

Thomas Hood (1799-1845)

3 *The Epping Hunt*

‘On Monday they began to hunt.’ — *Chevy Chase*.

John Huggins was as bold a man
As trade did ever know,
A warehouse good he had, that stood
Hard by the church of Bow.

There people bought Dutch cheeses round, 5
And single Glos'ter flat, —
And English butter in a lump,
And Irish — in a *pat*.

Six days a week beheld him stand, 10
His business next his heart,
At *counter* with his apron tied
About his *counter-part*.

The seventh in a sluice-house box,
He took his pipe and pot;
On Sundays for *eel-piety*, 15
A very noted spot.

Ah, blest if he had never gone
Beyond its rural shed!
One Easter-tide, some evil guide
Put Epping in his head! 20

Epping for butter justly fam'd,
And pork in sausage pop't;
Where winter time, or summer time,
Pig's flesh is always *chop't*.

But famous more, as annals tell, 25
Because of Easter chase;
There ev'ry year, 'twixt dog and deer,
There is a gallant race.

With Monday's sun John Huggins rose,
And slapt his leather thigh, 30
And sang the burthen of the song,
'This day a stag must die.'

For all the live-long day before,
And all the night in bed,
Like Beckford, he had nourish'd 'Thoughts 35
On Hunting' in his head.

Of horn and morn, and hark and bark,
And echo's answering sounds,
All poet's wit hath ever writ
In *dog-rel* verse of *hounds*. 40

Alas! there was no warning voice
To whisper in his ear,
Thou art a fool in leaving *Cheap*
To go and hunt the *deer!*

No thought he had of twisted spine, 45
Or broken arms or legs;
Not *chicken-hearted* he, altho'
'Twas whisper'd of his *eggs!*

Ride out he would, and hunt he would,
Nor dreamt of ending ill; 50
Mayhap with Dr. *Ridout's* fee,
And Surgeon *Hunter's* bill.

So he drew on his Sunday boots,
Of lustre superfine;
The liquid black they wore that day, 55
Was *Warren*-ted to shine.

His yellow buckskins fitted close,
As once, upon a stag;
Thus well equipt he gaily skipt,
At once upon his nag. 60

But first to him that held the rein,
A crown he nimbly flung;
For holding of the horse? — why, no —
For holding of his tongue.

To say the horse was Huggins' own, 65
Would only be a brag;
His neighbour Fig and he went halves
Like Centaurs, in a nag.

And he that day had got the gray,
Unknown to brother cit; 70
The horse he knew would never tell,
Altho' it was a *tit*.

A well-bred horse he was I wis,
As he began to show,
By quickly 'rearing up within 75
The way he ought to go.'

But Huggins, like a wary man,
Was ne'er from saddle cast;
Resolved, by going very slow,
On sitting very fast. 80

And so he jogged to Tot'n'am Cross
An ancient town well known,
Where Edward wept for Eleanor
In mortar and in stone.

A royal game of fox and goose, 85
To play on such a loss;
Wherever she sets down her *orts*,
Thereby he put a *cross*.

Now Huggins had a crony here,
That lived beside the way; 90
One that had promised sure to be
His comrade for the day.

Whereas the man had chang'd his mind,

Meanwhile upon the case!
And meaning not to hunt at all, 95
Had gone to Enfield Chase.

Forwhy, his spouse had made him vow
To let a game alone,
Where folks that ride a bit of blood,
May break a bit of bone. 100

‘Now, be his wife a plague for life!
A coward sure is he:’
Then Huggins turned his horse’s head
And crossed the bridge of Lea.

Thence slowly on thro’ Laytonstone, 105
Past many a Quaker’s box, —
No friends to hunters after deer,
Tho’ followers of a *Fox*.

And many a score behind — before — 110
The self-same route inclin’d,
And minded all to march one way,
Made one great march of mind.

Gentle and simple, he and she,
And swell, and blood, and prig;
And some had carts, and some a chaise, 115
According to their gig.

