Lake

OLD SPORTS AND SPORTSMEN

Or, the Willey Country

WITH SKETCHES OF SQUIRE FORESTER

AND HIS WHIPPER-IN

TOM MOODY

("You all knew Tom Moody the Whipper-in well").

By JOHN RANDALL, F.G.S.

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LONDON:

VIRTUE & CO., 26, IVY LANE

SALOP: BUNNY AND EVANS; AND RANDALL, BOOKSELLER, MADELEY

1873

LONDON
PRINTED BY VIRTUE AND CO.,
CITY ROAD.

PREFACE.

It is too much to expect that these pages will altogether escape criticism; my object will have been gained, however, if I have succeeded in collecting and placing intelligibly before the reader such noticeable facts as are interesting matters of local history. Should it appear that there has been imported into the work too many details touching the earlier features of the country, the little that is generally known on the subject, the close connection of cause and effect, and the influences the old forests may have had in perpetuating a love of sport among some members of a family whose name appears to have been derived from pursuits connected therewith, must be my excuse. Dr. Arnold once remarked upon the close connection existing between nature and mankind, and how each in turn is affected by the other, whilst a living writer, and a deeper

thinker, has gone still further, in saying that "He is great who is what he is from nature." Of course it is not intended to claim greatness for Squire Forester in the sense in which the word is ordinarily used, or qualities, even, differing very much from those bearing the impress of the common mould of humanity; but simply that he was what he was from nature, from pre-disposition, and from living at the time he did. Also, that he was in many respects a fair representative of the squirearchy of the period, of a class of squires in whom we recognise features discoverable in those in the enjoyment of the same natural vigour in our own day, but who may have chosen different fields for its development.

It did not appear to come within the scope of the work to enter to the same extent upon the doings of other sportsmen of Squire Forester's time, or to dilate upon those of gentlemen who subsequently distinguished themselves. It would have required many additional pages, for instance, to have done justice to the exploits of the first Lord Forester; or to those of the present right honourable proprietor of Willey, who upon retiring from the mastership of the Belvoir hounds was presented with a massive piece of plate, representing an incident which hap-

pened in connection with the Hunt. Of both Nimrod has written in the highest terms. The names of several whose deeds the same felicitous writer has described in connection with Shropshire will occur to the reader, as Mr. Stubbs, of Beckbury; Mr. Childe, of Kinlet; Mr. Boycott, of Rudge —who succeeded Sir Bellingham Graham on his giving up the Shifnal country; Lord Wenlock; Squire Corbett, and the Squire of Halston; names which, as Colonel Apperley has very justly said, will never be forgotten by the sporting world. As the reader will perceive, I have simply acted upon the principle laid down in the "Natural History of Selborne" by the Rev. Gilbert White, who says, "If the stationary men would pay some attention to the district in which they reside, and would publish their thoughts respecting the objects that surround them, from such materials might be drawn the most complete county history." This advice influenced me in undertaking the "Severn Valley," and I have endeavoured to keep the same in view now, by utilising the materials, and by using the best means at command for bringing together facts such as may serve to illustrate them, and which may not be unlooked for in a work of the kind.

Since the old Forest Periods, and since old Squire Forester's day even, the manners and the customs of the nation have changed; but the old love of sport discoverable in our ancestors, and inherited more or less by them from theirs, remains as a link connecting past generations with the present.

It matters not, it appears to me, whether either the writer or the reader indulges himself in such sports or not, he may be equally willing to recall the "Olden Time," with its instances of rough and ready pluck and daring, and to listen to an old song, made by an aged pate,

"Of a fine old English gentleman who had a great estate."

Shropshire and the surrounding counties during the past century had, as we all know, many old English gentlemen with large estates, who kept up their brave old houses at pretty liberal rates; but few probably exercised the virtue of hospitality more, or came nearer to the true type of the country gentleman of the period than the hearty old Willey Squire. Differ as we may in our views of the chase, we must admit that such amusements served to relieve the monotony of country life, and to make time pass pleasantly, which but for horses and hounds, and the

opportunities they afforded of intercourse with neighbours, must have hung heavily on a country gentleman's hands a hundred years ago.

It is, moreover, it appears to me, to this love of sport, in one form or another, that we of this generation are indebted for those grand old woods which now delight the eye, and which it would have been a calamity to have lost. The green fertility of fields answering with laughing plenty to human industry is truly pleasing; but now that blue-bells, and violets, foxgloves and primroses are being driven from the hedgerows, and these themselves are fast disappearing before the advances of agricultural science, it is gratifying to think that there are wastes and wilds where weeds may still resort—where the perfumes of flowers, the songs of birds, and the music of the breeze may be enjoyed. That the love of nature which the out-door exercises of our ancestors did so much to foster and perpetuate still survives is evident. How often, for instance, among dwellers in towns does the weary spirit pant for the fields, that it may wing its flight with the lark through the gushing sunshine, and join in the melody that goes pealing through the fretted cathedral of the woods, whilst caged by the demands of the hour, or kept

