

First Blood

by Chris Wright

A superlative feast of eggs, rashers and toast being dispatched, the Manchester Guardian freshly ironed in the pantry, the banter with Molly, a giggle and a promise of something hot for tea.

I am resplendent in Colonel Cormorant's finest, canary yellow vest, black coat, hunt buttons, the boots gleaming, crop smartly tapping as I stride briskly out to the courtyard.

The horses wheeling and stamping, Major Meredith Motley, master of the Borrowdale hounds checking the time, cursing roundly as he trips over my casually outstretched boot, depositing him arse first in the mire.

Motley looking up furious as Baroness Millicent Merryweather, an irritable grimace creasing her formidable features, extends a gloved hand : "For God's sake Motley it's only breakfast time, do try and remember there are children present..."

Staggering red faced and seething to his feet, the Merryweather progeny's smug smirking faces only adding fuel to the fire — God! how he hated the stinking shower of idle arrogant gobshites. He stamps the muck off his boots and barges roughly past the odious offspring — Oliver, jumped up little prig.

The Merryweather minxes, Miranda and Merlin, pretty little things, their first hunt, trotting primly in the rear, poking fun at odious Oliver. Here he comes now, fifteen going on fifty, upright and aloof. The girls giggle and Oliver flushes angrily, wheels and canters back to the pack.

Out in the field, the fox, streaming across the ghyll, a blur of red. The imbecile hounds catching the scent, trampling through the stream, horses flying over them. Mr Darcy Dickinson, unexpectedly separated from his mount, hurtling, flask firmly fixed to lips, through the crisp autumn air. Horse galloping on riderless.

The fox doubles back, into the Winn, tongue lolling, panting, creeping back out of the wood, trotting brazen across the open fields

as the pack pursue shadows, heading safely away to the North. The hunt gather, revise strategy, drain flasks, make arrangements.

I spot the divine Miss Middleton, Marcia to her friends, an exclusive set whose ranks I am keen to join. Spurring the nag. I trot briskly over, raising the hat “Miss Middleton, I say what fabulous sport!” She flashes her delightful smile. Leans into me, “Peregrine — you wicked man! Join us for sherry at the hall?”

Major Meredith, moustaches merrily twirling approaching from the starboard, a twinkle in his eye. Ms. Topsy Terpsichorean, blushing, “Well yes, it is frightfully cold, perhaps a little nip” accepting the proffered flask, coughing as the unadulterated spirit brings a tear to her eye. The Major guffawing “Tip top, keep the weather at bay, what?” The poor girl now crimson faced and choking, slipping sideways from the saddle.

The bugle abruptly sounds, the scent has been picked up, bitter cold forgotten, all hands to the pump — the children heading the field as the ponies bolt, hysterical and hands free, first one, then the other propelled head first into the briar, odious Oliver smirking behind.

The pack making up ground, the fox in the open — the dogs snapping at the brush as it spins this way, that way, eluding the slavering jaws by a hairs breadth. The fox twists and rolls, tries every trick, every last desperate one.

Dogs are upon him now, jaws snapping, tearing and wrenching — the riders catch up, Major Motley lashing out with boot and whip, driving the dogs away — with a knife cutting the brush from the still warm corpse, dipping it into the bloody guts steaming on the trampled gore soaked ground.

Baroness Merryweather approvingly smiles as the Major approaches Oliver, a peculiar grimace, painting a thick stripe of stinking sap across each cheek.

“You're blooded now boy...” Standing back, savouring the moment “Welcome to the sport of Kings!”

Tears welling up as Oliver, fifteen not fifty, projects his breakfast onto the sodden crimson ground.

