

The Pictorial Museum

OF

SPORT & ADVENTURE.



FOXES AND FOX-HUNTING.

“THE fox is an animal so well known that it requires no lengthy description,” say the natural history books, thus conveniently clearing the ground of much troublesome discussion. It belongs to the dog family, but is distinguished from dogs, wolves, jackals, etc., by the lengthened and sharp-pointed muzzle and round head, the erect and triangular ears, the form of the pupil (elliptical, or almost linear by day, but round, or nearly so, in darkness), the long body, short, slender limbs, and elongated bushy tail (or “brush”), and the subcaudal glands

which secrete a peculiarly offensive smell. It neither barks nor howls, but has a short yelp. It is widely met with, and known as the *Renard* in France, *Volpe* in Italy, *Raposa* in Spain, *Raposa* in Portugal, *Fuchs* in Germany, *Vos* among the Dutch, *Raff* among the Swedes, *Res* by the Danes, *Tod* by the Scotch, *Llwynog*, female *Llwynoges*, by the Welsh, etc. It breeds once a year, having a litter of usually four, five, or six blind cubs in April, which attain full growth in a year and a-half, and are said to live thirteen or fourteen years. They dig burrows for themselves in the earth, or take possession of holes already existing; the litters are brought forth underground, whereas those of the wolf are not. They feed on small quadrupeds,

birds, eggs, etc.; some, however, also partly on fruits and other vegetable substances.

The common fox (*Vulpes vulgaris*), the "hairy animal," as its name implies, the only species out of the twenty-four which is a native of Britain, is reddish-brown above, white beneath; the outside of the ears black, a black line extending from the inner angle of the eye to the mouth; the legs mostly black, the end of the tail generally white. It is hardly correct perhaps to say this animal is so generally known as to require little description; it is *exclusively* known, the subject, *par excellence*, of British "sport," but for which it would have long ago been as extinct in Britain as its more ferocious congeners, and, being such object of sport, is an animal whose domestic economy and habits are not to be too closely inquired into by outsiders.

It is said that in the recent epidemic of Anglo-mania in France, messieurs, knowing that Englishmen are fond of *le dogue*, and also seeing mention of dogs in connection with the nearly extinct open hearth of old houses, have forgotten that these dogs were simply iron supports for blazing logs, and have ordered from their *ironmongers* certain "grype and grimlie beastes," which, representing to them the "guide, philosopher, and friend" of many an English full-blooded squire, keep statuary sphinx-like watch and ward on either side of their drawing-room door. Keen and adaptable as was M. Taine, even his criticisms on English manners and customs could not fail occasionally to cause unintended amusement. But one feels a great respect for the master-spirit which animated or rather nerved M. Esquiros to go through practical experience of English fox-hunting, a pursuit in which he recognises that every one has a chance of breaking his neck at any moment. From this satisfactory premiss M. Esquiros deduces the real characterisation of the English charge

at Balaclava: "A charge of fox-hunters, led by the famous fox-hunter, Lord Cardigan."

There is abundance of truth in this remark, although the English love of sport and riding finds other outlets, and there is some fear lest the hard-riding division may get too powerful for those who love the traditional element of pleasure induced by the patient persistency and prompt pursuit of good hounds.

Costly, exciting, bracing, national, the sport of fox-hunting has drawn over its coarser features a veil of tradition and poetry. What a landscape and what life to enjoy it, sweeps over the mind on merely reading a good hunting-song! Beauty, motion, health flood with every cadence, until the pale student feels as hearty as Squire Western, and amid all the stir and storm of the pursuit, grows quite proud of the gallant fox, whose motto is "Nil desperandum, and devil take the hindmost."

In spite of the disadvantage arising from modern changes in agriculture, the institution of fox-hunting shows no sign of decay, but rather of increase. In the United Kingdom there are at least a hundred and seventy packs of fox-hounds—a fact which, somewhat paradoxically, promises but little towards the extinction of this *fera natura*. It would be a congenial occupation for the fanciful statistician to estimate the cost and to present a clear idea of the extent of these establishments; but it is a most remarkable institution to be founded upon and supported by enthusiasm, and far more can be said in its favour than for the less truly called national sport of horse-racing.

