ENGLISH HUNTING IN THE MIDDLE AGES

T has become the fashion to speak of the hunters of olden times as unsportsmanlike, and slaughtering rather than hunting their game. One is told that they considered any means legitimate, the sole object being the death of the quarry and the filling of the larder from well-stocked forests, or to rid the country of destructive depredators in as easy and expeditious a manner as possible.

But a great distinction was made in very early days between real sport and mere pot-hunting. We find Arrian stating that "the true sportsman does not take out his dogs to destroy hares, but for the sake of the course, and of the contest between the dogs and the hare, and is glad if the hare escapes." And he also declares that those Gauls "who only course for the sport, and not live by what they catch, never use nets." After this we cannot claim, as some would have us do, that the true sentiment of sport is peculiar to a later age of more advanced civilisation. Although there are very few works dealing with sport only, dating from the Middle Ages, still from the romances of that period we can gather much concerning the ideas entertained in those days on the subject. Whether it be in the adventures of Tristan, who was welcomed at King Arthur's court as one of the "best knights and gentlest of the world and knight of the most worship, for of all manner of hunting thou bearest the prise, and of all measures of blowing thou art the beginner, and of all terms of hunting and hawking ye are the beginner," or of Launcelot hunting a boar, or of wandering nobles slaying fierce wild boars single-handed with their spears and swords, or riding out with their brachet and greyhounds to seek the lair of a big stag, we can but see that it is personal valour and real sport that was held up for admiration and not killing for killing's sake.

No one would, of course, contend that hunting in the olden days was the exact counterpart in every detail of what we enjoy in England to-day. The surroundings, the game, as well as many other circumstances, have created an unavoidable distinction. Hunting the fox and carted deer are modern kinds of sport resulting from the almost entire annihilation of big game and the rapid deforestation of the country that has been going on since the fifteenth century.

The change was gradual, although some like to give a fixed date for the introduction and abandonment of ancient as well as modern methods. Hore, for instance, in his "History of the Buck Hounds," says that a manifest change took place in hunting in the time of Edward III. "Before this time the sport was a mixture of coursing and stalking the fallow deer with bow and arrow. The change referred to altered that method to hunting the buck with hound and horn at force, that is to say, by rousing the quarry from his lair, laying on the hounds, and riding to them in pursuit, somewhat in the manner followed at the present time." He gives no data in support of this assertion, and we have been unable to find any direct or indirect trace of such a change in any of the records we have been able to consult. Although Edward III. had extremely large hunting establishments, the chase seems to have been pursued in exactly the same manner by himself and by his three successors as under his Norman predecessors.

The fact seems to be that hunting, shooting, coursing and driving for the sake of sport pure and simple seems to have existed at all these early periods side by side with the methods which were more Saxon or Teutonic than French or Norman, of hunting, coursing and shooting within an enclosed boundary for the sake of the larder.

Dire confusion has been occasioned by various writers who, after somewhat superficial researches, have not been able to sort the material they have found so as to recognise the difference that obtained in methods that were contemporary in the Middle Ages, nor to understand the pictorial material relating to sport that has come down to us from that epoch.

Thus to use pictures of an early German battue within an enclosure, or a Flemish representation of a boar hunt in the Ardennes in the fifteenth century as illustrations of our hunting in the Norman days is as misleading as to illustrate a chapter on modern fox-hunting with pictures of a Plumpton meeting or of a German court battue. The sport that was first and foremost in the heart of all men of gentle birth in the Middle Ages in France as well as in England was stag-hunting proper. The descendants of those Gauls already alluded to, i.e., the early French veneurs, discouraged the killing of any animal of venery unless it was done in a knightly manner, giving it a certain amount of fair play. It was a chase that demanded a considerable amount of knowledge of hounds and hunting lore, besides the personal qualities of endurance and courage. It was what we call hunting, and not driving, or coursing, or even shooting, and it was considered the most knightly form of sport by the Normans. That the life of the stag, wild boar or wolf was eventually ended by a shot from a bow or a thrust from a spear or sword was merely an incident of no greater importance than is the coup de grace that dispatches the stag standing at bay before the Devon and Somerset in the twentieth century.

It was the pleasure of tracking the beast to its haunts, of seeing hounds picking out the scent, of helping them with voice and horn, of encouraging them to follow staunchly the tracks of one and the same beast in spite of all its wiles and ruses, which was the chief enjoyment, not the slaying of the hunted animal, nor the riding. A man was on horseback when hunting in order to be near the hounds, to check them if they hunted the change, to "sore astry" them if they ran riot, and to be at the bay before antlers or tusks could work havoc among the pack, and he was not mounted for the mere pleasure of riding. In all Gaston de Foix's and Edward of York's writings we see that the hounds were the essence of the chase, and in not a single instance that we know of in the early French and English literature on hunting is the horse treated of. Every man of gentle birth was necessarily in those days a horseman, but this by no means qualified him as a huntsman, for venery was an art by itself which required a lifelong apprenticeship. It is very likely that could one of these old veneurs come to life he would be as much astonished if asked to negotiate a post-and-rails or a bullfinch as he would be at the unorthodox views regarding the raison d'etre of hunting entertained to-day by the large majority of riders to hounds.

Hunting with hounds was called hunting by strength of hounds, a very direct rendering of the French prendre à force de chiens, and was generally shortened in both languages to taking of hunting by strength, or hunting at force, in Germany called Par Force Jagd. Coursing with greyhounds was called prendre à force de levriers. This latter was resorted to when the deer had been hunted up in some enclosed, or partially enclosed, place, whether the boundaries were made of nets or hedges or stations of huntsmen and greyhounds. (See Appendix: Stable, Snares and Venery.) Greyhounds were also occasionally slipped when the quarry broke covert and went away over an open country to "burst" or "wind" the animal. The hounds or raches, as the Master of Game calls them, seem to have been of the heavy bloodhound type, endowed with more nose than pace, and, however invaluable they may have been for forest or woodland hunting, they probably stood a poor chance of overtaking a "light" or swift beast which had got a good start of them in a clear country.

Apart from what we may call stag-hunting proper, according to the laws of venery and wood-craft, pursued for sport pure and simple, a large amount of hunting, coursing and shooting had to be undertaken by the King's huntsmen for the sole object of stocking the royal larder with the requisite amount of venison. To procure this the chief huntsmen of the various royal packs visited the forests in turn, during "the season of fat venison," to take the heavy stags, and later in the autumn to kill bucks and hinds. The huntsman received his orders from the King, with a list of the places he was to visit and the head of game to be killed in each.