

Robert's first drag hunt ...

He arrived at the Meet, a little late, to find the village green opposite the Brewers Arms awash with horses and riders. They all seemed in a very jocular mood, probably because of the fact most of the riders were clutching large pints of ale; the village apparently did not go in for a genteel stirrup-cup. He saw Mrs Bleavins hurling Ashley up onto a pony the spitting image of the one in Thelwell's cartoons: its name appeared to be Bodger. She walked over to Robert and pressed a foaming tankard into his hand.

"As it's not too cold, we thought a nice glass of beer would be best," she said.

Oh yes, thought Robert, and I'll feel it swilling around inside me as I go over those banks. Why am I here?

In answer, Faulkner appeared, leading a chunky brown cob. It looked docile enough. Robert viewed it with distrust. Mr Faulkner, hat on the back of his head and pint in his free hand, beamed at him expansively.

"Meet Victor," he said. "Goes like a lamb. Amy from the vicarage rides him, but she's laid up this season. Just see that he gets enough exercise. You haven't got a hat?"

"No," said Robert. "I don't wear a hat. Ever." He ran his hand through his red-brown hair. Since leaving the police he had allowed it to grow until now it curled over his collar. Not fashionable, but he liked it that way.

"Have to have a hat. Fred!" Faulkner bawled. "Chap here hasn't got a hat!"

Fred, whom Robert recognised as a local farmer with the habitually morose expression of his kind, ambled over. He looked at Robert.

"Mavis," he ordered, "go and borrow your brother's. It should fit him."

"Fred's the Master," said Faulkner. "Here we are, stick that on. You should get your hair cut: you'll never get a decent hat to fit with all that lot flopping about."

Robert resisted - with difficulty - the urge to push Faulkner's pint mug down his throat.

"Now, Ashley," Mrs Bleavins was saying, "be a good boy and do whatever Mike and Mr Stebbins tell you. You stay close to them, Mr March, and you'll be all right."

"You don't need to worry with Victor," said Mr Faulkner bracingly. "He's done this run dozens of times: a three-year-old could take him round. But don't get too close to Piper's heels - he won't like it."

"Pity Amy's missing the season with that fall," said Mrs Bleavins. "Still, they say when that leg's out of plaster she'll be good as new."

"Still can't understand how they fell at that bank," said Faulkner. "Not like her at all, that. Just time for another pint before we're off."

Robert wished they would all just shut up and get on with it.

"The hounds!" yelled Ashley.

Robert looked at the mass of dogs which erupted onto the green; they struck him as a motley, undisciplined crowd and he was glad he'd left Kasper safely locked up. Everyone was hurriedly finishing their drinks while Mrs Bleavins and assorted helpers collected glasses. Riders began to mount their horses.

Robert looked at Victor sternly. "We haven't met before, Victor, but be warned: I know too much about horses!" He decided to swallow his pride and use the mounting-block; his leg, already complaining in the too-tight boot, wasn't likely to stand for the normal method of mounting.

Mr Faulkner watched him, then came over to check his girth. "Better pull it up a notch for you. Victor blows out - you could find yourself upside down. Move your leg, man!"

Robert glared at him, then shifted his leg so Faulkner could tighten the girth.

"There, that should do it. Just keep with the main bunch. Watch that dun with the red

ribbon in his tail - he's a kicker. And watch out for Bodger: he likes to nip in front - nearly fell over the bugger last month. Right, Fred!"

The hunt moved slowly off, cheered on by the local children, trotting down one of the lanes, then off into the open fields; the hounds began to call.

"They've picked up the scent," said Faulkner. "You all right, March?"

"Yes."

It was a fine day, Robert thought. He'd forgotten how good it could be to be up on a horse again. He sniffed the air as the hounds began to move faster.

"We're off!" yelled a rubicund gentleman, whom Robert now recognised as the local doctor: he had just heard he was on his panel and wasn't sure he cared for the fact that his doctor was a hunting man.

Victor began to pull hard; he seemed to be trying to get up to the front with Piper and Gert, Mr Stebbins' mount. Robert wondered if they normally rode together, then stifled a curse as a madly galloping Bodger cut right in front of him. After a few moments he realised that Bodger constituted a major traffic hazard, as a storm of curses from nearby riders confirmed. However, this had no effect on Bodger, who continued forging ahead to shrieks of delight from Ashley, apparently kept in the saddle by gravity alone.