The sport certainly requires and promotes daring courage and cool calculation in those who follow and appreciate it, while the peculiar combination of circumstances that make a good run happen sufficiently seldom as to enhance its delight. But when the first "burst" is over, and the exciting and exhilarating

dash and ardour meets with some check, then are brought out the qualities of all engaged. The fox himself probably tries some wily manœuvre, seemingly too coolly planned to be prompted by despair, the young hounds get impatient or fussy, while their more experienced comrades examine the ground with a mute deliberation, provoking also to inexperienced young bipeds, while the huntsman encourages his pack to renewed exertions. Should the scent have failed utterly, he gives the hounds a little time while he thinks of every possible circumstance that may give him a clue—the set of the wind, the position of the nearest shelter, the possible means whereby the fox has thrown them off the scent, and a hundred things besides. At last an idea will perhaps occur to him; he instantly blows his horn, calls or “lifts his hounds” from that place, and by gradually taking them round in widening circles, or even abruptly in a fresh direction, the whimper of some hound shows that scent is recovered, the others reply with a musical chorus, and the chase is renewed with additional excitement.

“See,” says Beckford, enthusiastically, “where the hounds bend towards yonder furze brake! I wish he may have stopped there. Mind that old hound! How he dashes o’er the furze! I think he winds him! Hark, they halloo! Ay, there he goes! It is nearly over with him! Had the hounds caught view he must have died! He will hardly reach the cover! See how they gain upon him at every stroke! It is an admirable race; yet the cover saves him. Now, be quiet, and he cannot escape us; we have the wind of the hounds, and cannot be better placed. How short he runs! He is now in the strongest part of the cover! What a crash! Every hound is in, and every hound is running for him! That was a quick turn! Again, another! He’s put to his last shifts! Now Mischief is at his heels, and death

is not far off! Ha! they stop all at once: all silent, and no earth is open! Listen! Now they are at him again! Did you hear that hound catch him?—they overran the scent, and the fox had lain down behind him. Now, Reynard, look to yourself! How quick they all give their tongues! The terriers, too, are now yelping at him. How close Vengeance pursues!—how terribly she presses!—it is just up with him! What a crash they make! the whole wood resounds! That turn was very short! There!—now!—ay, now they have him! Who-hoop!” All is over! The gallant fox, who has tried everything that craft could suggest or courage support him to attempt, is vanquished by numbers. What is he against so many? What is he *amongst* so many? Almost before the huntsman can secure his brush as a trophy, it is all that is left. Yet how wonderful that he, smaller than any of the hounds, should so long have held out against such an army, with their superior intelligence and endurance, which last faculty of the hounds may be considered proved when they have been known “to run hard for ten hours before they came up with and killed the fox, and the sportsmen were either thrown out, or changed horses three times.”

Many wonderful stories are told of “the wily one,” whose name has become a synonym for craft from the time of Samson or Herod “the fox,” and long before, and when they “spoiled the grapes,” as they still do in France and Italy, where in the course of a season two or three foxes will eat a few tons of fine wine grapes, southern foxes being less carnivorous than British. Even the tales of which the fox is the hero in legend and fable sound far less absurd or grotesque than those concerning other animals. It is well known that the fox is a very playful animal, but an amusing writer in “Science-Gossip” contributes more gossip than science when

he tells how the facetious animal robbed the bear of that which enriched not himself but left him poor indeed.

"Everybody knows how the bear lost his tail. North American Indians, Scandinavians, and Laplanders, tell the story much in the same way, though a different tail-piece is appended to it by the Lapps. According to their version, the bear once when taking his predatory rounds in the forest, met the fox with a fish, and asked where and how he had got it. 'I stuck my tail in a well down yonder where manfolk dwell, and let the fish hang upon it,' said the fox. 'Couldn't I get a fish to hang on my tail?' asked the bear. 'Thou couldst not endure what I endured,' answered the fox. 'Pooh,' growled the bear, 'couldn't I endure what thou hast endured, old fox fool?' 'Yes, yes, then, grandfather,' said the fox, 'so thou also mayest stick thy tail into the manfolk's well and try, I will show thee the way!' So the fox led the bear to a well, and said: 'See, grandfather, here is the well where I caught my fish.' So the bear stuck his tail down into the well. Meantime, the fox skulked about a little, while the bear's tail was in course of being frozen fast. Then, when the right moment had arrived, he shouted: 'Come hither, manfolk, with your bows and spears. There is a bear here, sitting and polluting your well!' So the people came running with their bows and spears; and when the bear saw them, he hobbled up with such haste that his tail broke short off; but the fox sprang into the forest, and crept under the root of a fir-tree.

