Field Sports at Home and Abroad

LAVERACK'S HOME

A Ramble in North Shropshire

About a mile and a half from Whitchurch, on the road leading to Ash Magna and Ightfield, there is, on the right hand side, a house of interest to old-time lovers of the English setter, and no doubt of equal interest to the young generation of sportsmen who, after a day's shooting, admit that without the dogs the pleasures of the day could not have been so great, for this house was the home of a breeder who followed strictly his own ideas, who seemed to ignore and disbelieve all methods of breeding, scientific or otherwise, excepting his own, and who, after many years of patience and great love of gundogs, founded a strain which in make and shape, style and character, staunchness, nose, and color, not only satisfied his own ambition and represented the ideal he had for many years held in his mind, but created a lasting name in both England and America. The house referred to was the home of Laverack. The Grange, Lord Gerald Grosvenor's hunting box, is on the left, and a little further is the village. Adjoining the old smithy is Dan Cliff's cottage. Years ago, when not too busy at the anvil, it was Dan's custom to assist Laverack with the dogs. He was a great believer in the value of tan-pits as a cure for all skin diseases, and used to take the setters into Whitchurch for the purpose of giving them a dip. The virtues of tan-pits are known to others besides Dan, for I remember our old friend Fred Gresham when he lived at Shefford, in Bedfordshire, considered he owed much to "the pits," his famous kennel of St. Bernards being close to them, at the time when Monk, Shah Hector, and many other specimens of the breed, were making the Shefford kennels famous. Inside Dan's cottage there are several things kept in memory of Laverack. A chain is one; at the end of it there used to be a dog whistle. "My sister has the whistle," said Dan; "a gold one, sir, one that Mr. Laverack won with the dogs." But there is something else, something I remember seeing years ago, and what the setters no doubt had heard the crack of many a time. On my mentioning it, Dan immediately found it, and with stick in his right hand—emblem of rheumatism, and old age, and you cannot get rid of one more than you can of the other—he held in his left Laveracks' gun. "Pin-fire, sir, and the only one he ever used while I knew him."

As we were leaving Dan he had on the "tip of his tongue" a name he could not recall. "My mother," he said—and his mother is still alive—"would know who it is I'm thinking of, for the gentleman was a great friend of Mr. Laverack, and fond of the same kind of dogs." It required no thought to tell the name our quaint old friend was puzzled over, but, to squeeze it out of him, we asked if it began with the same letter as Mr. Laverack's—that is L. "Oh, yes," replied Dan; "I can get as far as that, but——" And there he stuck. Old-time breeders of setters, and the present for that matter, would finish the name as readily as we did. What pleased so much was that we should leave Dan with his stick and Laverack's gun just as he was making strenuous efforts to utter the name of a sportsman as much associated as his confrere Laverack with all and everything appertaining to gundogs—Mr. Purcell Llewellin.

A little further up the lane stands Ash Church. In the churchyard is a tall tombstone, a convincing testimony of the esteem in which Laverack was held by his fellow sportsmen, and their feeling of admiration of him as a breeder. On one side is the inscription: "To the memory of Edward Laverack born Keswick 1800 died at Broughall Cottage 1877 this monument is erected by admirers in England and America," and on the other: "His great love for the lower animals made him many friends. He was especially fond of dogs and by careful selection remodelled the English setter the best of which are known by his name. 'He prayeth well who loveth well both man and bird and beast.'"

