

A DISGRACE TO HER FAMILY.

(Continued.)

Thornberry Vale, in fact, was the very cream of the whole country. Twenty minutes across its grand grass sufficed to send every man home happy, and from the snugly-lying covert many a good, stout-hearted fox had led the field a merry dance to the accompaniment of horn and tongue.

Before many minutes had elapsed, Maggie found cause to congratulate herself on having preferred the real business of the day to coffee-housing with her friends. Scarcely were hounds put into covert before a magnificent old dog fox broke at the lower end, pointing his grey mask straight for the brook and the vale beyond.

Immediately, and as with one accord, the hounds burst into rapturous melody, and flinging themselves after their quarry, took up the fresh, hot scent with murderous zest. Had it not been for the impetuous horsemen who, before they had fairly settled to the line, pressed them unwarrantably, Reynard would have had a narrow squeak for his life. As it was, the plough served him, causing hounds to scatter for a moment or two, and granted five precious minutes, of which he took speedy advantage. And for once the scent was so good that the misconduct of the hard-riding division, and so called kee-ers, sportsmen, did not mar the day's enjoyment.

The brook possessed a ford, and for this point everyone made. The jostling and jamming, squeezing and swearing was tremendous, and in the midst of it all some reprehensible individual let the gate on the far side close, and galloped off heedless of the execrations hurled upon him. He got his start, and if he had prevented others from getting theirs that was their look-out.

At this juncture the huntsman appeared, having splashed in hot haste through the slushy rides of the covert. His quick eye promptly took in the situation. He knew from bitter experience that scant courtesy was to be expected at the hands of a "Ripper" crowd in their crack country.

If he became engulfed in that heaving mass of humanity, many precious minutes would elapse before he should emerge. And meanwhile the white bodies of his smooth-coated darlings were flashing like comets over the straggly boundary fence that divided the arable land from the grass.

There was no time to lose. Other people may get along out hunting without quickness and decision, but a huntsman is bound to possess these valuable qualities in the highest degree. Fortunately, Will Reddall owned them, and, with scarcely a second's consideration, he took his gallant grey by the head, and drove him at the brook.

It was no great width, not much more than twelve or fourteen feet across, but anyone acquainted with the Shires will testify how their two and three hundred guinea hunters—perfect, may be, at every species of fence—dislike water. A mere gutter will often bring nearly half their number to grief. The grey, however, came from a country where brooks were plentiful, and he flew it in his stride, a couple of eager Nimrods immediately following his example.

Maggie had avoided the crowd after her usual fashion, especially as she had already discovered that Galopard was inclined to be somewhat too handy with his heels. She hesitated for just one moment, then, ashamed of her indecision, brief as it was, went at the water.

Galopard cocked his ears, tore the reins almost out of her hands, and changing his legs in the last stride, as if surprised to find that there was anything to jump, left the brook behind him with scarcely an effort.

"Oh! you beauty," murmured Maggie, her heart leaping with exultation as she leant forward and patted his firm smooth neck, for she, and about some dozen others, out of all the vast host assembled, had got a start, and having once gained an advantage, Maggie was not the girl to lose it. How the hounds were racing ahead!

They were now running brilliantly over the grass, with straight sterns and extended forms, mutely following a stinging scent, which never once occasioned them to put their noses to the ground. Silent and fleet they glided along, determined not to let their prey escape.

Oh! good grey fox, of the swift limbs and stout heart, exert thy best speed to-day, for it will be required to save thee from the blood-thirsty foes in thy rear.

The ploughed field beyond the brook proved a smothering one to horses, but such was the pace that their riders did not dare take a pull for fear of losing sight of the pack altogether.

Galopard tore through the heavy fallows, flinging the dirt around him as if he positively revelled in it. Maggie sat back in the saddle, with both hands well down. It was useless trying to check him, and to sit still appeared the only wise course. Hold him she could not. It did not take her long to discover that fact. In vain did she try to steady him at the fence, which they were now rapidly approaching. It was straggly, but just high enough to make a horse rise, and had a blind but deep ditch on the near side. Galopard quickened his stride, took the bit between his teeth, and rushed at it like a lion.

How ever he got over without a fall filled Maggie with thankful amazement, for he dropped both hind legs into the ditch, as he took off in the most peculiar and horrible fashion, crashed through the fence, which fortunately was weak, landed on his head, and then—thanks to his splendid shoulders, recovered himself almost instantaneously. The whole thing happened so quickly that they scarcely lost a couple of yards.

"Maggie, Maggie, do be careful," called out Captain Falconer, just in the rear, vainly trying to overtake her, but his horse did not possess Galopard's speed. "You had a tremendous shave there."

"A miss is as good as a mile," she laughed back in reply, hoping for the best. But one more fence destroyed illusion and rendered her danger

quite clear. This time the ditch was away, but Galopard landed with a necklace of thorns and binders encircling his slender throat. He had hardly risen a foot, having galloped straight through it. The determination of his rush alone saved a fall.