Some long-ear’d jacks, some knacker’s hacks
(However odd it sounds,)
Let out that day *to hunt*, instead
Of going to the hounds! 120

And some had horses of their own,
And some were forced to job it;
And some, while they inclin’d to *Hunt*
Betook themselves to *Cob-it*.

All sorts of vehicles and vans, 125
Bad, middling, and the smart;

Here roll'd along the gay barouche,
And there a dirty cart!

And lo! a cart that held a squad
Of costermonger line; 130
With one poor hack, like Pegasus,
That slav'd for all the Nine!

Yet marvel not at any load,
That any horse might drag;
When all, that morn, at once were drawn 135
Together by a stag!

Now when they saw John Huggins go
At such a sober pace;
'Hallo!' cried they; 'come, trot away,
You'll never see the chase!' 140

But John, as grave as any judge,
Made answers quite as blunt:
'It will be time enough to trot,
When I begin to hunt!'

And so he paced to Woodford Wells, 145
Where many a horseman met,
And letting go the *reins*, of course,
Prepared for *heavy wet*.

And lo! within the crowded door,
Stood Rounding, jovial elf; 150
Here shall the Muse frame no excuse,
But frame the man himself.

A snow white head, a merry eye,
A cheek of jolly blush;
A claret tint laid on by health, 155
With master [R]eynard's brush;

A hearty frame, a courteous bow,
The prince he learn'd it from;
His age about three-score and ten,

And there you have Old Tom. 160

In merriest key I trow was he,
So many guests to boast;
So certain congregations meet,
And elevate the host.

'Now welcome, lads,' quoth he, 'and prads, 165
You're all in glorious luck:
Old Robin has a run to-day,
A noted forest buck.

'Fair Mead's the place, where Bob and Tom,
In red already ride; 170
'Tis but a *step*, and on a horse
You soon may go a *stride*.'

So off they scamper'd, man and horse,
As time and temper press'd; —
But Huggins, hitching on a tree, 175
Branch'd off from all the rest.

Howbeit he tumbled down in time
To join with Tom and Bob,
All in Fair Mead, which held that day
Its own fair meed of mob. 180

Idlers to wit — no Guardians some,
Of Tattlers in a squeeze;
Ramblers, in heavy carts and vans,
Spectators, up in trees.

Butchers on backs of butchers' hacks, 185
That shambled to and fro!
Bakers intent upon a buck,
Neglectful of the *dough*!

Change Alley Bears to speculate,
As usual, for a fall; 190
And green and scarlet runners, such
As never climb'd a wall!

'Twas strange to think what difference
A single creature made;
A single stag had caused a whole 195
Stagnation in their trade.

Now Huggins from his saddle rose,
And in the stirrups stood;
And lo! a little cart that came
Hard by a little wood. 200

In shape like half a hearse, — tho' not
For corpses in the least;
For this contained the *deer alive*,
And not the *dear deceased!*

And now began a sudden stir, 205
And then a sudden shout,
The prison-doors were opened wide,
And Robin bounded out!

His antler'd head shone blue and red,
Bedeck'd with ribbons fine; 210
Like other bucks that come to 'list
The hawbucks in the line.

One curious gaze of mild amaze,
He turn'd and shortly took:
Then gently ran adown the mead, 215
And bounded o'er the brook.

Now Huggins, standing far aloof,
Had never seen the deer,
Till all at once he saw the beast
Come charging in his rear. 220

Away he went, and many a score
Of riders did the same,
On horse and ass — like high and low
And Jack pursuing game!

Good Lord! to see the riders now, 225
 Thrown off with sudden whirl,
A score within the purling brook,
 Enjoy'd their 'early purl.'

A score were sprawling on the grass,
 And beavers fell in show'rs; 230
There was another *Floorer* there,
 Beside the Queen of Flowers!

Some lost their stirrups, some their whips,
 Some had no caps to show;
But few, like Charles at Charing Cross, 235
 Rode on in *Statue* quo.

