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Vanity Fair, October 1914



A group of young falcons on blocks, being "broken to the hood."

THE NOBLE ART OF FALCONRY

And the Gradual Extinction of the Sport in England

By P. G. Wodehouse

Author of "The Little Nugget," "The White Hope," etc.

THE Sport of Falconry is still seen a good deal in England and Scotland, although every year has witnessed a diminution of interest in it. It has ceased to grip the great heart of the public. No crowds assemble to watch somebody's merlin pull off a double header with somebody else's peregrine. The motto of the day is: Golf, and the world golfs with you; hawk, and you hawk alone.

The sport consists of sicking falcons or hawks onto perfectly inoffensive birds of other species, and standing by in a negligent attitude while the party of the first part does all sorts of unpleasant things to the party of the second part.

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, to which I occasionally turn to polish up my information on the few things I do not already know all about, the decay of falconry was due to the enclosure of waste lands,

agricultural improvements, and the introduction of firearms into the sporting field. Of these, it was the last that hit the fine old pastime hardest. Thinking men, faced with the alternative of watching a bird amuse itself or having the time of their lives peppering gamekeepers with small shot, did not hesitate for an instant. They saw in a flash what had always been the great objection to hawking, viz., that the hawk got all the cheers and spot-light, while the human in the background was merely a super, supporting the star. No man of spirit can endure for long to play second fiddle to a mere bird, so when firearms came along, the populace grabbed them as one man; and since then the hawk has been "resting."



Two hooded peregrines "on block."

Another reason why the sport waned in favor was because it failed to cater to the man in the cheap seats who is the backbone of every sport. "Falcons and hawks," says one writer, "were allotted to degrees and orders of men according to rank and station—for instance, to the emperor the eagle and vulture, to royalty the jerrfalcon, to an earl the peregrine, to a yeoman the goshawk, to a priest the sparrow-hawk, and to a knave or servant the useless kestrel." Do you imagine that, under those conditions, the knaves or servants, who formed the bulk of the sporting public, were going to throng into the bleachers and spend all their spare cash on falconry extras? After a knave or servant had failed for the *n*th time to get his kestrel to do anything but eat and sleep, he began to ask himself "What am I getting out of this?" The emperor could not understand the man's grievance. "I can't think what on earth you're always grumbling about," he would say. "It's the greatest sport in the world. Why, I've just been out with Clarence, my vulture, and we had a corking time." "That's all very well," said the knave or servant peevishly, "but my kestrel, Reginald, might be an I. W. W. for all the work he's done so far."

But, if neither of these causes had been strong enough to extinguish falconry, the vocabulary of the sport would have done it. Your enthusiast can put up with a certain amount of slang in connection with his favorite sport, but there are limits. No man objects to having to read that "Baker poled a leaguer over the sun pasture for the circuit," but suppose this same man had to follow a national pastime with words like bewits, brail, cere, creance, eyas, frounce, imping, jonk, mew, pannel, ramage, seeling, tiercel, varvels, and yarak inextricably mixed up with it! He would be a wreck months before the World's Series. It was no sinecure to be a sporting writer in the days of falconry. If you printed a statement that the Earl of Vavasour's peregrine had mantled, when all the time it had really raked out, you would have all the annoyance of (1) changing your act, (2) hunting for another job, or (3) accompanying the headsman into the operating theatre.



Game hawking in England. The falcons are perched on a "cadge."

BUT of all the men who must have cursed the day that falconry was ever invented, the birds' trainers must have had the greatest grievance. "The following," says a learned authority, "is an outline of the process of training hawks," and then proceeds to fill a dozen closely-printed pages. A perusal of it has left me with the impression that the only thing you do not have to do in training a hawk is to teach it the Maxixe. Everything else has been provided for. The hawk, says our authority, "will easily be induced to feed by drawing a beefsteak over her feet, brushing her legs at the same time with a wing, and now and then, as she snaps, slipping a morsel into her mouth." To my mind, a bird which makes such a fuss about its meals does not

deserve them. There is no need to pamper a bird. Bring it its beefsteak on a plate with a little water-ress and a few French fried potatoes, and, I submit, you have done your part.

(Note: this appeared in 1932 in *Louder and Funnier*)

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