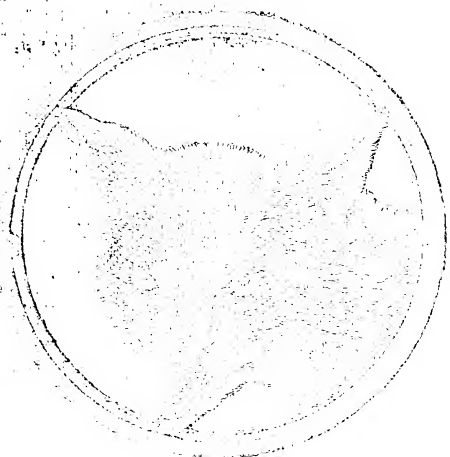

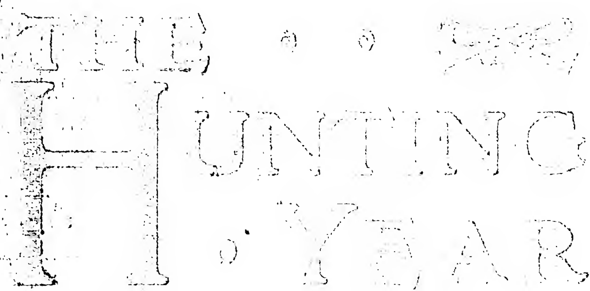


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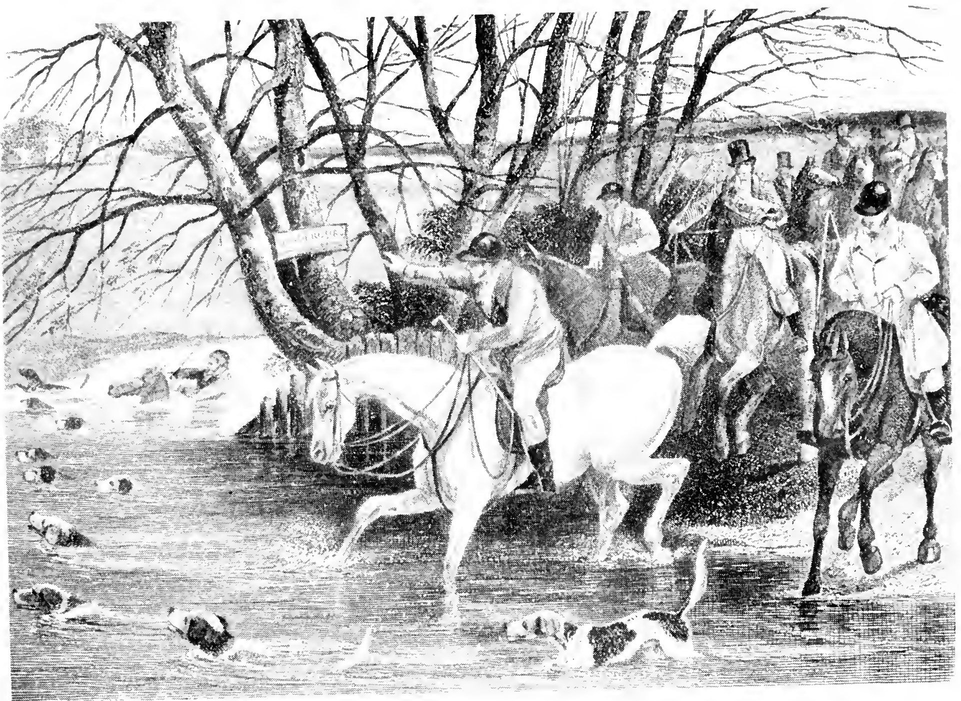
# THE HUNTING YEAR



BREAST HIGH

*From a painting by E. Hull. Engraved by T. A. Prior.*

[*Frontispiece*

# THE HUNTING YEAR

By

WILLIAM SCARTH DIXON

AUTHOR OF "IN THE NORTH COUNTREE," "THE HISTORY OF THE BRAMHAM MOOR HUNT," "THE HISTORY OF THE YORK AND AINSTY HUNT," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

"Go you to hunting!"
—*Cymbeline.*

LONDON
W. J. HAM-SMITH
1912

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# DEDICATION

## TO W. H. A. WHARTON, ESQ., M.F.H.

MY DEAR MR WHARTON,—It seems a happy accident that this little book of hunting memories should be going through the Press as you are commencing your twenty-sixth season as Master of the Cleveland, and whilst congratulating you on your twenty-five years of mastership, I take the opportunity to dedicate my book to you.

I am reminded, if indeed I needed the reminder, that it was in Cleveland I first learned to love hunting, and to appreciate that noble animal, the foxhound; that in Cleveland I have seen some of the best sport of a fairly "good innings" of fox-hunting; and that much of that sport has been seen in your company.

# Dedication

*Ou revient toujours à ses premiers amours* is literally true with hunting. I have hunted and seen good sport all over England, but as the time draws near for me to

"Scour the country in my elbow chair"

it is the gallant runs over my native moors, so many of which I have shared with you, that stand out in boldest relief.

Yours very faithfully,

WILLIAM SCARTH DIXON.

FAIRLIGHT,
LUTON, BEDS.
*November*, 1911.

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# THE HUNTING YEAR

## FOREWORD

"Hunt, fish, shoot,
  Would a man fulfil life's duty!
Not to the bodily frame alone
  Does sport give strength and beauty;

But character gains in—courage?
  Ay, sir, and much beside it!
You don't sport, more's the pity:
  You soon would find, if you tried it,

Good sportsman means good fellow,
  Sound hearted he, to the centre;
Your mealy-mouthed, mild milksops
  There's where the rot can enter!"
—*Browning.*

An idle word, idly spoken, often brings about results which were never expected, either by the man who spoke them or by him who heard. Sometimes, indeed, an idle word has struck the world to its centre; upheaving dynasties, shaking thrones, and bringing revolution with it. Sometimes it has had but a trivial result, yet a result

for all that, as in the present case. For it is entirely due to an idle word spoken thoughtlessly by a man who knew nothing about what he was talking of, and who consequently spoke with all the more authority, that the following papers were written.

As I was coming home from hunting on the last day of a very open and very hard season I met an acquaintance—who, though knowing nothing whatever of hunting—was always very ready to talk about it. Said he: " Now the hunting season is over you will have nothing to do till next November." I pointed out that there were many things to do between April and November —Epsom, Ascot, the big shows, etc., but that even if there were not there was plenty of work to keep a hunting man interested in his own sport in every month of the year.

As might have been expected, my acquaintance, whose knowledge of hunting was limited to seeing a few men ride through the town in which he resided—spic and span in the morning, dirty and mud-stained and occasionally carrying a little of the freehold of the country with

them in the evening—and perhaps a couple of days in a season on foot, knew a good deal more than I did, and declined to be convinced of the truth of my proposition.

Then it struck me that a considerable number of those with whom I had hunted during that and many other seasons, might, after all, be more inclined to side with my acquaintance than with me. Several of them I knew would in a week or so have commenced their racing season, and would be racing week in, week out, with the exception of a few days' grouse or partridge shooting till November brought round the time for gallops in the open once more.

And it struck me as I continued my homeward ride how much these friends of mine miss, who can see no good in hunting save " the madness of the gallop, forty minutes on the grass."

Each month—each day brings round to the hunt servants its own peculiar duties, and the man who interests himself in the work of the moment as it comes round, not only has a fuller and deeper enjoyment of the good things of the season, but he comes in for fewer of the

disappointments which are attendant on every hunting season.

I think this is what makes the farmer enjoy his hunting so thoroughly. He knows all about the country and the little details of its daily history; in his rides and walks he sees the young puppies grow and develop, and he watches that development with a keen and a personal interest; for a hundred to one that he is walking a puppy himself that he fancies a bit for the cup at the puppy show; he knows where many of the litters of cubs are; and from the beginning to the end of the year *he is in touch with Hunting*.

I cannot but think that it would be better for many of our hunting friends, such as those to whom I have alluded, if they were more in touch with the details of hunting—if they took a greater interest in the affairs of the Hunt. That hunting as a sport would benefit I am sure.

It is not, however, with the object of teaching that I have written these few sketches. But I would point out that there are many who hunt in these days who have not had the opportunity

of identifying themselves with the ordinary routine of country life, and that they perhaps may be glad of a hint.

I do not mean to infer for one moment that a man should make hunting the sole object of his life. There are those who have to do so, and to them may the business part of the sport be left. But anyone who hunts will be all the better for taking an intelligent interest in the details of the sport from year's end to year's end, and for trying to see the peculiar beauties which belong to it at different times. And I would point out that it is far better to follow one sport intelligently and well than to fritter time away in half a dozen pastimes without being able to attain a decent knowledge of any of them.

To know one sport thoroughly well, to understand it and be able to appreciate something beyond the mere excitement of its most thrilling moments, goes to the making up of a sportsman, of such a man as Browning wrote about. Such knowledge also remains a joy for ever when a man can no longer take that active part in sport that he was wont to do.

An instance of this may be given. Some few years ago I called on a friend—an ex-M.F.H., who was then in his eighty-fifth year. I found him with a copy of "Horse and Hound" by Nimrod, and he greeted me with: "I always tried to breed them by this standard, but found it hard to do," as he pointed to the portrait of the Earl of Kintore's Nosegay which is in that book. And then he talked of the difference between the hounds of his younger days and the present day, and discussed many of the points of management and hound work with all the eagerness of youth. But during our long talk he never spoke of the big fences he had jumped; and the "riding" part of hunting was but lightly touched upon, though he had been one of the hardest of a very hard riding set. He rode to hunt, and I know of few men who got so much good out of fifty-five seasons' hunting as he did.

In conclusion I would point out that though the circumstances described in these sketches have all occurred, they have not all occurred in the same country, and occasionally circum-

stances which have taken place at different times are spoken of as having occurred at the same time. I have adopted this plan to prevent any particular hunt being identified, and I refer to it so that my readers need not exercise their ingenuity in attempting to solve problems that are incapable of solution.

WILLIAM SCARTH DIXON.

FAIRLIGHT,

LUTON.

# AN EVENING IN JULY

## AN EVENING IN JULY

> "Soon as the evening shades prevail
> The moon takes up the wondrous tale."
> —*Addison.*

It has been a busy day at the kennels, and the huntsman turns into his pretty garden with a sigh of content as he hears the clash of a gate a quarter of a mile off which proclaims that the last of his guests, or his master's guests, save a privileged few, is well on his homeward way.

It has been the annual Puppy Show, and from early morning his has been a life of constant anxiety. For much of the success of these annual gatherings—that is the real success of them as distinguished from the apparent success which is expressed in the frequently meaningless words, "We have had a good time"—is due in great measure to the tact of the huntsman or his wife, who have to smooth out the little

wrinkles, which might cause serious trouble if left to themselves, and to touch with a light hand on some of those petty grievances about which it is well for we others, if we know anything of them, to be silent.

Our huntsman, if he has had an anxious day, has had a happy one. The judges, who have been selected with great care, have fulfilled their arduous duties to his satisfaction. They have done more than that, they have pleased the beaten, which is a difficult thing to do, especially when a very good lot have been put forward as has been the case this time. Then the accounts from all over the country are cheering. The farmers are all in good heart with the prospect of an early and abundant harvest, and with his hounds well forward in condition, he looks forward to commencing the season in another three weeks at the latest. So, as he turns into his garden to seek his special friends, he feels that he can face the good-natured criticism which is as much a part of the day's work as the judging and the luncheon and the speeches.

He does not want much guidance in his search

for his friends. The aroma of good cigars—what good cigars huntsmen smoke when they indulge in the fragrant weed—leads him to the snug little summer-house at the bottom of the garden, and as he comes within earshot he hears one of his friends expatiating on the merits of a hound that has not been among the placed lot.

"Harry is all for legs and feet," says he, "and he can never see merit in a hound that is not straight. Legs and feet are not much use without necks and shoulders, and ribs. Warrior is quite one of the right sort—good ribs, good constitution. Not quite straight, that I am quite willing to admit, but he has probably had distemper bad—oh, he had, had he? Then he will straighten with work. And if he doesn't, well, there is not much fault to find, and he looks like being there when foxes are killed. And, after all, that is what hounds are wanted for."

The ball is fairly set rolling now, and the argument waxes keen as legs and feet are discussed and as one huntsmen after another men-

tions a hound to illustrate his particular opinions on shape and make. Then the various lines of blood become subjects of debate, and we who are not of the learned in hound lore listen with something approaching awe to the way in which hound pedigrees are glibly run over. Beaufort Justice, Lord Henry Bentinck's strain, and the magic names of Foljambe and Osbaldeston, the Brocklesby Rallywood, Lord Coventry's Rambler and other foxhound celebrities come "trippingly on the tongue," and here and there a huntsman will drop in a word about our old Statesman or Warwick. Then when the Belvoir Weathergauge is mentioned, from all the little group there comes a regular chorus of appreciation, and the hound talk from the standpoint of the flags comes to a close with an abundance of evidence to confirm the opinion that for work and appearance the stock of the Belvoir Weathergauge and their descendants are not to be beaten.

From hounds on the flags to hounds in the field is not a very difficult transition, and soon our group of friends are busy talking over the

events of the past season, and as one of them said afterwards they soon killed twenty brace of foxes.

To an outsider, a man who simply sees the gallop, and who is accustomed to hearing hunting discussed from the standpoint of the riding man, this part of the conversation comes as a revelation. The ordinary phrases in which he hears a run described and commented upon are wanting. No one mentions that he or anyone else made a good jump; the riding part of the sport is simply taken as a matter of course. Our privileged friend, who, to do him justice, goes rather well to hounds, is surprised when he hears one of the huntsmen, describing a run in which he himself took part, say not a word about the fine jump he made over a wide brook with rotten banks. It was taken as all in the day's work. "It was an awkward check at the Fordwell Brook," said he, "and I was a bit puzzled. There were so many things a fox might have done. He might have slipped down the brook and gone to ground in those strong rabbit earths, or he might have gone up the

brook side for Warnton where I knew the earths were open. I should not have held them over the brook if it had not been for old Winifred. She hung back to the brook side twice, and I thought she was likely to know quite as much as I did. So I just slipped over, and we got on to the line in a moment and soon killed him. The Weathergauge strain again, Jim."

" It was strange his crossing the brook when so tired and especially when other earths were so handy," says another huntsman. And then the conversation turns to foxes and their ways, and it is pretty generally agreed by all huntsmen present that but little is known of the fox and his ways, though there is a general agreement that a good fox cares nothing about being hunted, whilst one man goes so far as to say that a really good fox is rarely killed save by a fluke.

And so the conversation goes on merrily. Hunting—hunting events, and hunting technicalities—are thrashed out again and again, yet the subject never seems stale. For there is always something new to be said about hound

work—a fact which the novice cannot too early lay to heart.

Then as the day fades, and the moon rises flooding the night with its brilliant light, our huntsman host suggests a walk. Cigars are thrown away for we all know—or at any rate the majority of us know—that our walk has an object and what that object is.

As we stroll across the park silently a startled rabbit will occasionally scuttle along in front of us, and an owl will now and then sweep past us with flopping wings. Ten minutes quiet walking brings us within reach of a big wood—a wood whose name is well known in the history of our hunt—nay, well known in the history of fox-hunting. For it is never drawn blank, and its foxes are of the stoutest.

We make a pretty wide detour to sink the wind and then we enter the wood itself, following silently in the wake of our huntsman. Down the long ride we proceed, with the moonlight through the trees throwing fantastic shadows on our path. A startled wood-pigeon coos dreamily as our footsteps disturb him; a host

of little finches flutter their wings as one of our number carelessly touches the bush in which they are taking their night's rest. A weasel chatters in the distance, but his voice is soon hushed. We turn to the right and proceed farther into the heart of the wood. All around us is that silence which is so pregnant with life —that silence of the woods which is tangible— almost audible.

And we have come to our journey's end. In front of us is a small open space, a little hillock in the midst of it—round it the thickest of covert, and not very far off there is the ripple of water. Carefully hidden in the thick covert we wait events.

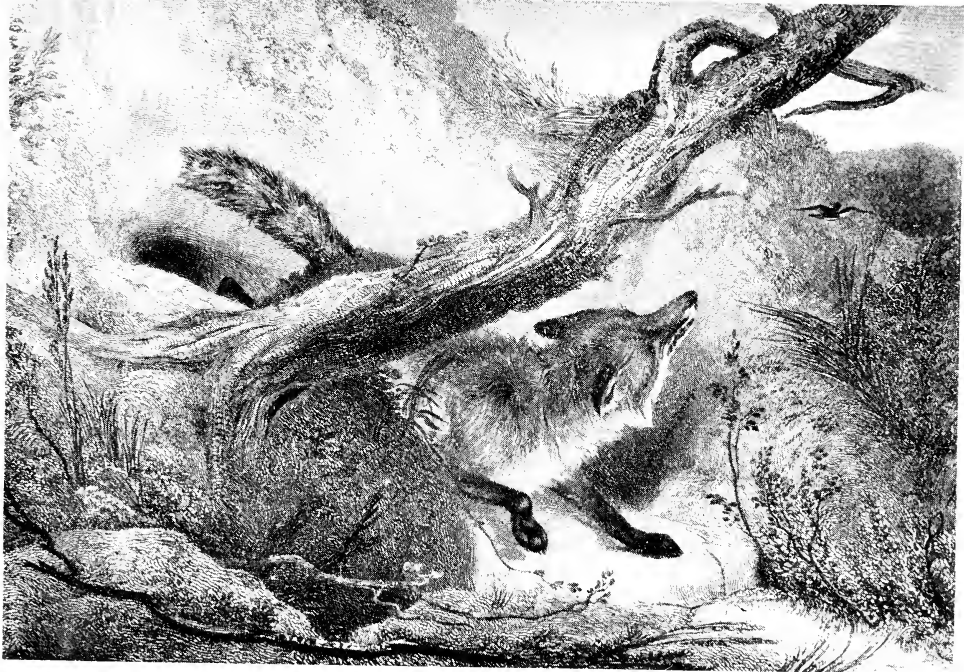
Presently we see a pair of bright eyes shining through the darkness. There they are, motionless at first, then they move a little, and a sharp little nose is outlined in the moonlight. Then confidence fully established, out into the open comes a smart, three-parts grown cub. Soon he is followed by another and another till there are five of them out, and they begin a wild race after each other, round and round the hillock.

