

Chapter 8 OF THE FOX AND OF HIS NATURE

The fox is a common beast and therefore I need not tell of his making and there be but few gentlemen that have not seen some. He hath many such conditions as the wolf, for the vixen of the fox bears as long as the bitch of the wolf bears her whelps, sometimes more sometimes less, save that the vixen fox whelpeth under the earth deeper than doth the bitch of the wolf. The vixen of the fox is a saute⁹³ (in heat) once in the year. She has a venomous biting like a wolf and their life is no longer than a wolf's life. With great trouble men can take a fox, especially the vixen when she is with whelps, for when she is with whelps and is heavy, she always keeps near her hole, for sometimes she whelpeth in a false hole and sometimes in great burrows and sometimes in hollow trees, and therefore she draweth always near her burrow, and if she hears anything anon she goeth therein before the hounds can get to her. She is a false beast and as malicious as a wolf.

⁹³ The term used by Turberville (p. 188) is "goeth a clicqueting."

The hunting for a fox is fair for the good cry of the hounds⁹⁴ that follow him so nigh and with so good a will. Always they scent of him, for he flies through the thick wood and also he stinketh evermore. And he will scarcely leave a covert when he is therein, he taketh not to the plain (open) country for he trusteth not in his running neither in his defence, for he is too feeble, and if he does, it is because he is (forced to) by the strength of men and hounds. And he will always hold to covert, and if he can only find a briar to cover himself with, he will cover himself with that. When he sees that he cannot last, then he goeth to earth the nearest he can find which he knoweth well and then men may dig him out and take him, if it is easy digging, but not among the rocks.⁹⁵ If greyhounds give him many touches and overset him, his last remedy, if he is in an open country, will be that he vishiteth gladly (the act of voiding excrements) so that the greyhounds should leave him for the stink of the dirt, and also for the fear that he hath.

⁹⁴ G. de F., p. 72, says, "because the hounds hunt him closely."

95 Our MS. only gives this one chapter on the fox, while Gaston Ph?bus has another: Comment on doit chassier et prendre le renard. In this he gives directions as to earth-stopping, and taking him in pursenets, and smoking him out with "orpiment and sulphur and nitre or saltpetre." He says January, February, and March are the best months for hunting, as the leaf is off the trees and the coverts are clearer, so that the hounds have more chance of seeing the fox and hunt him closer. He says that one-third of the hounds should be put in to draw the covert, and the others in relays should guard the boundaries and paths, to be slipped as required. Although this is a Frenchman's account of fox-hunting, we have no reason to believe that the fox was treated at that period better by English sportsmen, for until comparatively recent times the fox was accounted vermin, and any means by which his death could be encompassed were considered legitimate, his extermination being the chief object in hunting him, and not the sport. Even as late as the seventeenth century we find that such treatment was considered justifiable towards a fox, for, as Macaulay tells us, Oliver St. John told the Long Parliament that Strafford was to be regarded, not as a stag or a hare, to whom some law was to be given, but as a fox, who was to be snared by any means, and knocked on the head without pity (vol. i. p. 149).

A little greyhound is very hardy when (if) he takes a fox by himself, for men have seen great greyhounds which might well take a hart and a wild boar and a wolf and would let the fox go. And when the vixen is assaute, and goeth in her love to seek the dog fox she crieth with a hoarse voice as a mad hound doth, and also when she calleth her whelps when she misses any of them, she calleth in the same way. The fox does not complain (cry) when men slay him, but he defendeth himself with all his power while he is alive. He liveth on all vermin and all carrion and on foul worms. His best meat that he most loveth are hens, capons, duck and young geese and other wild fowls when he can get them, also butterflies and grasshoppers, milk and butter. They do great harm in warrens of coneyes and of hares which they eat, and take them so gynnously (cunningly) and with great malice and not by running. There be some that hunt as a wolf⁹⁶ and some that go nowhere but to villages to seek the prey for their feeding. As I have said they are so cunning and subtle that neither men nor hounds can find a remedy to keep themselves from their false turns. Also foxes commonly dwell in great hedges or in great coverts or in burrows near some towns or villages for to evermore harm hens and other things as I have said. The foxes' skins be wonderfully warm to make cuffs and furs, but they stink evermore if they are not well tawed. The grease of the fox and the marrow are good for the hardening

of sinews. Of the other manners of the fox and of his cunning I will speak more openly hereafter. Men take them with hounds, with greyhounds, with hayes and with purse-nets, but he cutteth them with his teeth, as the male of the wolf doth but not so soon (quickly).

96 According to G. de F., p. 74, it should not read that some are hunted like wolves, but that they themselves hunt like wolves.
