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Broken Bits of Old Kentucky

By Kenneth Lake

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BROKEN BITS OF OLD KENTUCKY

IN A RIVERSIDE NEIGHBORHOOD OF BOONE COUNTY

AT a time now somewhat remote there was supported, throughout the State of Kentucky, what some thought a most excellent institution—the whipping-post. This medium of humiliating punishment was a natural outgrowth of the slave-owner's right to punish his Negroes; but its general use among the blacks by no means meant immunity for lawless whites, many of whom were publicly whipped, the chastisement, in most instances, having a salutary effect. Why the custom was abandoned I am at loss to say—for good and sufficient reasons, no doubt; but while its reign lasted it exercised a decidedly reformatory influence over the communities wherein it was utilized.

Judge Jacob Piatt,* who had the distinction of having served as Circuit Judge for more than thirty years, owned a Negro who was possessed of that inordinate family pride so common to the blacks of the *ante-bellum* days, eespecially if they were the property of so-called aristocratic families. However, his pride did not prevent him from indulging in an occasional raid on a neighboring hen-roost, where he was caught one night with a large amount of feathered property in his possession. The following morning he was conveyed to Burlington, the county-seat of Boone County, to be whipped for the first time in public. Judge Piatt made it a point to see that Prince was not whipped more than was allowable by law, which sometimes occurred; but the crestfallen prisoner was unaware of his presence until after he had received his lashing and was released, a much-re-

* Of Federal Hall. He had been, previously, a Revolutionary officer.

lieved but shamefaced Negro. Espying the well-known face of his master in the crowd that had assembled to witness his humiliation, he sobbed, "Good Lawd, Marse Jedge, dis am a disgrace on de hull fambly!"

About the year 1835, when the slaves had a disagreeable tendency to go foraging, much to the depletion of henroosts, meathouses, and corncribs, a patrol was organized for the purpose of guarding the road and river ways of northwestern Boone County. It was composed of the most prominent farmers along the border of the county, who were vested with full authority to administer dire punishment to any black man caught abroad after nightfall without a pass from his master. The patrol ultimately did good service in destroying an annoying traffic of no mean proportions that had been established between certain Lawrenceburg, Indiana, white men and Boone County slaves. Large quantities of farm produce were purloined by the blacks, and disposed of to their white accomplices from across the river, who gave in payment nominal sums of money or such articles as the darkies desired in exchange, which were usually whisky and tobacco. One night during the autumn of 1836, four members of the patrol on duty between the sandbar opposite the mouth of the Big Miami River and the ferry-landing, caught three Negro men prowling about in a very suspicious manner among the willows lining the river shore. Upon examination they proved to be without passes, and were tied up to receive such punishment as their captors should determine upon. It was the intention of the patrolmen to intimidate them into disclosures concerning the whereabouts of a large quantity of bacon that had been stolen during the preceding night from a meathouse in the vicinity. Threats and bribes alike proved unavailing, and the prisoners, one by one, were severely chastised. While the first man was being whipped, one of his companions—a strapping Negro—gave him frequent words of advice and encouragement. "Bore hit as long as yo' kin, Mose; bore hit as long as yo' kin," he would say in response to the other's

wails; "dey dassen't beat yo' teh deff." When, at length, he found himself at the post, his tingling companions reciprocated in kind, till finally, when his broad back was roundly scored, though by no means in such a distressing state as those of his companions, and while the hickory rod was still being industriously applied, he cried in mingled pain, shame, and defiance: "O Gawd! I'se done bored hit as long as I kin. I'se gwine to tell whar dat bacon 's at." And he did, betraying, as well, the names of the white men with whom he was associated, who were ultimately caught and severely flogged, thus forever breaking up the unlawful traffic between the two sections of the country, and giving to Lawrenceburg a trio of very sore-backed rascals.

Long before the War of the Rebellion, and for some years after, there lived on the Kentucky shore of the Ohio River, just below Federal Hall, a unique character, known as Major Francis Parnell. In dress, speech, and manner the venerable Francis was ludicrous to a degree, but he was immensely popular. His ability to coin new and almost unimaginable words and phrases, setting at defiance every established law of grammatical construction, was illimitable. He usually accented the last syllable of every word, and emphasized the word next to the last in every sentence.

