

FOX HUNTING IN THE GENESEE VALLEY.

BY D. A. WILLEY.



DID you ever go to a fox hunt in the Genesee Valley?

No! Then you have missed one of the most healthful, most exciting, and most varying

pastimes that is carried on in this country.

And now some readers may want to know what and where the Genesee Valley is and who are its people. The valley takes its name from the Genesee River, which rises in the Northern Pennsylvania mountains, winds across New York State in innumerable curves, flowing through a gorge here, across a flat country there; sometimes rushing for miles over jagged rocks with the rapidity of a mountain torrent; sometimes flowing lazily along as a wide river, until at last emerging from high banks of rock and shale its waters are lost in Lake Ontario, at a point seven miles north of the city of Rochester.

At the village of Mount Morris the Genesee River emerges from a gorge nearly twenty miles long and enters the valley proper. Mount Morris might be called the northern limit of the hunting country. Three miles to the northeast and across the valley lies Geneseo, another model country village, with all the usual accompaniments of such a place and several handsome country houses within or just outside its suburbs. Among them may be noted the home of W. Austin Wadsworth, the man to whom the Genesee Valley Hunt really owes its origin and the M. F. H. since the first run was enjoyed. Not far from the Wadsworth estate are "The Hampton" and "The Hermitage," the residences of two families of Fitzhughs. And fine old country houses they are, with their massive pillars, quaint old windows, broad, echoing corridors and antique furniture, putting the visitor in mind of the memorable mansions still to be seen in Virginia and the Carolinas.

If he sees indications of Southern character and customs about these places, he

will not be in the wrong should he surmise that the families are of Southern descent. Sons and daughters they feel proud in being of the celebrated Fitzhughs whose fathers followed the hounds in the days when Washington himself thought it not undignified to take a cross-country run. A few miles farther to the south and one approaches "Belwood," the country seat of S. S. Howland and one of the finest in the United States. Mr. Howland, who is a son of the New York financier of that name, came to the valley in 1881, and was so pleased with it and its residents that he erected a model country house and stables capable of accommodating half a hundred horses. Passing farther up the valley one comes to "The Poplars," the home of John Hartman, and one of the most prominent farmers in the country; a man who has spent most of his life there, and is as keenly alive to its beauty and advantages as he was when the country was comparatively new. Other places which may be named are "Glenwood," the McNair homestead, and the residence of John Cone, another large farmer and ardent fox hunter.

The head of the valley is the village of Dansville, the southern limit of the hunting country, a cosy little town nearly twenty miles from Geneseo.

Such is a brief description of the locality of the Genesee Valley Hunt. Something more should be said about its surface. The valley proper varies many miles in width. The hills on either side rise often to a height of 400 feet and over. At frequent intervals the hill sides are furrowed by deep ravines, nearly concealed from view by a dense growth of underbrush and small trees. Sometimes a person will find himself on the brink of a chasm fifty or sixty feet deep ere he is aware of it, so closely are they hidden. Pasture, woodland, cultivated fields alternate on the slopes, and the valley proper presents about every variety of land, not excluding a swamp.

The fences are principally of the zig-zag pattern, made of split rails, and the straight fence of posts and rails. The horse must be a powerful animal which

can break the top piece on one of them. The post-and-rail fence is straight and is less feared, as it can be jumped straight. Very few wire fences are to be seen, however, and a barb wire seldom or never. Indeed, so favored is fox hunting by the people generally that I believe the farmer who tried to place a barb wire around his lots would be considered the meanest man in the country and stand a fair chance of mob law. Stone walls are few and far between.

And the height? That is the leading question, as every cross-country rider knows. Fences have been cleared in the country at six feet. Very few are lower than four feet, many are four feet six inches.

Here is what a man who had ridden with some of the best packs in England and who had been over grounds of the Long Island, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts clubs said to the writer: "Since I've been here in the Genesee Valley I have been over some of the stiffest country that I ever struck on a horse's back."

