

The King of the Foxes

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

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THE KING OF THE FOXES.*

BY A. CONAN DOYLE.

Illustrated by G. H. JALLAND.



It was after a hunting dinner, and there were as many scarlet coats as black ones round the table. The conversation over the cigars had turned, therefore, in the direction of horses and horsemen, with reminiscences of phenomenal runs where foxes had led the pack from end to end of a county, and been overtaken at last by two or three limping hounds and a huntman on foot, while every rider in the field had been pounded. As the port circulated the runs became longer and more apocryphal, until we had the whips inquiring their way and failing to understand the dialect of the people who answered them. The foxes, too, became more eccentric, and we had foxes up pollard willows, foxes which were dragged by the tail out of horses' mangers, and foxes which had raced through an open front door and gone to ground in a lady's bonnet box. The master had told one or two tall reminiscences, and when he cleared his throat for another we were all curious, for he was a bit of an artist in his way and produced his effects in a *crasseuse* fashion. His face wore the earnest, practical, severely accurate expression which heralded some of his finest efforts.

"It was before I was master," said he. "Sir Charles Adair had the hounds at that time, and then afterwards they passed to old Lathom, and then to me. It may possibly have been just after Lathom took them over, but my strong impression is that it was in Adair's time. That would be early in the seventies—about seventy-two, I should say.

"The man I mean has moved to another part of the country, but I daresay that some of you can remember him. Danbury was the name—Walter Danbury, or Wat Danbury, as the people used to call him. He was the son of old Joe Danbury, of High Ascombe, and when his father died he came into a very good thing, for his only brother was drowned when the *Magna Charta* foundered, so he inherited the whole estate. It was only a few hundred acres, but it was good

arable land, and those were the great days of farming. Besides, it was freehold, and a yeoman farmer without a mortgage was a warmish man before the great fall in wheat came. Foreign wheat and barbed wire—those are the two curses of this country; for the one spoils the farmer's work and the other spoils his play.

"This young Wat Danbury was a very fine fellow, a keen rider, and thorough sportsman, but his head was a little turned at having come, when so young, into a comfortable fortune, and he went the pace for a year or two. The lad had no vice in him, but there was a hard drinking set in the neighbourhood at that time, and Danbury got drawn in among them; and, being an amiable fellow who liked to do what his friends were doing, he very soon took to drinking a great deal more than was good for him. As a rule, a man who takes his exercise may drink as much as he likes in the evening and do himself no very great harm if he will leave it alone during the day. Danbury had too many friends for that, however, and it really looked as if the poor chap was going to the bad, when a very curious thing happened which pulled him up with such a sudden jerk that he never put his hand upon the neck of a whiskey bottle again.

"He had a peculiarity which I have noticed in a good many other men, that though he was always playing tricks with his own health, he was none the less very anxious about it, and was extremely fidgety if ever he had any trivial symptom. Being a tough open-air fellow, who was always as hard as a nail, it was seldom that there was anything amiss with him; but at last the drink began to tell, and he woke one morning with his hands shaking and all his nerves tingling like overstretched fiddle strings. He had been dining at some very wet house the night before, and the wine had perhaps been more plentiful than choice; at any rate, there he was, with a tongue like a bath towel and a head that ticked like an eight-day clock. He was very alarmed at his own condition and he sent for Doctor Middleton,

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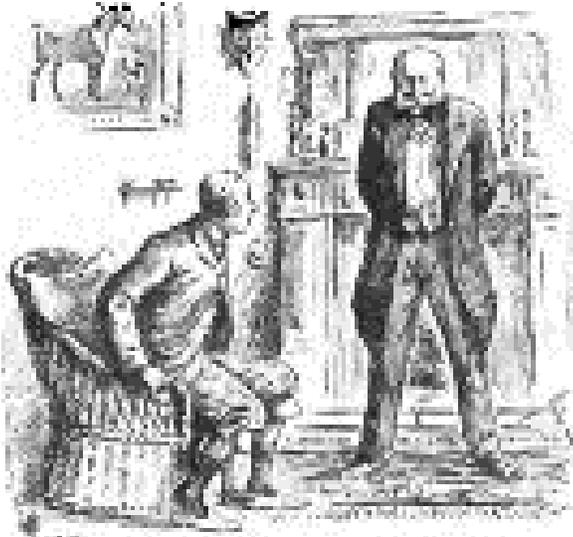
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"Middleton had been a great friend of old Danbury's, and he was very sorry to see his son going to the devil; so he improved the occasion by taking his case very seriously, and lecturing him upon the danger of his ways. He shook his

head and talked about the possibility of delirium tremens, or even of mania, if he continued to