Parnell labored for years on the Piatt estate, and it was while in the service of that family that the following laughable incident occurred. Working in the same harvest-field with the Major was another peculiar character, known by the sobriquet of Hoosier Jeems. For some reason the relations between Parnell and Jeems were somewhat strained, and the latter took frequent occasion to demonstrate his animosity toward his aged rival. The Major, averse to precipitating a conflict during working hours, contented himself, for the most part, with caustic repartee, at which he was an adept. Their fellow-laborers were eager for an encounter between Jeems and Parnell, and directed their efforts to the bringing about of such an episode, about evenly dividing their moral support between the

two men. Jeems was also eager to try conclusions with the Major, confident in his ability to defeat and disgrace that individual, for whose superior mental qualities and philosophical turn of mind he had only contempt. Finally a rainstorm came up, aggravating the ill-humor of Jeems, who was rapidly losing ground in the wordy war, and longing to demonstrate his physical prowess. The men were at the time building a wheat-stack which was fast nearing completion, with Parnell at the summit, placing the sheaves properly in narrowing layers as they were thrown to him by Jeems from the wagon below. The coming of the storm afforded the latter an excellent opportunity to vent his pent-up feelings in a volcanic outburst of profanity probably never before equaled in the annals of Kentucky, which is saying a great deal. Afterward, in relating the circumstance in his own inimitable way, Parnell said: "He persecuted the weather, the oxen, the wagon, the trees, the earth, the heavens, and me, sir. Then he cussed the wheat-stack, and when he persecuted the staff of life, I lit on him." An eye-witness informs me that the Major leaped from the top of the stack, alighting astride Jeem's neck, the two old codgers then rolling from the wagon to the ground, locked in a deathlike embrace. During the progress of the exciting and laughable struggle that followed, the oxen took fright at the enthusiastic applause of the delighted spectators, and ran away, overturning the load of wheat on the contestants, burying them completely from view. While some of the men were in pursuit of the frightened oxen, the heap of grain underwent a series of fantastic convulsions, that finally culminated in one grand upheaval; and the two men emerged from the dust of the contest, with Parnell on top, covered with chaff, half-choked with dust, but magnificently triumphant. That was the end of the feud between Hoosier Jeems and Major Parnell, they afterward becoming firm friends.

One Saturday afternoon in 1840, a number of Kentuckians were assembled on the principal street-corner of Petersburg for the purpose of devising ways and means of organizing a

racing association, and of constructing a course, over which weekly races between the horses of the vicinity could take place. Prominent in this assembly were John Norris, Captain Thomas Porter, A. S. Piatt, John Fowler, James Early, Neil Riddell, Harvey Parker, and Robert Mosby,—all well-to-do farmers, each the proud possessor of one or more thoroughbreds. Their unconventional deliberations resulted, a week later, in the completion of a track on the farm of John Norris, a half a mile above town. As the months passed, the new association thrived in a remarkable manner. Its grounds became a popular resort for sporting men from miles around. Each of them had some or other sort of a horse to enter in the races, and a diminutive darky to ride it. They drank whisky, fought occasionally, bet on the races, and enjoyed themselves hugely. In this manner a full year passed away, and the second annual racing-season opened auspiciously one Saturday afternoon in early August.

As may be imagined, the accommodations were of a very crude order. Seats were constructed of planks placed across angles of the "worm" fence inclosing the field; and when these were filled, late arrivals were obliged to content themselves with lolling about upon the sward, or with moving about in restless anticipation of coming events.

An aged darky, named Dave, the property of John Norris, kept bar. His establishment was unpretentious and unique. Across an angle of the fence, about waist-high, he had placed a couple of broad planks, upon which the remainder of his outfit—consisting of a number of gourd dippers and a large stone jug—was conveniently arranged. Standing in the triangular recess behind the bar, Dave served "John Barleycorn" to all who cared to drink, which were the entire assembly, himself included.

The races waxed exciting, the participants alternatingly miserable and happy, and the spectators increasingly boisterous. Near the middle of the afternoon wild hilarity prevailed, and several fights took place, one of which resulted in the complete demolition of the bar.

John Norris became involved in a quarrel with Tom Rozell, the bully of the neighborhood, whereupon the latter struck him. In retaliation for this indignity to his beloved master, who, owing to too generous patronage of the bar, was unfit for active service, Dave raised the heavy jug, shouting, "I 'll tek Marse John's pa't, ef I dies fo' hit." With those words he flung the vessel with unerring force, striking Rozell amidship and sending him reeling. Then he fled for his life across the field, with the enraged bully in hot pursuit.

