


ALL ROUND SPORT.

THE BIG FOX OF BALDERSWOOD ;

OR,

A CURE FOR HUNTING BAGGED-FOXES.

“OU ask me what that there is with the little bit of silver at the end of it,” said old Tom Gorseknot, of the Middlevale. “Well, as Master says when he calls here sometimes and has a pipe over a talk about the ’ounds, ‘thereby ’angs a tail.’”

“Yes, but it doesn’t seem like the tag of a fox.”

“Well, no ; and yet it is, somehow. But, if you’re not in a hurry, I’ll tell you this story—it’s a rum one, as you’ll say when you hear it. If you have time to listen now I’m ready, for I’m waitin’ till young Tom comes home.”

“Nothing would delight me more, I am sure,” was the reply, “for if there’s one thing I like more than another it is a story from a huntsman’s own lips, as it is free from exaggeration and affectation, and there is a humour about it which savours of the hunting-field, while the subject is handled like a fox.”

“Well ! well ! just draw in your chair and have a pipe and some of our home-brewed, and I’ll tell you all about the big fox of Balderswood.”

With a mug of home-brewed such as would make a Burtonian blush, and a nice-drawing “churchwarden,” I soon felt at home while old Tom commenced to “break covert,” as he called it. This he did in his own way.

“You’ll maybe not think it, sir—but its forty-five year, this ’ere month of October, since I drove a young shorthorn bull up to old Squire Sykes’, who hunted the Brumvale. A good old-fashioned old sort was the Squire, though he was a better judge of cattle than of hounds. It was a well-bred bull from Ware—where my father was a herdsman, and I’m thankful for it, for if it hadn’t been for that bull I might ha’ been all my life

on foot and never known what it was to be on a horse's back except when coming from the plough. However, that's neither here nor there. 'Can you ride?' says the Squire. 'No, but I'll try,' says I. 'Can you holler?' sez he. 'Can't I!' says I, and I gave him a view-holler as made the very woods ring. 'Can you brush yer own boots?' sez he. 'I never had none,' sez I, 'but I've brushed father's old ones as I've on,' sez I. 'Ye're a comical lad,' sez he, 'and I want a Whip, so you can have the job if ye mind, only you must not be afraid of yer neck,' sez he. Well, to make a long short of it, I was made Whip, and was with him for three years, when he guv up the country. I had some shifting luck for a time, and was in Wales, Leicestershire, and to Ireland and back twice; and then one day I was hangin' about Tattersall's—I sees a young fellow I used to know when with Squire Sykes.

“‘Where are you now, Gorseknot?’ sez he, ‘I’ve lost sight of you.’

“‘I’ll soon be losing sight of myself,’ sez I, ‘so you need not be surprised.’

“‘What d’ye mean?’ sez he.

“‘Well, I’ve been out of a job for a full season, and if I have another I may sell my clothes, for they won’t fit me: idleness don’t reduce the appetite, but its mighty sore on the victuals.’

“‘Well,’ he says, ‘I’m glad I met you, for I’ve a letter from an old friend, in the north country, who wants a huntsman, and you are just the very man. It’s not a nice country and the subscribers are a rum lot, but I daresay you’ll do with them.’

“So, while I was almost jumping out of boots with joy, he went into the office and gave me a letter to Sir Percy Fitz-Cogget in Berkeley Square, and off I went to see about the job. Well, you knew Sir Percy—Heaven rest his soul!—but he was as straight-necked a one as ever ran. Well, of course he cross-questioned me a little, and walked up and down the room swearing awful for he had been at sea, and everything swears at sea, even to a parrot. He called the Rabbledale men the biggest set of cranes ever you heard:—‘All weavers, Gorseknot, mind, or tailors, or grocers—mind, I warn you, you never saw such a counter-mounted set of cowards in your life. But you’ll just have to get used to them.’—Well, sir, I takes the crib and off I sets; I wasn’t married then, and my luggage didn’t need no special van