"Do you think I am going to get anything of the sort?"

lead such a life. Wat Danbury was horribly frightened.

"Do you think I am going to get anything of the sort?' he wailed.

"Well, really, I don't know,' said the doctor gravely. 'I cannot undertake to say you are out of danger. Your system is very much out of order. At any time during the day you might have those grave symptoms of which I warn you.'

"You think I shall be safe by evening?"

"If you drink nothing during the day, and have no nervous symptoms before evening, I think you may consider yourself safe," the doctor answered. A little fright would, he thought, do his patient good, so he made the most of the matter.

"What symptoms may I expect?' asked Danebury.

"It generally takes the form of optical delusions.'

"I see specks floating all about.'

"That is mere biliousness,' said the doctor soothingly, for he saw the lad was highly strung, and he did not wish to overdo it. 'I daresay you will have no symptoms of the kind, but when they do come they usually take the shape of insects, or reptiles, or curious animals.'

"And if I see anything of the kind?"

"If you do, you will at once send for me;' and so, with a promise of medicine, the doctor departed.

"Young Wat Danbury rose and dressed and moped about the room feeling very miserable and unstrung, with a vision of the County Asylum for ever in his mind. He had the doctor's word for it if he could get through to evening in safety he would be all right; but it is not very exhilarating to be waiting for symptoms, and to keep on glancing at your bootjack to see whether it is still a bootjack or whether it has begun to develop antennae and legs. At last he could stand it no longer, and an overpowering longing for the



"As he rode by the hounds from Corney."

fresh air and the green grass came over him. Why should he stay indoors when the Ascombe Hunt was meeting within half a mile of him? If he was going to have these delusions which the doctor talked of, he would not have them the sooner nor the worse because he was on horseback in the open. He was sure, too, it would ease his aching head. And so it came about in ten minutes he was in his hunting-kit, and in ten more he was riding out of his stable-yard with his roan mare 'Matilda' between his knees. He was a little unsteady in his saddle just at first, but the farther he went the better he felt, until by the time he reached the meet his head was almost clear, and there was nothing troubling him except those haunting words of the doctor's about the possibility of delusions any time before nightfall.

"But soon he forgot that also, for as he came up the hounds were thrown off, and they drew the Gravel Hanger, and afterwards the Hickory Copse. It was just the morning for a scent—no wind to blow it away, no water to wash it out, and just damp enough to make it cling. There was a field of forty, all keen men and good riders, so when they came to the Black Hanger

they knew there would be some sport, for that's a cover which never draws blank. The woods were thicker in those days than now, and the foxes were thicker also, and that great dark oak-grove was swarming with them. The only difficulty was to make them break, for it is, as you know, a very close country, and you must coax them out into the open before you can hope for a run.

"When they came to the Black Hanger the field took their positions along the cover-side wherever they thought they were most likely to get a good start. Some went in with the hounds, some clustered at the ends of the drives, and some kept outside in the hope of the fox breaking in that direction. Young Wat Danbury knew the country like the palm of his hand, so he made for a place where several drives intersected, and there he waited. He had a feeling the faster and the farther he galloped the better he should be, and so he was chafing to be off. His mare, too, was in the height of fettle and one of the fastest goers in the county. Wat was a splendid lightweight rider—under ten stone with his saddle—and the mare was a powerful creature, all quarters and shoulders, fit to carry a lifeguardsman; and so it was no wonder there was hardly a man in the field who could hope to stay with him. There he waited and listened to the shouting of the huntsman and the whips, catching a glimpse now and then in the darkness of the wood of a whisking tail, or the gleam of a white-and-tan side amongst the underwood. It was a well-trained pack, and there was not so much as a whine to tell you forty hounds were working all round you.

