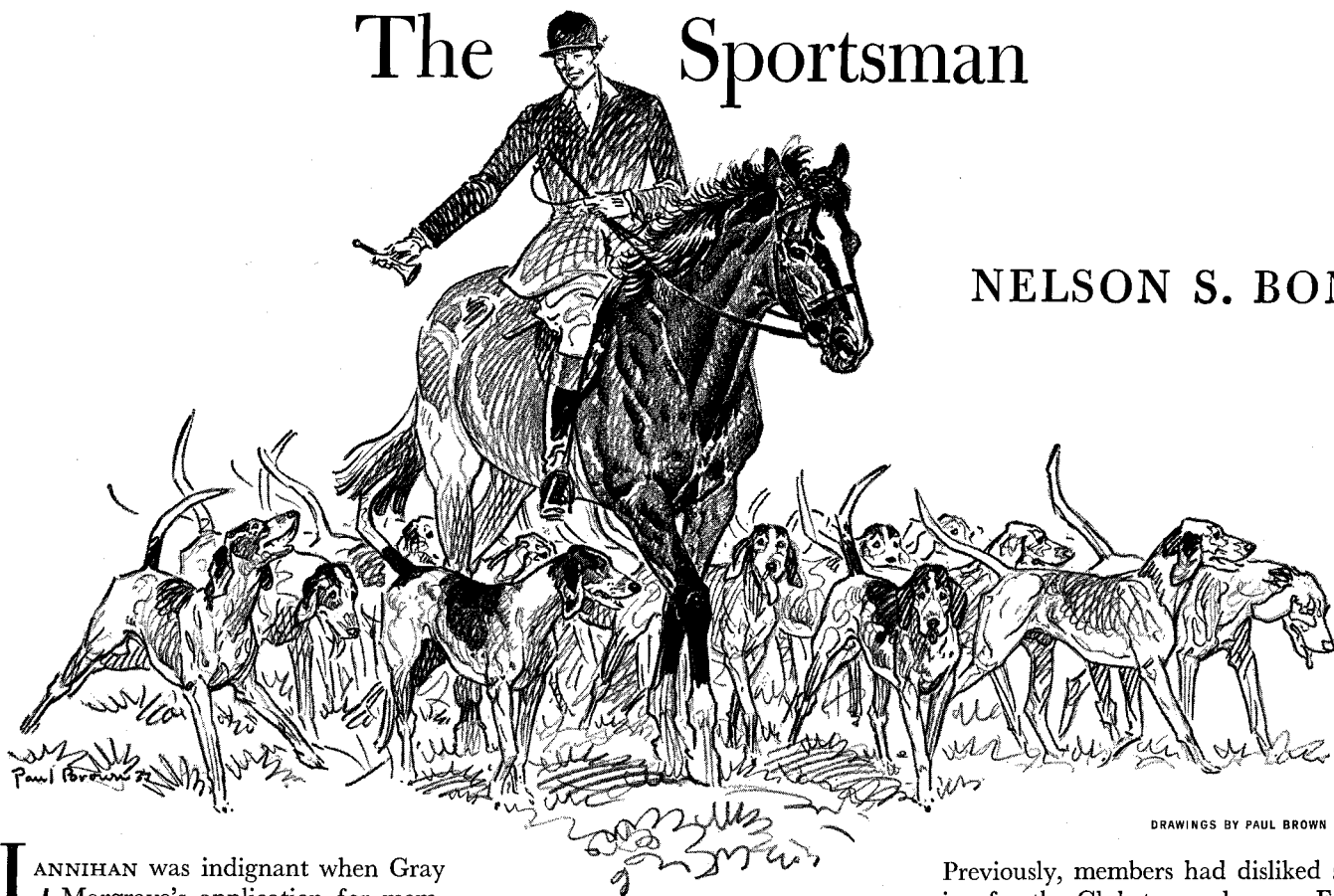


The Sportsman

NELSON S. BOND



DRAWINGS BY PAUL BROWN

LANNIHAN was indignant when Gray Margrave's application for membership in the Club was read.

He addressed the executive committee: "Gentlemen—you may count *my* vote against him! The man is a hopeless cripple! How will it look to have as a member of the Hunt Club a man who never sat a horse in his life?"

There were others who felt like Lannihan. And said as much. A little injudiciously, I thought—for in the Club it is wisdom to reserve opinion until O'Hara has spoken his mind. For thirty years, now, O'Hara has exercised a gentle tyranny over the affairs of Longditch—a dictatorship nonetheless real because of its velvet sheathing. But finally O'Hara spoke.

"Tush, gentlemen!" he said reprovingly. "You do be gabblin' like a yard of biddies, and not like the sportsmen you claim to be. Is it so important, then, that the man cannot walk?"

"Or *ride*!" added Lannihan. "O'Hara, this is a *Hunt* Club. What possible pleasure can Margrave find in a membership here? He can't take part in our hunts or trials. He won't enjoy our dances. He can do nothing but sit by the fire and——"

"And what more," interrupted O'Hara softly, "could a man be wantin'

than to sit hisself afore a cracklin' log, a tall glass in his hand, and him warmed by the good talk of his friends?"