Norris, becoming incensed at some adverse criticism on the part of the reckless crowd, cut a green buckeye club, and plunged into the assembly, delivering stunning blows right and left. This aggressive action on his part precipitated a long-pending free-for-all fight, and pandemonium reigned for the space of an hour. Men who had no participatory interest in the progress of the affray sought a more congenial atmosphere. A number of typical "Kentucky Colonels" plunged over a precipitous bluff overlooking the river, and, upon regaining their equilibrium, fought until they were in water considerably over their heads, having their ardor somewhat cooled during the immersion. Captain Porter, a veteran of 1812, who had obtained a position of vantage on the topmost rail of the fence-corner so lately and expeditiously vacated by the colored bartender, was struck by a random bowlder, and overturned among the rank growth of horseweeds beyond, where, deeming discretion the better part of valor, he concluded to remain.

That day witnessed the end of the Petersburg Racing Association, as well as the amicable relations of several prominent families. The sport was never resumed in that neighborhood. The good old days of copper-distilled intoxication, fisticuffs, and kindred pleasures faded slowly away and forever; and to-day live but few men, who, as boys, stood upon that long-forgotten race-course.

When the autumn winds that had scattered the gorgeous foliage of the blighted woodland returned, sighing, to the bare

branches of the naked trees, the horn of the hunter rang merrily on the frosty air, and the Kentuckians rallied to the chase. From the beginning of November to the end of March the bleak hills were reverberant with the gladsome voices of sportsmen and hounds; and nowhere in this broad land was the hunt more thoroughly enjoyed than in Boone County, where, for nearly a century, it had been the favorite pastime of country gentlemen, and their tenants as well.

Among the patrons of the sport in the zenith of its glory were E. H. Howard, N. S. Walton, John James Berkshire, A. B. Whitlock, Robert Brady, Joseph Lillard, Wesley Adams, and a host of others, whose names I am unable to recall. Of them all, the first-named was the pioneer. To him is due the credit of introducing from the Cumberland Mountains into Boone County the original stock of fox-hounds, from which descended the cream of the other packs. However, each of the gentlemen named owned a noble pack of hounds, that of Whitlock being of national celebrity. And what glorious days they enjoyed! especially after the arrival of visiting sportsmen—a red-letter event of the hunting-season—when local hunters exerted themselves to entertain the visitors, and defeat their dogs.

Long before daybreak, on these occasions, horns would be sounding, challenging blasts from hilltops on every hand; and by the coming of dawn the various parties would assemble in force, usually on Jenkins' Hill, near Petersburg,—a locality celebrated for the quantity of game abounding there. Then, when the fox was started, what melody awoke the echoes of the staid old hills! For the true sportsman invariably had a "musical" pack of hounds, comprising voices variously ranged on the scale, but forming a chorus that caused the blood to tingle warmly through the veins, and added new zest to living. By their voices alone the experienced hunter was easily enabled to determine the respective identities of the several dogs in a pack.

That the hunt was attended by great and unavoidable fatigue is an impression quite prevalent among persons but superficially acquainted with its realities. While such a belief

is not wholly unfounded, it is somewhat exaggeratory. Usually the hunters were fortunate in securing positions of vantage, from which the fox and hounds were frequently visible, the former invariably leading its pursuers in a wide circuit, thereby affording the hunter numerous glimpses of the exciting chase.

It frequently happened that the game was grounded, in many instances so deeply as to defy the picks and shovels of the hunters. Quite often it was found in queer and unexpected company. It is related that upon a certain occasion a party of hunters unearthed from the same den six skunks, three groundhogs, and two foxes.

A life of continual peril endowed Reynard with almost human intelligence, which was amply displayed in his methods of avoiding or wearying his pursuers. Doubling on the trail, swimming small streams, running for long distances on the tops of fences, seeking refuge in the dens of other animals, and even running turn-and-turn with others of his kind, were some of the many effective ruses that perplexed and outwitted the hounds.