"And then suddenly there came one long-drawn yell from one of them, and it was taken up by another, and another, until within a few seconds the whole pack was giving tongue together and running on a hot scent. Danbury saw them stream across one of the drives and disappear upon the other side, and an instant later the three red coats of the hunt servants flashed after them upon the same line. He might have made a shorter cut down one of the other drives, but he was afraid of heading the fox, so he followed the lead of the huntsman. Right through the wood they went in a bee-line, galloping with their faces brushed by their

horses' manes as they stooped under the branches.

"It's ugly going, as you know, with the roots all wriggling about in the darkness, but you can take a risk when you catch an occasional glimpse of the pack running with a breast-high scent; so in and out they dodged until the wood began to thin at the edges, and they found themselves in the long bottom where the river runs. It is clear going there upon grassland, and the hounds were



PARSON GEDDES AND SQUIRE FOLEY.

running very strong about two hundred yards ahead, keeping parallel with the stream. The field, who had come round the wood instead of going through, were coming hard over the fields upon the left; but Danbury, with the hunt servants, had a clear lead, and they never lost it.

"Two of the field got on terms with them—Parson Geddes on a big seventeen-hand bay which he used to ride in those days, and Squire Foley, who rode as a featherweight, and made his hunters out of cast thoroughbreds from the Newmarket sales; but the others never had a look-in from start to finish, for there was no check and no pulling, and it was clear cross-country racing from start to finish. If you had drawn a line right across the map with a pencil you couldn't go straighter than that fox



"The King of the Foxes"

ran, heading for the South Downs and the sea, and the hounds ran as surely as if they were running to view, and yet from the beginning no one ever saw the fox, and there was never a hallo forrard to tell them he had been spied. This, however, is not so surprising, for if you've been over that line of country you will know there are not very many people about.

"There were six of them then in the front row—Parson Geddes, Squire Foley, the huntsman, two whips, and Wat Danbury, who had forgotten all about his head and the doctor by this time, and had not a thought for anything but the run. All six were galloping just as hard as they could lay hoofs to the ground. One of the whips dropped back, however, as some of the hounds were tailing off, and that brought them down to five. Then Foley's thoroughbred strained herself, as these slim-legged, dainty-fetlocked thoroughbreds will do when the going is rough, and he had to take a back seat. But the other four were still going strong, and they did four or five miles down the river flat at a rasping pace. It had been a wet winter, and the waters had been out a little time before, so there was a deal



"The whips have had a tumble."

of sliding and splashing; but by the time they came to the bridge the whole field was out of sight, and these four had the hunt to themselves.

"The fox had crossed the bridge—for foxes do not care to swim a chilly river any more than humans do—and from that point he had streaked away southward as hard as he could tear. It is broken country, rolling heaths, down one slope and up another, and it's hard to say whether the up or the down is the more trying for the horses. This sort of switchback work is all right for a cobby, short-backed, short-legged little horse, but it is killing work for a big, long-striding

hunter such as one wants in the Midlands. Anyhow, it was too much for Parson Geddes' seventeen-hand bay, and though he tried the Irish trick—for he was a rare keen sportsman—of running up the hills by his horse's head, it was all to no use, and he had to give it up. So then there were only the huntsman, the whip, and Wat Danbury—all going strong.

"But the country got worse and worse and the hills were steeper and more thickly covered in heather and bracken. The horses were over their hocks all the time, and the place was pitted with rabbit-holes; but the hounds were still streaming along, and the riders could not afford to pick their steps. As they raced down one slope, the hounds were always flowing up the opposite one, until it looked like that game where the one figure in falling makes the other one rise.

"But never a glimpse did they get of the fox, although they knew very well he must be only a very short way ahead for the scent to be so strong. And then Wat Danbury heard a crash and a thud at his elbow, and looking round he saw a pair of white cords and top-boots kicking out of a tussock of brambles. The whip's horse had stumbled, and the whip was out of the running. Danbury and the huntsman eased down for an instant; and then, seeing the man staggering to his feet all right, they turned and settled into their saddles once more.