Among the names of Shropshire sportsmen who have devoted much time and thought to the pointer and setter, none are more familiar, or stand higher in estimation, than Mr. Purcell Llewellin and Colonel Cotes. For a length of time their respective kennels have been famous for gundogs, and there is "nought amiss" with a dog bearing the well-known affix Llewellin or the prefix Pitchford. Each stands as guarantee of careful breeding, and of style and character and ability to work. From Laverack's day to the present time is not long in the history of the setter, yet long enough to permit the question as to whether a setter, say, from the Ightfield or Lyth Hill kennels is a dog of different variety. Evidently, in the opinion of some, it is, for quite recently a sportsman who had rented a moor in Scotland was seeking information as to where he could obtain a Laverack. To suggest an English setter was futile, he "must have a Laverack," believing one to be something quite apart from the other. Laverack established a kennel of setters bred according to his ideas of what an English setter should be, and stamped it, so to speak, with his own name. A breeder may set his mind on eradicating what he considers a fault, he may increase length of neck, convert coarseness into quality, he may have a predilection for straight legs and good feet, and give all his attention to them, or he may have a strong dislike to any color except one, and not be contented till he has every dog in his kennel marked alike; but however successful he is in getting what he wants he has not created a distinct breed of setter. He has improved a point or given a character which, running through the whole of his kennel, is, as it were, fixed, and becomes a family or kennel trait. Neglect of certain points causes deterioration, but excessive exaggeration causes more. Fortunately all our chief breeders of gundogs are not given to the committal of either fault, for the reason that, however inclined they may be to overlook one point and tempted to attach overmuch importance to another, there is in the pointer or setter, retriever or spaniel, one property so essential that without it bodily structure, style and character become of little or no account, and that property is, of course, a good nose.

The scenting power, the sense of smell, no breeder can create. He can build and model bone and flesh to his liking, but while he is doing it, what good result accrues if by lack of keenness of smell the dog is of no practical service? Scenting power is a subject second to no other to the breeder of gundogs, foxhounds, harriers, beagles, and bloodhounds, yet it is a subject of infinite complexity to all excepting those who are painfully apt to settle any question regarding it by the terms "good nose," "bad nose," "no nose." When you meet such a man there is no better way of bringing him to reason than to ask him to test his own nose. Granted that there is an amazing difference between the scenting power of our canine friends and our own, there is nevertheless a possibility of those who are so certain in their opinions modifying them when their own sense is tested. Pick up a fragrant flower, or rather pick up two, both of the same kind. Smell the first for ten or twenty seconds, then put it down and immediately pick up the other. Will you get the same fragrant odor from the second as you got from the first? You will not. Try again and reverse the order, that is, smell the second flower first and the first second. The result will be the same. Why is it so? Maybe you have so saturated your sense of smell that it has become incapable of sustaining the same odor any longer. But rest the sense for awhile, and it will revive and again drink up that which it had just before been unable to. This fact, and it is a fact, leads one to think that there may be in our dogs a similar failing, an inability to keep on smelling the same scent beyond a certain time, or, to put it another way, may there not be a weariness of the sense of smell in pointers and setters at times? If that surmise be correct, we must be more chary in damning their noses. The point is whether or no the scenting diminishes in strength after being much used on the same scent with no interval between the exercising of the power. Conversing on these matters on our return by the Shrewsbury road from Hawkstone, we arrive at the Raven Inn, which is two miles out of Whitchurch and faces the open heath, green with fern and purple with heather. About three hundred yards up the track facing the inn is what my friend is anxious to see, viz., the cock-pit. Turn a soup plate upside down and you have a correct formation of it. The middle is about 18ft. in diameter, separated from the outside circle by a ditch about 16ft. dep and 20in. broad, used by the "handlers" or "setters." How long since the last main was fought in it no one knows, but we could not resist remarking that it only required the removal of a little fern here and there and a few sprigs of heather to be at once ready for another. Those who enjoy seeing a link with the games and sports of our forefathers have, I have no doubt, to thank Mr. J. S. Walley that this relic of an ancient sport remains. No one knows the Heath better than he (for on it there are the training stables and the jumping course. At the time when Galloway and pony racing was at its best Mr. Walley was the happy possessor of that wonderful pony Underhill, and no doubt it was his success in this branch of sport that put him on the way to the higher and more pretentious form, and eventually caused the erection of the training stables on the Heath, and a patronage of a kind which immediately caused the forty boxes to be occupied. Owing to Mr. Walley's ill-health the chasers are sadly missed, whilst the stables are awaiting a new tenant. To pass by a steeple-chase course unused, and a big range of stabling standing empty in such an exceptionally sporting centre is not pleasant. Perhaps the Health will reclaim what it has lost, and some lover of chasing refill the stables. Across the Brown Moss and over the style near Broughall Cottage, and we were back to where we started.—J. A. Tatham in Field.