Then they begin a mimic battle, snarling at each other and rolling over each other, sometimes chasing one and sometimes the chasers becoming the chased. So they play for ten minutes when the old vixen comes quietly on the scene with a rabbit in her mouth. But to her experienced ear there is something wrong. She has an undefined idea—but still an idea—that her hereditary enemy is not so very far off. So she drops the rabbit, gives a sharp "yap," and immediately the young ones scuttle into their earth, and then she picks up the rabbit and follows them leisurely.

"A nice litter," says our huntsman, "I shall let them alone for a bit; they are rather late." And then cigars are lighted, and a brisk walk takes the party back to the kennels, quite ready to turn in, for they are going out to early exercise on the morrow.

And as the huntsman, before closing his door, looks round on the glorious July night, with its scents and sounds, and hears some of his favourites "baying the moon," he is conscious that he, at any rate, has made a good beginning of the *Hunting Year*.

# AN AUGUST MORNING



THE FOX

*From a painting by C. Hancock. Engraved by R. Parr.*

[*Facing page 23*

# AN AUGUST MORNING

"Unfrequented woods
I better brook than flourishing peopled towns."
—"The Two Gentlemen of Verona."

August is associated with grouse-shooting in the minds of most people, the appearance of the game-dealers' windows early on the morning of the glorious Twelfth telling even to the man who knows least about sport that the shooting season has begun. But if one were to ask the "man in the street" when the hunting season began he would answer—if he answered at all—on the 1st of November.

Yet many a cub has heard the cry of hounds before the first grouse has fallen a victim to a charge of number five, and, except in late countries and in late seasons cub-hunting is pretty general by the middle of August.

There is a peculiar charm about August hunt-

ing for those who are priviliged to take part in it, for it is not in every country that the modern system of advertising the fixtures prevails. And when one comes to think of it, it is only natural that the huntsman should prefer to do the early part, at any rate, of his educational work, without being troubled by a large and a more or less ignorant field whose attention is wandering when it is most needed, and as one of the fraternity once expressed it, "he did not want more cats out than caught mice."

But a hound man who is keen enough to ride a dozen miles before daylight is pretty sure of an invitation for an August morning's hunting, and to find some enjoyment, too, when he gets there. So some fine morning he finds a letter informing him that the hounds will be at Oakdene at 5 a.m.

This entails an early start, for Oakdene is some ten miles off and it is essential to be in the saddle not later than three o'clock. It is an early hour indeed for these degenerate days, but it is worth the little discomfort of rising and breakfasting in the dark.

# An August Morning

In a hot August, and August is generally a hot month, there is a delicious freshness in the air at an early hour in the morning, which is quite sufficient compensation for the trouble of early rising.

The man who knows his business will ride a horse with some experience—a steady old hunter—on these early mornings, for he will know that young hounds are apt to rush wildly about in search of their huntsman if they should chance to miss him and may easily come within reach of his horse's heels. A horse that is at all inclined to kick should *never* be taken out during the early part of the cub-hunting season, unless his rider is content to view the proceedings from a distance. Besides, a steady horse should always be ridden on these occasions, for the sportsman is very likely to be pressed into the service and an unruly or fidgety horse distracts the attention.

How pleasant it is to ride an old favourite on these August mornings. As one jogs quietly along in the starlight, the old horse plays with his bridle gaily; and I know of no more cheery

sound than the jingle of the curb chain on the first morning's cubbing. What memories does it not bring back! And the horse has his memories as well as his rider or the curb chain would not ring so merrily at intervals as it does.

The stars are beginning to fade as the high road is left, and as day breaks, billows of mist rise up from the damp grass. The road takes us for some distance by the side of a river, where already the fish are rising eagerly at the flies which in their myriads tell of the coming heat, and heedless, in their ignorance, of a couple of herons which are wheeling about in their eccentric flight, looking with keen eyes for breakfast.

In the distance the sounds of industrial life are heard from a farm-house. The river is crossed and the sharp "yap-yap" of the ubiquitous and mischievous sheep-dog tells that he has another errand as well as bringing the cows in to milk, and visions of rabbit-pie pass through the mind of the ruddy-cheeked, flaxen-haired boy in whose temporary charge he is supposed to be. But if that boy does not look sharp,

"Watch" is likely to eat as well as kill that rabbit. Farther on a plough-boy whistles as he brings the patient draught-horses from the field to their accustomed labour, beating rude time against the side of the bare-backed bay he is riding, with the wicker corn-skep from which his charges have just nibbled a few oats.

Here and there a few stooks of corn are left out, but the big rick-yards, full of goodly stacks, tell of a plenteous harvest and of the prosperity of the land as land. Even though prices are unremunerative, a full stack-yard of well-built stacks is a goodly sight to see—a sight reminding one of England's prosperity when men made something well and were content with their good workmanship and a reasonable profit.

The sounds of rural labour tell that we have nearly reached the end of our ride, and as we pass our farm-house we are joined by the farmer, and as we look around us in the light of the rising sun we see everywhere that gradual getting of things into order for the work of the coming day, which appeals to the Englishman's sense of fitness; and the outward forms at any

rate, of that prosperity which was once attendant on English agriculture.

And as we look we see, behind the tall hedge half a mile off, an occasional glimpse of scarlet, and we sharpen our pace in order to meet our friend the huntsman at the corner of the wood just as the distant village clock strikes five. There are only half a dozen of us present. The huntsman, his two whippers-in, a second horseman, our farmer friend and ourselves make up the tale. Other two second horsemen have been sent round to the far side of the wood; a keen hunting man who has not missed a day's hunting for twenty seasons and who lives at the other side of the country, has taken his accustomed place at another distant corner. It is one of his peculiarities that he is always with hounds and that he never rides an unnecessary yard. Not likely, then, that he would ride round the wood for the purpose of riding back again; and you can tell to a yard where he is the moment the huntsman, having disposed of his available forces, moves off to draw.

One great charm about these early cub-hunt-

ing mornings is that every man who is out is a sportsman, loving hounds for their own sake as well as for the gallop they give, and with a keen appreciation of hound work. The "thrusting scoundrel," as a well-known M.F.H. termed him, is conspicuous by his absence; the man who rushes to the meet in a motor-car, and who overrides hounds whenever opportunity offers, is happily engaged elsewhere on, to him, more congenial pursuits.

Our friend the keeper, you may be sure, is there to have a word with the huntsman, and as he walks down to the wood-side with him, his honest face aglow with enthusiasm, he tells of four litters at least, and hopes "you'll get hold of one or two, for they've been mortal troublesome of late." As a matter of fact there are only three litters, but the keeper is a good fellow who would as soon think of shooting a man as a fox, and it is easy to count a litter twice.

Specially favoured by the huntsman, we are told off to watch the main earth, and as we jog down the ride to that familiar spot how the history of the past and bright hopes for the

future keep crowding on the brain. From that glorious gallop of three seasons ago the mind flits to that far more glorious gallop which we hope will take place in December—that gallop in which for once we are to have all the luck. But once arrived at our destination reminiscence and anticipations must be banished, for at any moment "the hunt may be up," and woe to the man who has not kept eyes and ears open when the huntsman comes his way.

How quiet everything is! A wood-pigeon coos plaintively; a jay starts noisily chattering amongst the trees. Otherwise not a sound is heard but the jingling of the bit, or the stamp of the horse's foot to rid himself of the annoying attentions of the insect life of the woods. Suddenly the insect life is forgotten, and he is all attention as he stands with pricked ears and quivering nostrils. His ear, quicker than that of his rider, has caught the sound he loves so well; in another instant his rider has heard it too.

The challenge, repeated again and again, swells into a chorus from fifty couple of throats,

and soon the practised ear of the sportsman tells him that the pack is running in two or three lots. Now near, now at the far end of the wood, the pack swinging round with their foxes, and carrying a rare head, there is plenty to think about now.

Presently the undergrowth is seen to move, and with ears pricked and listening for the pack, a cub creeps stealthily across the ride and makes for the main earths which, of course, are stopped. The pack, which has for some time past been at the far end of the wood, is now rapidly approaching the main earth; on the right a fox bustles over the ride in very different manner to the stealthy fashion of the first; in another minute a fox in a still greater hurry has crossed to the left, and the pack, about evenly divided, are screaming after them, and you are glad that you did not halloa at that first fox. Still more pleased are you when the huntsman trots up, quiet and self-contained, asks how many foxes you have seen as if he were asking about sheep and says, when you describe the half-beaten foxes that have crossed the ride just

in front of hounds, " I always let them alone, I like them to do it themselves."

For an hour or so the game goes on merrily. Hounds change once, twice—half a dozen times. The old foxes have left the covert long ago; so have the best and boldest of the cubs. The others, all but some four or five, have found shelter in rabbit spouts. The ground by this time has got thoroughly foiled and hounds can no longer carry a head. Indeed, they can scarcely own a line.

Now is the critical moment. Carefully the huntsman gets his hounds together, making as little noise as possible, and patiently he draws them through the thickest of the covert; a hound speaks—then another—then they hunt slowly for a few minutes and check again.

The morning by this time is hot, and it is close and stuffy in the wood; the unaccustomed early rising is beginning to tell its tale, and the attention is beginning to relax ever such a little. A little object crawling through the undergrowth is scarcely noticed at first—it is a rabbit perhaps —it cannot be a fox—hounds are at the other

end of the wood. It has been quite still for a moment or two—it must have been a rabbit. The undergrowth stirs again, a tired cub crosses the ride, and as you halloa "Tally ho over!"—it is the time to halloa now—you are glad that you considered it expedient to wait that other ten minutes at the place appointed for you.

The horn, which has not been much out of its case during the morning, is sufficiently in evidence now as the huntsman comes up at a sharp trot with his hounds at his heels. They pick up the line in a moment, and in two or three more they have killed and eaten the first cub of the season.

"I'll just draw on to the end of the wood," says the huntsman, "and then go home." And as he draws on to the end of the wood hounds pick up another tired cub, which our friend the keeper can well spare from his three litters.

Then in the hot August sunshine comes the homeward ride, part of it in company with the huntsman who is eager to discuss what the

young Dexters and Warwicks have done. And when about noon you arrive home, you find you have been some eight or nine hours in the saddle, that you have seen some good hound work, have learnt something about hunting, and done much to make your horse and yourself fit.

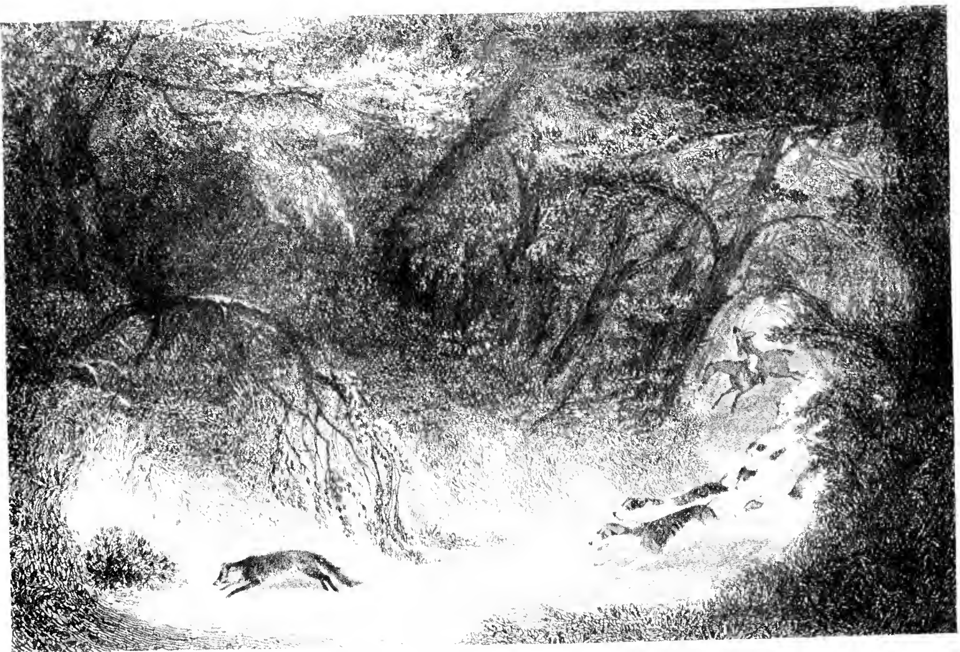
And if you are one of the right sort, you will so order your horse's work as to ensure your hunting the next time hounds are out, before you enter the house to discuss that most enjoyable of meals, call it breakfast or luncheon or what you will, that is earned by a good morning's work in the saddle.

This will not end your experiences of the opening of the cub-hunting season. In the club, or in the street, or somewhere you are sure to meet with the "ignorant person" * who will tell

* I once heard a man, who, by the way, had been pressing hounds unduly, criticise them pretty freely. The master rode up to him and said: "I don't know who you are, sir, nor where you come from; and I don't want to know. But"—and then came a long pause—"you are an exceedingly ignorant person."

you that hounds have been at Oakdene Wood and murdered a brace of cubs. You, who have been there, know better!

# A SEPTEMBER GALLOP



THE DEATH

*From a painting by R. B. Davis. Engraved by T. A. Prior.*

[*Facing page* 39

# A SEPTEMBER GALLOP

"If we be forbidden . . . we'll fall to't."
—1 *Henry VI.*

"And riots wanton in forbidden fields."
—*Burns.*

Why is it, I wonder, that we always revel in forbidden joys? Sport with just a trifle of mischief in it—just the least little bit against the strict proprieties, has always an attraction for an Englishman. I remember with greater delight two little poaching adventures—strictly on my own place be it understood—than all the good day's shooting on moor and in covert that have fallen to my lot. It was not that we got so very much by our very mild breach of the law—it was the spirit of adventure that gave the charm.

So the partridge brought down smartly on the evening of 31st August when one is taking an evening stroll with the gun to get a couple of rabbits is a joy for ever. There is no intention of

shooting a partridge when the evening stroll with the gun begins; all the sportsman's thoughts are of an early start on the morrow as he saunters homeward with the couple of rabbits he wanted in his shooting-jacket pocket. Then suddenly up gets a fine covey; involuntarily the gun goes up to the sportsman's shoulder and a right and left are neatly dropped almost before he is aware that he has shot a partridge out of season. And I ask anyone whose fortune it has been to take an active part in such an adventure if it does not remain firmly impressed upon his mind; if he does not remember the scene—the sinking August sun, the mellow sky, the plantation bathed in the light of the dying day, and the quick whirr of wings followed by what latter-day journalists love to describe as the pop-pop of the rifle, and the two plump birds dropping on the stubble. I ask him if this scene does not bring happier memories with it than the best day he ever had in the turnips.

Again, late in September, when beating a hedge, especially a boundary hedge, a pheasant will occasionally rise amongst a covey of part-

ridges that is flushed, and if it does rise somehow it is sure to get into the way of the shot; and no brace of rocketers brought down in handsome style in October gives quite the satisfaction that pheasant does.

And so a September gallop, falling under the category of forbidden sweets, possesses a charm which few mid-season gallops can quite rise to. The mid-season gallop is better in itself, probably very much better, the surroundings are more in harmony with the sport and the country is more rideable. But the mid-season gallop has been looked for; perhaps it has been anxiously looked for for some time, and perhaps coming after a series of disappointing days and on an unlikely day, too, the sportsman has got a little slack—it is just possible—and so missed his start. Or he has got shut in at a gate or a gap and had to make up a lot of leaway through deep ground.

But in September there are none of these things to contend with. The gallop comes quite unexpectedly; there is no crowd; and just because no one is looking or scheming for a

start so everyone gets one. The country is blind, but somehow one gets there, and not being expected to ride, everyone does his level best. And so the gallop stands out as "that good run we had cub-hunting," and it is just possible that the very circumstances under which it takes place makes it valued more than it really merits.

Hounds have met at half-past five. It is just light enough to hunt when the coverts which are the objective are reached; a hot, stuffy morning, one on which the most sanguine would scarcely expect even a working scent. As the morning goes on it gets hotter and closer; there is no sun, but a sultry, heavy air which is all against hounds; and, by the way, somehow there always seems a better scent on the whole in August than there is in September—especially in covert.

Hounds have soon got to work amongst the cubs, but those who prophesied a bad scent have had their opinion justified by events; and a couple of hours' very slow work amongst a couple of litters in a big wood has ended in the death of a cub.

The sun has got out now, and with the sun has come a little breeze which has dispersed the dewdrops from the hedges, and as hounds go on to break fresh ground there is certainly an improvement in the weather. A covert or two have been drawn blank, and a small covert has held a single old fox, who of course has been left for another day, for we are nothing if not orthodox, we who go cub-hunting on these early autumn mornings.

The day grows hotter in spite of the little breeze as we reach a wood of some fourteen acres. In this covert hounds are soon at work again, and the natural conclusion is that they have got amongst the cubs which belong to the covert in which they had found the single old fox. Scarcely have they been at work five minutes when a fox breaks gallantly. There is no mistake about the business-like way in which he faces the country, and the defiant whisk of his brush as he makes for the smeuse in the hedge. He has been at the game before, so the few hounds that got away close at his brush are promptly stopped. Almost at the same

time a second fox is halloaed at the top of the wood, but the huntsman has seen him, and his curt " old 'un " as he touched his horn tells us that we have not been on the line of a cub as yet.

Hounds have got together now and are bustling a fox about merrily. Surely this bright, alert-looking little fellow that won't be held up is a cub, though undoubtedly a bold one. Hounds are hard at him, too, and he is pointing for a wood only three big fields distant. He is sure to stop there, so hounds are not turned back, and we take hold of our horses' heads and gallop gaily along over the lush grass, full of thoughts of the joys of the coming season. That formidable fence at the bottom of the field recalls our thoughts to the present. It is full of leaf, but we know that at the far side of it is a wide and blind and deep and dirty drain which has held many a good man and true, and which will hold many another. But there is some timber in the corner, and where the timber is there the drain is not. So we make for the timber. The horses that are pasturing

in the field, excited by the unwonted commotion, come careering along the fence-side with " head and tail aloft," but the good horses we are riding are striding along and require no sharpening up, and we are well away and galloping our hardest by the time the loose horses have pulled up at the rails to stare stupidly and longingly at the receding chase. A gate is handy at the far side of the field, and then an easy fence gets us into the field joining the wood, and just as the whipper-in is making the best of his way round the far corner we draw up our horses, quite pleased with our little " dart " over those three fields.

But barely have we pulled our horses up when the whipper-in's " forrard away " tells us that the fox has not done what was expected of him, and we are galloping hard again in another minute with the pack a good field ahead of us. A few gates help matters a little, and the inside turn helps us a little more as we ride on gaily for other nine or ten minutes with hounds well in sight all the time. Then comes a check, and as we ease up for a moment we are quite pleased

with our surroundings, and also—not to put too fine a point upon it—with ourselves.