"Joe Clarke, the huntsman, was a famous old rider, known for five counties round; but he reckoned upon his second horse, and the second horses had all been left many miles behind. However, the one he was riding was good enough for anything with such a horseman upon his back, and he was going as well as when he started. As to Wat Danbury, he was going better. With every stride his own feelings improved, and the mind of the rider had its influence upon the mind of the horse. The stout little roan was gathering its muscular limbs under it, and stretching to the gallop as if it were steel and whale-bone instead of flesh and blood. Wat had never come to the end of its powers yet, and to-day he had such a chance of testing them as he had never had before.

"There was a pasture country beyond the heather slopes, and for several miles the two

riders were either losing ground as they fumbled with their crop-handles at the bars of gates, or gaining it again as they galloped over the fields. Those were the days before this accursed wire came into the country, and you could generally break a hedge where you could not fly it, so they did not trouble the gates more than they could help. Then they were down in a hard lane, where they had to slacken their pace, and through a farm where a man came shouting excitedly after them; but they had no time to stop and listen to him, for the hounds were on some ploughland, only two fields ahead. It was sloping upwards, that ploughland, and the horses were over their fetlocks in the red, soft soil.

"When they reached the top they were blowing badly, but a grand valley sloped before them, leading up to the open country of the South Downs. Between, there lay a belt of pine-woods, into which the hounds were streaming, running now in a long, straggling line, and shedding one here and one there as they ran. You could see the white-and-tan dots here and there where the limpers were tailing away. But half the pack were still going well, though the pace and distance had both been tremendous—two clear hours now without a check.

"There was a drive through the pine-wood—one of those green, slightly rutted drives where a horse can get the last yard out of itself, for



"She repped it hard!"

the ground is hard enough to give him clean going and yet springy enough to help him. Wat Danbury got alongside of the huntsman and they galloped

together with their stirrup-irons touching, and the hounds within a hundred yards of them.

"'We have it all to ourselves,' said he.

"'Yes, sir, we've shook on the lot of 'em this time,' said old Joe Clarke. 'If we get this fox it's worth while 'aving 'im skinned an' stuffed, for 'e's a curiosity 'e is.'

"'It's the fastest run I ever had in my life!' cried Danbury.

"'And the fastest ever I 'ad, an' that means more,' said the old huntsman. 'But what licks me is we've never 'ad a look at the beast. 'E must leave an amazin' scent be'ind 'im when these 'ounds can follow 'im like this, and yet none of us have seen 'im when we've 'ad a clear 'alf mile view in front of us.'

"'I expect we'll have a view of him presently,' said Danbury; and in his mind he added, 'at least, I shall,' for the huntsman's horse was gasping as it ran, and the foam was pouring down it like the side of a washing-tub.

"They had followed the hounds on to one of the side tracks which led out of the main drive, and that divided into a smaller track still, where the branches switched across their faces as they went, and there was barely room for one horse at a time. Wat Danbury took the lead, and he heard the huntsman's horse clumping along heavily behind him, while his own mare was going with less spring than when she had started. She answered to a touch of his crop or spur, however, and he felt there was something still left to draw upon. And then he looked up, and there was a heavy wooden stile at the end of the narrow track, with a lane of stiff young saplings leading down to it, which was far too thick to break through. The hounds were running clear upon the grassland on the other side, and you were bound either to get over that stile or lose sight of them, for the pace was too hot to let you go round.



"Well, Wat Danbury was not the lad to flinch, and at it he went full split, like a man who means what he is doing. She rose gallantly to it, rapped it hard with her front hoof, shook him on to her withers, recovered herself, and was over. Wat had hardly got back into his saddle when there was a clatter behind him like the fall of a woodstack, and there was the top bar in splinters, the horse on its belly, and the huntsman on hands and knees half a dozen yards in front of him. Wat pulled up for an instant, for the fall was a smasher; but he saw old Joe spring to his feet and get to his horse's bridle. The horse staggered up, but the moment it put one foot in front of the other, Wat saw it was hopelessly lame—a slipped shoulder and a six weeks' job. There was nothing he could do, and Joe was shouting to him not to lose the hounds, so off he went again, the one solitary survivor of the whole hunt. When a man finds himself there, he can retire from fox-hunting, for he has tasted the highest which it has to offer. I remember once when I was out with the Royal Surrey—but I'll tell you that story afterwards.