Robert looked around: apart from himself and possibly two of the ladies present, he wouldn't care to breathalyse this bunch. Victor was now galloping hard on Piper's heels and they were approaching what looked like Becher's Brook, only larger.

"Oh shit!" said Robert.

With the rest of the pack thundering on his heels there was no chance of pulling up. He looked for a convenient gap; there wasn't one so he sat down hard, as his grandfather had taught him, and prayed. Piper rocketed over the bank ahead of him. Not bad, thought Robert; his rider was no lightweight. Then Victor followed suit. The descent on the other side of the bank seemed to have been modelled on the Cresta Run, but both horses took it in their stride. After that Robert just sat down, enjoyed the trip and left the decisions to Victor.

As they pounded across what seemed endless miles of muddy fields, always with the unspeakable Bodger not far behind, he heard a shout as a rider to his left took a crashing fall. They were now thundering down a muddy lane then, to Robert's relief as a large muddy clod narrowly missed his left ear, the hounds seemed to lose the scent and circled about, yelping dismally.

"Not a bad run," said Faulkner, looking back at him; his face was liberally splattered with mud. "You kept up well, March."

"Victor seemed to want to," said Robert. Credit where it was due, he thought.

"Yes, Amy and I usually ride together. Ashley!" he roared, "you stay right there!"

Robert winced as Faulkner's voice, guaranteed to carry across ten miles of hunting country, grated on his ear. Faulkner walked his horse over to Ashley and Bodger. Robert could not hear what was being said but Faulkner's gestures offered hints.

"... and take your bloody pony and go!"

Ashley gazed up; his lower lip trembled, and even Bodger quivered. Then, with a howl, Ashley buried his face in his pony's mane.

"You're always rotten to him," he wailed. "He didn't mean any harm. It's not his fault they can't keep up with him." Large tears were splashing down his round face.

Robert, amused, watched Faulkner disintegrate before this attack.

"All right," Faulkner said through gritted teeth, "but the little sod goes on a leading rein before he has someone down. Maud, can you take him?"

"No problem, Mike. Bring him over, Ashley."

Ashley hugged Mr Faulkner's leg thankfully, which transferred even more mud to his person, then led his pony over to Maud. The rest of the hunt had now caught them up,

several looking much the worse for wear.

“Faulkner!” roared the doctor, tossing his hip-flask over. Faulkner caught it deftly and took a long drink. He offered it to Robert, who shook his head; he was beginning to feel a deep-seated ache in his bad leg.

There was a shriek of delight from Ashley. “They’ve found the scent again!”

“Oh God,” said Robert, but thankfully the banks did not seem as high on this run and Victor dropped back from the leaders. To his deep regret Robert missed seeing Faulkner and Piper come to grief; Piper, for once taking the easy jump, had landed square in a very muddy pond and then apparently settled there with a resigned expression on his calm face. Mr Faulkner had been forced to abandon ship, to the detriment of his clothes, to haul his mount ashore while the rest of the hunt fell about.

Robert sighed with relief as he saw the village coming into view again. When they halted at the green, Maud came over.

“I could take Victor home with me,” she said. “The vicarage is on my way.”

“Thank you,” said Robert. Passing her Victor’s reins he dismounted with care and looked about: Mrs Bleavins was leading away a very happy and filthy Ashley and Bodger; Mr Faulkner was trying to wash the worst of the mud off his boots at the pump. After a while he gave up on them and came over to Robert.

“Enjoy the run?” he asked.

Robert, leaning on the wall and praying the pain in his leg would ease up, stared at him.

“I ...” he began.

The pain peaked. Sick and dizzy, Robert grabbed at his questioner’s tall, solid body.

When Robert’s head cleared he was lying on a sofa in the back parlour of the Brewers Arms. The landlady and Faulkner were both leaning over him, looking anxious. The doctor pushed them aside.

“Better get that boot off, Mike. Do it carefully. Didn’t realise it was you at first, Mr March. What on earth were you doing hunting without a proper support boot - all that jarring at the jumps!”

Faulkner took out a knife. “You’re going to owe Tommy Perkins for a new pair of boots,” he said as he began to slit it open.

“You watch it with that knife!” said Robert.