But the check is only momentary; a wood of some twenty-five acres is just in front of hounds and not half a mile off. Surely our cub has had plenty by this time, and is making for the main earths in that wood which are certain to be stopped. Hounds race on over the grass again; the whipper-in rides his hardest to get to the far side of the wood, and as our horses are somewhat blown with the burst so early in the season, we ease up a little when hounds enter the wood.

But hark! what is that? Scarcely have we eased up when "forrard away" from the far end of the wood rings out loud and clear, and tells us that the end is not yet. The huntsman looks grave as he gallops on and rides at a stiff fence, having made up his mind that hounds must be stopped at any cost. But before they can be reached they swing sharply to the left and cross a wide and unjumpable brook; so stopping them is for the moment out of the question. Luckily they turn parallel to the

brook, and we make the best of our way to a not very distant bridge, encountering two or three formidable fences on our way; then we cross the bridge, still luckily on the inside of hounds which have turned away from the brook and are running harder than ever.

Then comes an opportunity to stop them, the first we have had, and the huntsman's horn is already in his hand. "Do you see him, sir?" says that worthy, his horn held in mid-air. Yes, there he is, not four hundred yards in front of us, with arched back and trailing brush. There is no thought of stopping them now; the horn is thrust back into its case, and as hounds cross the brook once more, this time luckily very near the bridge, they get a view at their fox. Then comes a sharp turn, and another, hounds turning like harriers with him. Then they get another view at him, and as we scramble over a big leafy hedge, it is to see them in a cluster in the far corner of the field. Forty minutes, mainly over grass, and with only one slight check, and a triumphant finish to a really good gallop.

There will be filled legs in the morning, for the ground is hard and horses are not in trim for such a gallop yet, but we think nothing of that now. We put off such thoughts till the morrow, hoping, maybe, that things won't be so bad after all. The glory of the gallop is all that we can really think of at the moment.

And the fox! Was he a cub? To judge from the hearty words of praise we hear it would seem that he was. But perhaps it would be as well not to inquire too closely. A young fox he certainly was, and there we had better leave it.

# AN OCTOBER AFTERNOON

GONE AWAY

*From a painting by R. B. Davis. Engraved by T. A. Prior.*

[*Facing page* 51

## AN OCTOBER AFTERNOON

"Iron sleet of arrowy shower
Hurtless in the darken'd air."—*Gray.*

Hunting is not all made up of fast gallops or good hunting runs ending satisfactorily with a kill in the open. August mornings and September gallops frequently give way to a long series of indifferent sport—of sport which is not inaptly described as no sport at all. The rising barometer, which has brought in its train that September gallop which served us to talk about for at least three weeks, and which even now brings back happy memories, brought in its train an Indian summer.

The beauties of an Indian summer are many. There has been a touch of frost strong enough to give us a foretaste of the storms and squalls of winter. We have seen leaden skies, and heard the plash of autumn rains, and then all

at once we have a return of brilliant summer weather. Mornings and nights may be a little misty and chilly, but the sun soon gets through the mist and shines gloriously during the middle of the day, and though there may be "falling leaf and fading flower," the leaf falls and the flower fades bravely enough in the sunny hours of an Indian summer. And then to the dweller in the country, whose interests are closely identified with those of his farming neighbours, or who, perchance, has some farming in hand himself, an Indian summer brings breathing-time in a busy year. Harvest is over—it is too early to lift turnips or for the autumn seeding, and there is plenty of time to "put things tidy"—an operation which is so dear to the orderly mind.

But the huntsman looks with anything but favour on an Indian summer. For, though there are exceptions, it is pretty certain that when the weather is not what is called seasonable, scent is generally very poor. The falling of the leaf makes it bad in the woods, and with no rain to assist in decaying the fallen leaves, they

blow about, dry as dust, and trouble hounds no little. Outside, too, scent is only moderate as a rule. The fallows and stubbles are as hard and as dry as the high road, and about as dusty, and hounds, if they are able to hunt a little on the grass, are bothered on every side with cattle and sheep, whilst the fine, open weather keeps people in the fields, and foxes are headed on every hand. No wonder, then, that the huntsman does not like an Indian summer, for he sees day by day some of the results of his early mornings' hard labour slipping away from him. His quick eye notices how Rarity looks longingly at that rabbit which has just blundered up in front of her very nose; he is not slow to notice how Merriman flung round outside the covert and owned the line of a hare though he did not speak to it. A month ago neither of them would have been so near transgression, but a month of disappointments has told its tale, and there is a laxity of conduct amongst the young ones at times which costs the huntsman no little anxiety.

I have said that there are exceptions to the

rule about scent in an Indian summer, and I have seen two or three Indian summers in which hounds could run well *outside*. In one of them we had a succession of excellent sport—indeed there were three weeks of the best sport we had up to the middle of December. The going was, however, terribly hard, and several falls had nasty results. There was also a large number of lame horses—indeed, scarcely a stable was clear of lame horses when the season opened on 1st November. No wonder, then, that with hunting men a little Indian summer goes a long way!

But all things come to an end, even an Indian summer. One night in the middle of October the wind, without any warning, whips round to the north, and next day there is an ominous howl amidst the trees, a bleak sky, and flying showers of cold rain. And of this kind of weather there can be several days without the rain making any impression upon the ground. Scent in the woods is as bad as it was in the Indian summer, and out in the open, too, there has been little improvement. Indeed in the open, scent is as

bad for the huntsman as it well can be. If a bull may be forgiven, it would have been better for him if it had been worse. For when hounds can barely own a line it is trying enough, but if they have been taught to hunt, and are quietly and patiently handled, though there may be disappointment, much serious harm cannot happen.

But when, as so frequently happens on these squally days, hounds can run as if tied to their fox for half a mile, and then they check all at once and cannot touch the line for some minutes, and then repeat the same thing a few times; the young ones are ripe for any mischief, and even the steadiest old hound will so far forget himself at times as to show an inclination to stray from the strict paths of virtue and to theorise, to say the least, that there are other beasts of chase as well as the fox.

We have got into the third week in October. The Indian summer has been followed by the autumn weather described, and though hounds have done as well as could be expected during the awkward weather they have experienced,

they have gone home several times without blood. Foxes have been more difficult to kill, too, for another reason. Bold cubs have grown so bold that they can no longer be held up, and they have also grown stouter. And this has added to our huntsman's difficulties.

There is another thing, too, about October hunting when such weather prevails. It is generally admitted by experts that there is a scent at some hour of the day, and judging as well as one can, this would seem to be in the early hours of the morning. On these squally mornings the wind begins to rise and the rack to ride just about the time hounds arrive at the fixture. And an early start—that is, a very early start—is an impossibility. Hunting cannot well go on in the dark.

At last the land has got a good soaking, and it is now possible to ride over a country with something like comfort—provided one does not mind the blindness of the fences, for they, of course, are blinder than ever. That is the state in which the third week in October *always* finds the country. I can only remember one excep-

tion, and that was when we had a very sharp frost and a good six inches of snow on the 4th of the month.

It is, however, one of the curiosities of this variable climate of ours, that we get our weather in snatches, and the north-west wind that has brought us the much-needed rain, keeps blowing up strong showers day after day. So on this particular morning there was a very glimmering, shimmering sunshine, and a wildish wind, increasing in violence. " Shining thro' rain " and " blowing thro' rain " were the dicta of the weather-wise, and hounds moved off to draw the first covert in a drenching shower.

They found, of course, they always do find in White Thorn Dene; but it was only now and again that a few hounds spoke. A fox slipped over the ride, our huntsman viewed him, and a few notes of his horn got hounds so close to his brush that they were able to send him along rather cheerily. After running twice round the Dene they got away close to him—a lucky thing for them—for as he broke he caught sight of a belated sportsman and was making back for

the covert just as hounds came tumbling out over the hedge. They got one brief " look " at him, and then away they went at a good pace, favoured by the wind. For ten minutes they ran cheerily enough, and they were only just behind their fox when he entered a big wood. And when the huntsman got up to them in the middle of the wood, it was to find that they had marked their fox to ground in the main earths which had been badly stopped. What the huntsman said would not look well in print, and his anger was quite justified.

Young Jones said to young Brown: " He was a good fox and will give us a good run later on," and young Brown said to young Robinson that he was " glad the fox had got in, don't you know, and beaten that bloodthirsty huntsman "; and young Robinson remarked to young Smith that " for his part he did not see that it mattered whether hounds killed or not." And young Smith, knowing considerably more of the business than they did, recognised that hounds by an exceptional bit of good luck had had a chance of getting the blood they so much needed, and

they had been disappointed owing to the carelessness of a man who was well paid to do the earth-stopping. So Smith's remarks to Jones, Brown, and Robinson did not meet with the approval of these worthy gentlemen, but they did soothe the ruffled feelings of our huntsman, who said, on talking over the case with his fellows, that "that young Mr Smith showed some feeling for hounds and had a deal of sense, and he had no doubt would make a good sportsman some day."

Then came more disappointing work. Foxes were found, but in a few minutes they managed to run hounds out of scent. Things from the huntsman's standpoint were looking black indeed, when in the afternoon they went to draw Holtfield Spinneys. The day had made little if any improvement. Several of the field, tired out by the continued bad sport and the heavy showers, had gone home. "And a good thing too," said the huntsman, "they would probably have spoilt my chance of killing by halloaing a fresh fox. Not that there's much chance now."

Holtfield Spinneys held a fine lot of strong cubs, and hounds kept them moving about in the coverts for about half an hour—not pressing them exactly, but keeping them moving on if they wanted to keep out of the way. Then a fox broke covert, and the moment hounds touched the line on the grass they raced along cheerily, and as the huntsman thrust his horn into the case, he looked more cheerful than he had done for some time. In half a mile, however, up went their heads, and they came to a check for no perceptible reason. Old Valentine feathered on the line, "gave him the key," as the huntsman said, and he held hounds forward for a few fields, one or two of the old ones feathering on the line now and again. Then came a heavy, squally shower, and after it had passed over, scent improved and they hunted on nicely, though only at a slow pace for some distance. Another squall caused another check, but it was soon over, and patience, combined with the fact that there were only a few of the field left, and that these did not press hounds, got them on the line again. They hunted on

then at a fair holding pace—checking occasionally but always improving their position—till they had been running a couple of hours altogether, and then, just as they had worked up to their fox, he managed to beat them into some strong rabbit earths.

It was after three o'clock. Messrs Jones and Robinson had gone home, voting the proceedings slow and "doosid uncomfortable, don't cher know?" and so there was no dissentient voice when our huntsman expressed his intention to have his fox at whatever cost of time and trouble. Hounds were baying angrily at the earth; the first whipper-in was dispatched for a spade and terrier; and as a close inspection showed that digging was likely to be a long job, and as, moreover, a steady rain was setting in, only two or three remained to be of what assistance they might to the huntsman.

Few of my readers, perhaps, have any idea of the difficulties which attend the digging out of a fox. Digging is, of course, easy enough; but digging for a fox is one thing and getting him is another, and considerable skill is required

in following his course in strong rabbit earths, which are practically a network of underground labyrinths. Hence the assistance of one or two men who will keep their wits about them, and think as well as listen and talk, is valued on occasions like the present when getting the fox means so much. So one or two of the remnant of the field go to assist the first whipper-in, who has already put the terrier in, and two or three willing hands are busy with the spades.

The rain comes down in dreary monotony, soaking, persistent rain, and cold withal, and the thump of the spades as they occasionally come across a root, the occasional " yap-yap " of the terrier as his enemy and he come nearer to the surface in the working, and now and again the sharp bay of a young hound impatient of delay, are the only sounds save the patter of the rain on the leaves.

Yet dismal as seem the surroundings to an untrained eye, the scene has a beauty which is all its own. Just look at the expectant pack for a moment. There, sitting in front of them

is old Warrior, who has seen many foxes dug out in his time. Patient and expectant is the old hound, thinking—if hounds do think, and surely that wise old countenance of his is indicative of thought—of many things, no doubt, but with an eye that never for one second leaves the body of workers in front of him. No sound comes from him; but scarcely quite so patient is Merriman, an eager whine escaping from him now and again. An impatient puppy or two break the circle, and when there is a little "commotion" among the digging party, they make a rush to the earth. The crack of the second whipper-in's whip and his rate remind them of duty and disciplinary methods.

The digging has been going on for an hour, and of late there has been every now and again those little "bits of bustle," I scarcely know how to describe them, which tell to the initiated that the digging party are about at the end of their labours. Suddenly there is a bit more commotion than usual, and as the fox emerges from the earth with Viper at his brush, he is met by Warwick and Merriman, and their com-

rades, and the huntsman's "Whoo whoop" rings out clear and shrill, and startles the distant ploughman wending homewards.

There is a ten mile ride home for us; it is a soaking wet night; and we have not the recollection of a great day to enliven us on the road. As a matter of fact it has been below the average. But, kind reader, if you throw in your lot with "the glad throng that rides laughing along," you will have many such days; and if you learn to appreciate what is good in them; to rejoice with the huntsman in the triumph of his hounds under circumstances of exceptional difficulty; to see all the points, which, trivial in themselves, go for eventual victory; to see where the fox was really killed;* so shall you

* As a race is often won a long way from the winning-post, even when it seems a near thing at the finish, so very frequently a fox is lost or killed long before the end of a run. That little indiscretion of yours, dear reader, when in your anxiety to cut down your best friend, you got a trifle too near the hounds, and drove them on over the line, was probably just what enabled the fox to reach the main earths which were not stopped!

become a good sportsman and have the reward which every good sportsman deserves and gets, viz. the ability to get and make the most out of every incident of the chase.

# NOVEMBER'S JOYS

BREAKING COVER

*From a painting by F. C. Turner. Engraved by T. A. Prior.*

[*Facing page* 69

# NOVEMBER'S JOYS

> "Chill November's surly blast
> Makes fields and forests bare."—*Burns.*

November is not a month that is favoured by the poets. They have scarcely bad enough a name for it. The Londoner associates it with fog—opaque, dirty, miserable fog; shortening days and increasing cold are, or are supposed to be, its chief characteristics, and there are few who have a good word or a word of welcome for it.

Few, that is, who are not fox-hunters. But to the fox-hunter it is almost the month of months. It is the month he has been waiting for ever since a May fox was killed—if he was lucky enough to prolong his season into May. His season has once more begun—once more is the country in a condition to ride over, and his only dread is a long frost.

It is the month also which is the most important of the season from the social standpoint, and it was before hunting became so "fashionable" as it is now—not altogether to the benefit of the sport. There were in the good old days men who regularly appeared at the opening fixture of their local pack. Then, if as generally happened, they had a pleasant day, renewing old acquaintances and talking over county business with their friends, they would turn out again on a fine November morning, and yet again. But the first rough day sent them home, and their breeches and boots were put by till the following season, unless perchance a bright April morning tempted them to make one on that most dismal of days in the hunting man's calendar—that which is marked by the words, "to finish the season." The writer has known in his time many such men. That they were not keen is evidenced by the fact that whilst they had plenty of opportunity for hunting regularly they contented themselves with a very few days indeed. But if not keen they had a kindly feeling towards hunting and hunting men. Their

coverts were always full of foxes; their hospitality to their hunting friends was unbounded; and about once in three or four seasons they had a lawn meet—generally be it said in November, and at any rate on that day they were as keen as the keenest—keen that everyone, gentle and simple, should have his or her share of the creature comforts "in that case made and provided"; keen that the home coverts should provide foxes; keener still that the home-bred foxes should show good sport; and in the seventh heaven of delight if, after a good run, one of the home-bred foxes should manage to beat hounds at the finish.

The opening day of the season generally takes place at the residence of some well-known hunting man whose coverts are always full of foxes, and who is found hunting regularly from October to April. In some hunts, where happily the master has had a long reign of office, the opening fixture is at his house, though this is by no means always the case; and there is a sort of unwritten law, that as the opening day of the regular season always finds the

Quorn at Kirby Gate, so should every other pack have its special fixture for its opening day.

The first day of the season, of course, is only a part, and not a very large part, of the hunting in November. But for all that it does fill a very large place in the minds of the country-side for some days before it takes place and for some days afterwards. In country houses in the neighbourhood where guests are staying there is much planning about the packing of enthusiastic sportsmen—and sportswomen—in carriages. "We must see the first meet of the season," says the hostess, who probably, for the rest of it, never gives a thought to hounds, though like the good soul that she is, she is always ready to extend her hospitality to those who follow them.

Of people such as she is are the carriage people generally composed, for every one who can muster a horse and a saddle rides as a matter of course on our opening day. The publican from the neighbouring town naturally turns out in a very sporting vehicle, with a fast-

trotting pony between the shafts, and the conventional flaming black and yellow " tiger-skin " rug hung out at the back of the conveyance; and amongst those who come on wheels are to be found men of all ranks and conditions of life.

It is always a pleasant thing to ride round the carriages and have a word with an old friend. There, in a cosy pony carriage, sit two veterans, who probably know more about hunting than any dozen men there. They have both over fifty years' experience; they have both hunted hounds for many years, and hunted hounds well, and though no longer able on account of advancing years to follow hounds as they were wont to do, their interest is as keen as ever it was; and they will see a good deal of the sport, and it is by no means unlikely that they may be able to tell the huntsman, for whom they have a sincere regard, where he lost his fox. They will not tell anyone else—of that you may be sure—for they are sportsmen of the first water, these veterans of ours. Long may they live to enjoy sport in their own way, and to tell us tales of the " brave days of old," when wire

was not, and when at least thirty per cent. of the field were tenant farmers.

Others there are at our opening day who are perforce kept to the carriage division, and who are not blessed with the hardy old age of the veterans I have spoken of. In that carriage which is surrounded by men in scarlet is one who should himself be wearing the bright livery upon which he is perhaps looking for the last time. Disease has told its tale, and the once powerful form is wasted and worn; but his eye brightens at the familiar scene, and his greeting to his friends is cheery as he wishes them good sport, and that he may see as much as it is possible to see of it on wheels. It is a sad little episode to introduce on our opening day, you will say. Well, perhaps it might have been left out, but even the opening day of the hunting season is not one of perfect joy; and the man who had taken his part in the front so long as health remained deserves a passing word from old comrades. And how those words are cherished! If some of us would think a little, I am sure there would be more of them to cherish.

Let us never forget then, when we come across the veterans and those who are dropping out of the ranks from ill-health, that we owe our sport to their strenuous exertions, and that if it had not been for them—and their fellows—there would have been no fox-hunting for us.