prisoner by the shop, the counter, or the machine? Spring, with its regenerating influences, may wake the clods of the valley into life, may wreathe the black twigs with their garb of green and white, and give to the trees their livery; but men who should read the lessons they teach know nothing of the rejoicings that gladden the glades and make merry the woods. Nevertheless, proof positive that the love of nature—scourged, crushed, and overlaid, it may be, with anxious cares for existence—never dies out may be found in customs still lingering among us. In the blackest iron districts, where the surface is one great ink-blotch, where clouds of dust and columns of smoke obscure the day, where scoria heaps, smouldering fires, and never-ceasing flames give a scorched aspect to the scene, the quickening influences that renew creation are felt, teaching men —ignorant as Wordsworth's "Peter Bell"—to take part in the festival of the year. When the sap has risen in the tree when the south wind stirs the young leaves, and the mechanism of the woods is in motion, when the blackbird has taken his place in the bush, and the thrush has perched itself upon the spray, in the month of pelting showers and laughing sunshine, when the first note of the cuckoo is heard

from the ash in the hedge-row or the wild cherry in the woods, an old custom still proclaims a holiday in honour of his arrival. When the last lingering feature of winter has vanished; when brooks, no longer hoarse, sink their voices to a tinkling sweetness, flooding mead and dingle with their music; when the merry, merry month, although no longer celebrated for its floral shows and games as formerly, arrives, the May-bush may be seen over the door of the village smithy and on the heads of horses on the road.

It would have been of little use passing acts of Parliament, like the one which has just become law, for the preservation of members of the feathered tribes, if their native woods had not been preserved to us by sportsmen. To have lost our woods would have been to have lost the spring and summer residences of migratory birds: to have lost the laugh of the woodpecker, the songs of the blackbird and the thrush, the woodlark's thrilling melody, and the nightingale's inimitable notes, to say nothing of those faint soothing shadowings which steal upon one from these leafy labyrinths of nature. As some one taking deeper views has said:—

"There lie around
Thy daily walk great store of beauteous things,
Each in its separate place most fair, and all
Of many parts disposed most skilfully,
Making in combination wonderful
An individual of a higher kind;
And that again in order ranging well
With its own fellows, till thou rise at length
Up to the majesty of this grand world;—
Hard task, and seldom reached by mortal souls,
For frequent intermission and neglect
Of close communion with the humblest things;
But in rare moments, whether memory
Hold compact with invention, or the door
Of heaven hath been a little pushed aside,
Methinks I can remember, after hours
Of unpremeditated thought in woods."

ing of the estimation in which this bird was held by our ancestors, it being not uncommon to find persons holding tenements or paying fines in lieu of service to the lord of the fee by rendering a *sore* sparrow-hawk—a hawk in its first year's plumage. Stringent restrictions upon the liberty the old Roman masters of the country allowed with respect to wild fowl were imposed; the act of stealing a hawk, and that of taking her eggs, being punishable by imprisonment for a year and a day. The high-born, with birds bedecked with hoods of silk, collars of gold, and bells of even weight, but of different sound, appeared according to their rank—a ger-falcon for a king, a falcon gentle for a prince, a falcon of the rock for a duke, a janet for a knight, a merlin for a lady, and a lamere for a squire. From close-pent manor and high-walled castle, to outspread plain and expansive lake or river

bank, the gentry of the day sought perditch and plover, heron and wild fowl, many of which the fowling-piece has since driven from their haunts, and some—as the bustard and the bittern, the egret and the crane—into extinction.

Mention is often made of hawk aeries, as at Little Wenlock, and in connection with districts within the jurisdiction of Shropshire forests, which seem to have been jealously guarded. The use of the birds, too, appears to have been very much restricted down to the time that the forest-charter, enabling all freemen to ply their hawks, was wrung from King John, when a sport which before had been the pride of the rich became the privilege of the poor. It was at one time so far a national pastime that an old writer asserts that "every degree had its peculiar hawk, from the emperor down to the holy-water clerk."* The sport seems to have divided itself into field-hawking, pond-hawking, brook-and-river hawking; into hawking on horseback and hawking on foot. In foot hawking the sportsman carried a pole, with which to leap the brook, into which he sometimes fell, as Henry VIII. did upon his head in the mud, in which he would have been

* Appendix A.

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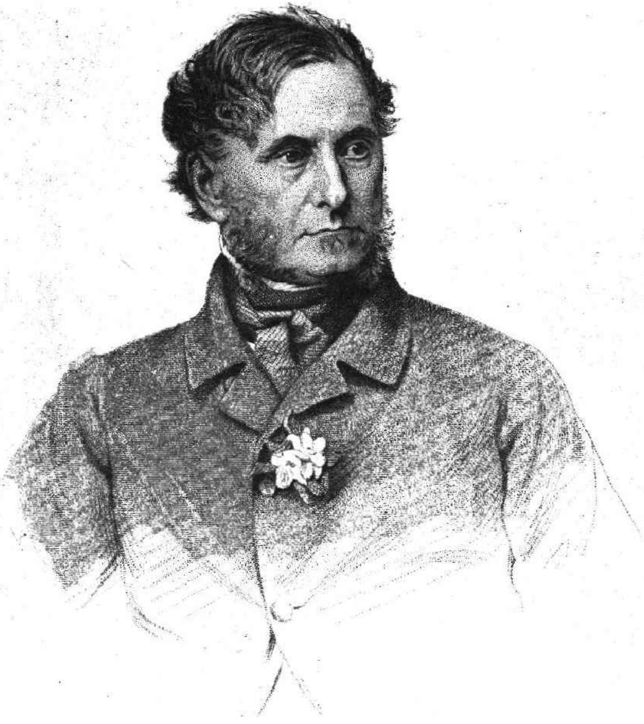

Engd by J. Brown

From a Woodburytype