'O dear! O dear!' now might you hear,
 'I've surely broke a bone;'
'My head is sore,' — with many more
 Such speeches from the *thrown*. 240

Howbeit their wailings never mov'd
 The wide Satanic clan,
Who grinned, as once the devil grinn'd,
 To see the fall of Man.

And hunters good, that understood, 245
 Their laughter knew no bounds,
To see the horses 'throwing off,'
 So long before the hounds.

For deer must have due course of law,
 Like men the Courts among; 250
Before those Barristers the dogs
 Proceed to 'giving tongue.'

But now Old Robin's foes were set,
 That fatal taint to find,
That always is scent after him, 255
 Yet always left behind.

And here observe how dog and man

A different temper shows,
What hound resents that he is sent
To follow his own nose? 260

Towler and Jowler — howlers all,
No single tongue was mute;
The stag had led a hart, and lo!
The whole pack follow'd suit.

No spur he lack'd, fear stuck a knife 265
And fork in either haunch;
And every dog he knew had got
An eye-tooth to his paunch!

Away, away! he scudded like
A ship before the gale; 270
Now flew to 'hills we know not of,'
Now, nun-like, took the vale.

Another squadron charging now,
Went off at furious pitch; —
A perfect Tam o' Shanter mob, 275
Without a single witch.

But who was he with flying skirts,
A hunter did endorse,
And like a poet seem'd to ride
Upon a winged horse, — 280

A whipper in? no whipper in:
A huntsman? no such soul:
A connoisseur, or amateur?
Why yes, — a Horse Patrol.

A member of police, for whom 285
The county found a nag,
And, like Acteon in the tale,
He found himself in stag!

Away they went then dog and deer,
And hunters all away, — 290

The maddest horses never knew
Mad staggers such as they!

Some gave a shout, some roll'd about,
And antick'd as they rode,
And butchers whistled on their curs, 295
And milkmen *tally-ho'd!*

About two score there were, not more,
That galloped in the race;
The rest, alas! lay on the grass,
As once in Chevy Chase! 300

But even those that galloped on,
Were fewer every minute, —
The field kept getting more select,
Each thicket served to thin it.

For some pulled up, and left the hunt, 305
Some fell in miry bogs,
And vainly rose and 'ran a muck,'
To overtake the dogs.

And some, in charging hurdle stakes,
Were left bereft of sense, 310
What else could be premised of blades
That never learn'd to fence?

But Rounding, Tom, and Bob, no gate,
Nor hedge nor ditch could stay;
O'er all they went, and did the work 315
Of leap years in a day!

And by their side see Huggins ride,
As fast as he could speed;
For, like Mazeppa, he was quite
At mercy of his steed. 320

No means he had, by timely check,
The gallop to remit,
For firm and fast, between his teeth,

The biter held the bit.

Trees raced along, all Essex fled 325
 Beneath him as he sate, —
He never saw a county go
 At such a county rate!

‘Hold hard! hold hard! you’ll lame the dogs:’
 Quoth Huggins, ‘So I do, — 330
I’ve got the saddle well in hand,
 And hold as hard as you!’

Good Lord! to see him ride along,
 And throw his arms about,
As if with stitches in the side, 335
 That he was drawing out!

And now he bounded up and down,
 Now like a jelly shook:
Till bump’d and gall’d — yet not where Gall,
 For bumps did ever look! 340

And rowing with his legs the while,
 As tars are apt to ride;
With every kick he gave a prick,
 Deep in the horse’s side!

But soon the horse was well avenged, 345
 For cruel smart of spurs,
For, riding through a moor, he pitched
 His master in a furze!

Where sharper set than hunger is
 He squatted all forlorn; 350
And like a bird was singing out
 While sitting on a thorn!

Right glad was he, as well might be,
 Such cushion to resign:
‘Possession is nine points,’ but his 355
 Seemed more than ninety-nine.

Yet worse than all the prickly points
That enter'd in his skin,
His nag was running off the while
The thorns were running in! 360

Now had a Papist seen his sport,
Thus laid upon the shelf,
Altho' no horse he had to cross,
He might have cross'd himself.