"DUCK HUNTIN' 'WAY BACK"

We are not the only people who drop their g's; anyway, the "hunters from Belville" did in the old days when they were the sporting subaltern's rivals and mentors in that best of soldiers' quarters—Kingston, Ontario. This was when we talked of Quebec, Montreal, Kingston and London, Canada West, as the real Canada, looking down on our less fortunate (so we thought) comrades who were quartered in Nova Scotia. What a subaltern's heaven it was! Unbounded hospitality was dealt out to us, while fishing and shooting for those who cared to work hard for it was to be had for nothing. The winter brought us skating, and that best and most exciting of all outdoor sports (flying had not then emerged from the Jules Verne stage), ice boating. But it is of the late autumn that I propose to write. Then it is that the flock-duck come in to their favorite sheets of water; then it is that the wooden decoys, painted with loving care and artistic accuracy during the summer, are launched; then it is that with an eye on the falling barometer we load up our canoes with those same ducks, reeds wherewith to construct a blindage, guns, cartridges, and a goodly store of tinned food.

I am writing for convenience in the present tense, but, alas! all this was in the far off past. Hay Bay, now I believe preserved by an American club, was easily reached by paddling across Lake Ontario, past Long Island, and up a length of canal, and it was there that on one side we found a friendly sheltering farmhouse, the "hunters from Belville" being camped on the opposite shore. Between them and ourselves lay a line of ducks of over a mile in length, and apparently about six deep. No one has dared to compute the numbers of this vast assembly, but when the wind came and scattered them, the sky seemed to darken and the air quivered with the pulsations of a myriad wings. The hunters from Belville shot, I believe, for the market, and shot very well, but they were men of strong opinions, and I am convinced that, had anyone fired a gun and disturbed that mighty concourse before the wind arose and scattered it, there would have been an immediate and thorough piece of lynching.

Behold us arrived at our destination. The owner of the farm is delighted to see us, for we bring him news from the "madding crowd," and he cheers us up when, in a talk about the weather, he taps a prehistoric wheel barometer and thinks "there'll be wind before nightfall." After a drink of his very best old rye whisky, we run down to our canoes hauled up in the creek, and, with the help of a ball of string, we fasten our store of reeds into a curtain which can be attached "all standing" to the canoes, thus making a perfect screen for the gunner which is quite indistinguishable from the rest of the lake border. A pleasant evening with the farmer and his family and a sound sleep on the floor, softened by ample folds of a buffalo robe, brings a tempestuous morning, and we are away after an early and very large breakfast to set out our decoy ducks, gladdened by the sight of the general break-up of the long line, and by the whiz of countless wings as the birds rise after the first shot fired by the hunters from Belville. Then, sitting comfortably behind our blinds, we watch the ducks circling, and soon a couple of "buffle-heads," the merriest and boldest of the flock ducks, swoop down to our decoys and swim among them, plainly astonished to find no response from their inanimate, glass-eyed presentments, bobbing stupidly up and down on the waves. Shooting them on the water is ill-advised; first, because these stout little birds are so well clothed that they take a lot of killing with their wings closed; second, for the good reason that filling our wooden ducks with shot does not add to their floating capabilities. We wait, therefore, till they have taken alarm from the silence of their supposed friends, and fire as they rise, leaving them if they fall dead to drift ashore in our little bay, for our decoys have been set out up wind. Then the fun which, if the wind holds, is to be continued all day, begins. Bluebills, red-heads (Pochards), and buffle-heads drop down towards the decoys, and we get grand driving shots as they fly past or head straight towards us. Towards sunset all the canoes fold up their blinds and come out for the pick up. A few cripples are finished off, and looking down into the clear, shallow water, which covers the wild rice growing at the bottom, we find not a few that, when wounded, have dived down, caught a stem of rice in their bills, and have so died, the serrations in their mandibles holding them there until a strike from the canoe paddle releases them. The pick up, and a supper in which some of the hard shot ones are a much appreciated feature, brings the day to a close. Then pipe, talk, and bed.