A humorous incident, illustrating the infectious enthusiasm of the chase, is related by a veteran hunter. Some years ago there lived in Boone County a venerable colored minister, the righteousness of whose life was disturbed by one prevailing weakness—fondness for fox-hunting—which, sad to relate, interfered greatly with the performance of his labors in the Master's vineyard. On account of this he had for some time been subjected to the most scathing criticism from a rival expounder of the gospel, who exhausted every available argument to establish the great wickedness of fox-hunters in general, and clerical ones in particular. His malicious efforts resulted in a perceptible diminishment of Brother Ben's flock; and when the lightness of the contribution-box became apparent to the old man, he resolved to reform and eschew fox-hunting. The announcement that Brother Ben had repented, and would make his reformation the subject of a sermon, was received with considerable rejoicing by the faithful. On the day appointed for the delivery of the important sermon, the

church was packed. The old man had repented publicly, prayed for forgiveness and an increase in the contributions, and was in the midst of a sulphurous discourse when, from far off, came the softened melody of irreverent hounds. For some time Brother Ben's equanimity remained undisturbed by this annoying interruption, but finally the sounds drew so near as to be heard plainly in all parts of the church. Then it was that he grew restless and his discourse halting. He was gazing as though enchanted toward the open window at the end of the pulpit, through which he could see the fox galloping leisurely along the hillside beyond, and hear the voices of the hounds drawing closer as the minutes passed. He craned his neck to obtain the first view of them. Discourse and congregation were alike forgotten. "Stan' by yo' principuls, Brudder Ben!" cried a fat aunty from the mourners'-bench. "Doan' 'low de debbil teh lead yo' wrong ag'in. De Day ob Jedgment am a-comin'." But Brother Ben did not heed her warning. He was past redemption. The voices of the hounds awoke the old fever in his veins, and he was half-way through the window, when he yelled: "Drat de principuls! I'se gwine afth dem dogs!" And he did, the tails of his coat fluttering defiantly in the breeze, and the male members of the congregation cheering him to the echo.

There were a number of famous hounds in Boone County, chief among which were Gamester, Remus, and Victor, owned, respectively, by E. H. Howard, N. S. Walton, and Jacob Piatt. The last-named attained considerable renown, having the distinction of being the swiftest runner and keenest trailer in the three States,—Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky,—which reputation was permanently established when he led the pack on the memorable day that it defeated the famous Whitlock hounds. He was a medium-sized black-and-tan dog, with nothing in his general appearance to indicate the possession of such speed, endurance, and keenness of scent as were his. Upon one occasion he and his sister, Wing, exhausted three fresh packs of dogs in pursuit of the famous black fox of Campbell County, during which Wing was severely injured

by a barbed-wire fence, leaving Victor to continue the chase, so to speak, into the enemy's country. Probably the first two of the trio, in which he is the third, are the only dogs that ever equaled him in more than one respect. He is said to have caught, unaided, a greater number of foxes than any two other dogs in the county, besides being in at the death of countless others. He lived to the ripe old age of sixteen, and in the closing years of his life became stiffened, toothless, and almost blind. But he loved the chase to the end; and during his declining days I have seen his faded eyes fill with tears of disappointment as he made ineffectual attempts to join the hounds, whose voices he heard daily among the neighboring hills. It was pitiful to hear him barking dolefully on an imaginary trail, living in memory (like an old, old man) the pleasures and triumphs he enjoyed in the days that were gone.

A commendable feature of the hunt in Kentucky was the gentlemanly manner in which it was usually conducted,—the hunters, as a rule, being heedful of the safety of the property of land-owners, over whose farms they were obliged to pass. There was no hurdling, and, therefore, when gates were unhandy, it was necessary to open a panel of fence for the passage of the horses; but in every instance it was replaced, custom decreeing that the last man through should put up the gap. The Kentucky chase is unexcelled in fairness. Among the many "points of honor" connected with it are, that it is unfair to confuse the dogs by entering fresh hounds ahead of them, or to interfere in any way with the fox.

The sport of to-day is tame at best. Modern customs and improvements in restricting the range have curtailed the enjoyment of the hunters, who are compelled, for the most part, to confine themselves to the highways. And, too, old Reynard's bark is growing less aggressive as the years pass. Trappers snare him for his pelt; farmers kill him on account of his depredations, and to discourage hunting on their lands; and with his exodus is passing one of the most fascinating sports that ever existed in the land.

KENNETH LAKE.