When the rider gets after a fox that escapes after worrying him from 2 o'clock in the afternoon until 9 o'clock in the evening he eats his supper and tumbles into bed with a very small idea of his own ability and a very large idea of the fox's, saying nothing about the horses and dogs. One day last fall they had just such a chase up in the valley. It was a wild fox hunt and the meet was called for 9 A. M. sharp at a cross road near the summit of a hill, on the east side of the valley. Horses were saddled early and several of the Genesee members who had to come ten miles to the meet rode hacks in order to have their mounts fresh when the fun began. A quarter of an hour before the appointed time, the M. F. H., wearing his familiar slouch hat, appeared at the corner with as pretty a pack of fox hounds as ever awoke the echoes of a covert in this or any other country. By twos and threes up came the riders; the first group were attired in the true costume, very tight, colored trousers, boots of enamel leather without a spot to mar their glistening surfaces, black cutaway coats showing a couple of inches of vest, collars of the most approved bend and four-in-hand ties of the latest imported tint. Their hats were of the black derby pattern, fastened to the back of the coat collar by a strong rubber cord.

Of course, they had spurs, principally

for ornament, and these, with the polished stirrups, light leather saddles and bridles and ornamental bits, gave the whole equipment that appearance which you see in a saddler's shop. Everything was apparently used for the first time. The horses of the two came in for not a little attention. One was a hunter from the North of Ireland, a horse with a pedigree as long as your arm. And a beautiful animal he was, thought several grooms, as they gathered round him and noted his points. Like the other two animals his coat was sleek as satin, and every indication showed him to be in prime condition.

These men were gentlemen riders; that is, they were not farmers, and had come from one of the neighboring cities. They kept their horses in Genesee and rode to the meets from the village. "There comes —!" exclaimed the whipper-in, and turning in the direction named a solitary rider was seen coming across the fields at an easy gait, taking the fences without respect to condition, age or size. And what a jumper was his horse! The beast would go over the field with a graceful lope until within say thirty or forty feet of the fence, according to its height, then his pace quickened and over he went, just clearing the top rail, while his rider made scarcely an effort at "lifting" him.

The last comer was one of the farmer members of the hunt. His dress was careless, his horse's coat lacked the sleek, shiny appearance of the others noted. His hat had a jam in it. No gloves covered his hands. His boots were ordinary leather, with no spurs attached. He wore a flannel shirt and actually hadn't a "crop." In other words, he didn't use a whip or anything else to protect himself from the trees and bushes. But he sat on his horse not like a Centaur—that is, too stiff—but as if he had never been out of a saddle since he was born. From the waist to the knees his body seemed rigid as iron, so firm was his seat. Above the waist his body was perfectly flexible, inclining according to the gait of the horse. His legs hung easily, with the feet projecting forward and pointing outward in the stirrups. Most of the time while riding his left hand was in his trousers pocket, his right holding his bridle rein loosely and close down to the saddle. Such is a brief pen picture of a man who though riding at over two hundred pounds weight is counted as one of the best and most daring horsemen in the valley.

Soon two or three more farmers came up, none of them dressed with any decided care, and evidently none of them had worried as to whether he had rubbed all the mud off his boots or all the wisps from his horse.

At last the hour for the start arrived, and the M. F. H. motioned to the huntsmen, who trotted down the road a few hundred feet with the dogs and turned into a piece of woods, in the centre of which was a ravine of which the foxes were very fond. Here the dogs started out; the horses pricked up their ears and the riders, who had been laughing and joking as they idled along, became silent and took firmer positions in their saddles. Slowly but surely the pack worked its way, going over seemingly every inch of ground, sniffing at every rock, stump and hole, but still no cry was heard. It was a little tedious as the horses slowly picked along, now toiling up hill, now feeling their way down again, and when an open field was reached more than one leaped into it and followed the hounds along the edge of the woods.

The ravine was covered, and not a sign of a fox. "I guess we'll follow the top of the hill and work along toward —'s. We'll have lunch, anyway, if we don't have the hunt." Everyone seemed to agree with this idea expressed by the M. F. H., and the enemies of the four-footed chicken-thief continued on their way. To a novice it must have been, indeed, wearisome. This was the dark side of the sport, and his hopes were not buoyed up by the experience others had had. The fun was still in prospect, and when at the noon hour the party had arrived in front of a tasty, comfortable-looking house he alighted with the rest, with a feeling of relief at touching the ground again with both feet.