"The pack, or what was left of them, had got a bit ahead during this time; but he had a clear view of them on the downland, and the mare seemed full of pride at being the only one left, for she was stepping out rarely and tossing her head as she went. They were two miles over the green shoulder of a hill, a rattle down a stony, deep-rutted country lane, where the mare stumbled and nearly came down, a jump over a 5 ft. brook, a cut through a hazel copse, another dose of heavy ploughland, a couple of gates to open, and then the green, Downs beyond.

"'Well,' said Wat Danbury to himself, 'I'll see this fox run into or I shall see it drowned, for it's all clear going now between this and the chalk cliffs which line the sea.' But he was wrong in that, as he speedily discovered. In all the little hollows of the downs at that part there are plantations of fir-woods, some of which have grown to a good size. You do not see them until you come upon the edge of the valleys in which they lie. Danbury was galloping hard over the short, springy turf when he came over the lip of one of these depressions, and there was the dark clump of wood lying in front of and beneath him. There were only a dozen hounds still

running, and they were just disappearing among the trees. The sunlight was shining straight upon the long olive-green slopes which curved down towards this wood, and Danbury, who had the eyes of a hawk, swept them over this great expanse; but there was nothing moving upon it. A few sheep were grazing far up on the right, but there was no other sight of any living creature. He was certain then he was very near to the end, for either the fox must have gone to ground in the wood or the hounds' noses must be at his very brush. The mare seemed to know also what that great empty sweep of countryside meant, for she quickened her stride, and a few minutes Danbury was galloping into the fir-wood.

"He had come from bright sunshine, but the wood was very closely planted, and so dim he could hardly see to right or to left out of the narrow path down which he was riding. You know what a solemn, churchyardy sort of place a fir-wood is. I suppose it is the absence of any undergrowth, and the fact the trees never move at all. At any rate a kind of chill suddenly struck Wat Danbury, and it flashed through his mind there had been some very singular points about this run—its length and its straightness, and the fact from the first find no one had ever caught a glimpse of the creature. Some silly talk which had been going round the country about the king of the foxes—a sort of demon fox, so fast it could outrun any pack, and so fierce they could do nothing with it if they overtook it—suddenly came back into his mind, and it did not seem so laughable now in the dim fir-wood as it had done when the story had been told over the wine and cigars. The nervousness which had been on him in the morning, and which he had hoped he had shaken off, swept over him again in an overpowering wave. He had been so proud of being alone, and yet he would have given 10 pounds now to have had Joe Clarke's homely face beside him. And then, just at that moment, there broke out from the thickest part of the wood the most frantic hullabaloo ever he had heard in his life. The hounds had run into their fox.

"Well, you know, or you ought to know, what your duty is in such a case. You have to be whip, huntsman, and everything else if you are the first man up. You get in among the hounds, lash them off, and keep the brush and pads from

being destroyed. Of course, Wat Danbury knew all about that, and he tried to force his mare through the trees to the place where all this hideous screaming and howling came from, but the wood was so thick it was impossible to ride it. He sprang off, therefore, left the mare standing, and broke his way through as best he could with his hunting-lash ready over his shoulder.

"But as he ran forward he felt his flesh go cold and creepy all over. He had heard hounds run into foxes many times before, but he had never heard such sounds as these. They were not the cries of triumph, but of fear. Every now and then came a shrill yelp of mortal agony. Holding his breath, he ran on until he broke through the interlacing branches, and found himself in a little clearing with the hounds all crowding round a patch of tangled bramble at the further end.