The boot was removed very gently. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me about this?” asked Faulkner, staring at the swollen, damaged leg.

“None of your damn business,” said Robert.

“Well,” said the doctor, “you’re going to have to keep off it for a few days.” He looked round. “Thomas, will you take Diamond back for me and ask Fred if we can borrow his car to take Mr March home? Mike, you can help get him into it.”

“I can manage,” said Robert aggressively. He got to his feet, managed a few steps and sagged against the wall.

“Don’t be an idiot,” said Faulkner, settling him back on the sofa. “I’ll have the lads carry you out on a chair.”

Fuming, Robert was carried out and settled into the car.

“Here he is, Ian,” said Faulkner. “I’ll be over as soon as I’ve stabled Piper.”

The car started up, drowning Robert’s yell of, “Don’t bother!”

Dr Ryan helped Robert onto his own sofa and bandaged the leg. “Keep off that as much as possible. You have some painkillers?”

“Yes. Thanks for the lift home.”

“I’ll call tomorrow. Here’s Mike now.”

Robert heard them talking in the hall before Faulkner walked in; he had washed and changed. Robert looked at him without enthusiasm.

"I thought that with living alone you could do with some help," said Faulkner.

"I like it that way, can manage fine."

"Ha!" said Faulkner, looking about. "Any coffee? I could do with a cup."

"You'll have to make it yourself then," said Robert ungraciously.

"I intend to," said Faulkner. "Come on, puss, I'll feed you too." Kasper followed him, purring.

A cup of coffee was placed on Robert's chest. He drank it slowly as a voice rang out from the kitchen.

"What have you got to eat?"

"I dunno," said Robert. "Look in the pantry."

"I did. It looks like Old Mother Hubbard's."

"There should be some bread," said Robert. "I'm not very interested in food."

"Can tell that - you're so bloody thin. I'll just go down to the farm."

"Faulkner!" yelled Robert, but he had already left.

When he came back it was with a large bag.

"Here we are - bacon, sausages, black pudding, eggs. And I can do you a good chunk of fried bread to go with that," said Faulkner cheerfully.

"I hate fried bread," Robert complained.

"Good for you, puts hair on your chest."

The smell of fried bread began to percolate.

"Here," said Faulkner as he dumped a well-filled plate on Robert's stomach. "Get that down you."

Robert looked at the plateful in horror; obviously Faulkner enjoyed a keen appetite. He began to eat slowly. Not bad, he thought grudgingly as he glanced over at the other man, who was pouring tomato ketchup over his, then mopping up with a large wedge of bread. Robert finally pushed his plate away.

"Couldn't eat another mouthful. Was all right, that."

"I'll put the kettle on," said Faulkner. "Where can I sleep tonight?"

"You have a house two miles down the road."

Unsnubbed, Faulkner looked about. "I'll just shift the rubbish off that settee."

"You will not," said Robert. "That's where I'm sleeping. I'll never make the stairs. Use my room."

He realised that short of brute force there was no way Faulkner would be shifted and his leg was hurting like hell.

They had coffee peacefully and later Faulkner insisted on seeing him comfortably settled before he went upstairs. Robert lay listening to the clock ticking. Was it always that loud?

At 3 a.m. Robert decided he couldn't stand it any longer and got up to look for his painkillers. He made it to his feet successfully, then fell over the coal-scuttle and a pile of books. The resulting crash brought Faulkner downstairs.

"Rather early to do your aerobics, isn't it?" he inquired.

"Shut up," said Robert, struggling to his feet. He swayed and almost fell again. Faulkner swore and eased him back onto the couch.

"What were you after, the bathroom?"

"No, my pills. Leg's griping a little. I thought they were down here."

"All right, tell me where they're likely to be."

Robert described their possible location and after a brief search Faulkner was back with the pills and a glass of water.

"Sorry I woke you," said Robert. "Should be all right now - they work fast."

"You could have called me," said Faulkner. "Why didn't you tell me about your leg?"

I'd never have taken you on that run if I'd known."

"Stupid, I guess," said Robert vaguely. "Kept up all right, didn't I?"

"You did, went very well too," said Faulkner.

"Good." Robert grinned at him woozily as the pill took effect. "Think I'll sleep now."

He closed his eyes.

Faulkner tucked the rug back round him and stayed until he was sure Robert was asleep before returning to his room.