Fox hunting, even if you don't start reynard, will make almost any man hungry unless he is a confirmed dyspeptic, and he can't be a hunter and dyspeptic. One or the other will have to give way. So when the host of the day—one of the members of the hunt—led them into the dining room, where stood a table loaded with plates of cold tongue, generous slices of roast beef, halves of chicken and other good things, not forgetting a big pitcher of sparkling cider and a decanter of something of a more exhilarating nature, there wasn't much said for about ten minutes. The eatables disappeared with astonishing

rapidity. Then out came pipes, cigars, and cigarettes as the men stretched themselves about the commodious sitting room, in which blazed a cheerful grate fire. Then the conversation began on the proper seat on a horse; a new style of bit; the winter wheat crop; the prospective price of wool; the coming steeplechase; lockjaw in horses; Mr. Howland's new pack of hounds; the Chicago jumping contest, etc.

"I wish some of you fellows would go in there and gently whisper to Mr. Wadsworth that it's after 1. If we're going to get any run to-day we had better start pretty soon." This from one of the younger riders, who was impatiently walking up and down the road with his hunter's nose nearly on his shoulder, broke up the luncheon hour. The crowd started for their horses, which had been given a bite of oats and a rubbing; straps were tightened and readjusted, gloves put on, and in a few minutes the hunters were trotting leisurely up the road, the hounds huddling together in the van. Another ravine about a mile away, near the summit of a hill on the east side of the valley, was chosen as a starting point, and there the hounds again began their search. A half hour of silence, then that sound of all sounds, a deep bay, was heard. One of the veterans of the pack had struck a fresh scent, and away he went and the rest after him. The horses started into a run as though electrified by the sound, and the nerves of the riders tingled as they rushed through the woods. Luckily the scent led up to fairly good ground, and for fifteen minutes matters were serene. Then arose the first fence—a five-footer to an inch—and soft ground to start from. The first man, one of the farmers, went straight at it and over all right; then the next and the next. No. 4's horse bolted, and so came the first fall of the day. Down he went in the mud, but was up and mounted again in a couple of minutes, in time to keep company with the last flight.

The chase was no young fox. He knew the woods were the place for him; and everyone soon saw that the afternoon sport would make up for the morning's idleness. On went dogs, horses and men, leaping a creek here, scraping through bushes there, grazing stumps and branches and occasionally spinning along an open field on the edge. Falls were becoming frequent. One horse had gone lame and

his rider had dropped out. Streaks of foam were beginning to appear on the flanks of the horses, but still they kept up without a moment's hesitation. needed spurs. It was blood that was telling now.

"He'll have to take the field if he keeps much farther this way, sir!" exclaimed the whipper-in to the M. F. H. The latter nodded. He was too intent in watching ahead to utter a word. A moment more and the baying grew louder. Glimpses of open country could be seen. The dogs knew well that their chances of taking the brush were becoming better with every step they took and increased their speed. Faster and faster tore the riders, and at last they were in view. The fox was going across a stubble field, making for another piece of woods a half mile away. He still had a good lead and sped over the ground so fast that he looked like a streak of red with his tail streaming out behind. If the dogs ran before they fairly flew now, and what a pretty chase it was! The horses redoubled their efforts and every rider, his eyes flashing and teeth set, braced himself for the supreme effort of the day.

If they could only prevent him from entering those woods!

But they couldn't.

Scarcely one hundred feet ahead of his pursuers the fox disappeared in the underbrush. The horses were pulled up and forced down to a trot, the dogs, now in the woods, relaxed their efforts and were busied in picking up the scent momentarily lost; then they opened cry again and started. But it was tough country. The wily barnyard poacher knew the place and in twenty minutes had thrown the dogs off the scent.

It was now well along in the day, and men and horses were beginning to feel the effects of the chase. They had covered over fifteen miles of country that day, including seventy fences by actual count, and to have the chase thus elude them was indeed a disappointment, and the dogs felt it as much as their masters apparently. They had done their best, but there's nothing so successful as success, and they felt it instinctively.