But enough of sermonising on the opening day. There, mounted on a quiet old horse, is the county member—a rare one to go a couple of decades ago, and the jolliest of companions now at a Hunt dinner. It was he who cut out the work in that historic run of five-and-twenty years since; but he is modest about his achievements in the saddle, and always insists that his friend, who is riding by his side, and with whom Time has dealt gently, inasmuch as his riding weight is still under eleven stone (our M.P. walks 16 st. 7 lb.), had by far the best of it. Of course, there are the gentlemen from the neighbouring town—doctor, merchant, lawyer, or tradesman—generally well mounted and always good sportsmen, though sometimes apt when they do ride hard to get a little near hounds. Farmers are always to be found in

goodly numbers at the opening day, that is in any country in which hunting farmers are still left. The young ones are all mounted on likely-looking horses, and you may depend that however hard hounds may run, or however rough and strong may be the country, two or three of that black-coated group will be found "right there," as the Yankees have it.

The regular hunting men, the four days a week men, are good to tell as they come up. There is a sobriety about their horses—a kind of "this is what I am used to" air—which there is no mistaking. And the men themselves have a business-like appearance which cannot fail to impress even a casual observer. From the fit of their hat-guard to the knee buttons on their breeches, to their spurs and spur-straps, everything seems as if it were in the only possible place, and as if it had come there of itself without effort from anyone.

Hospitality always prevails on the opening day, but the wise man will eschew the Hunt breakfast and content himself with a sandwich or a biscuit and a glass of cherry brandy. He

is really better without that perhaps, but it would be ungracious to refuse. A heavy fall after a Hunt breakfast, however, is no laughing matter, and I know of more than one man who had cause to regret having partaken of a heavy meal some threequarters of an hour before his horse tried to roll him out like the proverbial pancake.

At last, after giving considerable law to late-comers because it is the opening day, a move is made to the Laurels. Hounds find at once—they always do—and now for some quarter of an hour or twenty minutes there is plenty of fun for the good folks in carriages and on foot. For the Laurels, with an eye to this same Monday in November, have not been cub-hunted. A good fox or two slip away, but hounds are busy with one in the shrubberies and in the park, and finally they kill him in the open to the great delight of our friends on wheels and on foot.

The brush is given to some golden-haired little girl in a carriage or some budding enthusiast on a pony; and then the Master, with thoughts of the more serious business of

the day, gives the word for a covert a mile or two away, where a fox is soon found, and gives the field that gallop in the open for which they have been longing.

There is a great charm—a charm peculiarly its own—about November hunting when November is a good month, when the leaf has got fairly off tree and hedge, when the going is good, and when, as is generally the case in November, there is a fair average of good days.

The country looks lovely at times on a fine November day; the grey sky, with the sun shining behind it, as it were, giving beautiful colour effects. Then in November, hunting men, whether they hunt one day a week or six, have got regularly into their stride. Everything is to hand, there is as yet no great fear of frost, and arrangements, so to speak, make themselves. November is not the month in which, as a rule, the run of the season takes place. But in an ordinary November, the man is unlucky indeed who does not see a fair average of sport.

Then again, November is the month in

which worries about the stud are few and far between unless, indeed, some untoward accident should take place. The young ones have got their backs down and are steadied by regular work; there is as yet no sign that that suspicious foreleg on the old favourite won't last the season through. It is a month, too, in which a lofty sky and stars shining rather brightly on one's homeward ride do not bring those forebodings of a lengthened frost which they do later in the season, and it is seldom indeed that November's frosts come to take the glory off November's joys.

# DECEMBER DAYS

# DECEMBER DAYS

"The north-east wind
Which then blew bitterly against our faces."
—*Richard II.*

An open season up to Christmas—what a delight that is to the fox-hunter! It is an old story, but one that bears retelling, how Mr Nicholas Parry, when asked if he had to live his long life over again, if he would do any different, replied that if he had to live it all over he would hunt a great deal more before Christmas. That is the way to get the most out of hunting, and upon December may, in a way, be said to depend the season as a season.

There is one course which is often adopted by the young sportsman with a limited stud. He, having only a certain amount of time at his disposal, tries to pick his days. He will, when his horse is quite fresh, miss Tuesday or

Wednesday for Friday or Saturday, because on Friday or Saturday hounds are at a favourite fixture; and probably when Friday or Saturday comes there is not a scrap of scent, or worse still, there is a frost. Depend upon it that the way to get the most out of a hunting season and to see the best average of sport is to go out whenever your horse is fit, and you have the time. The writer can recall numerous cases of disappointment which have been the result of waiting for a good country, and many instances of hitting the good runs through taking the fixtures in their turn and as they came. For good runs do not always take place in the best country; the crowd is against them, for one thing.

A curious thing in connection with hunting is that one's personal experiences are always somehow running counter to preconceived theories, or to the ordinarily accepted canons of the sport. For instance, if any group of fox-hunters with a wide experience were questioned as to which was the best month for sport, they would be unanimous in saying February. Yet

in a pretty long experience, during which I have seen my share of historic runs—one does not see so very many in a lifetime after all—I have seen more of them in December than in February.

Whilst on the subject of historic runs, I may perhaps be permitted to remark, by the way, that I never saw a historic run in January—a somewhat curious experience perhaps. I have seen one in November—a couple of the fastest gallops I ever saw in March—one a six-mile point in twenty-eight minutes and the other nearly six miles as hounds ran in half an hour; and once I saw a historic run in April, a good point, top pace with a kill in the open and only two men with hounds when the fox was killed, though four or five more turned up before he was eaten.

This, however, by the way. December being once fairly in, the run of the season may come any day. If the weather has been fairly open and there has been a fair holding scent on most days, by the middle of December foxes will have got quite on the look out for the

huntsman and his hounds. They will have learnt to be alert and soon on the move; they will have got to know more country, and if there has been sufficient rain to fill those spoil-sports, the big drains, they will be obliged to make good points, and this means sport.

As an instance of this may be given the wettest of wet seasons, 1903-4. Opinions differed about that season, some stating that it was a good one, whilst others pointed out that hounds had rarely, if ever, beaten the horses well, and so it could not have been a good one. There was something in both contentions; in the personal experience of the writer there were very few good days. That is, there were very few days which would stand out in any season; and it was decidedly not a good scenting season. But there was a lot of good hunting; foxes made good points, and there was a very good average of sport, due no doubt in some measure to foxes not being able to find shelter in the big drains. There is not much known about foxes, but their adaptability to circumstances, of which this is an instance, is remarkable.

But to return to the December weather and the December hunting. Average scenting days week after week have tended to the improvement of sport on the whole. There have been days when it has been practically hopeless; there always have been days of this sort and there always will be; but, happily, they have been few and far between. Hounds have had no opportunity for forgetting those good lessons which were so carefully taught them in August and September; the giddiest of them is steady by now, and they settle to their work in a business-like way which is one of the most important factors in the providing of sport.

Another thing that will have happened by the middle of December, if everything has gone on as it should do, and hounds have not been unduly kept out of coverts on account of the shooting, is that foxes will have got fairly split up and will not be all in a heap as they were earlier in the season. So that any covert which affords dry and warm lying may be looked upon as a nearly certain find, and the small coverts which were not much troubled in the early part

of the season will frequently hold a fox. When they do, a good start with him is certain with a good huntsman and a handy pack of hounds. And a good start generally means a good gallop, if not a good run.

If the season has been very open and parts of the country have been very hard hunted, it is more than likely that there will by this time be somewhere in evidence that bane of the huntsman's existence, the outlying fox. There is nothing more unsatisfactory than to arrange a fixture for an outlying fox; he is sure not to be there when he is wanted, for the best of all reasons, viz. that someone who knows of his whereabouts has gone that morning just to see if he was there. He was there right enough when his friend visited him, but taking time by the forelock he is over the hills and far away long before the huntsman and his hounds are on the scene. But occasionally in December you shall drop on an outlying fox and have a run such as you will never forget—such a run as it has been my good luck to fall in with once or twice in my life.

# December Days

The shortening days have had a sting of cold in them that made itself felt on a dark ride home on a tired horse, with the wind in one's face all the way; the moon wading through fleecy clouds, heavy and laden; and the sour wind whistling and moaning through the leafless trees are plain indications that the open weather will not last so much longer. There have been mornings when the roads have been hard, though an hour's sunshine or driving rain has made hunting possible. Sometimes, indeed, it has been necessary to wait till noon before a start could be made, and once it seemed as if the frost had come in earnest, though happily it disappeared after hounds had been kept in kennel one day. Since then there has been a week of sour, wild weather, with driving showers of rain and sleet from the north-east, scent has been catchy and sport indifferent.

Then suddenly comes an ominous calm; there is a lofty grey sky—one dull, monotonous grey without the least relief. The wind, what there is of it—it is not strong enough to blow out a match—is from the north-east, and the

cold makes one's fingers tingle as one jogs on to the fixture. "Will there be a scent?" that faint tinge of blue fog on the distant horizon is not very promising, it is true, but though a blue fog is generally a sign that hounds won't run, it is not always so.

It is an outlying fox, or perhaps it would be more correct to say a travelling fox that provides the sport on this occasion. A farmer who is to be thoroughly relied upon has told at the fixture how he has seen, when on his way, a fox almost as big as a wolf, so everyone is on the look out for him, even whilst coverts are being drawn. A couple of these that have not much undergrowth have been run through on the chance that the traveller may have dropped in for a rest, and then a hedgerow or two are tried. Then, half a mile away, the cap of a whipper-in, who has been sent forward, is seen in the air, and he hurries on at best pace to tell us what he knows. There is no halloaing, you will observe; it would never do to let a fox know too much about the whereabouts of his enemies.

The huntsman, who is never in a bad hurry, trots up to where the fox has been seen, and the moment hounds touch the line, they rush together with a glad cry, and then race on in a body, and with a swing and drive such as is not seen more than a dozen times in a lifetime. Reader, if you are worthy the name of a sportsman, you will *never* forget the first time you heard that joyous cry, nor the thrill which it sent through you. Even if you were not quite a first flight man, you hardened your heart on that occasion and rode on as if you were. In the hurry and scramble and excitement of a good start you found yourself over three or four stiff fences without knowing it, and then—why the rest seemed easy. Many a good man has been made by a start in a historic run, for though the country may be big there is always plenty of room when hounds run as they are running to-day.

Half an hour fleets past like a few minutes, and the young farmer on the four-year-old knows he has had enough, and wisely pulls up before his horse begins to flag. He has enjoyed

his gallop, and so has the horse, and they go home well pleased with themselves and each other.

But hounds run on with what may be termed the "monotony" of pace. They never dwell or slacken for a moment. Right up the middle of the fields, turning neither to the right nor to the left, they race along. Every mile sees some-one dropping out—lucky the man who can manage to keep on anything like terms with them, and when at the end of an hour they check, a score alone out of a large field are with them. The check is a short one, caused by the fox running through a drain, and hounds are soon going again nearly as fast as ever. Field after field, mile after mile is left behind them; in front a big wood tells that safety is at hand if the gallant fox can only reach it, but within two hundred yards of the open earths hounds roll him over in the open after an hour and a half with only one check, and if you are one of the lucky twelve who see the fox eaten, you have seen the best run of your life—a run such as you will probably never see again.

There is a long homeward ride, and the short December day is closing in long before home is reached. Colder and colder it gets; the monotonous grey of the morning sky has changed to a bright blue which is momentarily increasing in intensity; the stars shine out conspicuously, becoming brighter and brighter every minute, and before the welcome stable lights appears in sight there is a decided "ring" of the ground which has but one meaning.

And the horse, what of him? He has carried you well, but he has been obviously leg-weary for the last five or six miles. There is just a lurking suspicion likewise that he is not too sound on that off foreleg about which you have had qualms once or twice of late. Well, he will have a chance of getting right again, for the frost is here at last and in good earnest. A final look round shows you the snow packs on the horizon, and you know you are in for a rest.

But you have had a good season's sport up to this time; the horses, especially the old

favourites, were beginning to work light and show signs of wear, and you have had the run of the season, which ought to provide you with hunting conversation for the next three weeks.

# A JANUARY FROST

IN COVER

[Facing page 97

*From a painting by Henry Alken. Engraved by J. H. Engleheart.*

## A JANUARY FROST

"For all the frosty nights that I have watched."
—*Titus Andronicus.*

THERE was no mistake about the signs on that bright December night when you rode your old favourite home—limping a little bit as you are willing to confess now that the heat has gone out of the leg and it is cool and fine as silk again—after "The best run I ever saw in my life, sir," as you have told all your friends time without count during the last few days. The frost set in sharply, and on the morning after the gallop the ground was like adamant, and the gentle but very cold wind which curled up the few leaves spoke mischief. On the second day fell a few flakes of snow; on the third morning there was a cover of a couple of inches, upon which the pale winter sun made no impression at all.

So far you are pleased with the temporary

stoppage. As you look at the sky for the hundredth time you tell your groom for the ninety-ninth that it is as well the frost has come, as it will give the old horse a chance of getting quite right.

But now there has been a week of it, and January is here. A new moon accentuates the fact that days are beginning to put out a little, and you remember the old proverb: " As days begin to lengthen so the cold begins to strengthen," with anything but equanimity.

And the frost is harder than ever. From the pond not so far off comes the ominous ring of many skates; the sour wind tells of more " bad weather " to come, and as the new moon appears—a new moon is setting, not rising on this wintry night—she is obviously wading through snow packs. Standing under the wall that shelters you from the bitter north-east wind after a rather long " stables," you fancy that it is a little milder than it was half an hour previously, and you say to your groom that it is likely to draw to rain. So it is, but in your heart of hearts you *know* that before the

welcome rain comes to open out the country there will be a heavy fall of snow. You know that the few flakes which fall as you walk back to the house are not the prelude to the cleaning up storm, though you would fain think that they are; and you know you are in for three weeks or a month of it as you turn into your study, light a cigar, and with a discontented grunt pick up last week's sporting papers to see if from them you can glean a ray of comfort.

A prolonged frost is no doubt a great trial to the patience of any sportsman, but the man of leisure who, if he cannot hunt on Monday can hunt on Tuesday and so on throughout the week, and from one week to another, is not so much to pity after all, unless the days run into weeks and the weeks into months, as they do sometimes, but, thank the Fates, not very often in this England of ours.

He who is to pity, however, is the hard worker—professional or business man—who is so keen on the sport that he takes his hardly-earned holiday in the hunting season. Perhaps a fortnight is all that he can spare from a busy

life in which every nerve has to be strained to keep or gain that place in the world which is his due. For him, if he would see but a little of the sport he loves so well, there is no trip to Switzerland or Scotland in sweltering summer heat—he has to see that through; but as he slaves on at his work there are occasional visions of a tired but happy man riding home in the dusk of a winter evening, which restore his flagging energies; and as he smokes his last pipe before turning in he builds castles in the air about a happy fortnight in the country of his choice.

It is no small thing to him this fortnight's hunting. For it he has to make many sacrifices and to practise many small economies of which the majority of hunting men know nothing. He has to hire four horses at the fewest, and he must hire them well in front of the time he wants them if he will be well served. Then there is the Hunt subscription, which I make bold to say in many countries is grievously heavy for a man in his position. So that altogether his expenses mount up to a very respectable total.

And in the end he finds that perhaps he gets one day's hunting, and the rest of his fortnight is—so far as hunting is concerned—a blank. I think such a man is very much to be pitied. His quarters are probably comfortable enough as far as they go, but remember that he is practically "a stranger in the land," and that he has nothing to do with his time but dawdle the day away over magazine or book, and his nights at billiards. "Golf," you say. Well, I have yet to learn that golfing with four or five inches of snow is a practicable pastime. Of course between the snow showers he will take long walks, and being a keen sportsman he will go over to the kennels. But his time is sure to hang heavily on his hands, and his more favoured brother sportsmen should do all in their power to make his dull fortnight as cheery as possible.

For that he is a good fellow they may be sure. The man cannot forget the days of his boyhood when his holidays were spent in sport; the sound of the horn and the cry of the hounds are the sweetest of music in his ears; hunting

and all pertaining to it are for him an open book considering his opportunities, and if opportunity comes, as come it may, he may become a shining light amongst hunting men. There have been such amongst his class.

I have always held that the wise policy for hunting men to adopt is to make the sport as popular as possible. The difficulties which have arisen of late with overgrown fields have rather tended to make hunting men adopt a different policy, and in some quarters hunting is beginning to be regarded in the light of a "close borough." This is not to the advantage of hunting as a sport. It is sound policy—on the principle that one never knows what may happen—to give every encouragement to the casual visitor of the class I have been talking about. Let me give an instance of what happened when a different policy was pursued.

A gentleman went down to hunt a fortnight with a certain pack of hounds. He was a hard-working man, with but little leisure, and for reasons to be afterwards given he was particularly anxious to see the pack and gain a

knowledge of the country. So he hired horses for the fortnight, and wrote a polite letter to the secretary enclosing a cheque for a third of the minimum subscription, and informing him that he contemplated hunting a fortnight with the —— hounds. The secretary returned his cheque with a curt and not very civil intimation that the minimum subscription was so-and-so. Of course the gentleman did not hunt; he had to pay for his horses, though, and his holiday was spoiled.

Now he calculated the whole case up in this way. A subscriber of the minimum amount—I may say the subscription was a big one, no paltry ten pounds—would be likely to get, between the middle of October and the end of April, something like thirty days in a fairly open season. He in a fortnight in January might get eight days, but he might only get seven, or six, or even fewer, and he thought a third of the minimum subscription was a liberal one. And so do I.

But it may be asked, why did he go to so exacting a hunt when there are plenty of hunts

that would have been glad to welcome him on the terms he offered? For this reason. The whirligig of Time had brought about events which made him the presumptive heir to a small estate in that country, and he wanted to see a little of it. Being a modest man he did not choose to advertise his possible future connection with the country, in which again I think he was quite right.

In course of time he succeeded to the estate, *but he went elsewhere for his hunting*, and did not support in any way the Hunt in which his estate was situated. "They would not have me when I was poor," he said to his intimates, "I won't have them now that they have need of me."

I do not think even now that the Hunt ever knew the circumstances of the case—in fact I know it did not, from what I have heard people say about the gentleman in question.

Whether he was right in taking up that position my readers may decide for themselves. At any rate the story points the moral that it is always advisable to make friends.

A fortnight's frost, however, with no signs of it abating, make a man inclined a little to selfishness in his regrets, and it must be admitted that a long frost is terribly monotonous to a hunting man; the probability is that he does not do much else in winter. He may shoot a few days, but a hunting man is seldom a keen shot, and besides, the best of the shooting is over in January. He may skate, and he must take long walks, but his steps ever gravitate to the stable, where he hears the crunch, crunch of his horses' teeth as they eat the oats of idleness.