But, the reader will say, "this is not 'way back!" No, it is not, but it is an excellent preparation for it, for it teaches us how to set out our decoys, to make blindages, and to take advantage generally of surroundings, which knowledge will come in useful for a more extended expedition to some lakes "back of" the township of Peterborough. For all I know this may now be a well drained and settled district. When a brother subaltern and I went there forty-three years ago it was in its pristine and very attractive wildness. It was reached by way of the Rideau Canal, a tug boat taking our two selves, our canoes, and our decoy ducks a very long way for a very small sum. We came to forest primeval on either side, a few clearings, and mostly swamp, which forest fires had covered with tangles of tree trunks, crossed and re-crossed like giants' spillikins. No farmhouse this time, but a "tente d'abris," tinned food of sorts, some flour, and a "batterie de cuisine" of a very rudimentary and limited order. To our great annoyance we found that the tug had to bring down the last fleet of barges the following night, so we had only one clear day on the lake. This was because a cold snap was expected and they were afraid of being caught in the ice. We disembarked at the lock nearest our proposed camp, paddling up a creek to reach the lake, and got to our ground before sundown. Next day we started off before sunrise, and in the dim light of dawn we set out our decoys and blinded one canoe. Then we tossed up to settle who was to take first turn at sitting over the decoys while the other paddled round the lake to put up ducks. As usual, I lost, and started away as the first almost horizontal rays of the sun swept down the inky calm lake. There was what is called in Canada a "vert glace" (my spelling of this is phonetic and probably wrong, but it must go at that); rain had fallen in the night and had frozen as it fell, and every twig was coated with a thin layer of perfectly transparent ice, the weight of which bent the lower branches till their extremities touched the black water. Never was such a fairy scene! Prismatic, iridescent colors flashed from each jeweled twig as the sun's rays, piercing them at an ever changing angle, found fresh tubes to illumine. The reeds, too, contributed to the splendor, and the dark pine woods behind them served to lend brilliance to the display. Not a breath of wind was stirring, and when there was a sufficiency of sun power, the smooth surface of the lake duplicated the scintillating fires of its shores. I have seen many a "vert glace" since that, but never did I see one so exquisitely composed and framed. It was as though some deft-handed angel had plucked a rainbow from the sky and flung it, a filmy fold of lace work, over the marsh, and each point of sedge had caught its atom of the glistening fabric and held it aloft.

In the half light I pushed out and paddled slowly around the shore. When about halfway round I saw another canoe steal out, and with only a round black head visible, make for the opposite bay. It was evident that the short paddle was being used (this is a toy about 2ft. long, and used generally for the last fifty yards of a stalk; it is tied to the canoe by a short string, and can be dropped silently into the water, thus avoiding the noise of shipping it), and that the stealthy approach was being made with some important object in view. Then the fact dawned on me that the canoe was heading for our precious decoy ducks! Though nearly half a mile from me, I saw the black head rise, and the body of an Indian boy follow, it raising with it a gun of preposterous length. Almost instantaneously, boy, gun, and all, fell back in the canoe, and borne on the wind came shouts from my friend, who, by waving his arms and using language of inordinate strength and breadth, had saved himself from a devastating shower of "grape and canister," for the Indian brave is not particular about what he puts into his gun. Encouragement from both front and rear, for I had then paddled up, brought the young Objibbaway up to look at the great medicine of the wooden ducks, and with one long "wagh" of admiration he started with but little instruction from to work the shores and creeks, while we both sat in the blindage. A little wind came up and we had a most successful day; the thermometer fell to a degree or two below zero, and with the help of a friendly farmer and a cart we brought canoes and ducks, fleshy and wooden, back to the lock. The tug hailed the lock about 2 a.m. It was a very dark night, and we heard the ice creak and rattle as the upper gate closed behind her. Getting on board was no easy matter. A warp stretched from a bollard on shore to the bitts in the bows of the tug bridged the two feet, or thereabouts, between her side and that of the lock, but the moment in which I chose to step on it was unfortunate, in that a man on shore chose the same in which to cast off and ease the strain on the warp, which was tautening as the water lowered in the lock. I fell forward, breaking my gun across the grip against the side of the tug, and dropped into the water between her and the lock. Almost as I fell a huge hand grasped the collar of my coat, another when I rose gripped the waistband of my breeches, and I was landed on deck by a gigantic lumberer as the tug swung over and ground with a sort of squeal against the lock wall. Grateful for being saved from being burst like a bubble, I proffered what small sum a subaltern would have with him, but my hand was pushed away. "Take away your (adjective) money! Don't you think you'd have done the same for me if you'd bin strong enough?" We made friends with the five or six men, nearly all giants like the big chap who had saved my life, and told them of our sport over "them cute little ducks." Honest they certainly were so far as this world's ordinary goods were concerned, but at the end of our voyage we were two of "them cute little ducks" short. Ah, well! After all, one's life is not dear at the price of two wooden ducks, is it?—D. O'C., in Field.