Another hour of toiling and scrambling through the woods and the M. F. H. called a halt. What was the best thing to do, give up or not? Several thought best to stop. Others did not. The result was that about half of the riders turned home-

ward and the rest continued. In a half hour another fox was struck and followed, but darkness had now set in and the pursuit was reluctantly abandoned by the riders, although the hounds kept on with the huntsman until 8 o'clock in the evening.

The above may give a partial idea of one of the hunts in the Genesee Valley which came as a heritage to the present generation from their fathers. In the early part of the century they were accustomed to hunt with the dog and gun.

The season in the valley is confined to October, November and December, unless the snow becomes too deep in the latter month for a safe footing. Drag hunting occupies most of October, while the wild foxes, and there are plenty of them, are run in November and December. Most of the members prefer wild fox hunting, and the other kind is arranged more for the accommodation of New Yorkers and others who cannot be absent from the city more than a day or two, and who want to be sure of a run. A dozen hunts or more are scheduled on a card by the M. F. H., the meets coming first at one place then at another, until in the season the whole country has been covered pretty thoroughly. In connection with the hunt proper a steeplechase or two is arranged over about four miles of the stiffest country the rain ever fell upon, for in most cases a steeplechase falls upon a rainy day.

Somewhere in "Under Two Flags," in which Ouida pays such a masterly tribute to cross-country riding in her powerful and vivid descriptions, the genius of fiction makes the assertion that the English belles of the ballroom are in the main the women who are to be seen in the first flight after the hounds, fearless, cool headed, daring, graceful and superb riders. It may seem bold to substitute America, and that particular part of America located in the Genesee Valley, for merry England, but it is doubtful if there are any of the English ladies who can surpass these American cousins of theirs.

Many of them own as their special pets fleet-footed hunters, and away they go like the wind. Over a dozen ladies are regular members of the Genesee Valley Hunt, and when possible enter in the sport with a zest only equaled by their fathers, brothers, husbands and sweet-

hearts; gaining in that king of sports the self possession and courage which they must gain on the field, it lends them additional charms in other stations of life, and whether in the quietness of the home circle or in the brilliant excitement of the

reception room they are equally attractive and thoroughly American.

Such is hunting in the Genesee Valley. To appreciate it in all its merits, you must take a trip up in Livingston County some fall and participate in it.



"If you will start as early as that," said Polly, "you needn't expect me even to look out of the window as you pass by—provided you happen to come round this way."

Happen to come around this way, indeed! I had not intended to come around this way, at least not until that moment. Now I should. And I knew that she would be there, too, ready to give me a last word as a text to think on as I ride. So without replying I only laughed at her, and as I looked back in the moonlight she was still standing at the gate.

The morning sky was brightening every moment as I mounted and wheeled around Polly's way. The sparrows were beginning to chirp, but no other sound stirred the still air except the occasional tinkle of the spring, and that delightful, almost inaudible, rumble of the bicycle, the sound that the rider feels rather than hears, as the machine spins over the smooth path. It is the inarticulate hum of the well-adjusted creature doing its perfect work and communicating its satisfaction to its happy master.

There is a bond of delightful sympathy between the rider and his bicycle. The wishes of the one are the desires of the other. The machine does not seem to

be an inanimate and senseless structure of steel rods and springs. It is not. It is a part of the rider. It becomes a living creature to which you can speak in the quiet places of the country road, and that responds with a gentle murmur telling of the willingness and the intention to do as it is asked to do. If the merciful man is merciful to his beast, the good bicyclist is a lover of his machine. You know that often when you have dismounted beside the way, and are standing with your face bent down against the saddle, and the wagon that you passed back yonder comes lumbering along, and the driver says: "O, ho! tired out are you?"—then you know very well that you are not tired. You are not panting for breath. The machine is not weary. It and you are only getting a little closer together in that delightful companionship that always exists between those that are alike in nature and in thought. The spirit of the wheel and the soul of the rider know each other, and all is well.

The wheel murmured pleasing things as we spun over the smoothness of the path in the early morning light. A too-long-delayed dodge under a low branch dashed a shower of dew drops, cool and sweet, against my face. A stem of the early golden rod swished against the