Then all at once as he goes across the yard one night he feels the snow a little softer under foot, and he finds that the wind has chopped round to the south-west; a thaw is at hand evidently. Is it? All the next day it thaws. A gloomy sky is overhead, and there are little pools of water on the top of the snow, which is visibly wasting. Then comes a little sighing of the wind, and a splutter of rain every now and again, and the hunting man, hearing that the ice is in bad condition and seeing these signs,

hugs the idea to himself that hunting will be possible on the third morning, though he *knows* very well that as yet there is no real thaw; and just when his hopes seem about to be realised the wind whips round to the north and one or two stars wink at him wickedly as he takes his evening walk to see his horses. That was certainly snow which fell on his coat as he came back to the house, but when he looks out four or five hours later there has been no more snow. Some rain is falling, and heavy clouds are driving across the sky, and still those bright stars are winking wickedly.

There has not been much frost during the night, only two or three degrees, but it has snowed and rained and frozen within the space of an hour at daybreak, and the roads are glassy enough. A bright sun struggles through snow packs, and it is evident that the end of the frost is not yet.

But about half-past ten a second horseman in pink trots into the yard, to say that it will be quite possible to hunt at Buster's Heath at half-past eleven. Then all is hurry and bustle.

The Master gets himself into the war-paint in next to no time, and saddles and bridles are in immediate request, for an early start is necessary, as the second horseman has impressed upon all whom it may concern that it is very bad going on the roads.

And it is bad going; of that there is not the least doubt. Every now and then the horse will give a long slide, and the crown of the road is avoided and a way carefully picked where the road is the softest or the roughest. Buster's Heath is reached at last, and just as it is reached down comes the snow. It does not snow long; and less than half an inch has fallen. The Master asks anxiously of those in whose judgment he places confidence if they think it is fit to hunt, and they reply that it is bad enough but they think it will just do; and so a move is made, and as hounds draw the first covert the sun shines brightly on the snow with an effect that is dazzling. Suddenly comes a halloa at the far end of the covert; three or four sharp notes on the horn, and hounds are well out of it. And by Jove! they are going to run.

A gate with a chain round it, and a locked chain at that, necessitates the jump which everyone swore they would avoid. It is only a low rail after all, and it is negotiated safely. Then the sun is in the eyes of gallant sportsmen, and what with the sun and what with the snow it is not very easy to see where one is going. But hounds run on and must be followed somehow, and after twenty bright minutes they roll their fox over in the open, and the few who have chanced the weather talk of their luck, and congratulate themselves that there have been no casualties.

A little breathing time is given as the snow is melting fast in the midday sun, and then a move is made to another covert. But even as the move is made the weather-wise are talking about a harder frost than ever, and some of the prudent ones go home as soon as they see the second fox found. There is again a good scent, and in the fields there is not much fault to find with the going; on the north side of the fences it is a little hard here and there, but there is really nothing much to complain of. So

hounds run on for an hour, and it is enjoyable enough—a good wide ring nearly back to where the fox was found. They swing round before entering the covert, and take nearly the same lines as before for a field or two. That is a good place into the lane, exactly where we jumped it an hour earlier; but as the horse reaches the crown of the road, he makes a big slip, and we realise that it is freezing hard. Still hounds run on, and there is a chance of killing, so perseverance is the order of the day, and we do very well indeed on the grass. But the plough is getting harder and harder; the fox is gradually getting more and more in front, and the huntsman begins to worry about hounds' feet; so orders are given to call them off—not a very difficult thing to do, for scent has been failing of late; and then it is realised all at once how hard a frost it is. The stars as they come out glitter viciously, and every now and again the horse gives an ugly slide. Indeed, that ride home has a very strong resemblance to skating, and our tingling finger-tips make the lights from our home doubly welcome. But

you do not grumble much on this occasion, for you have stolen a day; and your horse, in spite of the untoward conditions which have sometimes raised qualms of conscience and forebodings, has come home sound.

There is no mistake about the weather next day. The thermometer registers eight or nine more degrees of frost than it has yet done, and at night snow begins to fall heavily. A foot of snow on the level brings out snow ploughs, and also tells plainly enough to those who know the weather signs that there will be no more hunting for days.

What, then, is a hunting man to do with his days under such circumstances? If he is a methodical man he has already got the arrears of his correspondence worked up; and time may begin to hang heavily on his hands. But this it ought not to do, and he can do some good to hunting in the way of making himself friendly to the men to whom he is indebted for his sport. Who will be so delighted as Mr Broadacres, the sporting farmer, to see him and show him that promising young chaser with which he

hopes to win the Farmers' Plate at the Hunt Meeting: and the ride over to Broadacres' farm in the sharp air will have given him a healthy appetite; and Mrs Broadacres' cheese and cake and nut-brown ale, pressed on him with such kindly hospitality, will be duly appreciated. The conversation will naturally drop from sport to farming, and Broadacres, like the good fellow he is, volunteers to ride over to Oatlands to show his visitor Mr Cropley's Shire horses. A couple of miles' ride will bring them to their destination, and Mr Cropley—no hunting man himself—recognises his visitor as one who regularly rides over his land, and is pleased that he should take an interest in the young Shire horses he is making ready for the forthcoming show at the Agricultural Hall.

More bread and cheese and nut-brown ale or perhaps an invitation to stop to luncheon, and the conversation passes from Shire horses and farming to hunting, and Mr Cropley tells how, during the storm the foxes have gathered together in Oatlands Wood, and how they are becoming rather daring in their raids on the

poultry yard, a fact which, he says, he is going to notify to the huntsman.

And as he is talking, up rides that worthy on a hack, and he is soon sitting over the fire and talking about the weather. He asks Mr Cropley what Oatlands Wood is like, and hears as he expects, that it is full of foxes. "But I want to know what the rides are like; can I come and disturb the foxes for you?" The question is answered in the affirmative, and then arrangements are made for the pulling down of a rail here and making a gap there, and the party separate after arranging a meet on the morrow.

A hunt in the snow! It is good fun—for once in a way. So mounted on hacks—care having been taken to stuff their feet with gutta-percha to prevent "balling"—some ten or a dozen men, mostly farmers, foregather at Oatlands Wood the next day. Dear reader, you would be much better amongst that number than playing pool at your club, or sitting over your smoke-room fire injuring your nerves by smoking innumerable cigarettes, and your morals by reading a French novel.

It is nearly noon before a start is made, for Mr Cropley is all hospitality, and the home-made cherry brandy or sloe gin has to be sampled before Jim throws the fifty-five and a half couple into Oatlands Wood, for, like William the Fourth with his horses in the Goodwood Cup, he is "starting the whole fleet."

Orders are given that on no account are hounds to be allowed to go away, and as the wood is a big one and the undergrowth is thick, there is plenty of opportunity for a good woodland hunt. The first foxes that go away are allowed to do so without hindrance and the game is soon in full swing. What a crash of melody as the whole fifty-five and a half couple open on the line of a fox!

"So joyous the music each note was a song,"

and as we struggle along the rides as best we may, there is plenty to occupy our attention. Several foxes have gone away, but there are plenty left in the big wood, and for two or three hours hounds change from one to another till at last they run into one at the corner of the wood.

As there are more foxes left in the wood the huntsman thinks that another good rattling up will do it no harm but good, so to work they go again, and run right cheerily for an hour. Then a fox breaks with hounds close at his brush; stopping them is out of the question, though the whipper-in makes a gallant effort. So is riding to them, and there is nothing for it but sinking the wind, keeping to the roads and bridle paths and trusting to the chapter of accidents. A mile of this work brings the field to the brow of a hill, and there in the valley below are seen hounds streaming across the fish-pond in front of Oatlands House, on which there is a large party skating. The huntsman's anxieties are now at an end, for yon distant speck in the snow can be nothing else but the fox, and in other ten minutes hounds have run into him, and those who have been there have something to talk about when they get home.

Still the frost holds; like the brook, it looks like going on for ever. Every now and again the "watcher of the weather" has thought he discerned signs of a change—always to be dis-

appointed, and to find either more snow or another hard frost in the morning. The top snow, of course, has melted a little with the heat of the midday sun, but that is no thaw. And then, one night after stables, the signs of a change are treated with indifferent scepticism.

But in the morning,

> "There's a sound as of roof tiles dripping,
> There's a splash on the window pane,
> There's a general sense of a moisture sweet,
> With a musical splashing of horses' feet
> So hurrah! for the Chase again.
> On the road before the window there's a glorious
> pool of mud,
> And the meadows, stretched in the vale below,
> That so long were hid 'neath the hideous snow
> Are bathed in a rippling flood.
>
> On the hill above, the ploughed land,
> Where every clod was rock,
> And rang like the hard, unyielding steel
> To the flying foot and the spurning heel
> Is mud to the knee and hock.
> There's a musical trill to every rill
> Where the rippling waters flow;
> And the brook in its boisterous, boiling glee,
> Tears wildly along, from the ice grip free
> In the vale where the alders grow."

# FEBRUARY FILL-DYKE

## FEBRUARY FILL-DYKE

"Governed by the watery moon
May send forth plenteous tears to drown the world."
—*Richard III.*

THE first day out after a month's frost. How thoroughly one enjoys it. We have lost a month's hunting, but the month's frost has kept things nicely back; there is now no probability of an early spring, and at any rate the hunting season is sure to last till late into April. So, after all, the prospect is a cheery one, with the outlook all in favour of open weather, and, as we say to ourselves a dozen times as we ride on to the kennels on the first open day, "It is mild for the time of year."

The first open day after a month's frost is not always one on which much sport is seen. Everything is against sport, even the weather, for immediately after a frost scent is always

worse than it is just before one. The water-soaked fields are not calculated to carry a scent, and though on grass, and in some places hounds may be able to run a bit, at the best scent is sure to be catchy. Then hounds, that is the young ones, will have forgotten some of the lessons they learnt earlier in the season, and from their very gladness at finding themselves at work again, will be apt to be headstrong—and just a trifle wild.

And the field? Well, the bulk of them are just the concentrated essence of wildness, if such a phrase may be permitted. No sooner does a fox show himself outside a covert than there is a wild charge of cavalry in his direction, and, of course, he is headed. And when hounds are once well out of covert and apparently settled, Jones and Co. press on Smith and Co., and Smith and Co. press on Brown and Co., and Brown and Co. press on Robinson and Co., and Robinson and Co. press on Jackson and Co., and Jackson and Co. press on the hounds and drive them fields over the line, and the huntsman swears, *sotto voce*, and the long-

suffering Master swears at the top of his voice. Another peculiarity of the field is, that however quiet they may be on other occasions, they are noisy enough on the first day after a long frost, and at every check and even when hounds are running halloas in every key are heard all over the country.

The horses are perhaps the wildest of the lot. That sober old hunter who has passed his twelfth year, nearly upset his gallant owner within a mile of the meet by shying across the road, for no possible reason except that a bird that he could not have seen flew out of the hedge twenty yards in front of him. The brown, who is known as Sobersides in the hunt, has just astonished his master—and himself as well, by jumping off all-fours suddenly and indulging in three or four vigorous buck jumps which only just missed ending in catastrophe. When the old stagers are like this, what can be expected of the young ones? They are naturally all over the place, and as hounds go from one covert to another early in the day, it behoves the sportsman to be very careful, for kicking horses are all round him,

and a broken leg or a split knee-cap is easier come by than cured.

The heavy going, and the going is heavy —the plough being nearly of the consistency of a hasty pudding—soon tames the horses; indeed they are sooner quieted than their riders, whose excitement does not cease till they have been in a gallop.

It is especially trying to a huntsman when there is a catchy scent, when he is conscious in his heart of hearts that his favourites are not quite so handy as usual, to find them pressed and over-ridden, knowing all the time as he does, that they and he will come in for a lot of quite unnecessary and not very just criticism when the day's work is over; and there is little wonder that he feels a little angry at the course events are taking.

Flying showers frequently are found on the first open day after a long frost, and when they are brewing up, scent is simply as bad as it well can be. That is, it is flashy; and hounds will run on for half a mile on grass as if tied to their fox. Then they will scarcely be able to own a

line at all, even if they should happen to be on the line of a fox, which is by no means always the case. For the too eager field is very apt to drive hounds several fields over the line, and foxes, moreover, under such conditions, are apt to run short.

Unpleasant, uncomfortable days generally these first open days after a long frost, and it is seldom that anything very brilliant takes place on them. The fine weather sportsman—there are too many of his class nowadays, I fear—is apt to grumble at the bad sport and the flying showers, and take himself off home early in the day. He makes a mistake, for when three or four of the flying showers have cleared the sky, and the sun is westering, it is quite on the cards that there may be at any rate a good hunting run.

A typical first day after a frost occurs to the memory—one which brings back many pleasant reminiscences of old friends and old scenes and a good horse that carried me well. It was a sloppy morning—the country was as spongy as it well could be, and the outlook not very promising. The field—well there were 300 at the

very fewest, and as no hounds had been out for at least six weeks, it was only to be expected that the wildness to which I have alluded would be very much in evidence. Foxes were plentiful, scent was catchy, and hounds ran in snatches. Covert after covert was tried, a fox found, run a few fields and lost; and, to make the matter all the more aggravating, when a fox was found there always seemed to be a chance of better things. At last hounds found in a nice gorse covert; they sent their fox round it cheerily three or four times, and got well away with him. Over three grass fields they ran fast, and, just as they seemed nicely settled, they checked. Of course, the gallop across three grass fields at something approaching top pace set everyone on the ride, and hounds were driven quite a field forward. The difficulty was set right, and the same thing was repeated—hounds ran a field, checked, and were driven over a field or two by an excited crowd. At length a long-suffering master of hounds spoke in no uncertain tone about taking hounds home, to such a state had matters grown. And it is not a

little curious how at such times the innocent generally gets the blame, and how masters of hounds, long-suffering as they may have been and indeed generally are, will sometimes turn on the man who is nearest and who has done nothing wrong. So no one is much surprised when, after having "let off the steam" and threatened summary pains and penalties, our Master turns round and says in a tone of mild expostulation: "Mr Smithson, I am really surprised at you; you, at least, should know better."

It is in vain to point out that poor Mr Smithson, who had got a decent start when hounds ran over those three or four big grass fields, was on the horns of a dilemma. He must either get too near hounds or inevitably be ridden down by his kind and over-eager friends behind. Being a wise man in his generation he takes the Master's unjust reproof quietly, making no excuse or remark; and that gentleman, conscious when his anger is cooling a little, that he has been just a wee bit unfair, asks him what else he can do but take hounds home if men will be so unruly.

Whilst the Master was reading the Riot Act, the huntsman had cast his hounds, and, recovering the line, they hunted slowly—very slowly for about five minutes—at the end of which time they took the line into a covert of some thirty or forty acres. I have always thought it lucky that that covert was so handy; for, before the hounds got there the field was beginning to press forward, and in another two or three minutes, or perhaps in less time hounds would have been driven over the line again, and the inevitable order given for home. But the covert was there, and with its opportune appearance the miseries of the day came to a conclusion. Hounds only just picked out a line into it, and for some time proceedings were so slow that the impatient ones were talking amongst themselves about the futility of attempting to hunt that fox any longer, and suggesting that a fresh covert ought to be tried. After the exploits of the morning, however, they were rather careful about giving loud expression to their opinion.

Then came a driving shower of sleet, not a

half-and-half affair, but blown up in the teeth of a half-gale, stinging the face and wetting one through about the knees in less time than it takes to tell of it. This gave the malcontents an excuse for going home, of which many availed themselves, and the field was by this time considerably reduced in numbers, though still of formidable dimensions.

The shower was sharp, but was quickly over. As soon as it was over the wind fell, as is usual with these sudden squally showers in February fill-dyke, and the sun shone out faintly through a watery cloud. Then matters began to be more lively in the covert. Hounds ran round it twice rather nicely; the shrill scream of the whipper-in told that the fox had gone away; the huntsman was handy, and a few notes of his horn brought hounds tumbling out of the covert close on their fox's brush.

They had got a good start with him, and matters were still further improved by the fact that the covert was a long and narrow one, and that with one or two exceptions the field was

at that end of it on which the fox did *not* go away. So hounds had the great advantage of getting plenty of time to settle down. For even if the pace is not great, when they get a long field's start, they take some catching when the ground is deep, if they keep running on.

They did not run very fast now, but they kept moving, and they had been running for at least twenty minutes before there was any danger of their being over-ridden again. Then certainly an opportunity seemed about to present itself. A couple of ploughed fields, much of them under water, brought hounds to their noses, and, though they did not check, they could only just pick out the line. This happened at a very critical time, for the "crowd" had just got on terms—on good terms—with hounds again, and their bad start made them eager, over eager in fact.

In a word, matters were looking none too well, when, happily, hounds hunted down to the Sherston Brook, flung themselves into it, and, picking up the line on the grass on the

far side, began to run better now than they had done all the day.

Now, the Sherston Brook is a place of historical renown. It is the receptacle of stirrup-leathers and spurs innumerable; it is responsible for the spoiling of sundry pairs of snowy leathers, for, somehow, if you get well into it, the slimy mud makes stains that are indelible. It is wide, it is fairly deep, the approach is none too good, and the banks are rotten, so that men, and good men, too, will talk of "that day when I jumped the Sherston Brook on the old horse."

The Sherston Brook, then, is sufficiently formidable when in a normal condition, though then plenty of men are to be found who never turn away from it. But even under those conditions, I have seen fifteen good men and true down at it at once.

But the Sherston Brook, after six weeks of snow and frost, with the water coming down in muddy floods from the hills, and with the banks brim full; Sherston Brook, at its widest, and with the country up to the hocks, is a very tall

order indeed. But there are men out to-day who would scarcely have been turned back by the Thames itself.

The huntsman and whipper-in, and the Master all went, as a matter of course; and they all got over. Our veteran friend, Mr Smithson, on his favourite grey, was one of the first over; a well-known thruster, very frequently in a bad hurry, was one of the first in. He went at it forty miles an hour through the deep ground, hit his horse with his spurs before he got at it, with the result that he took off too soon, and went into the stream instead of over. His hat-guard broke in the scrimmage, and a new Lincoln & Bennett went bobbing down the stream to join the other spoils of war in the German Ocean. And our friend did not get out at the right side either; for it was bad getting out at the landing-side and comparatively easy at the taking-off side, so the horse, after making one futile attempt at the right side, was soon out at the wrong one, and so we went on our way and saw our friend no more that day.

