

FALCONRY.

BY MARY V. WORSTELL.

THERE is a certain old saying, very quotable in the early summer, to the effect that "all work and no play" has a deplorable effect on a lad named Jack. The great age of this proverb is due to the profound truth it contains rather than to the rhetorical beauty which enfold it. One must play occasionally in order to work well, for labor and recreation should go hand in hand. And as far back as tradition reaches we find records of sports, most of them flourishing for a time and then declining. Some games, like tennis, enjoy a revival, after years of comparative oblivion.

What sport was the most ancient? Probably hunting; but if very old pictures and sculptures are carefully studied it will be found that falconry, or "hawking," as it was often called, "followed hard upon." Falconry is probably the oldest sport of which any record has been preserved. Hunting could not always be called a pastime, for men had to hunt and kill game for food; but if their nourishment depended on the game caught by their hawks and falcons many might have starved.

Antiquaries tell us that the art of falconry was practiced two thousand years before the Christian era, and that it had its origin in the Far East; that it was introduced into England about the ninth century, and there flourished for nearly a thousand years. Its decline dates from the introduction of a certain clumsy instrument that brought down game as surely as a sparrow hawk; so they gave the weapon the name of an inferior sort of hawk. They called it a "musket." Probably for a similar reason the name "falcon" was given to a kind of cannon used in the sixteenth century. Year by year muskets were improved, and year by year hawking was favored less and less, until now it is wholly confined to some few countries in the northern part of Africa. The introduction of firearms completely did away with the great expense of training and maintaining falcons and hawks.

But falconry found favor in those far-away days when to be able to row, run, leap, wrestle, cast darts and hawk was considered the proof of a complete education. Thus, in an old chronicle we find that Olaf Tryggesson, a king of Norway, acquired the following royal accomplishments: "He was stronger and more nimble than any man in his dominions. He could climb up the rock Smalserhorn, and fix his shield upon the top of it; he could walk round the outside of a boat upon the oars while the men were rowing; he

could play with three darts, alternately throwing them in the air, and always kept two of them up while he held the third in one of his hands; he was ambidexter, and could cast two darts at once; he excelled all the men of his time in shooting with the bow; and he had no equal in swimming."

Another Northern hero modestly makes the following list of his own accomplishments: "I know how to play at chess; I can engrave runic letters; I am expert at my book; I know how to handle the tools of the smith; I can traverse the snow on skates of wood; I excel in shooting with the bow; I use the oar with facility; I can sing to the harp; and I compose verses."

While one cannot but suspect the genuineness of walking on oars, as well as the merit of the verses so complacently claimed, these examples will serve to show what constituted a highly bred gentleman of ancient times.

Hawking could be practiced on horseback, in the fields and open country, where the royal or knightly sportsmen rode forth, a brave cavalcade, on horses richly caparisoned, their hooded birds poised erect and stately upon their carefully gloved hands. Ladies, too, indulged in this elaborate pastime, and their appearance gave an added charm to a scene where knights, horses, hounds and hawks made a spirited, living picture.

In the woods and coverts the falconer was obliged to go on foot, and then a special outfit was necessary. A picture published in Chambers's "Book of Days," volume 2, page 212, shows no less a personage than King James I. in his hawking dress; and though his costume looks absurd enough to us, we may be sure that in the sixteenth century it was considered very appropriate and very magnificent. The bag attached to the royal girdle is to hold the hawk's hood and the "jesses," or thongs, which held the bird till the falconer discovered suitable prey. The long staff was to assist the sportsman in leaping brooks and ditches.

It is recorded that once when Henry VIII. was hawking in Hertfordshire he attempted to cross a muddy ditch with the help only of his pole. But alas for the royal calculation! Instead of vaulting lightly over, he fell into the ditch headforemost, and would surely have stified had not John Moody saved his corpulent majesty from a watery grave—and by the same act rescued his own honest name from oblivion. "And so," says

the devout historian Hall, "God, of Hys goodness, preserved hym."

The falcon is a very beautiful and stately bird, and it is capable of rising to a height from which a human eye could distinguish only the general features of the landscape. Yet a falcon's sight is so wonderful that it can discern a small object at a great distance, and can descend upon it with unerring accuracy. A French naturalist has calculated that the keenness of this bird's sight is nine times that of the farthest-sighted man.

Falcons are divided into two general classes, the long-winged, or "noble" falcons, which rise to a great height and then drop directly upon their prey; and the short-winged, or "ignoble," which pursue their prey through the wood, and which overtake it by "raking," or chasing. The first are called "rowers," because they use their wings after the manner of oars; and the second, "sailors," because they fly best with the wind. Herons, rooks, hares, partridges, rabbits and wild fowl were the usual "quarry," or prey, sought for.

