



4. Gone A-Hunting

LOU had gone hunting. The North Kent Foxhounds were meeting near Grandmother's house that day and a neighbour had offered to take Lou along and look after her. Grandmother had not been sure, but Lou had insisted that there was the pony, and she knew how to ride, so why shouldn't she? When the morning came it was pouring with rain, as it had been for days, but Lou said that hunting people didn't take any notice of the weather. So she had gone clattering off on the pony with the other

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riders, splashing through the puddles in the lane. Barney thought she looked a bit smug, but maybe it was just the rain trickling down her neck that made her turn her nose up.

Barney stood by the window looking at the weeping grey clouds.

'I'll take you in the car if you like, Barney,' said his grandmother. 'We could follow along the lanes.'

'No,' said Barney. 'Thank you,' he added.

'You'd rather just amuse yourself, dear?'

Barney nodded. He wandered off through the gloomy house, feeling sorry for himself. A cat saw him coming and must have seen the expression on his face, for it turned and bolted through the hall and into the back kitchen, where it shot into the broom cupboard. Barney went after it, but when he got to the broom cupboard he remembered something.

Yes, there among the brooms and mops and feather dusters was Stig's spear. He untangled it from all the other handles and brought it

out into the light. He gave it a rub with a duster and the flint blade glinted. He shook it and the smooth wooden shaft quivered. It was a real hunting spear, there was no doubt about that. And Barney's face suddenly lightened.

Lou wasn't the only one who could go hunting!

Barney looked out at the wintry sky. Hunting people didn't take any notice of the weather, he thought. All the same, since nobody had told him he *ought* to, he decided to put on his rubber boots and mackintosh and sou'wester hat. He felt like a whaler with a harpoon.

He squelched through the empty paddock and into the dripping copse. He was glad to see that there was a wisp of smoke coming from Stig's end of the pit, and a smell of wood smoke hung about the copse. He went round to the entrance of the pit. At the bottom was a lake of rainwater with old cans and light-bulbs floating sadly around in it. But Stig was

there in his den, sitting quite contentedly by a cheerful fire. He looked alarmed at first, not recognizing Barney in all his rainwear, but as soon as he saw Barney's face under the sou'wester he grinned.

'Hallo Stig!' called Barney. 'Would you like to come hunting with me?'

Stig went on grinning, but made no move.

'Hunting, Stig!' urged Barney. 'Foxes! Seek 'em out, Stig!' Barney made fierce stabbing motions with the spear, and galloping movements in his rubber boots, and even imitated a hunting horn: 'Tara, tara, taraaa!' Stig started to look excited, but he was still puzzled.

Barney took his hat off and scratched his head. How was he to explain to Stig about the meet of the foxhounds, and how he wanted them to join in? He looked at the drawings on the wall of the cave and they gave him an idea. He put down the spear and picked up a charred stick.

'Look, Stig,' he said. 'Fox!' And he carefully did his best drawing of a fox on the wall of the cave.

Stig looked alarmed, if anything, but Barney went on drawing. 'Hounds, Stig!' he said. Stig's eyes grew very big and round, but his face did not yet show that he understood what it was all about. Crackers! thought Barney, I'll have to draw the horses now. But Stig had already drawn some horses, so he only had to copy. He was rather pleased with his horse and at last Stig seemed to understand. I'll have to put someone riding the horse, thought Barney. I'll do Lou. There's the reins and there's her riding stick.

There was something about this human figure actually on top of the animal that really seemed to excite Stig. His eyes blazed, and he jumped up and seized his best bow and a handful of arrows, and looked hopefully at Barney like a dog that knows it's going to be taken on an exciting walk.

'Good old Stig!' cried Barney. 'That's the idea. Come on, let's go!' And without even thinking of putting on any extra clothes against the wintry weather, Stig danced out into the rain and Barney with him.

From deep in the distant woods came the toot of a hunting horn. Barney and Stig set out off across country towards it, down the muddy cart track that tunnelled into the woods, and into the fir plantation. As they trod softly over the carpet of fallen fir-needles Stig suddenly stiffened and raised his bow. Barney looked up. At the top of a fir tree was a squirrel, stripping a fir-cone.

Barney pulled Stig's arm. 'Don't fool about, Stig!' he said. 'It's foxes we're supposed to be hunting, not squirrels. Come on or we'll never find the hunt!'

The squirrel shook its tail, ran to the end of the branch, and sprang into the next tree, where it disappeared. Stig looked a bit annoyed, but he lowered his bow and they

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went on their way. They came into a woodland of tall sweet-chestnut trees and oaks. As they came near one of the oak trees Stig dropped to the ground and began crawling carefully forward.

'What is it, Stig?' asked Barney in a loud whisper. 'Is it a fox? Where, Stig? I can't see anything.'

Without looking round Stig waved his hand as if he wanted Barney to get down too. He dropped to his hands and knees, on to a bramble.

'Ouch!' yelped Barney. 'It's prickly!' And as he did so, a flock of six, twelve, no it must have been more than twenty wood-pigeons sprang into the air and flew off with a great beating of wings, every one of them stuffed with fallen acorns which they had been gorging. Stig let loose an arrow into the flying flock, but somehow failed to hit anything.