"Some of the Swedish peasants have another version: The fox found a bumble-bees' nest, and would fain get the honey. So he stretched out his tail, and all the bees settled upon it; he then ran off with them, and afterwards turned back and ate the honey. Rambling a little farther, he met the bear: 'Thou art licking thy lips,' said the bear; 'I

know thou hast been eating honey.' 'Yes, that I have,' said the fox. 'Where didst thou get it?' said the bear. 'Well, I did so-and-so,' said the fox. 'Thou art alway ingenious,' said the bear; 'good would they be who would show me where I also might get myself a little honey.' 'Oh, that is easy enough,' answered the fox; 'if thou wilt only follow me; I happen to know of another bees' nest in the forest.'

"But the fox thought only of a roguish trick, as he never was anything else but a rogue. He therefore led the bear to a great log which lay cloven in the forest, with the wedge in. 'Stick thy tail in here now,' said the fox; 'it is full of bees, and here thou wilt find honey.' But when the bear had stuck his tail in, the fox was ready, and took out the wedge. 'Now thou hast them,' said the fox. 'Jerk now quick!' So the bear jerked with such force that the tail, being fixed fast in the log, was jerked off. And the bear has been tailless from that day.

"Another story in the same work also contrasts the simplicity of the bear with the arch cunning of the fox. A bear and a fox once joined in a rye-field, and after shearing the rye, took it home to thresh. Then said the fox, 'Thou art not good at striking so that the straw may lie still.' So the bear struck harder and harder, and the more he struck the more hopped the straw.

"When the threshing was over they had to winnow. Then said the fox, 'Whether wilt thou have the great heap or the lesser heap?' 'I will have the great heap,' answered the bear. Yes, the fox winnowed, and when all was ready the bear took the chaff. But the fox, poor fellow, he contented himself with taking the lesser heap."

It is very difficult successfully to entrap foxes; they can sometimes manage to set off the trap and then quietly enjoy the bait, first looking it all over and smelling it very carefully to find out if it is genuine. They are said to have

been seen drawing near waterfowl by swimming slowly with a turf in the mouth, so as to remain concealed. One has been known which, on seeing a group of hares in a field, gradually limped towards them, keeping his head down as if eating clover, till by a sudden rush he secured a more congenial meal. Foxes captured in hen-roosts have often been known to simulate death, and to submit to being dragged about and very roughly treated, till a chance of escape presented itself. If they are driven to their holes, when these are surrounded by traps they will not unfrequently rather starve for days and even weeks than risk the danger of a sortie.

But it is of course when hunted that the cunning of the fox chiefly manifests itself. A thousand artful wiles are tried to break the scent or divert the hounds on to a false track—perhaps returning upon its own steps, and then jumping on one side while the headlong hounds stream on, only to find themselves at fault just as Reynard has escaped; leaping into a stream and emerging on the opposite bank at a well-chosen spot; mingling with sheep, or trying to scent itself with any odorous substance it meets to make the hounds believe themselves mistaken. One untameable, who had been brought up by hand with some cubs, with whom it played rather short-temperedly, though with great vivacity, and who had been turned adrift like Ishmael, used to be hunted season after season. His particular cover for a long time could never be “drawn” with success, till one day he was routed out of an old tree and gave his pursuers a most tremendous run and escaped, but never did he trust again to that old tree.