There was no lack of gallant spirits present

who would have "had" the water under ordinary conditions; nay, who would have put it to the venture even as it was, but half a dozen of one's friends bobbing about up to the neck in very cold and dirty water has not a very encouraging effect. Besides, at a stream where the approaches are bad when half a dozen are in it, there is not much chance of finding a decently safe place. So, full of ire, the field galloped off to the nearest bridge. "Thank heaven, it is two miles off," murmured the Master as he looked back.

We, who were lucky enough to get over the brook, and whoever got over it that day was lucky indeed, knew that to it we were indebted for the good run we now enjoyed; for it stands to reason that fifty men are more easily kept in hand than five times that number, and that five-and-twenty are more easily kept in hand than fifty, and it was nearer the smaller than the larger number that went on with hounds over a beautiful country for other forty minutes. Then came a view, a short turn, and "Whoo whoop!"

The February sun was shining softy over the trees of the park in which the fox was killed, casting pale shadows on the grass, when the huntsman gave his hounds the fox they so richly deserved, for they had hunted well under trying circumstances. They had eaten him, and still the happy few lingered on the spot, wondering why the Master made no move. "It was Sherston Brook that killed him," said the huntsman. And then the field, who had gone round, began to turn up in twos and threes, and the Master began to condole with them on what they had missed, and describe the beauties of the run. "It was not fast—not what you call fast. We had plenty of time to watch the hounds that had the line. Oh, I'm so sorry, Mr X, you hadn't your brook jumper. It's always as well to have one clever at water in this country." Such was the consolation delivered to the worst delinquents of the morning, each being addressed individually, and then the word was given for home, for by this time the distant village clock was striking four.

One frequently hears the impatient hunting

man, speaking of the whole duty of huntsmen, insist upon that worthy being consistent in showing sport. He is generally very lavish in expressing his opinion as to what a huntsman should or should not do, and especially has he a great deal of fault to find when hounds have had a bad day after a long frost. That he knows nothing about the science of hunting is obvious the moment he opens his mouth to tell you that it is the huntsman's business to show sport, by which he means a given amount of galloping and jumping; and the more a huntsman tries to hunt his fox, the more he is condemned by many of his impatient followers. And too frequently those who ought to know better—nay, perhaps, who do know better, but who let their impatience get the better of their discretion—are to be found amongst the ranks of the critics.

Let me give an instance, though it has nothing to do with February fill-dyke. Hounds had been running nicely for thirty-five minutes, and they checked. There was a halloa to the right, about half a mile off, and the huntsman

took no notice of it. " I wonder why Jim is not going," I remarked unthinkingly, forgetting for the moment that the gentleman I addressed possessed the critical faculty in a remarkable degree. " Oh," replied my friend, " you'll never find Jim going anywhere where there's a fox." As he said this, the huntsman turned, touched his horn, and cast his hounds back. I asked him what had happened, for I was at one side of a big wood and he with hounds was at the other for a few minutes, and I did not see all that had taken place before the halloa. " There were two lines down the wood," said he, " and that halloa was the fresh fox and heel way of him."

Going back for a moment to the saying of many critics, that it is the business of the huntsman to show the best sport possible every day he goes out, this may be freely admitted. It is what the huntsman is there for. But I would point out emphatically that the critic is there to enjoy the sport provided, not to find fault; and especially, not by his conduct, to spoil his own sport, and, what is of much more con-

sequence, other people's, and incidentally, to injure hounds. Only the hound man can appreciate at its true value the difference it made to the pack I have been writing about between killing that fox and being taken home after such a disappointing morning; and I shall not have written this chapter in vain if here and there it causes a few men to remember to give hounds a chance on that most critical of days, the first open day after a month's frost.

# MARCH WINDS

## MARCH WINDS

> "Take
> The winds of March with beauty."
> —"WINTER'S TALE."
>
> "The Ides of March are come."
> —"JULIUS CÆSAR."

THE country which for the last two or three weeks has been so deep is beginning to dry up; farmers are busy sowing their spring corn and preparing land for potatoes and turnips; young lambs are playing in the fields; there is a bright blue sky and a bright sun which warms you thoroughly in the middle of the day; and there is a snarly, biting bitter wind that chills you to the bone as you stand at the corner of the wood, out of the sun and full in the way of the blast, vainly hoping that the fox you in your heart of hearts know is stopped in the main earth, will put in an appearance and let you have a "dart," if it were only over three or four fields.

Yes, the end is at hand, and though there have been exceptions, hunting in March is a weariness of the flesh. A peck of March dust may be and is worth a king's ransom to the farmer, but to the hunting man it is nothing but unalleviated misery. It blinds him, it makes his eyes smart; and unfortunately it ruffles his temper.

And there is excuse for this, for on those few occasions when hounds run like "greased lightning" in a March wind, and I have known them to do so now and again, the blustering wind makes it difficult to hear what is taking place, and the sportsman, unless he is absolutely taking the greatest and keenest interest in what is going on, may easily be "left" when the best run of the month takes place. What men say under such circumstances may be left to the imagination.

It may be said, and probably will be said, by those who have not had much experience, that it serves a man quite right who misses a run by relaxing his attention. But this, though in a certain sense true enough, is rather severe on

the unfortunate sportsman. We are told, on the best of authority, that Homer sometimes nods, and the " cheerful voice of Spring," as heard on a wild March morning, is certainly not favourable to that close attention which is necessary if a man would never miss an opportunity.

There is something which is particularly charming though about a ride to the fixture on a March morning if the wind is not too strong. For one thing the road will not be too familiar. In March the outside boundaries, the big woods and the moorlands, if there are any, are hunted, and those snug gorse coverts from which you have had so many fine gallops during the past few months, are left severely alone. The best part of the country is now full of busy workers; every field has its team or teams, and the only chance of sport is in that part of it which is not so much cultivated. Therefore it is to the hills and the woods that the hunting man has to repair in March.

And there is something very enjoyable in jogging along those bridle paths through the woods and plantations rich with the scent of the

budding larches. You may, in some moods, join with the old huntsman in execrating "the d—— stinking vi'lets," which are bringing the season to a close; and at certain times you may join with Ko-Ko in singing "Bother the flowers of the Spring." But no hunting man worthy of the name of sportsman is blind to the beauties of Nature as they unfold themselves to his eyes; and as you ride through the woods, rich in their display of violets and primroses, and daffodils, and wild hyacinths, and wood anemones, you recall the anathemas you uttered in your haste, and whilst hoping for a good day's sport, you realise the fact that, if it should be your fortune to fall in with one, it will be none the less enjoyable because it takes place amongst the reviving vegetation of an English spring.

And if the season has been an open one, and a hard one, terms which, if not always, yet are frequently synonymous, you will probably reflect as you jog along the woodland rides that the time has come for a rest. An ominous trip, now and again, on the part of the horse you are riding, most sure-footed and safest of mounts,

reminds you that his legs are getting a little round, and that he is beginning to feel the wear and tear of the season. Perhaps, too, you may be conscious in your heart of hearts of a trifle of staleness in yourself, though you would be torn in two by wild horses before you would admit it. But conscience will not be silenced, and conscience tells you that the plausible excuses you made for missing that sharp forty minutes last Tuesday night were excellent proof of your ingenuity—nothing more. Conscience will tell you what you don't need telling, that you would not have missed that gallop in the beginning or the middle of the season, and that the reason why you missed it is that you are getting a trifle stale; that in other words you want that change of scene and occupation which is necessary for the thorough appreciation and enjoyment of any of our pleasures.

The foxes and the hard-worked hunt servants want a rest as well, though, so far as the latter are concerned, the rest comes in the way of change of work, and March is perhaps the busiest month they have.

Reflecting on these subjects you emerge from the wood, and as you cross the yard of Mr Wheatley to catch the bridle road at the other side of it to Danes Beacon, for which landmark you are bound, you see the kennel cart drive up. Then Mr Wheatley brings out a reluctant puppy, fat perhaps, but that is a fault on the right side, for he has evidently had plenty of exercise. And you are called upon to examine and admire the many excellencies of Runnymede, to listen to his aristocratic pedigree, full of Belvoir, and Brocklesby, and Warwickshire blood.

It is very probable that you know nothing whatever about a hound, but it is not necessary to commit yourself. You need not attempt to pass for the late Captain Percy Williams and the late Mr George Lane Fox compressed into one individual in your knowledge of hound lore, and of make and shape, for if you do you are sure to be found out. And it is not pleasant to be found out, and it is so easily done. For if Mr Wheatley does not hunt—his weight, a good solid twenty stone prevents that—he is a rare

judge of the shape and make of a hound—nearly as good a judge as he is of sheep, than which perhaps it is impossible to say more. And in his sanctum you will find the "Foxhound Kennel Stud Book," and a drawer full of hound lists, the contents of which he is fairly well master of. But you may generalise safely when he gives you the lead which he is sure to do. And if you would occupy a high place in his regard you will notice Runnymede closely, and take care to remember him when you see him again. A trip or two to the kennels in order to impress his appearance thoroughly on your memory would be time well spent. Then shall you be able to say to Mr Wheatley in the preliminary glimpse at the puppies, to which the favoured few are admitted on the day of the Puppy Show: "How well Runnymede has done; whatever the judges may say to him, he is a foxhound." And Mr Wheatley will say to his friends that you are a sportsman—a man that takes an interest in the pack, not one of those fellows that come down to gallop about and make holes in the fences; that you are "one of

us." And you will be treated as a friend and an intimate by the men to whom you owe your sport, and it is worth all the trouble and more to gain that end.

There is another thing you must not do—if Mr Wheatley offers you a drink, you must not tell him it is too early. Remember that he was about amongst his sheep and lambs hours before you left your bed, and that by half-past eleven he can do very well with some refreshment. And so it is the graceful thing to accept the offered hospitality. And when one comes to think of it, perhaps you are as much in need of the refreshment as the worthy farmer himself, for there are more unlikely things than that you were playing bridge till the small hours, and than bridge there is no greater provocative of thirst.

Fashion in March hunting has changed since my early hunting years. Then when February went out the hour was made 9.30 instead of 10.30; and later in the month hounds met at 8.30 and at 8 a.m., and I have on occasion known them meet as early as 6.30 a.m., or even as 6 a.m. Now as soon as March comes in, the

hour of meeting is put back, and hounds meet at noon, but occasionally later.

Personally, I must admit that I preferred the earlier hour. In the first place, the wind is generally not so troublesome early in the day, and woodland hunting on a fine spring morning has a charm peculiarly its own. But the reason for putting the time of meeting back is a sound one. When March comes in, the puppies that have been out at walk are all brought up to the kennel, and this brings a lot of extra work on the huntsman and his staff during the month. It may be said that this was always the case, but that statement would not be quite correct.

I think hounds are brought up from walk certainly a month earlier than they were thirty years ago, and for this there seem to be several good reasons. For one cause and another cub-hunting operations commence earlier than they were wont to do, and the puppy show has become an institution. This, of course, necessitates an early start amongst the puppies to get them handy. For the puppy show

season is of necessity a short one, and puppies take a good deal of licking into shape when they come up from walk.

So far as the sport itself is concerned I am in favour of the early start rather than the late one. But though the hours from noon to four o'clock on a dry, windy March day are generally unproductive of sport, after four o'clock one frequently falls in for a nice little gallop.

It is very amusing to notice how some huntsmen will draw the country in March, so as to have a pretty certain find about four o'clock or half-past. I have, on occasion, seen many schemes resorted to to prevent the selected covert being disturbed before the favourable hour, some of them transparent enough. If a fox has been hunted I have occasionally seen a huntsman cast about all over the country in the quite hopeless attempt to hit off the line. I have also seen a huntsman try for a problematical outlying fox for an hour or more. Then he would trot off to the covert he had "saved," and very likely have a run.

One huntsman friend of mine used to say:

"There will be a scent about five or half-past; then's when we want a fox, and I know where there is one." I must say he was generally right, and those who stopped to the "bitter end" with him generally had a better record of the month of March than their neighbours.

On one occasion we had a very remarkable experience. I should premise that my huntsman friend was one of the keenest men I ever knew. He never turned his horse's head homewards willingly when there was the least chance of sport, and he would draw to the last minute of time if he thought there was enough daylight to kill a fox. We frequently had some chaff about this; for, on the days when I hunted with him, his draw led him homewards whilst it took me away from home, with the possibility of finishing some eighteen or twenty miles from my stable at 6.30.

The day in question was a typical day in March. Hounds met in a woodland country, where several big woods are very near to each other; just the country indeed in which foxes might be expected to jog about leisurely

in front of hounds on a bad scenting day.

And this was a bad scenting day; of that there could not be the slightest doubt. There was a wild west wind, soft and apparently blowing through rain; and one could not hear what hounds were doing a hundred yards off if one was up wind. And, oh, the monotony of what they did do during that wearisome afternoon! How many foxes we had on foot I should not even like to guess at. Luckily, we were in a country which was well supplied with foxes, and so things were not so bad as they might have been. But scent was wretched, and hounds, if they got close away on the brush of their fox, might run him decently for three or four fields. Then the progress was in inverse ratio to that of John Gilpin. The gallop became a canter, the canter a trot, the trot a walk. Then a long time was spent in the vain endeavour to recover the line of our hunted fox. History kept repeating itself, as history has a knack of doing under such circumstances; and, to add to the monotony, we never seemed to

break fresh ground. There is a familiarity about a fence when one has jumped it half a dozen times in a day which breeds contempt. I don't think I ever was out on a more irritating day, but towards four o'clock the wind began to drop, and by half-past it had dropped altogether. Hounds began to do a little better now, and, getting on good terms with a fox, they hunted him rather nicely. Then an unfortunate circumstance happened; they changed foxes and crossed a river.

I had mounted a friend of mine, and we were rather undecided as to what we should do; but the river decided it, for it meant a long detour to a bridge, and, as we thought, a very long ride home late in the evening. But for once in a way the unexpected happened in such a way as the wildest of optimists could never have hoped for.

Hounds ran beautifully on the other side of the river. How well they always seem to be running when one cannot get to them! We walked our horses slowly on the homeward road, and in about ten minutes' time we heard

by their cry that hounds were again in the river. A momentary pause on the river-bank, and then they began to run as they don't often run in March. They crossed the bottom of the field we were in, and then for forty bright minutes—minutes which will ever live in the memory—we had them to ourselves. We were both down, but what did that matter so long as we were up and going again without much loss of time, and just as the sun was sinking below the horizon, hounds rolled their fox over in the open as the huntsman and some half-dozen good men and true turned up. And the fox had taken us homewards, and this time it was my friend the huntsman who had the eighteen miles ride home on a tired horse after six o'clock!

There will be many litters of cubs about before the end of March if it is a forward season, and the man who takes an interest in the animal life of the country may hear and see much that will be of service to him in improving his knowledge as he rides to the fixture or as he comes home. The keeper has generally a word to say that is worth listening to, and there

is no keener observer of nature than the agricultural labourer if you can only get him to talk.

March is a month, too, when the careful man will look critically through his stud with a view to supplying deficiencies, for now is the best time to buy. A horse that has been regularly hunted has got all the superfluous fat off him by this time, and you will be able to see him as he is. He is also better to buy at the end than at the beginning of the season, and there is the additional advantage—and it is no small one—of having the summer for your new purchase and you to get used to each other. Even the best of men ride a horse that they know and like with more confidence than they do a strange one. And buy a horse of a farmer if there is any farmer who has one like suiting you. The long draws, which are so frequent in March, will give you plenty of opportunity of looking a horse over; they will give you a good chance of a thorough trial, and half an hour's trial with hounds is worth more than half a day's trial in a dealer's yard and trial ground.

If you buy of a farmer you will be well thought

of in the country, and wherever you hail from you will be looked upon as belonging to it.

But wherever you buy, it is false economy to put off buying till the moment you want a horse. If you wait till then the horse looks so much better than he really is that you run a risk of great disappointment when you get him home.

So, though March is seldom a great month for sport, it is one of the busiest months of the hunting year. The hunt staff is busy with the puppies that have come in from walk and with those that will soon be sent out to walk, and the ordinary hunting man will find his time fully occupied if he has to pick up a fresh horse or two and to get himself and his best horse ready for the point to point meeting which will shortly take place.

# APRIL GLORIES

THE DRAW

*From a painting by R. B. Davis. Engraved by T. A. Prior.*

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## APRIL GLORIES

"Well apparell'd April on the heel
Of limping winter treads."
—"ROMEO AND JULIET."

"The uncertain glory of an April day."
—"TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA."

"Often men would say
That horse his mettle from his rider takes."
—"THE LOVER'S COMPLAINT."

NOWADAYS there are few countries in which the ominous words, "To finish the season," do not appear at the end of one of the fixtures early in April. For many reasons, it is inexpedient to continue hunting so late as was the custom in the early part of the nineteenth century. Improved agriculture has brought the seasons of field-work forward; and for the same reason that it is now possible to commence cub-hunting much earlier than used to be the case, so must the hunting season come to a close sooner than it was wont to do in

" the brave days of old." And when one comes to think of it, if a man has turned out in the early days of August and followed up the sport throughout the hunting year, the time has arrived when he and his horses both need and deserve a rest.

There are here and there countries in which hounds can hunt during the whole of April—in which indeed it is necessary for hounds to hunt during the whole of April, and into these countries the very keen sportsman not infrequently migrates when hunting is over in his own country — provided, that is, that he has sufficient horses left, a very necessary proviso indeed.

These countries are wild, and what the exquisite would call unfashionable, and it would puzzle his brain to find adjectives expressive enough to describe his disapproval of them. Widespreading moorlands, rising one behind the other, hilly and in places precipitous, and practically unrideable in the middle of the season on account of the bogs, are the places fitted for April hunting, and where they exist

in a country, it is desirable that they should be well hunted in that month.

I think every hunting man should endeavour for once at least to have an April's hunting on the moors: for I am quite certain that no one can have a full knowledge of the sport until he has seen hounds run over a moor with a burning scent. It has been my luck to see many a brilliant run on the moors, and in more countries than either one or two, and I look back upon them as amongst my happiest hunting experiences.

To a man who loves to see hounds work and run, and whose appreciation of the sport is not confined to the riding over grass fields and jumping fences, all hunting on the moors is good, but in the autumn and mid-winter there are many drawbacks. One is that the bogs are then nearly impassable—and that under any circumstances, even the most favourable, you constantly find that you have to go a long way round, and so lose sight of hounds for a time. It is not a particularly cheering sight to see the sterns of hounds disappearing and going away

from you when you know there is an impassable bog in front of you, the skirting of which means riding a mile or two out of your way. Then there are the inevitable mists and fogs which are very perplexing, and again it is soon dark, and you have to hurry a tired and perhaps not a very sound horse over a rough track, well knowing that if you are not within touch of the road by nightfall, the hour of your arrival home is a very uncertain quantity indeed.