'Oh, *sorry*, Stig!' said Barney. 'I didn't know it was pigeons. Still we're not *supposed* to be

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hunting pigeons, you know. People don't. When they go fox-hunting they don't take any notice of anything else.'

But this time there was such a fierce scowl on Stig's face that Barney began to feel almost afraid of him. They walked in silence down a woodland track which held great pools of rainwater. Stig splashed through them without seeming to care how muddy his legs were getting. Barney waded more slowly behind, rather worried that the water might come over the tops of his boots. He saw Stig fit another arrow and raise his bow again. Across the track ahead strutted a proud cock pheasant, and before it knew what was happening Stig's flint-tipped arrow struck. With a pounce, Stig picked up the body of the pheasant, pulled the arrow out, and stuck the pheasant behind him into his girdle. The long brown feathers wagged as if he had sprouted a tail as he walked on, but Barney was not at all happy about killing this

pheasant. It was bound to be poaching, or the wrong time of year, or not sporting to shoot them except with a real gun and cartridges, or something. It would have been better to stick to squirrels and wood-pigeons. But he did not say anything this time.

The tootling of the horn was getting nearer now and there were crashings in thickets and the voice of the huntsman encouraging the hounds. Stig stopped and looked about him, and Barney ran and caught up with him.

'It's the hunt, Stig,' he said. 'There must be foxes here somewhere. Keep a good look out and we might see one.'

The crashings and voices seemed quite close, and Barney suddenly thought that perhaps the huntsmen would be angry if they found them in the middle of the wood, especially with a poached pheasant. There was a bank with a sort of little cave under the exposed roots of a beech tree, and Barney pulled Stig into this. As they lay hidden there

they both sniffed. There was a strong and peculiar smell hanging about the place. They lay there and waited. Barney tried to crawl backwards as far down the hole in the bank as he could.

'That's funny!' he muttered. 'Somebody's put sticks here.' In the mouth of what seemed to be a large rabbit burrow were fixed three stakes of hazelwood, so that no animal that was bigger than a mouse could possibly get in or out. To pass the time, Barney kicked and worried at the stakes until he got them loose, and then cleaned the mud and chalk off them.

'Look, Stig,' he said. 'You could make arrows out of these. Or perhaps they're a bit thick.'

But Stig was not listening. He was looking up the track at an animal the size of a small dog, with reddish fur, sharp ears and very bright eyes, calmly walking towards them with its tongue hanging out.

Barney's heart missed a beat. He got slowly to his feet, gripping his spear.

'Fox!' he hissed. 'That's it, Stig. It really is a fox.' He levelled his hunting spear at the fox, and wished he had the bow and arrows. But perhaps he could spear it.

'Stig!' he breathed. 'Come on, now's your chance.'

But this time Stig did not raise his bow. Instead, he took hold of the end of Barney's spear and held it so that he could not throw it. The fox strolled calmly up to their very feet, gave Stig a glance, and vanished down the hole.

Barney nearly burst into tears of rage. 'But Stig, why did you let him go?' he stormed. 'You're *supposed* to kill foxes. That's what hunting's *for*! That's why we *came*!'

But Stig grinned in a rather superior way. He pointed down the hole after the fox, acted a little pantomime as if he was eating, and screwed up his face as if he was tasting a bad taste. He made it quite clear that he thought Barney was mistaken in wanting to kill something you couldn't eat.



The scufflings in the undergrowth seemed to be just the other side of a bramble patch on the edge of the track.

'Quick, Stig, they're coming!' exclaimed Barney. 'Get back into our hiding place!' And he pulled Stig back into the mouth of the earth. As he did so a large foxhound came out on to the track and lolloped towards them on the scent of the fox. It came straight for where they were hiding, looked up and saw Stig, and bared its teeth and growled.

Stig bared *his* teeth and growled.

The hound looked surprised. It wasn't sure whether Stig was animal or human, but he

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was certainly lying between it and a good strong scent.

The hound took a step forward, making horrible noises in his throat.

Stig took a step forward on his hands and knees, making horrible noises in *his* throat.

Barney sat at the back of the little cave, holding his middle. The hound looked very big and fierce and he was afraid it might hurt Stig. But then Stig was looking very fierce too, and he might hurt the hound.

Stig was the first to move. With a lightning spring he darted forward and bit the hound hard on the ear. It was too much for the poor animal. It was not afraid of sharp-toothed foxes or other animals that fought back, but Stig smelt like a man and it had never heard of a man biting a dog. It turned and made off yelping, with its tail between its legs.

Barney looked at Stig. 'I think we better go home,' he said. 'We're supposed to be fox-

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hunting and what have you done? Killed a pheasant, helped a fox, and bitten a hound! What are you going to do next, I'd like to know?'

