next comes the water jump, where the steeplechaser almost requires wings. First, there is a two foot rail, then a few feet further along is a stiff thorn hedge, and beyond this—a running stream of water fifteen feet wide! It would seem as though any horse that has survived the Canal Fence, Valentine's Brook, Becher's Brook and the Water Jump, should be sufficiently pitted to be excused from further tortures. But no, these are only four of the obstacles he must surmount if he wishes to walk off the field with his legs, body and neck intact. There still are twenty-eight more, and not only must he make these twenty-eight other jumps but he must go over each one of those four dreadful obstacles a second time.

And in the Grand National there are dangers other than even these treacherous jumps. At many of the fences there is not room for more than two or three horses to prepare for the jump abreast. Often half a dozen, and even more, riders bring their steeds to one of these jumps at about the same time. Consequently they must bump and jostle each other, each rider trying desperately to be first to reach the first fence and to have clear way for his jump, and to be assured that there will be no fallen horse to stumble over on the other side.

usually have been from thirty to forty. Even in a country where there is a wide effort to breed and raise horses fit for the Grand National there seldom are more than ten horses entered in any year who have the slightest chance, in the opinion of the spectators, of finishing the course. Yet in the pell-mell dash for the first fence the excitement of those horses who really should not have been entered often cause others who, if left to an uncrowded field, might even make the worst jumps, fall at the easier leaps. There are many bad spills, injuring both riders and horses, caused by the mad scramble of riders and steeds who really have small reason to hope that the honor of being among the winners will ever fall to them.

Most of the horses in the Grand National have to carry between 140 and 175 pounds of rider weight. Gentleman riders are not so diminutive as even the heavier jockeys. Within recent years many horses have been killed, spectators have said, because of their inability to lift riders who have enjoyed too many good dinners.

Even in England, the country of steeplechasing, there are no courses which are marked by such obstacles as those strewn along the course of the Grand National. The longest other course is three miles, and the hardest of these are quite easy for hundreds of each season's steeplechasers.

Steeplechasing always has been an essentially British sport. In early days men were accustomed to match their hunters against each other and ride across country to a fixed point near to some steeple which guided them on their way; and this is no doubt, in several respects, a class of sport superior to that now practiced under the name of steeplechasing. For it tested the capacity of the horse to jump fences of all descriptions, and provided the rider with opportunities of showing his readiness and skill in picking the best line of country. But racing of this kind afforded spectators a very small chance of watching the struggle; and made-up steeplechase courses, the whole circuit of which could be viewed from the enclosures, came into existence.

It is especially since the war that a feeling of resentment against the cruelties of the Grand National has been taking more and more tangible shape. So many of the thoroughbred animals entered in this year's race were hurt that the antagonism seems to be certain of definite result. It is doubtful if spectators ever again will be treated to the spectacle of what is in many ways almost a one day slaughter of the finest horses in the kingdom. It is extremely doubtful if in America such an event would be given the clearance of favorable public appreciation.

There are those, of course, who maintain that the Grand National is England's greatest spur to the breeding of fine horses, but more and more these are losing favor.