Many of my readers, I know, have never been alone in the middle of a moor on a tired horse with perhaps threequarters of an hour of daylight left, and a certain four miles to travel before the high road can be hit. I have had that experience many times, and an awesome experience it is.

A hard day has finished in the orthodox manner by the death of a stout fox about half-past three o'clock in the afternoon. That fox has shown you a great run, and the small field which is generally found at a moorside fixture in mid-season has been reduced to half a score, including the hunt servants. These, with a

couple more are going eastward, other four are going north and west, your solitary road lies in a southerly direction. All round you are swelling hills, one rising above the other, and the brown heather covering all. Really there is not a landmark, and though you know fairly well where you are and that you are several miles from the road, you have not the faintest idea how to get there. Going with the hounds or your friends means a ride of many miles round, and that is out of the question on a tired horse. So, trusting in your bump of locality, your horse's sagacity, and the chapter of accidents, you ask the way of a native—there is sure to be a native to the fore at the end of a moorland run, riding a rough pony that to look at does not seem worth more than a ten pound note—and set off on your journey.

You are to keep the road you are on for about a mile—the road, *bien entendu*, being a scarcely perceptible track—then you are to make for a stunted Scottish fir where you get on to an old causeway; so old that only a stone here and there is to be seen, the rest being

submerged by the wear and tear of ages. Then there is a stream to cross and then you have to leave Hangman's Hollow, of which you have never heard in your life before, so the name conveys no meaning to you, on your right; and then you must keep straight on, and if you don't go wrong you will be on the road in another two miles.

So you keep to the track for a mile and hit off the broken Scottish fir, and get on to the causeway and cross the brook, and leave a circular hole, evidently the remains of some long-forgotten worship, from the big stones round it, on your right, and guess that it is Hangman's Hollow, and go on straight as you can in search of the high road and comfort. But as you cross the end of Hangman's Hollow, the mists begin to come rolling out of the valleys, and you are soon enveloped in a driving damp fog, which wets you through in no time, and which also makes it difficult to see where you are going. There is nothing to direct you now, only an indistinct kind of path which can scarcely even be dignified by the name of a

track. You plod slowly on, for you cannot go at any pace; all your wits and all your horse's are necessary to keep you straight. Darkness is at hand—at last it is here. Surely you must have gone more than two miles; can you have lost your way? Suddenly the horse gets out of the heather on to a bit of short grass; you cannot see it, but you can feel he is off the moor and hear the water squelch out of the grass as he steps on it. Then he comes to a little elevation—it looks something monstrous in the thick fog—he hesitates a moment, and drops down into the road, and he gives a whinny of delight when he feels the hard macadam under his feet; and once off the moor the fog seems to lift. There, some two miles in front of you are the lights of the little market town that lies on your homeward way, glittering against the sky; and if you are a humane and a wise man, as no doubt you are, being a sportsman, you will give your good horse a bucket of gruel when you get to that town, and you won't forget yourself.

But these difficulties are not to be encoun-

tered in April, and much as I love a hunt on the moors I should advise my friends who have had no experience of moor hunting to leave it alone in mid-season, and take their moor hunting in April.

In the ordinary hunting country, where moors and big woodlands are not, the functions in connection with April hunting are mainly social. The first week or ten days may be devoted to hunting, but "to finish the season" is announced, and the Point to Point Meeting is exercising the minds of all and sundry, and is the most important event of the month in the hunting man's diary.

Point to Point racing has really sprung into existence during the last quarter of a century, and it was a necessary consequence of the action of the National Hunt Committee insisting on the regulation fences. Hunting men did not like these regulation fences; they objected to school their horses over them, and they wanted to have races among themselves. So they turned to the old rules of steeplechasing which prevailed in the days of Red Deer and

Moonraker and Grimaldi and other magnates of olden times, and there found what they wanted.

It is not my intention to trace the various vicissitudes of Point to Point racing since its re-introduction. This would demand a chapter to itself. It is sufficient for my purpose to say that it caught on in a way which was never anticipated, and that it has proved a great attraction to thousands of hunting men and their friends all over the country.

There are two great social functions in the hunting year—functions to which the farmers' families are always invited, and which they look forward to with great pleasure. These are the Puppy Show and the Point to Point Meeting, and of these, the latter is the most popular. For at the Point to Point Meeting there is always a race for the farmers, and at the Point to Point Meeting the farmers' wives and daughters are always included in the invitation.

The great question of luncheon, for it is a great question, comes in for solution. I have known great mistakes made with the best of

intentions. Once a magnificent luncheon was provided by some hospitable gentlemen, but they made the silly—I had almost said the unpardonably silly—mistake of having a couple of tents and asking the farmers and their wives to one tent and the country gentry and their friends to the other. The farmers were naturally offended and so were the rest of the guests, many of whom joined the farmers by way of protest. My friend, if ever you have anything to do with organising the refreshment department of a Point to Point Meeting, bear in mind what Lord George Bentinck said: "That on the Turf and under it all men are equal."

The farmers and their friends are the guests of the Hunt on this occasion, and no effort should be spared to ensure them a thoroughly enjoyable day. And to give hunting men their due no effort in this direction is spared, and the mistake to which I have drawn attention is the exception which proves the rule.

I must honestly own that it is the social rather than the sporting aspect of Point to Point meetings which appeals to me. I prefer my

racing with the ordinary surroundings; like to be able to distinguish the horses by the colours of their riders, and to see what they are doing all or most of the way. But we are not all constituted alike, and there are thousands who take a keen interest in the racing at these meetings, and obviously those who have not been used to the " c'rect card " and the colours of the riders, do not miss them.

The component parts of the field for a Point to Point race afford much subject for study. The field is generally a large one, and it seems to a looker-on that the majority of horses entered cannot have, even in the minds of the most optimistic of owners, the remotest chance of winning a race of any kind. Let us have a look at the lot saddling for the heavy weight race.

Our worthy friend Jones is going to ride his favourite grey, a weight carrier that carries his seventeen stone owner safely and with credit to the pair of them. But Jones won't trust his favourite in the hands of anyone; he rides himself, throwing at least three stone away, and so

of course has not the remotest chance of winning under ordinary circumstances. But Jones will go the nearest way and he will get the course, and if by the chapter of accidents there should be much falling it is just possible that Jones may win after all, for Jones' grey has never been known to fall; and in the days when Plancus was consul, Jones did win a Point to Point race in some such fashion. He was lighter then, but he was still giving a lot of weight away; and it was a fine performance, and Jones is justly proud of the handsome trophy that stands on his sideboard.

There are sure to be half a dozen or perhaps half a score youngsters well mounted, that goes without saying, who are keenness itself, and any of whose horses would have a chance if they were to be ridden by that spare, hard-bitten looking man who is superintending the saddling of a plain looking screw in the corner. Both horse and man are worth looking at. The horse, standing about fifteen hands, is all muscle, and though a little one, he is built on

the lines of a weight carrier. The deep, well placed shoulders, short muscular back, and well turned quarters denote power of an exceptional kind, and the lean head and neck tell of aristocratic lineage. The man, tall and muscular, has not an ounce of superfluous flesh on him, yet with his saddle he is unable to scale less than fourteen stone. So he runs his little one in the heavy weight race, and if you are wise you will have your small investment on him with that bookmaker who is vociferating the odds so loudly. You will probably be surprised at the short odds he will offer you, but you will admit afterwards that it is a nice winning price. For the little bay with his heavily bandaged legs is the hero of many a Point to Point race, and has managed to win three out of every four he has taken part in.

Our young friends, whom we have left for a while, are remarkably busy and fussy. They are gallant men enough when hounds are running, quite capable of holding their own in any country. But racing is a very different matter to riding to hounds, and riding in a

Point to Point is race riding, as you will speedily find, if ever you take part in one.

There are some people who write and talk as if it were not, but Point to Point racing is steeplechasing with slow horses instead of with fast ones, and on a different kind of course; and so it happens that the gentleman in pink who is just mounting a somewhat indifferent chestnut will be the most dangerous opponent to the little bay we have just been looking at, for he is a steeplechase jockey of high repute, an amateur of course, but as good as most professionals and better than the average. He would win on any of the horses our young friends are going to ride, though he would have his work cut out to beat them in the hunting field, which is a very different game altogether.

The course has been arranged so that most of it can be seen from the winning field, and though this is a plan which the purists don't approve of, it is the wise one. There is sure to be the grumbler at your meeting, and he will hold forth to the effect that the race rider has

the advantage here, in which he is undoubtedly right; whilst, if the race was run from one point to another, as these races used to be, then the hunting man would be on equal terms with the racing man, in which he is wrong. For it is knowledge of pace and knowledge of where the winning-post is that wins races, and the reason the hunting man who is not experienced in race riding is placed at a disadvantage compared with the man who is, is that he is riding faster than he is accustomed to do, and that there are no hounds to set the pace for him.

It is advisable to so arrange the course that the start and the finish can both be seen from the winning field if possible. Remember that the Hunt Point to Point Meeting, though originally little more than a friendly gallop over a country amongst members of a Hunt, is very much more than that now. It is the most important social function of the hunting year. It is that at which hunting men have the best opportunity of extending their hospitality to the farmers' wives and daughters, and the question may well be asked: What is the good of asking

people to a " show " if the most interesting part of it is invisible.

There is another reason, too, for that flagging of the course which is such an offence in the eyes of the grumbler. Now that wire is so much used for the mending of fences, it is quite possible that a little bit of wire may have been left or may be in the line a man would naturally take if he were riding an unflagged course. The wire might be marked right enough, and there would be no risk of an accident, but the man with the best eye to country might lose a great deal of ground through coming across a fence on which there was wire. We experience this every day in the hunting field, and find sometimes it is a great inconvenience; but what is an inconvenience in the hunting field is fatal in a race.

But we have left our field running, and they are nearly home. Let us go down to the last fence, for it is at the last fence generally that the race is really decided. There are half a dozen horses in sight—five of them apparently with a good chance. On the right, our friend

on the pony holds a slight lead, and is coming along as hard as he can; then there are three of our young friends, Brown, Jackson, and Robinson; then the steeplechase jockey in pink, some lengths behind, nursing his horse and looking out for opportunities. About a field behind them comes our welter weight, Jones, whose horse has been jumping fault-lessly. The last jump is a stiff cut hedge—about four feet high with a wide drain, about seven feet wide, on the landing side—a fairly formidable but quite fair fence, with a take off from good sound grass.

The leader quickens his pace without apparent effort, and slightly increases his lead, and our friends Brown, Jackson, and Robinson immediately begin to bustle their horses, and as is the way with the inexperienced in such cases, they leave loose of their heads; the consequence is that Brown and Jackson come down, whilst Robinson's mount half stops as he lands, and in a second our steeplechase friend is alongside him. Then up goes Robinson's whip, and flop, flop, go his reins, and our friend in pink soon

has him beaten. But he fails to catch the pony, who wins by a couple of lengths, whilst Robinson just manages to beat Jones, who has come plodding on and seen all the fun, by the same distance for third place; and Robinson goes away with the idea that he has really ridden a decent finish, don't you know, but is soon undeceived by the gentleman in pink telling him he ought to have won, and pleased when he adds that if he will take to it seriously he will make a jockey some day. Then comes the light weight race, and the farmers' race, which is frequently one of the most interesting of the day. For, when farmers take to steeplechase riding they generally ride well, and know a lot about it; and it is quite on the cards that the winner of the farmers' steeplechase may be seen to advantage "under the rules" on some future occasion.

The racing is over with the farmers' race; the cups, if there are cups, are handed over to the respective winners; the ladies are given a cup of tea; the men drink to the next season in something stronger, and another

landmark of the hunting year has been passed.

At some meetings there are challenge cups given. Personally I don't think much of challenge cups. There is little satisfaction in winning a trophy and only being able to retain it one year; and in all cases where there is a challenge cup there should, I think, be some memorial of it which the winner could keep in addition to the sweepstakes which, of course, are his.

# A MAY FOX

FOX-HOUNDS IN FULL CRY

[*Facing page 179*

*From a painting by Laporte. Engraved by A. Duncan.*

## A MAY FOX.

" More matter for a May morning."
—" TWELFTH NIGHT."

MAY is perhaps the slackest month in the hunting year, except in those few countries in which it is still the custom to kill a May fox, or to try to kill one, which is not always the same thing. In the month of May, hunt servants take up their new quarters, and in many countries it is in the month of May that the huntsman takes his hardly earned holiday.

A huntsman who goes to a new place finds indeed plenty of matter for a May morning. He has to get to know his hounds, and the people he will have to deal with, and his new country, and when you come to think of it this is a pretty big order. He will have the least trouble with his hounds, that is quite certain.

But a man coming into a new country neces-

sarily finds some trouble with his new surroundings. If he is following a good man, who has been huntsman for many seasons, he will be wise to endeavour to learn what that huntsman's methods of dealing with the country were. And let him follow a good lead ever so carefully, there will be sure to be some little details in which he will act differently from the old huntsman, and by so doing draw on his devoted head unmerited criticism.

Huntsmen are generally tactful—it is one of a man's chief qualifications for such an important post that he should be possessed of tact, and to give huntsmen their due, they are seldom wanting in the very useful characteristic. And if the old huntsman has retired and is still living in the neighbourhood, you will find that the newcomer will become friendly with him and will be glad of any hints he may give him.

The hunting man—the man who identifies himself with the country and in moments of enthusiasm talks of "our" hounds and "our" huntsman—will do well to call on the new huntsman as soon as he gets nicely settled; and if he lives

some distance from the kennels he would do well to ask the huntsman over to his house, and ride round the district with him, introducing him to farmers and keepers and others. In the course of such rides he may, without taking any liberty or appearing to dictate, drop many valuable hints which the huntsman will treasure up for future use; hints for instance on the run of foxes, on the scenting character of the various districts, and on many other little details connected with the chase. Such hints are often given unthinkingly when relating some incident of the past, which field or fence or covert calls to the memory.

Perhaps I may be permitted to say one other thing about a change of hunt servants, and give one word of advice. Do not be in too big a hurry to express an opinion about the new man or to compare him with the old one. Give him a chance, and above all, remember that a good man is generally original.

But if there is no change of hunt servants, there is something in which the hunting man may take an interest even in the (to him) rather

slack month of May. There are, for instance, the hound sales, at which a few couple may have been purchased, which he naturally wishes to see. Or a few couple have come in a draft from some famous kennel. And then there is always the entry to look over, and nothing is more interesting than to make a periodical inspection of the entry in the summer. One gets to know them thoroughly, to mark their progress, and when the cub-hunting season comes round, one's interest in the pack and its doings are enhanced by the fact that one is thoroughly intimate with the young hounds.

Then in some countries there is a Horse Show for the benefit of the farmers residing within the limits of the Hunt. These shows, however, are not general, for the best of all reasons, for Horse Shows and Agricultural Shows are so numerous that Hunt Shows would in many places have to compete with, if not clash, with older established shows, to the injury of both.

I mention the Horse Show here, however, because the country shows begin in May, and

at a very great many of them the hunting men give special prizes for the farmers of the district. The hunting man should always make a point of going to these shows and of taking an interest in the special prizes given by the Hunt. He will be wise, however, if he refrains from judging on these conditions, however good a judge he may be. It is always better for the judge to come from a distance; his mistakes are not so freely criticised and the decisions don't do harm to the Hunt.

One instance of the mischief which accrued from a member of a Hunt judging at a certain show at which that Hunt gave some special prizes, is worth relating. There was an exhibitor there who had an overweening sense of the quality and perfections of a young horse he was showing. He was really a very average sort of animal indeed, which, by the way, is by no means uncommon when an inexperienced man holds such a high opinion of a horse's merits. The judge placed him fourth, which was quite as high as he deserved. But his owner thought he should have won, and told the

judge so in very plain language, accusing him of favouritism, and telling him that on that account he would take care that hounds never found a fox in his covert again. Whether he ever interfered with foxes or not is more than I can say. Probably he did not, and that when his covert was drawn blank as it was a time or two, it might be owing to natural causes over which he had no control. But he was very bitter for some time, and took some talking round. Indeed, perhaps the decision of other judges opened his eyes to the real merits of his horse.

The hunting of a May fox is a very different thing from the killing of one, as I have already said, but I have more than once seen hounds run as hard in May as I have seen them run in December.

One curious incident of May hunting is worth relating. It was before my time, but I was told by those who took part in it. It happened more than sixty years ago and is now a forgotten incident, though I believe it made some stir in the country at the time. A gentleman made a com-

plaint to the Master of a well-known pack of hounds that a fox was in the habit of coming regularly amongst his sheep and worrying quite big lambs. The Master was, of course, incredulous, but told the gentleman that such a fox was no good to anyone, and that he had better set his shepherd or keeper to look out for him and shoot him. One morning in May, the shepherd saw the fox at work in the half light of early dawn. He fired at him and thought he hit him, though he went away gallantly enough. The shepherd galloped off to the kennels, where they fortunately still had some horses in condition, and in a very short time hounds were on the spot. They took up the line at once, and soon began to run hard. But all the time there was something about it the Master, who hunted his own hounds, did not like. However, hounds ran on for some four miles and ran straight to a farm-yard and to the cow-house door. On looking into the cow-house they found a sheep-dog dying. He had been wounded, and, of course, was the "fox." It is an interesting incident, as showing that when a sheep-dog does kill

mutton, he goes a long way from home to do it.

I once saw hounds run a sheep-dog hard. It was at the end of a long, wearisome woodland day, when there was practically no scent at all. Late in the afternoon hounds began to run, and they were soon out of the wood and racing over the grass. The curious thing was that though the old hounds would not drive to the front they "went on" with the delinquents as if they were not quite certain, and the bulk of the pack were running cheerily enough. It was then that the Master told me the above anecdote. He told me these were the only times he had seen hounds run a dog, and on the last occasion he said he could not account for it at all. It is the only time I have ever seen a pack of hounds run a dog, and I have heard of no other instances.

I have said I have seen hounds run as hard in May as in December. One occasion on which this took place was very remarkable. The ground was dry and dusty, and hounds absolutely raced on dry new-sown ground, being practically hidden from sight by the dust for

nearly twenty minutes. Then they turned down wind and the steam was all out of it.