But once again Stig was not listening to Barney. He was hearing something new – the thud and squelch of heavy hoofs moving through the woodland glades. And perhaps he was smelling another animal smell. The horses of the hunt followers were moving through the wood, and now at last Stig's face was alight with the excitement of the hunt. Without a sound or a look to Barney, he slipped into the undergrowth and started flitting from thicket to thicket and tree-trunk to tree-trunk towards the sound of the horses, an arrow already strung in his bow and held with his left thumb. Barney followed as best he could through the undergrowth, with a feeling that something had gone badly wrong with his hunting trip, and that something far worse was going to happen any moment.



Stig seemed to pass through the banks of bramble without feeling or caring for scratches, but Barney's mackintosh was always getting caught and ripped, and low branches snatched his hat off, and his rubber boots did not save his knees from scratches, and the more he tried to keep up with Stig the hotter and crosser he was getting. When he came to an open space at last, and saw Stig, and saw what he was doing, all he could do was cover his face with his hands and moan softly to himself: 'Oh, no, no, no, no, no!'

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Standing in the track, where the huntsman had left it to go into a thicket on foot, was the huntsman's white horse. Hiding behind a mossy stump, his eyes blazing with excitement, his bow bent to the full, with an arrow pointing straight at the white horse, was Stig.

Stig was really hunting now, and to him, *horses were meat!*

Lou sat on her pony at the edge of the wood. On one side the black trunks of the trees dripped sadly and the wind moaned in the branches, on the other side low ragged clouds swept over the bare stubble fields. Around her were various ladies, gentlemen, and children of the hunt, on bored or fidgety horses, waiting around for something to come out of the wood. They had waited by a field of cabbages and found nothing, they had waited by a field of turnips and seen a hare, they had jogged along lanes and tracks and waited by copses, but they still hadn't found a fox. Lou's cheeks

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were glowing and so was her nose, her eyes were sparkling, her hair hung down in wet strips, and her numb fingers could hardly feel the reins. Flash, the pony, who in his younger days at least used to live up to his name, stood in a puddle with lowered head and blew steam from his nostrils into the damp air.

'First time out with hounds, young lady?' asked a hearty lady on a big black mare. Lou smiled and nodded and a little shower of drips fell from the peak of her cap.

'Enjoyin' yourself?' asked the lady.

'Yes, thank you. Super!' replied Lou.

All the same, she thought, if only they'd let me go into the wood and poke around a bit I'm sure I could find a fox. There must be something going on in there.

At that moment out of the wood came the shrill neighing of an outraged horse. All the waiting horses pricked up their ears, riders nervously shortened their reins, there seemed to be a sort of commotion among the riders

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who had gone some way into the wood. Horses were backing, rearing, turning in spite of their riders, snorting and neighing. And into the thick of them plunged the huntsman's white horse, riderless, eyes rolling and nostrils wide with alarm, cannoning into horses and riders and sending them sprawling in puddles and mud. It was a stampede. As the huntsman's horse bolted through the middle of them all the other horses whipped round and joined it in mad flight. Most of the riders were caught off balance. Some lost their hats, some lost their reins or stirrups, some lost their seats straight away and were left on the edge of the stubble. Some of them who had been round the corner of the wood thought the fox had gone away and urged their horses after the rest of the field. All Lou could do was stay on top of Flash as best she could and join the stampede. So this was hunting, she thought, though thinking was difficult at full gallop in the middle of a lot of other excited animals.

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Yet even then she had a feeling that there was something queer. Why wasn't the huntsman on his horse? And had she imagined it or had she seen, sticking into the saddle of the bolting horse, something that looked like an *arrow*?

And Lou was never quite sure whether or not she had seen out of the corner of her eye, at the tail of the hunt, a very odd creature indeed coming whooping out of the wood. Had it been naked and mud-spattered? Did it have hair like a tangled bramble-bush? Did it have rabbit-skins round its middle and a sort of tail of feathers behind? And could it have been brandishing a bow and arrow? No! If one was old enough to go hunting one was really too old to believe in goblins and things. She must have imagined it.

The hunt eventually scattered itself in all directions over the countryside. Riders at last reined in their blown horses and found themselves alone or in small groups in remote stack-yards. They decided they'd had a good

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day's sport and went home. Nobody was quite sure what happened to the hounds, or the fox, but it had been a good run. Lou, after directing quite a few lost people, got back to her Grandmother's house as the evening was beginning to close in. Barney had got back only a little earlier. They both needed baths and they were both very hungry by the time they sat down to tea in front of a blazing log fire.

'Well,' said Grandmother. 'So you went off hunting after all, Barney!'

'Oo, not *really* hunting like *me*,' said Lou scornfully.

'Well, no,' said Barney, 'I went with Stig, see, and he was only interested in hunting squirrels and pigeons and pheasants really.'

'That's not hunting,' said Lou. 'In England it's only hunting if it's foxes. Or stags.'

'Well, Stig doesn't hunt foxes because they taste nasty. So we let the fox go. But it was so near I could touch it.'

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Lou's eyes and mouth were round with disbelief.

'It *was*, Lou, really! And then Stig bit the dog and started hunting the horses. It was jolly funny,' Barney chuckled. 'But I thought I'd better come home.'

Lou looked at Barney very hard, but for once she didn't say anything.