as our Tom and some o' the young ones would want nowadays for their neckties alone. Well, you never see such a place as Rabblesdale. The kennels were awful-like places, and the old sailor had got them all arranged into quarter-decks and 'tween, decks and poops and forecastles and the like. And the hounds—oh, my lor! I only saw sich once afore, and that was when I had deliriums from a heavy fall in Ireland, and had dog dreams as had no actual existence, only I recollects huntin' 'em all as if they was real. Well, the kennel-man was a caution. He was an old ship's cook as had been with Sir Percy, and had about the rummest ideas on management ever you see. However, I soon cleared him out, and, having got hold of Jim Waghorn from Culver Vale, I had things pretty tidy by the commencement of the regular season. One of the great difficulties was Sir Percy's lingo, and I couldn't make it out. For instance, he yelled at Jim to go the starboard side of a hedge once, and Jim going away down the left side had him a-sweering before the whole field.

“‘ You infernal lubber!’ says he, ‘where did you learn your business that ye don't know the starboard side of a hedge?’”

“Well, I think that it was this kind of ridiculous state of things as made the Rabbledale men take liberties. Had he spoken less he would have been paid more attention to, but he was always at it. So they put it down to what they called his eccentricities, and paid no heed—all of which was a bit rough on me.

“Well, of course, as you say, few huntsmen would have stood that sort of thing; but, if you've known what it is to be dead-thrown, you can put up with a lot before losing a job. It's all very well readin' Lord Hardhead has thrown up the Suffolk and all that, but he's provided for. What one man may do for a huff, another man twice as disappointed could not do for a heavenful o' pleasure. However, it did come about, you see. Well, I know I'm not much of a story-teller. Lor' knows how men write descriptions o' runs with hounds nowadays in the papers, but they do it wonderful considerin' as I never see them except at the covert-side of a mornin', so I must have my own way. Well, these Rabbledale men had the most conceited way o' interferin' ever you saw, and there was no governin' o' them. One day I recollects Sir Percy gallopin' up, and, says he:

'You—ah, well, I won't say what!—son of a gun!' he said, 'don't you see you're ridin' over sown grass?' says he. 'Sown grass!' says he again, 'sown grass! you infernal idiot!'

"'Hand-sewn or machine-stitched?'" says the man. 'I don't care a sixpence! You ride up the seams'—he was ridin' the furrows—'and you don't do much damage nohow.'

"Well, this was rough; but, worst of all, we were coming home from a blank day, and we comes across six o' them jumpin' in and out of fields, and smashing fences, and they had just got about one whole hurdle left over a sheepfold, where the sheep was eatin' off turnips. Well, up went Sir Percy, and how he did go for them! 'You —— tailors!' says he, 'is this the way you smash a good man's fences, you Jumping-Jack, sixpence-a-yard ribbon-measurers! what do you mean? Get out of this—the lot of you, or I'll take my whip across you!'

"'Well,' says the fellow, 'I've paid my two guineas, that's forty-two shillings,' says he, 'and it was to be sixpence a jump, run or no run, and I'm hanged if I don't have my eighty-four, so here goes!' and off went the top bar of another hurdle. Well, the old man wanted me off to fight the lot, and I had half a mind to, but it was better not. However, things did come to a point, as I've got for to show you. These fellows were some of them wonderfully clever, and could give you fifteen hundred reasons for losing foxes, but never a reason for not finding one. Well, one day, one of these nice Spring days, the ground all a-steaming in places, we gets well away with a grand old dog-fox. I viewed him away myself, and knew him, and I daresay he knew me—at least by my voice. Well, we goes straight slap over everything for four miles, and then, all at once, after hounds going breast-high, they throws up their noses. Well, I was just a-thinkin' what to do, when a fellow—I believe he was what they calls a drysalter, that's something in the chemists' and druggists' way—he came up, and says he:

"'You've under-ridden the scent, Gorseknot.'

"'I've what?'" says I.

"'Under-ridden the scent,' says he.

"'You meant *overran* it,' says I.

"'Not at all,' says he, 'scent rises from the ground—sometimes it is an inch from it, sometimes a foot, sometimes a yard, as

when they're running breast-high, sometimes a couple o' yards.'