THE PHEASANT IN HISTORY

The etymological claim, by tradition, of the pheasant for an oriunde in the Colchian port of Phasis may be reasonably admitted, without accrediting that district as the birthplace of this far eastern jungle fowl. There are too many other instances of a depot for delivery to customers affiliating its name to the experts therefrom. Oporto and Xeres respectively christened the wines that were floated down river for shipment at these ports Stilton, as a coaching halt for change of horses, became a depot for cheese distribution and hence conveyed its name to the table supply thereof. There is further evidence from the Clouds of Aristophanes that this traditional land of the Golden Fleece endowed other animals beside pheasants with its port title. The pheasant seems to have found its way to British woodlands and British tables centuries before the science of shooting flying with firearms had gained recognition among sportsmen of these isles. We do not hear much of it in hawking records, probably because its taste for woodland shelter, except when feeding rendered it practically immune from attack in this line. Its capture was one which devolved upon the fowler rather than on the falconer, although the latter would avail himself of the use of spaniels to drive a pheasant from the wood and kill it with a goshawk, as shown in a fine engraving by Hollar after Francis Barlow, and as recorded also in the Household Books of the L'Estranges of Hunstanton about the same period. The bird figured on banqueting bills of fare in early Plantagenet times. Whether Roman conquest of Britain assisted its introduction to our islands is not clear; Roman epicures knew of it as "phasianus," and there is concensus that the 'taturas" of Pamphilus is identical with Avis phasianus. Hippocrates refers to it in the study of diet, and of food for invalids, and seems to esteem it highly for nutriment and flavor. The tradition of Colchian origin or source of introduction of the bird seems to hold its own in all old records.

Sportsman's Calendar

DECEMBER

December 15—Last day for deer-shooting.

December 31—Last day for pheasants, grouse, and quail.

After November it is illegal to sell ducks, geese, snipe.

BACK TO BOYHOOD

I loll at the sycamore's knotted feet,
And troll my line in the deep, dark pool;
Oh the welcome the fresh leaves whisper is sweet,
The caress of the woodland wind, how cool!

How lightly the lisping waters curl
O'er solemn and bearded rocks, and tinkle
Low bells in their play, and bubble and swirl
A rainbow of ripples! How pebbles twinkle!

Where kissed by the frolicsome, careless wind,
The waves in lingering laughter wrinkle!
A flurry of minnows, silver-finned,
A sudden dash—a showery sprinkle!

Of glittering jewels! Then strikes the bass!
I lead him slowly o'er shallows of gold,
Nerves tingling and tense. How he leaps! Will he pass
That gnarled, old root? Will the thin gut hold?

Ah, netted at last! Such a moment redeems
Dull days held captive in duty's chain!
The world is good; and once more it seems
There is joy in life to pay for the pain!

My heart sings here with the merry birds,
With myriad voices of summer in tune,
And rhythm that never had raiment of words,
All swelling delights of the blooming June,

Flow free and full with my leaping blood!
A boy released from tasks and at play,
Rejoicing as when my life was in bud,
I fish in the meadow brook today.

—By Stokely S. Fisher, DD., Sc. D. in Rod and Gun.

Near Creston recently a pedestrian met four cougars on the trail. A local paper suggests that the Provincial Government increase the bounty on these animals so that it would be an incentive to hunters to get after these pests, who are fast depleting the deer and other game in the vicinity.

In Labrador it has been demonstrated that one deer can readily do the work five of the local dogs do with constant urging. On one day, for example, the deer drew three logs each, while the teams of from seven to nine dogs were hauling not more than two, and these no larger.

"Well, old man, how did you get along after I left you at midnight. Get home all right?"

"No; a confounded nosey policeman haled me to the station, where I spent the rest of the night."

"Lucky dog! I reached home."—Boston Transcript.

Every tailor knows a lost of promising young men.—New York Tribune.