

THE CHACE

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The Chace by Nimrod

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NIMROD

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"Listening how the bounds and horn
Cheerly rouse the slumbering morn,
From the side of some beare hill
Theo' the high wood echoing shrill." — MURTON.

IN various old writers, — "The Mayster of the Game," for instance — we find lively pictures of the ancient English chace, which in many respects, no doubt, was of a more noble and manly nature than that of the present day. The wolf, the bear, the boar, were among the favourite beasts of "venery;" and none can doubt that the habit of pursuing such animals, independently of giving vigour to the frame, and strength to the constitution, must have nourished that martial ardour and fearless intrepidity, which, when exerted in the field of battle, generally won the day for our gallant ancestors. The

hart, the stag, the hind, the roebuck, and the hare, are likewise constantly mentioned, as is also the wild or martin cat, now nearly extinct; but the fox does not appear to have been included in the list of the Anglo-Norman sportsman. The first public notice of this now much-esteemed animal occurs in the reign of Richard II., which unfortunate monarch gives permission, by charter, to the abbot of Peterborough to hunt the fox. In Twice's "Treatise on the Craft of Hunting," Reynard is thus classed:—

"And for to sette young hunterys in the way
 To venery, I cast me fyrst to go:
 Of which four bestes be, that is to say,
 The hare, the herte, the wulf, and the wild boor
 But there ben other bestes five of the chace;
 The buck the first, the seconde is the do;
 The fox the third, which hath ever hard grace
 The forthe the martyne, and the last the roe."

It is indeed, quite apparent that, until at most a hundred and fifty years ago, the fox was considered an inferior animal of the chace—the stag, buck, and even hare, ranking before him. Previously to this period, he was generally taken in nets or hays, set on the outside of his earth: when he *was* hunted, it was among rocks and crags, or woods inaccessible to horsemen; such a scene, in short, or very nearly so, as we have, drawn to the life, in Dandie Dinmont's primitive *chasse* in Guy Mannering. If the reader will turn to the author of Hudibras's essay, entitled "Of the Bumpkin, or Country Squire," he will find a great deal about the hare, but not one word of the fox. What a revolution had occurred before Squire Western sat for his picture! About half-way between

these pieces appeared Somerville's poem of "The Chace," in which fox-hunting is treated of with less of detail, and much less of enthusiasm, than either stag-hunting or *hare-hunting*!

It is difficult to determine when the first regularly appointed pack of fox-hounds appeared among us. Dan Chaucer gives us the thing in *embryo* :—

"Aha, the fox! and after him they ran;
And eke with staves many another man.
Ran Coll our dogge, and Talbot, and Gerlond,
And Malkin with her distaff in her hond
Ran cow and calf, and eke the veray hogges.
So fered were for herking of the dogges,
And shooting of the men and women eke,
They ronnen so, hem thought her hertes brake."

At the next stage, no doubt, neighbouring farmers kept one or two hounds each, and, on stated days, met for the purpose of destroying a fox that had been doing damage in their poultry-yards. By-and-by, a few couples of strong hounds seem to have been kept by small country esquires, or yeomen, who could afford the expense, and they joined packs. Such were called trencher hounds—implying that they ran loose about the house, and were not confined in kennel. Of their breed it would be difficult to speak at this distance of time; but it is conjectured that they resembled the large broken-haired harriers now to be met with in the mountainous parts of Wales, which, on good scenting days, are nearly a match for anything by their perseverance and nose. Slow and gradual must have been the transition to the present elaborate system; but let us wave the *minutiae* of sporting antiquarianism.*

* In a letter, dated February, 1833, from the late Lord Arundel to the author of these papers, is the following interesting passage to sportsmen :—

In no one instance has the modern varied from the ancient system of hunting more than in the hour of meeting in the morning. With our forefathers, when the roost cock sounded his clarion, they sounded their horn; throwing off the pack so soon as they could distinguish a stile from a gate, or, in other words, so soon as they could see to ride to the hounds. Then it was that the hare was hunted to her form by the trail, and the fox to his kennel by the drag. Slow as this system would now be deemed, it was a grand treat to the real sportsman. What, in the language of the chace, is called "the tender-nosed hound," had an opportunity of displaying himself to the inexpressible delight of his master; and to the field—that is, to the sportsmen who joined in the diversion—the pleasures of the day were enhanced by the moments of anticipation produced by the drag. As the scent grew warmer, the certainty of finding was confirmed; the music of the pack increased; and, the game being up, away went the hounds "in a crash." Both trail and drag are at present but little thought of; hounds merely draw over ground most likely to hold the game they are in quest of, and thus, in a great measure, rely upon chance for coming across it; for if a challenge be