The different names given to hawks were varied enough to puzzle any but an expert in this sport. Here are the names of a few, summarized in Izaak Walton's "Complete Angler." They are

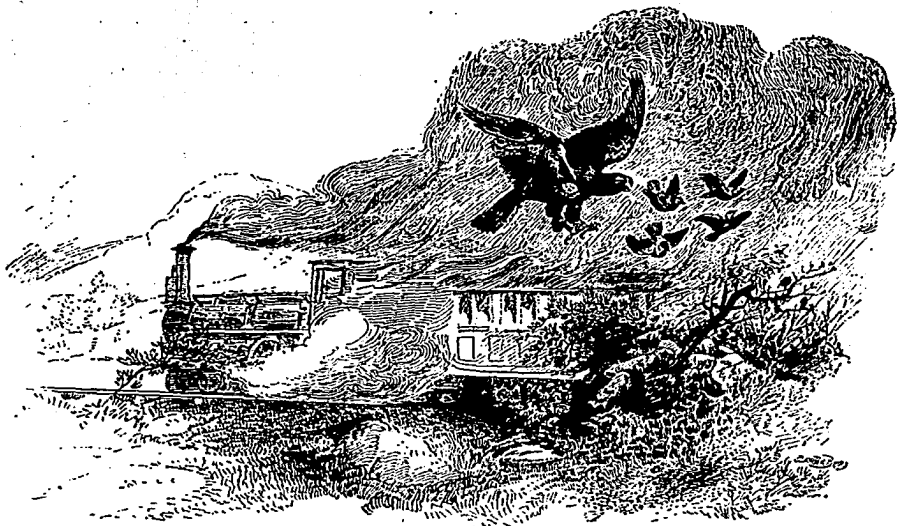


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eredited to an enthusiastic falconer, who says: "You are to note that they are usually distinguished into two kinds, namely, the long-winged and the short-winged hawk. Of the first kind there be chiefly in use amongst us in this nation the gerfalcon and the jerkin, the falcon and tassel gentle, the laner and laneret, the bock-orel and bockeret, the saker and sacaret, the merlin and jack merlin, the hobby and jack. There is the stelletto of Spain—the blood-red rook from Turkey, the waskite from Virginia. And there be of short-winged hawks the eagle and iron, the goshawk and tarcel, the sparrowhawk and musket, the French pye of two sorts." These are reckoned hawks of note and worth, but we have also, of an inferior rank, the stanyel, the ringtail, the raven, the buzzard, the forked kite, the bald buzzard, the hendriver, and others that I forbear to name."

The same worthy man says in praise of his birds: "In the air my troops of hawks soar up on high, and when they are lost in the sight of men, then they attend upon and converse with the gods; therefore I think my eagle is so justly styled 'Jove's servant in ordinary'; and that very falcon that I am now going to see deserves no meaner a title, for she usually in her flight endangers herself, like the son of Dædalus, to have her wings scorched by the sun's heat, she flies so near it, but her mettle makes her careless of danger; for then she heeds nothing, but makes her nimble pinions cut the fluid air, and so makes her highway over the steepest mountains and deepest rivers, and in her glorious career looks with contempt upon those high steeples and magnificent palaces which we adore and wonder at; from which height I can make her descend by a word from my mouth, which she both knows and obeys, to accept of meat from my hand, to own me for her master, to go home with me, and be willing the next day to afford me the like recreation."

The training of a hawk was a long, tedious process, but the science was thought a necessary part of the education of every young man of rank. Young birds were taken first to a dark room, and fed at short intervals, so that they became gradually tame and docile. When at length taken to the field the hawk wore a hood made of leather, often highly ornamented, and surmounted with a small bunch of feathers. On the legs were the "jesses," little thongs of leather about eight inches long, to keep the hawk within reach; and on the back part of each leg a little bell was fastened. These were light, so as not to impede the bird's flight, and they were very musical, one being half a tone below the other,



MERLIN POUNCING UPON SMALL BIRDS FRIGHTENED BY A LOCOMOTIVE.

so as to produce a pleasing sound whenever the bird soared aloft. Referring to this, these lines occur in an old play :

“ Her bells, Sir Francis, had not both one weight,
Nor was one semi-tone above the other :
Methinks these Milan bells do sound too full,
And spoil the mounting of your hawk.”

When a falcon is molting, or changing its feathers, it is said to “mew,” and the Royal Mews, or stables, at Charing Cross were originally devoted to the royal falcons ; but during the reign of Henry VIII. the birds were removed, and the place converted into stables. The old name, however, clings to the place to this day.

The laws of falconry, the many special names employed, and the etiquette connected with it, were endless. For instance, the frame on which hawks were sometimes carried was called the “cadge,” and the one who carried it was called the “cadger” ; two hawks flown together were called a “cast” ; cutting the beak or talons was called “coping” ; the “quarry” was the bird or beast that the hawk flew at ; and to approach a hawk when she had killed her quarry was to “get in”—which, by the way, does not sound altogether antiquated. In short, to learn the many special terms employed in falconry is much like learning a new language.

