



A LONG RUN HOME

A Thrilling, True-to-Life Nature Story

By CLIVE R. FENN

As he dashed into the shelter of the covert the fox heard the sound of the hunting horn far off down the valley. It was music that was most distasteful to his ears, but he breathed again in the rough sanctuary beneath trees where the tangle of bronzed brambles afforded a chance of concealment.

It had been a hard run, quite a touch-and-go business, and there had been moments when the fox had given up all hope of getting away. He listened, ears twitching uneasily. The chase had been hot, and even he, a remarkably cunning representative of his race, had had all his work cut out to show a clean pair of heels. Far off in the misty distance once more he heard the call, and shivered, then started again, loping through the dense woodland.

Here and there was a gap bathed in yellow sunlight, and here the silver gossamer threads flashed in the light, making shining pathways out beyond the covert, right across a big ploughed field. The fox shrank from the open stretch, and dropped like a red shadow into a gully. Here he stopped and sniffed again.

They were after him still. He saw a mile away the gleam of something. It was a pink coat, and the fugitive trotted on, making

straight for the swollen, brawling stream, flooded by the heavy autumn rains. This river cut through the woodland. The fox splashed across it, and a knowing-looking waterfowl regarded the hunted one thoughtfully before darting into a forest of reeds.

The fox gained the further bank, shook himself, looked back furtively, and then continued his flight. Things seemed a bit more hopeful now, but he felt he had had enough. A brilliant-coloured pheasant gazed at him as he passed a clump of dead bracken, and then went off in clumsy fright. But there was no cause for alarm. It was not the fox's day for game. His intention was to get round by Tagg's Corner, and so make one more point homeward. This corner was dangerous, for it meant exposing himself on two lanes.

Tagg's Corner boasted a signpost which had seen better days. It had been blown flat the previous March. Someone had kindly stood it up again, but had omitted to put it the right way; not that this signified to any considerable degree, as all the writing had been washed away by years of rain. The



peculiar advantage of this little oasis in the lanes was that from out of the bushes in the centre a clear view could be obtained of the surrounding country. With his keen, bright eyes flashing in the dusk of the shady look-out, the fox surveyed the land.

Not out of the wood yet! He snuffled uneasily. Borne on the soft, warm wind the fox heard the hounds. For a brief moment the fox crouched there, panting, his tongue hanging out. Just behind where he hid rose a green hill, spangled with gorse and dotted with stone patches. Then, as far below he heard a sharp bark, the fox was off, slipping across the narrow lane, gaining a green track, and making straight for Gaffer Tapper's farm. Many a plump fowl had the fox gleaned from the well-stocked yard, but now he was otherwise engaged. As he slid into view, the geese, getting fat for Christmas, raised a deafening noise.

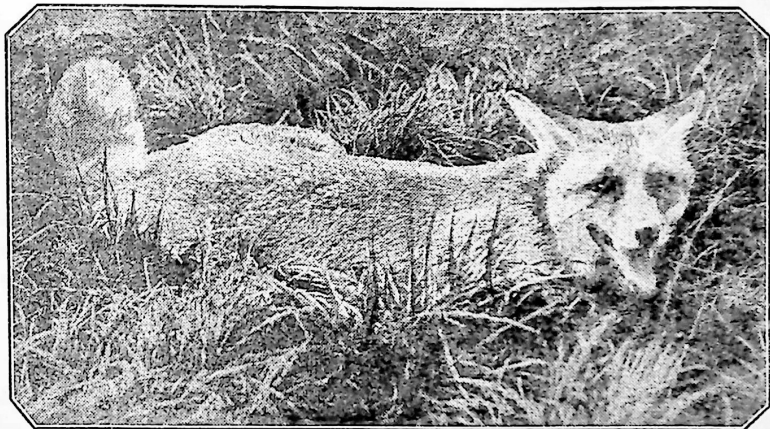
"That dratted fox again!" shrilled Mrs. Tapper, a stout lady, dashing out of the house, where she had been ironing, in her hand a business-like-looking flat iron, all hot.