* A pack of fox-hounds were kept by my ancestor, Lord Arundel, between the years 1690 and 1700; and I have memoranda to prove that they occasionally hunted from Wardover Castle, in Wiltshire, and at Brimmer, in Hants, now Sir Edward Halse's, but then the occasional residence of Lord Arundel. These hounds were kept by my family until about the year 1746, when the sixth Lord Arundel died, when they were kept by his nephew, the Earl of Castle-Haven, until the death of the last Earl of that name, about the year 1783. The pack were then sold to the celebrated Hugo Meynell, Esq., of Quorndon Hall, Leicestershire; and hence it is possible they may have, in part, contributed to the establishment of that gentleman's fox-hunting fame."

heard, it can only be inferred that a fox has been on foot in the night—the scent being seldom sufficient to enable the hound to carry it up to his kennel. Advantages, however, as far as sport is concerned, attend the present hour of meeting in the field. Independently of the misery of riding many miles in the dark, which sportsmen of the early part of the last century were obliged to do, the game, when it is now aroused, is in a better state to encounter the great speed of modern hounds, having had time to digest the food which it has partaken of in the night, previously to its being stirred. But it is only since the great increase of hares and foxes that the aid of the trail and drag could be dispensed with, without the frequent recurrence of blank days, which now seldom happen.

Compared with the luxurious ease with which the modern sportsman is conveyed to the field—either lolling in his chaise-and-four, or galloping along at the rate of twenty miles an hour on a hundred-guinea hack—the situation of his predecessor was all but distressing. In proportion to the distance he had to ride by starlight were his hours of rest broken in upon; and, exclusive of the time which that operation might consume, another serious one was to be provided for—this was, the filling his hair with powder and pomatum until it could hold no more, and forming it into a well-turned knot, or club, as it was called, by his valet, which cost commonly a good hour's work. The protecting mud-boot, the cantering hack, the second horse in the field, were luxuries unknown to him; and his

well-soiled buckskins, and brown-topped boots, would have cut an indifferent figure in the presence of a modern connoisseur by a Leicestershire cover-side. Notwithstanding all this, however, we are inclined strongly to suspect that, out of a given number of gentlemen taking the field with hounds, the proportion of really scientific sportsmen may have been in favour of the olden times.

In the horse called *the hunter*, a still greater change has taken place. The half-bred horse of the early part of the last century was, when highly broken to his work, a delightful animal to ride; in many respects more accomplished, as a hunter, than the generality of those of the present day. When in his best form, he was a truly-shaped and powerful animal, possessing prodigious strength, with a fine commanding frame, considerable length of neck, a slight curve in his crest, which was always high and firm, and the head beautifully put on. Possessing these advantages, in addition to the very great pains taken with his mouth in the biting, and an excellent education in the school or at the bar, he was what is termed a complete snaffle-bridle horse, and a standing as well as a flying leaper. Held well in hand—his rider standing up in the stirrups, holding him fast by the head, making the best of, and being able, from the comparatively slow rate at which hounds then travelled, to pick or choose his ground—such a horse would continue a chace of some hours' duration at the pace he was called upon to go, taking his fences well and safely to the last; and he would frequently command the then large sum

of one hundred guineas. But all these accomplishments would never have enabled a horse of this description to carry the modern sportsman, who rides well up to hounds, on a good scenting day, over one of our best hunting countries. His strength would be exhausted before he had gone ten minutes, by the increased pace at which he would now be called upon to travel, but to which his breeding would be quite unequal; and his true symmetry, his perfect fencing, his fine mouth, and all his other *points*, would prove of very little avail. If ridden close to the hounds, he would be powerless and dangerous before he had gone across half a dozen Leicestershire enclosures.

The increased pace of hounds, and that of the horses that follow them, have an intimate connection with each other, if not with the march of intellect. Were not the hounds of our day to go so fast as they do, they would not be able to keep clear of the crowd of riders who are now mounted on horses nearly equal to the racing pace. On the other hand, as the speed of hounds has so much increased, unless their followers ride speedy, and, for the most part, thorough-bred horses, they cannot see out a run of any continuance if the scent lies well. True it is that, at the present time, every Leicestershire hunter is not thorough-bred; but what is termed the cock-tail, or half-bred horse of this day, is a very different animal from that of a hundred years back. In those days, a cross between the thorough-bred, or perhaps *not quite thorough-bred*, horse, and the common draught-mare, was considered good enough to produce hunters equal