In old books on the subject are given not only the terms employed, but also the prayers which were to be said at certain times while indulging in the sport !

The ailments by which the bird might be

afflicted, and the means for its relief, also received due attention. Here is a prescription for a sick hawk, copied from “The Gentleman’s Recreation,” published in 1677 : “Take germander, pelamountain, basil, grummel seed and broom flowers, of each half an ounce ; hyassop, sassafras, polypodium and horsemint, of each a quarter of an ounce, and the like of nutmegs ; cubebs, borage, mummy, mugwort, sage and the four kinds of mirobolans, of each half an ounce ; of aloes soccotrine the fifth part of an ounce, and of saffron one whole ounce.”

This mixture weighed over nine ounces, and yet formed but a single dose. If it was frequently administered the decline in the art of falconry might be easily explained.

During the many years that falconry flourished a man was known, not by the company, but by the hawk, he kept. In the old times hawks were as beloved as faithful dogs are to-day. Indeed, one enthusiastic sportsman said that if he had to choose between his friends and his falcons he would not hesitate for a moment to give up his friends ; for he believed that a cast of hawks were the truest friends a man could have. And when we consider how fearless these beautiful birds were, and how gentle, faithful and affectionate as well, we can realize how falconry became, indeed, a royal sport.

To each class of men was assigned a particular bird : thus, only a king, a royal prince, or a man of the very highest rank, was allowed to fly the splendid white hawks of Norway and Iceland ; the falcon gentle was assigned to a prince ; an

earl was allowed to fly a peregrine falcon; the falcon of the rock was a duke's hawk; the squire's was a lanner, the goshawk was a yeoman's, and the tereel was the poor man's. Young gentlemen had their own hawks, and it was one of their few diversions to train and make tractable the smaller birds, such as sparrow hawks and merlins. Indeed, some became so proficient in the art that one writer very ungenerally remarked that falconry was becoming "effeminate."

A fine falcon cost as much as a fine horse, but parting with a bird for money was not considered merely a business transaction—it was an especial favor as well. When so great a value was placed on a hawk we can easily fancy how severe the punishment would be for stealing or concealing one. During the reign of Henry VIII. any person taking the eggs of a falcon could be imprisoned for a year and a day; during Elizabeth's time this was reduced to three months, but then the offender had to find security for his good behavior during seven years, or else remain in prison all his life.

In France the office of grand falconer was very important, and he was well paid. This dignitary had fifty attendant gentlemen and fifty assistant falconers. He not only had the care of many hawks, but from him a license must be obtained by every person in the kingdom who sold the birds. On state occasions this officer had to accompany the King. Louis XI. of France was particularly extravagant in regard to his falcons, for he employed over a hundred falconers, and owned a proportionate number of hawks. When Edward III. invaded France, as Froissart tells us, he was accompanied by thirty falconers, so that when the affairs of state pressed too heavily he might find recreation in his favorite sport.

The pursuit of waterfowl is so often mentioned by writers on falconry that this form of hawking must have afforded the greatest amusement of any.

A picture in Strutt's "Book of Sports," copied from a Saxon manuscript written near the end of

the ninth century, represents a Saxon nobleman and his falconer with their hawks. They are by the river waiting for the quarry.

Two other pictures were found in a manuscript written in the early part of the fourteenth century. We see a party of men and women hawking by the waterside. The falconer is frightening the fowl (and perhaps the reader also), to make them rise. The hawk is in the act of seizing upon one of them.

Poets, painters and sculptors—how irresistibly this quaint old sport appeals to their love of the picturesque! Which of our great poets has not preserved in verse some old legend of falconry? Lowell has likened truth to a falcon, ready to descend upon "fraud and wrong and baseness." Both Tennyson and Longfellow have told the story of Count Federigo and his beautiful falcon. Hawking was very popular in Shakespeare's time, and all through his plays are frequent allusions to it. Sometimes it was called "birding" instead of hawking. One of Shakespeare's characters is made to say: "We'll go a-birding together; I have a fine hawk for the bush."

In practicing falconry man only took advantage of an instinct of the hawk when he trained it to hunt for him. To-day, in its natural condition, the hawk is as keen, intelligent a hunter as ever. Quite recently an engine driver on a Scotch railway noticed some merlins flying close to the train, partly concealed by the smoke from the engine. As the train thundered along many frightened little birds flew upward, only to be pounced upon and eaten by the merlins.

It is not probable that falconry as a sport will ever be revived, yet a new field of usefulness is opening to these strong, swift and fearless birds. It is reported that the Russian Government has decided to use falcons in place of carrier pigeons, and if this is done other European armies will follow Russia's example. In experimenting with falcons it was found that they could carry documents weighing over four pounds without impeding their flight or losing speed.