" 'Then how high may it be now?' says I, 'for there's not a moment to lose.'

" 'It's just the height of my nose,' says he, with a sniff like an old hound.

" Well, I did not know what to do, as I saw no way o' gettin' up to it, when up comes Sir Percy, and he starts to him the same way. Well, if ever you hear the language that he let out—well, all I say is, have your ears stuffed with cotton. 'So *you* are here!' he says, 'and you haven't brought your old balloon to go huntin' ten feet from the ground. You old salt-fish, dried up, chemical old humbug! don't you know that the hounds have been waitin' to hunt the heel scent ever since they started, all on account o' your carbonified old carcass? Get out o' this, or, by the piper who played afore Moses, I'll break you up, I will, as their lawful property!'

" Well, old Dickson, the drysalter, was a very influential party with the Hunt people, and the result was a meeting, and the result o' that meetin' was that the country people backed Sir Percy up in refusing to hunt the hounds, which I, however, agreed to do for them, so long as they backed me, for I had a wholesome dread of getting out of a job. Well, the country people went away over to a neighbouring county where they told all sorts of stories about us; and no wonder!—and, indeed, to tell you the truth, we were a regular laughing-stock pack. They were all in league together, and such men as to give advice you never heard, and all just like old Dickson, the drysalter, great on scent. You would actually have thought, you would, that a fox carried a smelling-bottle and dabbed a lot of it down every here and there for the hounds to pick up. Then, of course, the foxes gets scarce, for the gamekeepers were against us, and the farmers not with us, and things got worse and worse every day, me sticking to my post for sake of my bread and butter. At last, one old fellow, on his deathbed, he leaves a legacy of five hundred pounds to the Covert Fund. Well, that would have improved matters, you think; but it didn't. No sooner was that announced in the newspapers, than claims for damages came in from the farmers on all hands. You'd barely believe it, sir, but, though we had been unable to find a fox for a week, accounts came in for fifty pounds for lost chickens, ducks,

geese—ay, and no end o' number o' lambs. 'It must have been dogs,' I said to one fellow who claimed for a score o' lambs, and, the cunning fellow, d'ye know what he wrote back? He wrote back, he did, that it was possible I was right, as he hadn't got a good view of 'em in the dark, and he would shoot some just to see. Then there was a Mrs. Grab, a widow, she had an account against me every week—always came, she did, regularly crying, but never brought one o' the dead fowls. The cruel monster had worried them all, she said, down to the old gander. And, curious, it was always a certain big fox of Balderswood, one of our last coverts in the old times, that was always blamed. Yet we could never find him, let alone run him, and I was getting chaffed no end about it—for the country papers had taken the yarn up, and every other day had remarks in about the poultry-depredations. At last, one day, the *Rabbedale Gazette* had in a long account of the capture of the Balderswood fox in a hen-roost, and that there was to be a famous run with him. Who put it in I had no knowledge of, and paid no attention to it. I was dead sick of the business. Well, we met next day, a Saturday, at Coffintree, and you never see such a turn-out—a full field of five hundred—everybody from the Mayor on his mare, to the butcher's boy on a moke; and—would you believe it too?—but, on wheels everyone of them and keeping at a respectable distance, were the country folks. Hang me! I might have guessed something from a look at their faces, but I didn't. 'Got a fox at last, Tom,' says one. 'You've the big one from Balderswood safe now,' says another—and sure there was a lump of a yokel in the middle of a field with a bag.

"Give us all a fair chance, Gorseknot," said some of the youngsters, as I kept the hounds back and told the man to drop him out. Well, and he did, and you never hear such a laugh from the country folks! It was nothing—but here our artist has drawn the picture.

"Picture of the thirsting division pressing forward. The county families in carriages laughing like to split; some of the young ones holloing, and a yokel standing with an empty sack over a big black Tom Cat, with its back up at the nearest hounds.

"I left that night and took the cat's tail as a memento," said Tom, laughing, as I rose to bid him good-bye.