She gazed this way and that. The prize

geese chattered thirteen to the dozen, and shook themselves vigorously, but Reynard had vanished. Mrs. Tapper shook her head. She had lost her best goose at Michaelmas. But her fears were groundless this time. The fox had streaked for the glebe lands, half a mile on. Beyond that lay safety, for he knew once he had gained the wild country and the chalk cuttings all would be well—for him; though it would be bad for the geese, some day when he was disengaged!

As Mrs. Tapper went back to her ironing-board the fox was gazing at her from behind the wood-pile, alongside the homestead. All was well. Nothing had given the game away. But he was only just in time, for as he darted past the garden boundary the cocker spaniel, who was getting old and lay dreaming by the kitchen fire, started up and barked, for he smelt the intruder. But the dog was too fat and lazy to do more than run to the door and show his zeal by another bout of barking.

The fox raced through a dip in the ground, and then risked everything by taking the open hillside. Here the grass was



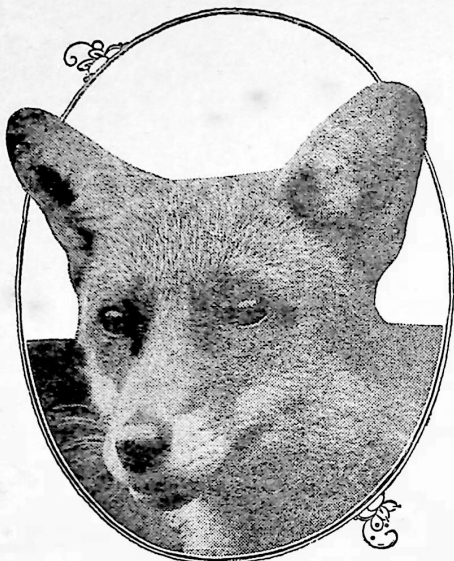
A wily fellow is Mr. Fox! Some think he enjoys a good hard run with the horsemen and hounds full-tilt after him. But does he?

so poor that even the sheep would have nothing to say to it. Here the tough little brown butterflies still pretended it was summer-time; here a drowsy bee still hovered in the tiny pink heath blooms.

From behind came a volley of barks. A couple of hounds had sighted him, and were thundering in his wake. He leaped a narrow ravine, but his enemies were hot in pursuit, and came up with him as the fugitive gained the spot he had been making for all the time. Here there was a sharp descent, right at

the crest of the sun-bathed hill, as if cut with a knife. As he sprang, the foremost hound leaped, too; but the quarry had been too smart. This chalk cutting was the emergency entrance to his burrow, and he knew the way. A minute later and the fox was gone; hounds were frantically tearing at the loose chalk. They could do nothing. The quarry was energetically scuffling through a tunnel in the chalk, the myriad windings of which he understood in every detail, and he chuckled vastly as he reached his lair in safety, after a very adventurous run!

But one thing was clear as noonday. There was no doubt that Reynard had escaped more peril than even he had reckoned for. To hear Mrs. Tapper relate the incident to her friends, it was evident that it was mere touch-and-go that the fox had not been carefully ironed, brush and



A fine head, this—sharp and intelligent! Yes, Mr. Fox has all his wits about him!

all, with the flat-iron the good woman carried!

The members of the hunt cursed the chalk pits. Long after the quarry had gone to earth—or chalk—the agitated geese in the Tapper farm-yard made as big a clatter of their fears and nerves as the historic birds in the Capitol at Rome. But the fox, safe in his comfortable headquarters, cared for none of these things. He laughed over the whole business as he discussed a turkey, lifted the previous week from an outlying farm, with a friend who

dropped in, just about supper-time—curiously enough!

"There is no doubt about it," he said, "these brisk runs are most healthy—keep one in the pink of condition." But the guest shivered at the word "pink," for it conjured up the huntsmen, in their gay coats, who refuse to let an honest fox grow fat in peace at the farmer's expense.

Rumour has it that our wily fox is still living in his snug headquarters in the chalk hill, making nightly pilgrimages up and down the countryside. If you happen to be that way, you may hear soft rustles by the hedgerow, and catch a glimpse of his shadow in the misty moonlight of autumn-time. There will be a quick scuffle amidst the dead leaves and ferns, and Reynard will have vanished. Mrs. Tapper will continue to tremble for her chickens in the yard!