Many a “tod” has been known to plunge into the whirl of a Highland stream, and as the miniature maelstrom swept him round to jump out on to a rock at the nick of time while the dogs are carried away and drowned; or has

led the dogs into a maze of boulders in the bed of chasms from which they can never extricate themselves and perish of starvation. An American fox—of course as “smart” as a mere Britisher—has been known to escape by getting upon the rail of a fence and running along it for some distance till the scent was lost. Another Yankee, on one occasion, ran along the newly-laid rail of a railroad elevated above a swamp. One would lead the hounds in full cry to the top of a rather steep hill, where the scent was invariably lost; he simply laid down and pressed himself close, while the impetus of his pursuers bore them over the hill to the farther descent, and while they were discovering they had lost the scent, he was leisurely returning home. One would swing himself over a chasm into a hole by snapping at a twig; hounds would do just the same—but *miss the twig*. But a curious story is told of a Britisher, which is vouched for by Mr. Gordon Stables. A fox in danger of being dislodged from a wood by the hounds made his escape to a piece of furze waste, where it had its hole and young ones. But two of the hounds, having caught scent of him, pursued him to his hiding-place. But *Vulpes* (not, in this case, surely, *vulgaris*) proved himself quite equal to the occasion. His hospitable heart (even in face of such imminent danger) opened to his intrusive guests; he made them welcome, showed them his cubs, and danced and gambolled about with the visitors, till they could no longer cherish the hostile feelings which had thrust them upon his domestic privacy, and the chivalrous hypocrites drew off and kept the matter a profound secret from their baffled companions.

But foxes sometimes hunt on their own account. A clever writer in “Bailey’s Magazine,” gives experiences of the Irish fox. “For some reason or other the rabbit tribe proved wild and wary this morning, so I wandered wearily on

without firing a cartridge, and found myself presently in a region of somewhat rough and coarse grass and weeds. Through the centre of this vast tract, many times larger than the famous Port Meadows at Oxford, flowed a dark, sullen stream, while the only divisions and boundaries were marked by great rhines, occasionally margined by a small bank. Coarse cattle were here feeding in different herds and in great numbers, and my attention was suddenly arrested by the movements of one of these herds who were slowly reconnoitring at a respectful distance what appeared to me a sheep-dog of one of the colley breeds, who was quartering the ground like a pointer, and evidently hunting something, judging by his pace and manœuvres. Now the young cattle stalk in, and what I imagined a dog, on finding himself pressed by the beasties, squats in an old drain, and more cattle seem pouring in and form all round, as if they had an evil design on the troubler of their morning meal. Whether he thought so or not I can't say, but very soon out of his lurking-place jumps a noble old dog-fox, and I now understood his morning manœuvres, as a hare, with a hind leg broken by gun or trap, came hopping up close to me. I ought to have shot it for sheer humanity's sake, but the terror of the law and its myrmidons was upon me, and I saw the poor tired beast stopping to watch and rest every sixty or seventy yards. The cattle saw it too, and whether they wished to befriend the wounded hare or not, they certainly drove off the fox, who could be seen slinking off discomfited and baulked of his prey. Now, 'tis said foxes hunt by

scent and not by sight. I think they do both, and my morning's experience confirms me in the idea, for if bold Reynard had viewed the hare he was winding all along he would have killed it in little or no time, but he followed puss's gyrations through the meadows, possibly since she had left her farm at daybreak.

"That foxes hunt like cats, feign sleep, and baffle the most careful precautions of less-gifted animals is a matter of commonest observation. But that they appreciate fish like cats may not be generally known; but a friend of mine told me that he had deported some foxes to an island about a mile from the shore, and that they were to be seen regularly each tide pulling up the flotsam and jetsam floated in by the waves, and that they did not seem to lose condition on the strange diet."

Is fox-hunting cruel? The arguments for and against this are many, but the discussion is generally of a *tu quoque* character. An enthusiast will argue: All animals must die at some time or other; every animal's death is more or less painful. Between birth and death many and grievous are the ills animals bear—from most of which foxes, so well able to hold their own, are exempt: the fox but for us would not exist at all; we give him a dozen or so years of luxurious existence, for which he provides for us an occasional hunt—besides, *he likes it*.

The last argument is unanswerable, and pet-keeping objectors may save their breath to prattle to their canaries and song-birds, and rejoice in the occasional song of the heaven-aspiring lark as he flutters in his six-inch cage.