Yet surely still the wind is ill 365
That none can say is fair;
A jolly wight there was, that rode
Upon a sorry mare!

A sorry mare that surely came
Of pagan blood and bone; 370
For down upon her knees she went,
To many a stock and stone!

Now seeing Huggins' nag adrift,
This farmer, shrewd and sage,
Resolv'd, by changing horses here, 375
To hunt another stage!

Tho' felony, yet who would let
Another's horse alone,
Whose neck is placed in jeopardy
By riding on his own? 380

And yet the conduct of the man
Seemed honest-like and fair;
For he seem'd willing, horse and all,
To go before the *mare!*

So up on Huggins' horse he got, 385
And swiftly rode away,
While Huggins mounted on the mare
Done brown upon a bay!

And off they set, in double chase,
For such was fortune's whim, 390
The farmer rode to hunt the stag,
And Huggins hunted him!

Alas! with one that rode so well
In vain it was to strive;
A dab was he, as dabs should be — 395
All leaping and alive!

And here of Nature's kindly care
Behold a curious proof,
As nags are meant to leap, she puts
A frog in every hoof! 400

Whereas the mare, altho' her share
She had of hoof and frog,
On coming to a gate stopp'd short
As stiff as any log;

Whilst Huggins in the stirrup stood 405
With neck like neck of crane,
As sings the Scottish song — 'to see
The *gate* his *hart* had gane.'

And, lo! the dim and distant hunt
Diminish'd in a trice: 410
The steeds, like Cinderella's team,
Seem'd dwindling into mice;

And, far remote, each scarlet coat
Soon flitted like a spark, —
Tho' still the forest murmur'd back 415
An echo of the bark!

But sad at soul John Huggins turn'd:
No comfort he could find;
Whilst thus the 'Hunting Chorus' sped,
To stay five bars behind. 420

For tho' by dint of spur he got

A leap in spite of fate —
Howbeit there was no toll at all,
They could not clear the gate.

And, like Fitzjames, he cursed the hunt, 425
And sorely cursed the day,
And mused a new Gray's elegy
On his departed gray!

Now many a sign at Woodford town
Its Inn-vitation tells: 430
But Huggins, full of ills, of course
Betook him to the Wells,

Where Rounding tried to cheer him up
With many a merry laugh:
But Huggins thought of neighbour Fig, 435
And call'd for half-and-half.

Yet, spite of drink, he could not blink
Remembrance of his loss;
To drown a care like his, required
Enough to drown a horse. 440

When thus forlorn, a merry horn
Struck up without the door, —
The mounted mob were all return'd;
The Epping Hunt was o'er!

And many a horse was taken out 445
Of saddle, and of shaft;
And men, by dint of drink, became
The only *'beasts of draught.'*

For now begun a harder run
On wine, and gin, and beer; 450
And overtaken men discuss'd
The overtaken deer.

How far he ran, and eke how fast,
And how at bay he stood,

Deerlike, resolved to sell his life 455
As dearly as he could; —

And how the hunters stood aloof,
Regardful of their lives,
And shunn'd a beast, whose very horns
They knew could *handle* knives! 460

How Huggins stood when he was rubb'd
By help and ostler kind,
And when they cleaned the clay before,
How 'worse remain'd behind.'

And one, how he had found a horse 465
Adrift — a goodly gray!
And kindly rode the nag, for fear
The nag should go astray.

Now Huggins, when he heard the tale,
Jump'd up with sudden glee; 470
'A goodly gray! why, then, I say
That gray belongs to me!

'Let me endorse again my horse,
Deliver'd safe and sound;
And, gladly, I will give the man 475
A bottle and a pound!'

The wine was drunk, — the money paid,
Tho' not without remorse,
To pay another man so much,
For riding on his horse; — 480

And let the chase again take place
For many a long, long year —
John Huggins will not ride again
To hunt the Epping Deer!

MORAL.

Thus pleasure oft eludes our grasp, 485
Just when we think to grip her;

And hunting after Happiness,
We only hunt a slipper.

1829

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