By no means a safe animal to cross the far-famed Thornberry Vale upon; but by this time Maggie's blood was fairly up, the hounds were running like a storm, a clear field ahead of their nearest pursuers, and, moreover, she could not have persuaded her steed to desist from taking any further part in the chase if she had tried. He was full of "go."

What a grand disposition this horse had, if only his performances had been equal to it. The will, the wind, the courage, all were there. He never dreamt of refusing, and galloped like a Derby winner, so smoothly, strongly and resolutely. But at each fence Maggie's heart was in her mouth. Twice Galopard bit the earth, and twice he recovered his legs without rolling, reseating his rider on each occasion by an upward toss of the head, which, catching her on the nose, brought smarting tears to both eyes. In short, their escapes were simply miraculous, but as the minutes passed away, she knew that sooner or later the end must come. It was simply a question of time. One piece of stiff timber, white and new, or a real thick binder, would inevitably turn them over. The only wonder was that they had been fortunate enough to encounter so many yielding substances during their career, and it seemed to Maggie that nothing but the most wonderful succession of luck had kept Galopard upright until now. He no longer pulled quite so hard, and by making a superhuman effort, it was just possible she might have stopped him. The tremendous pace of this glorious gallop had choked off all but the fastest and best bred horses, and the perspiration was pouring off them in rivulets. One after one soaked to the rear, and the numbers of those actually with hounds became exceedingly select. No doubt this fact helped Maggie to conquer her fears. The excitement was too great to allow of her dwelling upon them. That would come afterwards, when her blood had cooled, and reason once more reassumed its sway.

She was right up in front, one of only three or four, and she would have yielded her life as soon as her place. The enthusiasm of the Chase had rendered her mad for the time being.

Ha! the huntsman is down. There must be an extra big ditch on the far side of that black, dark hedge, for she saw the good horse he rides make a truly gallant spring, which ought to have cleared any ordinary gully.

She has sense enough still to choose the weakest place she can find. It is her only chance.

Swish, crash, crash, and they are through—not over—clearing a regular yawner beyond, and carrying away with them enough thorns to have planted a small covert. Galopard's neck resembles a pincushion, and his broad chest is bleeding from several places. Once more the impetu-ous, aided by Providence, has served the rash pair. But this cannot last forever. She feels Galopard's stride begin to shorten, she hears his heart beat under her, and see his silky mane hanging in moist wisps on his now out-stretched neck.

Thirty minutes at racing pace. Oh! what a glorious gallop, and, with the exception of one ploughed field at starting, all over grass. The whole season may not be productive of such another.

Suddenly, to Maggie's intense relief—for the strain upon her nerves increases momentarily—the hounds, who have been running hard and mute, burst into riotous music as they gallantly charge a hill, up which bold Reynard can be seen wearily crawling, his long brush almost touching the earth as it draggles behind him.

"Tally-ho! Tally-ho!" cry the leading men, in delight, and at the sound of their voices and those of the clamouring pack, tired horses take heart and put on a final spurt. Up, up they gallop, cheered by a full sight of the bristling hounds, and the tuneful melody of their clarion notes.

And at the top what greets their eyes?

A newly plashed hedge, at least five feet in height, with binders as thick as a man's arm running all across it. Alack! alack! Prudent horsemen upon panting steeds hesitate and draw rein. Must they, ah! must they harden their hearts, and with the almost absolute certainty of a fall, ride at this terribly stiff fence?

The answer is yes, for the fox takes a fresh lease of life, seeing a covert within a few hundred yards, and races ahead, with every canine foe booming murder behind him.

Shirking is out of the question at this supreme moment, when the intense excitement of the last half hour seems suddenly to reach a climax, which sweeps common-sense and discretion into the background. The old, dogged, Saxon spirit that knows not defeat, rises within the breasts of man and woman.

Will Reddall—who had quickly re-mounted—with his keen eyes fixed on the leading hounds, his honest face flushed with pride, pleasure and enthusiasm, is the first to show the way. His good hunter has been down once, he will not lightly commit a second error, even though his breath comes thick and short, and his lungs cannot inhale air fast enough. A still uphill fence at the end of a real quick run is a crucial test for any horse. The gallant animal seems to know this, for getting well on his haunches he collects himself steadily, and with a desperate effort just succeeds in twisting his hind heels over the topmost binder. He lands grunting and disappears from vision.

It is Maggie's turn next.

Before she rides at the fence, she knows that her time has come, but no thought of declining it on that account enters her head. On the contrary she clinches her teeth, settles her hat, and gives Galopard a vigorous pull of the bridle hand, to which he responds in his usual willing fashion.

Oh! how high the hedge looks. How black and strong, as she gets