"When he first caught sight of them the hounds were standing in a half-circle round this bramble patch, with their backs bristling and their jaws gaping. In front of the brambles lay one of them with his throat torn out, all crimson and white-and-tan. Wat came running out into the clearing, and at the sight of him the hounds took heart again, and one of them sprang with a growl into the bushes. At the same instant, a creature the size of a donkey jumped on to its feet, a huge grey head, with monstrous glistening fangs and tapering fox jaws, shot out from among the branches, and the hound was thrown several feet into the air, and fell howling among the cover. Then there was a clashing snap, like a rat-trap closing, and the howls sharpened into a scream and then were still.

"Danbury had been on the look-out for symptoms all day, and now he had found them. He looked once more at the thicket, saw a pair of savage red eyes fixed upon him, and fairly took to his heels. It might only be a passing delusion, or it might be the permanent mania of which the doctor had spoken, but anyhow, the thing to do was to get back to bed and to quiet, and to hope for the best.

"He forgot the hounds, the hunt, and everything else in his desperate fears for his own reason. He sprang upon his mare, galloped her madly over the downs, and only stopped when he found himself at a country station. There he

left his mare at the inn, and made back for home as quickly as steam would take him. It was evening before he got there, shivering with apprehension, and seeing those red eyes and savage teeth at every turn. He went straight to bed and sent for Dr. Middleton.

"'I've got 'em, doctor,' said he. 'It came about exactly as you said —strange creatures, optical delusions, and everything. All I ask you now is to save my reason. 'The doctor listened to his story, and was shocked as he heard it.

"'It appears to be a very clear case,' said he. 'This must be a lesson to you for life.'

"'Never a drop again if I only come safely through this,' cried Wat Danbury.

"'Well, my dear boy, if you will stick to that it may prove a blessing in disguise. But the difficulty in this case is to know where fact ends and fancy begins. You see, it is not as if there was only one delusion. There have been several. The dead dogs, for example, must have been one as well as the creature in the bush.'



"A creature that was seen by the 'hounds'."



"He galloped madly over the downs."

"'I saw it all as clearly as I see you.'

"'One of the characteristics of this form of delirium is what you see is even clearer than

reality. I was wondering whether the whole run was not a delusion also.'

"Wat Danbury pointed to his hunting boots still lying upon the floor, necked with the splashings of two counties.

"'Hum! that looks very real, certainly. No doubt, in your weak state, you over-exerted yourself and so brought this attack upon yourself. Well, whatever the cause, our treatment is clear. You will take the soothing mixture which I will send to you, and we shall put two leeches upon your temples to-night to relieve any congestion of the brain.'

"So Wat Danbury spent the night in tossing about and reflecting what a sensitive thing this machinery of ours is, and how very foolish it is to play tricks with what is so easily put out of gear and so difficult to mend. And so he repeated and repeated his oath this first lesson should be his last, and from that time forward he would be a sober, hard-working yeoman as his father had been before him. So he lay, tossing and still repentant, when his door flew open in the morning and in rushed the doctor with a newspaper crumpled up in his hand.

"'My dear boy,' he cried, 'I owe you a thousand apologies. You're the most ill-used lad and I the greatest numskull in the county. Listen to this!' And he sat down upon the side of the bed, flattened out his paper upon his knee, and began to read.

"The paragraph was headed, 'Disaster to the Ascombe Hounds,' and it went on to say four of the hounds, shockingly torn and mangled, had



been found in Winton Fir Wood upon the South Downs. The run had been so severe half the pack were lamed; but the four found in the wood were

actually dead, although the cause of their extraordinary injuries was still unknown.

"'So, you see,' said the doctor, looking up, 'I was wrong when I put the dead hounds among the delusions.'

"'But the cause?' cried Wat.

"'Well, I think we may guess the cause from an item which has been inserted just as the paper went to press:—

"'Late last night, Mr. Brown, of Smither's Farm, to the east of Hastings, perceived what he imagined to be an enormous dog worrying one of his sheep. He shot the creature, which proves to be a grey Siberian wolf of the variety known as *Lupus Giganticus*. It is supposed to have escaped from some travelling menagerie.

"That's the story, gentlemen, and Wat Danbury stuck to his good resolutions, for the fright which he had cured him of all wish to run such a risk again; and he never touches anything stronger than lime-juice—at least, he hadn't before he left this part of the country, five years ago next Lady Day."