The best day I ever saw in May was at the end of the first week in that month, about the 6th or 7th. There had been some showers; there was a snap of east in the wind, and, as it often is in early May, it was very cold. Foxes had been very troublesome in certain quarters, so we were to have one more " last day " to try to get hold of some of the delinquents. I started at five o'clock, for I had an hour's ride and hounds met at six. We were not long in finding, and a very few minutes served to account for an old and very fat dog fox—doubtless the delinquent we came to look after. Hounds soon found again, for we were in a country that was full of foxes and after an hour's bustling about the woods without very much exciting incident, they got hold of number two. Then came a lot of running with no very great scent, and frequent changes of foxes, the sort of sport one would have expected three months later. At last after a good deal of time was spent in this manner, a fox was marked to ground in a

drain. The farmers were determined to see the end of it, and the Master was acquiescent, and so a terrier was put in. But the fox was of the fighting kind, and not one that bolted with little provocation. So his assailant and he were quickly at " fisticuffs," and it soon became evident that the drain would have to be taken up. This was no very light undertaking, and the afternoon was well on the wane when at last the fox was reached. There were signs of battle in his face and he had left his marks on the terrier, and there is no doubt but that the fight had been a tough one.

The fox was turned down, and not given very much law. And then the unexpected happened. Hounds began to run hard, and the fox made a famous point and at the end of an hour was marked to ground in a strong breed earth. A curious thing was that he was a bob-tailed fox that was well known and that had beaten hounds several times during the past two or three seasons; and during that time he had never been known to take the line he did on this occasion—a line too, which was evidently familiar to him.

It was thought that the good dusting up he had got after his battle with the terrier would be too much for him, and that he would never leave the earth in which he had found shelter. But the prophets of evil were wrong for once in a way, for I viewed him away from one of his old haunts on the opening day of the following cub-hunting season. He was, I believe, seen onece again, and only once; when hounds could do but little with him. This was the last run he gave us, and it was a good one, making a fine finish to a good season. The stable clock was striking six as I rode into the yard—thirteen hours in the saddle, not such a bad day when one was after a May fox.

# A JUNE FESTIVITY

# A JUNE FESTIVITY

"Let us feast him to the height."
—"TRIOLUS AND CRESSIDA."

"I do feast to-night.
My best esteemed acquaintance."
—"MERCHANT OF VENICE."

HITHERTO I have said but little of our friend the keeper, to whom we have been obliged for many a good run during the last season, and many last seasons. I have had much to say about the farmer and the farmer's wife, and of the way in which hunting men should enter into their business and their pleasures, and show an interest in their everyday life, not treating them as mere "incidents," who unfortunately cannot be left out of consideration. And I have incidentally shown how, if a man would have the best out of hunting, he should identify himself, as far as in him lies, and as opportunity permits, with the everyday life, business and social, of

the country in which he hunts. But our friend in velveteen has been hitherto neglected.

It is not, however, because he has been forgotten, and he shall have a chapter all to himself for he is an important person—a very important person—in the economy of a hunting country.

We hunting men owe the keeper a deep debt of gratitude, and the many little things he does—they may be apparently little in themselves, but they have far-reaching consequences—which contribute to the sport of fox-hunting, would fill pages.

It is, I know, amongst some hunting men, a habit to be constantly slanging keepers as a body. This is worse than unjust, if anything can be worse than injustice. It is foolish. I am not going to say that every keeper is a keen fox preserver. I am not going to say that no keeper was ever known to put a fox down. But I do say that as a body keepers, as I have known them, are friendly to hunting; and I have had instances of keepers being as keen about the sport, and as proud about the show of foxes they had, and of *their* foxes beating hounds after

a good run, as any huntsman about his hounds and their achievements.

The keeper who thoroughly knows and loves his business—the terms are by no means synonymous—for, as there are good hunt servants who are not good sportsmen,* so there are good keepers who are not good sportsmen—knows perfectly well that there can be a good show of foxes and a good show of game at the same time, and that hounds do little if indeed

* There are many men who perform the duties of their office skilfully and conscientiously and who simply look upon it as a means of livelihood. I have known hunt servants who, when they retired, scarcely ever had a look at hounds; and keepers who scarcely ever looked at a gun. One instance of the former was a huntsman who both in that capacity and as a first whipper-in distinguished himself in more countries than one. When he was hunting he was a famous man over a country, and he was a good man in the kennel. I saw him handle hounds well, and ride right up to them the last season he hunted. I believe he went out *once* afterwards. Yet he lived many years after his retirement. It would perhaps scarcely be fair to say of him that he was not a sportsman, for he became an enthusiastic fisherman, I believe. And his is not a solitary case.

any harm in coverts, if there are wild foxes in them. It is the half-tame foxes that have not been educated by the vixen that hang about the woods. The real wild ones are off like a shot after two or three days' cub-hunting.

Many years ago I was hunting with a famous midland pack. It was in the middle of a great shooting district, and we met at the house of one of the great shooting men in the county. There was abundance of game in evidence all over—pheasants popped up every now and then as one crossed the corner of a spinney, and if one went through a wood they rose in great numbers —one might almost say in flocks. But hounds were no sooner in the first wood than they found. They went away at once with their fox, and scent not being very good, they soon lost him. We went back to the same wood and soon had three foxes on foot. As I was riding through the wood I came across the head keeper, who was, to use a colloquialism, black in the face with running. He had just halloaed a fox over the ride, and another crossed it as I was talking to him. I remarked that he had a fine show of

foxes and also of pheasants. "Yes, sir," he answered, "and we shot 1500 pheasants out of this wood last week." Finally hounds went away with one of the foxes, and we had rather a nice hunt with him. For our afternoon fox we drew another covert on the same estate, and had a capital hour and twenty minutes. During the run hounds ran straight through a covert—still on the same estate, from which I saw four fresh foxes go away myself. Our fox beat us at the finish, and on my homeward ride, I overtook the keeper. "What did you do with that last fox?" he asked. I told him as well as I was able, and he replied, "Ah—my foxes take a lot of catching," with an emphasis on the pronoun.

Just let us consider for a moment what a hunt owes to such a man as this. He looks as carefully after the Hunt's foxes as he does after his own pheasants. Many a rabbit is dropped near the breed earth and is welcomed by the old vixen—and this, mind, is a very different matter to wiring the cubs in after the old vixen has met with an untimely death, and feeding them like prize pigs till the cubbing season—a course of

procedure I have met with in my time. But I wish to avoid controversial matters as much as possible, and to show what a good keeper can and does do for a hunt. He knows, for example, the balance of foxes in the district, perhaps in many districts. He can tell where a litter can be spared, and where a litter is wanted, perhaps better than any man in the country, and he is generally consulted in all cases of suggested removal, and not infrequently he makes suggestions respecting the placing of foxes which are invaluable, as he knows things "from the other side," from the standpoint of the non-hunting man, as few can. He is always in evidence when hounds meet on the estate in his charge, and if you see him in close conversation with the huntsman, and every now and again notice that he is pointing to distant coverts, you may be pretty sure hounds will not be such a very long time in finding.

Of course, there is the pinchbeck imitation, as there is a pinchbeck imitation of every good thing under the sun; but we are not discussing him, and there is no difficulty in spotting him

if one should unfortunately come across him.

A keeper should know all about the foxes on his beat; he should almost have a personal acquaintance with them; and there is no doubt that many of them have. But it is easy for even a good man to make a mistake, and the anecdote I am about to relate shows how even a good keeper—a man who knows " the way of the world in the woods " can make a mistake, especially when he is obsessed by a strong wish.

A keeper of my acquaintance, a good sportsman and a strict preserver of foxes, had long been disappointed because, for some reason or other, foxes would not breed on the estate which he had in charge. His coverts held foxes; after the cub-hunting season indeed they were rarely drawn blank. But for years, there never was a litter on the place. Why, it is impossible to say, for there were suitable earths, and the coverts were always kept quiet. But foxes are curious animals, and very little is really known of their ways. Perhaps, though this is only a surmise on my part, the keeper

offered special inducements in the way of leaving food about. I have often said, knowing what I did, that there were coverts on this estate which were ideal ones for foxes to select for the production and education of a young family; but then, though I have been a good deal amongst foxes all my life, I am not a fox, and therefore do not look at the subject from a fox's standpoint.

At last, after some years of disappointment, the keeper was jubilant. There was a breed in Ray Wood at last, and he told the huntsman about it with great satisfaction. That worthy was a man who never got excited. Quiet and self-contained, he rarely enthused, and when anything out of the common in connection with hunting was imparted to him, he contented himself with asking a few quiet questions which were not always so easy to answer. So he asked the keeper how many cubs he had seen, and one or two questions of the like nature, to which no satisfactory replies were forthcoming.

Then a fortnight or three weeks later, one market evening, the huntsman and the keeper

foregathered again. The huntsman asked the keeper if he were engaged for the following Tuesday morning, and on receiving a reply in the negative, he astonished that worthy by telling him to meet him at the earth at 8 a.m., as he was going to dig out his litter. The keeper was indignant, the huntsman was obdurate, and finally an arrangement was made to meet at the earth at the time mentioned.

On the Tuesday morning the huntsman was there with a man or two to dig, and a terrier. Again the keeper expostulated, pointing out quite justly that it was "hard lines" to have a litter removed when he had been wishing for one for so many years. The huntsman agreed, but said there was no help for it—"orders were orders"—and when he was asked where he was going to take the cubs to, replied that he hadn't got them yet. All through that hot June day they dug, and at 8 p.m. they got to the far end of the earth, and found—a big, old sow badger and two young ones.

Something the keeper had said in reply to the huntsman's questions had aroused his suspicions,

and he went a few times himself to the earth to make sure. A visit after a shower of rain showed him plenty of badger's prints, but no fox's, and then he saw what had taken place.

There are, I believe, cases on record in which foxes and badgers have occupied the same set of earths, living if not exactly on friendly terms, yet at any rate, tolerating each other. But for all that, I am inclined to think that the reason why our keeper friend had no litters of foxes was that badgers were so much in evidence.

It should be added that the badgers had a rare larder, the legs of game birds, a rabbit or two and part of a newly-dropped lamb, in a very decayed state.

Now I don't blame the keeper for making a mistake in a case of this kind, for there is not such a very great difference between the foot-print of a fox and a badger. There is a difference which is at once apparent to the expert, but the footprints of badgers are not very common, though there are more badgers in the country than is generally thought. And it must

also be remembered that the footprints of a badger are not often looked for.

June is perhaps *par excellence* the month when keepers are most to the fore in a Hunt. They are called into consultation about the moving of litters, as we have already seen. They are consulted about the situation of new coverts and new fox drains; and in most countries June is the month of the Keepers' dinner.

The latter is an important function indeed—one which takes rank with any social function immediately connected with the Hunt Polity.

From far and wide come the keepers in early morning, and each man is interviewed privately by the Master or the huntsman, or both. He brings in his report of the litters there are on the estate he looks after; tells the huntsman which litters the vixens have moved, and if possible, which it frequently is, where they have moved them to. This part of the business finished, he produces from his pocket a slip of paper on which is put down the number of finds which have taken place on his beats during the past season. This is compared with the hunts-

man's book, and it is highly creditable to both parties that rarely is there a discrepancy between the two accounts. Occasionally perhaps some such colloquy as this may occur. The huntsman will say: "There was that fox found in Shufflers' Bottom, who shall I put that down to—you or to Jim Jones?" And the keeper will reply: "Well, it was a near thing, but I think it was Jim's," and Jim may perhaps think it should be divided if he were asked the question. Generally, however, these little matters are amicably arranged amongst the keepers themselves, and there is nothing to do in the little private room but to compare accounts and settle.

The long morning's work entailed by reports and settling accounts is over at last, and then the company sit down to a solid old-fashioned English midday dinner. No fashionable modern hotel is ever patronised for the keepers' dinner, even supposing there should be one in the market town in which it is held. It is held at some quiet, old-fashioned inn, with oak-panelled walls, hung with old coloured prints of

coaching, hunting and racing scenes by Alken and Herring. Quaint pictures some of them, but full of life, all the same, and serving to pass a brief interval before the more serious business of the day claims attention. Mr Powell on Red Deer clearing an almost impossible ravine into which his green jacketed adversary has incontinently jumped, is always subject of much discussion, and Captain Becher on Vivian, swimming what is apparently a navigable river, brings a lot of comparisons with the steeplechase courses of these degenerate days, in which the latter come off second best. A favourite is Dan Seffert on Grimaldi, jumping a broken gate, and an opponent who is flattened out on the "hard high road."

But perhaps the picture which pleases best of all is Jim Mason on Lottery winning at Liverpool. For Lottery may be termed the Eclipse of steeplechasing. Everyone has heard of him, and of his mighty performances. And there he is, jumping an entirely unjumpable wall, only less formidable than that which faced the Knight of Altenahr, when he "emptied a cup of the red

Ahr wine," and "spurred the old horse and held him tight" before taking that last fatal plunge into the unknown. There is wagging of heads as one says to another: "Lottery, aye, he jumped sommat like; no chancing it with him; he were a horse now"—and though they may differ about what is likely to win the Royal Hunt Cup or the Northumberland Plate—for your keeper puts his half-crown on, on occasion, in spite of a paternal, or shall I say grandmotherly government, all are agreed that there never was a chaser like Lottery, or a jockey like Jim Mason.

Then dinner is announced, and the company loses all interest in Lottery and Red Deer and the rest, and crowds into the dining-room. The Master, if present, will take the chair. If he is not present the duty devolves upon the huntsman. A few farmers will probably have been asked and one or two active members of the Hunt may also be present, and one of these will occupy the vice-chair.

There is no carving at the sideboard on these occasions:

> "The strong table groans
> Beneath the smoking sirloin, stretch'd immense
> From side to side, in which with desperate knife,
> They deep incision make, and talk the while
> Of England's glory, ne'er to be defaced
> While hence they borrow vigour; or amain
> Into the pasty plunged, at intervals,
> If stomach keen can intervals allow,
> Relating all the glories of the Chase."

It is a solid meal; kickshaws are not for such as our guests, and though it is mid-June, many of them would not consider the repast perfect were there not plenty of plum puddings! But the keenest appetite is appeased at last, and plates and dishes give way to glasses replenished with good liquor, to pipes and tobacco and to cigars.

Then the Master proposes the usual loyal toasts, and having drunk the King's health as the best of sportsmen, the company settles down for an afternoon's enjoyment. After a little time has been spent and the glasses have been filled again, the Master proposes the health of the keepers. He tells them he enjoys their sport as well as his own, and proceeds to enlarge on the many good services which the Hunt receives from them, and he couples the toast

with the name of Mr Robert Hardness, the oldest keeper present. But before that worthy gentleman rises to respond, the Chairman calls upon one of the company by name to sing a song. This, with some diffidence, the gentleman named proceeds to do. Ah, those old songs, how I wish I had kept some record of them. This was a fine old ditty about a servant maid who left her place, and who was waylaid by a robber, whom she killed by toppling her box—which she carried on her head, by the way—on to his. Then the song goes on to say:—

> " She put her box upon her head and carried it along
> And the next that she met was a noble gentleman
> Said he: 'My pretty, fair maid, where are you going so late,
> And what was the noise I heard at yonder gate?' "

The young lady told her adventures, and the *dénouement* was dramatic—not to say melodramatic.

> " She took him by the hand and she led him to the place
> Where this young and able fellow lay bleeding on his face.
> They looked into his pockets for to see what he had got
> And there they found three pistols, some powder and some shot,
> They found three pistols, some powder and some ball,
> And a little silver whistle more robbers for to call.

> He put the whistle to his mouth and blew loud and
> shrill,
> And four more robbers came tripping o'er the hill.
> This nobleman, he shot one, and that right speedilee
> And the beautiful damsel, she shot the other three."

Such a heroic young woman must be rewarded, and so we learned that the nobleman married her

> "For the taking of her own part and firing off the
> gun."

It takes a good ten or twelve minutes to get through this song, which is sung in a sort of drawling recitative, and then Mr Hardness gets up to respond. He tells us how many years he has attended the Keepers' dinner with never a break—a point which he emphasises and which brings a round of applause—and how long he has been head-keeper; and that he never has shot a fox and that he never will shoot a fox. Of course, a servant has to obey orders, but he is thankful to say he has always lived under a gentleman—given with great emphasis—and again there is a hearty round of applause. He hopes he shall be there many years to respond to the toast, and to tell them there is a lot of good foxes in his coverts. And he hopes his friend the huntsman won't be too hard on 'em

early in the season for he would like 'em to last out. Then he resumes his seat amidst a lot of knocking on the table, which the waiters promptly take advantage of to refill the glasses.

Toasts come thick and fast now. "Success to Agriculture"; "Success to the Hunt"; "The Master's Health"; the "Hunt Servants" follow in rapid succession, and the company by this time having got well into their stride, personal toasts are proposed, the proposer always beginning his few remarks with, "There's a toast I should like to propose, sir, with your permission."

And though there may be no very eloquent speeches made, there is a lot of sound sense talked, and the public opinion of one portion of the Hunt, and that no inconsiderable one, is made pretty clear.

And between the toasts there are always songs, the last singer generally having the privilege of the call. And the songs are, of course, old favourites. "Lord Bateman" with its thirty—or forty, is it?—verses, is sure to be in evidence, and it should be added that most of the songs are long ones, and have a story. I regret I remember so few of them, but there is

one of which I can recall a couple of verses, and which made a great impression on me. I only heard it twice, and though I heard it in the north, I have an idea that it is a west country song.

It relates the history of a poaching expedition, and the first verses run something in this way:

> "You gentlemen both great and small,
> Gamekeepers, poachers, sportsmen all,
> Listen awhile to my simple song,
> I'll sing you the death of poor Bill Brown,
> I'll sing you the death of poor Bill Brown,
> Fol de rol, etc.
>
> One moonlight night as you shall hear
> It was the season of the year
> We went to the woods to get a fat buck
> But oh, that night we had bad luck,
> For Bill Brown was shot and his dog was stuck.
> Fol de rol, etc."

The first four lines in each verse were sung in very slow time—at a funeral pace—the last line and chorus at a gallop, and the effect was curious.

But the sun is throwing long shadows on the oak-panelled walls. Those who have to return home by train are beginning to look at their watches, and those who are driving to order their horses. Every festivity must have an end

—even a Keepers' dinner. So "Auld Lang Syne" is sung in divers keys and tunes, and the company separates—each going home with the feeling that he has done something for the cause of fox-hunting; that he is one of the many links which go to the making up of a somewhat mighty chain.

And so the Hunting Year comes to an end. Month after month brings its allotted task to the hunt servants—month after month brings a fresh interest to the true sportsman. And as we get older there are memories of the past, as well as hopes for the future, to occupy our minds. And these memories of the past have their influence on the future, and that influence not a small one. The glorious traditions which have been handed down from our hunting ancestors are the foundations on which fox-hunting rests, and so long as these traditions of mutual forbearance and courtesy and good fellowship are acted up to, so long shall fox-hunting remain the great winter sport of a great people.

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