Lannihan had sense enough to shut up then. For the shadow of the Old Country had begun to slur O'Hara's speech, and when that happens it is time to tread on eggs. And because none present—including Lannihan—had any wish to feel the lash of O'Hara's tongue, Margrave's membership was approved on the first ballot.

So Gray Margrave came to live at Longditch. Came, literally, to *live* at the Club, I mean. For where most of us, nuisanced by business ties, used the clubhouse only as a week-end retreat, the retired Margrave was sufficiently free and wealthy to make it his home. He did not allow such business affairs as still concerned him to interfere with Club activities in any way. He had a private wire strung into his rooms, and he brought with him his man, Muldoon, to care for his few personal needs.

His coming altered the atmosphere of the Club—but not in the way you might think. Even Lannihan was forced to concede, after a few short weeks, that Margrave's occupancy made the clubhouse a homier, a more livable place.

Previously, members had disliked starting for the Club too early on a Friday afternoon—each dreading to be the first to get there. The aging caretaker and the kitchen help were drab company for a lonely horseman impatiently chafing his wrists before a cold fireplace. Many a time I, as others, had wandered glumly about the grounds, into the stables, through the gardens, counting the slow minutes until O'Hara or one of the others should show up.

But now all that was changed. No matter what hour of the day or night a member should choose to drop in at the clubhouse, he would find soft lights glowing from the cuppy windows of the lodge, the hearthlog blazing, and Margrave seated before the fireplace, his thin face smiling toward the doorway as the newcomer stomped in. Because of this, good fellowship prospered. More and more of us developed the habit of stopping off at the Club once, twice, three times a week . . . confident that there awaited us companionship, good conversation, and warming drinks.

He was a thin man, Margrave, as I have already said. But his thinness was not the weak slenderness of a sapling. His was the wiry strength of a fine-spun steel wire. All about him, I can see now, was steel-like. His hair, blue-gray at the

temples, the fine, scratched-metal lines at the corners of his mouth and eyes, his eyes themselves, deep-set and burnished. Sometimes, when thought or fatigue relaxed his guard, his eyes mirrored a fragment of the suffering he had known. For Margrave had always been a cripple. But he wasted no moments in weak self-pity, nor did he make any bid for sympathy from his associates. He was a cheerful, friendly man, not with the resigned false courage so many invalids affect, but with an honest, wholesome cheeriness that caused you quite to forget that without a helping arm he was chained to that chair before the fireplace.

The illusion he sought to foster—and the one to which all of us, willy-nilly, must subscribe—was that he was not crippled; that the woollen blanket drawn tightly about his wasted knees was merely protection against such cool drafts as sighed through the clubhouse. A stranger visiting the Club might easily believe Margrave, musing in his chair, one of the riders, too weary to return to the city, who had decided to spend the night at the lodge.

Margrave was meticulous in his demand that no member of the Club be disturbed by his handicap. He discouraged all reference to his helplessness from the very first day when, at the end of an evening's conversation, our little group broke up and Corson, in gruff, friendly fashion, said, "Time to turn in, gang! Can I give you a hand to your rooms, Margrave?"

Margrave had merely looked at him, not unkindly, but with his eyebrows just faintly arched as though in bewilderment.

"Why, no thanks, Corson," he had replied. "I think I'll have another pipe and then run along upstairs myself."

It was like him to say it that way. He would "run along" upstairs . . .

It was Muldoon, his dour but faithful attendant, who cared for Margrave—but when or how was something of a mystery. Certainly no member had ever seen Margrave either ascending or descending the stairs that led to his chambers. Margrave's place was the sprawling morocco chair just to the right of the fireplace. There he might be found at any time. If alone, he would be smoking and staring into the flickering fire. Or more often, he would be reading a book about horses, hounds, or the hunt—for these things were his passion.

When our group conversations turned to horses and horsemen, it was Margrave who usually gathered the reins of discourse in his lean, veined hands, his steel-gray eyes reflecting the soft fire of the hearth, his slim body tensed forward in his chair as though he were posting for, say, the Mudwater Topple or Chokehole Ditch. For although he had never sat a horse in his life, he knew all there was to be known about riders and their mounts. You might ask him the most unlikely questions—the name of a steeplechase champion of twenty years ago, the silks of a little-known stable, the scenting traits of an obscure breed of dogs—and get an answer. He usurped the authority of our hunting library, and rightly so . . . for he had read everything on the subject, and knew which theories held true and which rubbed leather on the rise. . . .

"Faith," O'Hara was wont to say, "and I'll stack the man's knowledge ag'inst a ninny o' pratin' textbooks. And that with him half-drunk, to boot. 'Tis

a creed to him, ridin', and not just a hobby as to the likes of us!"

Which from Geoffrey O'Hara, M.F.H., was high praise indeed.

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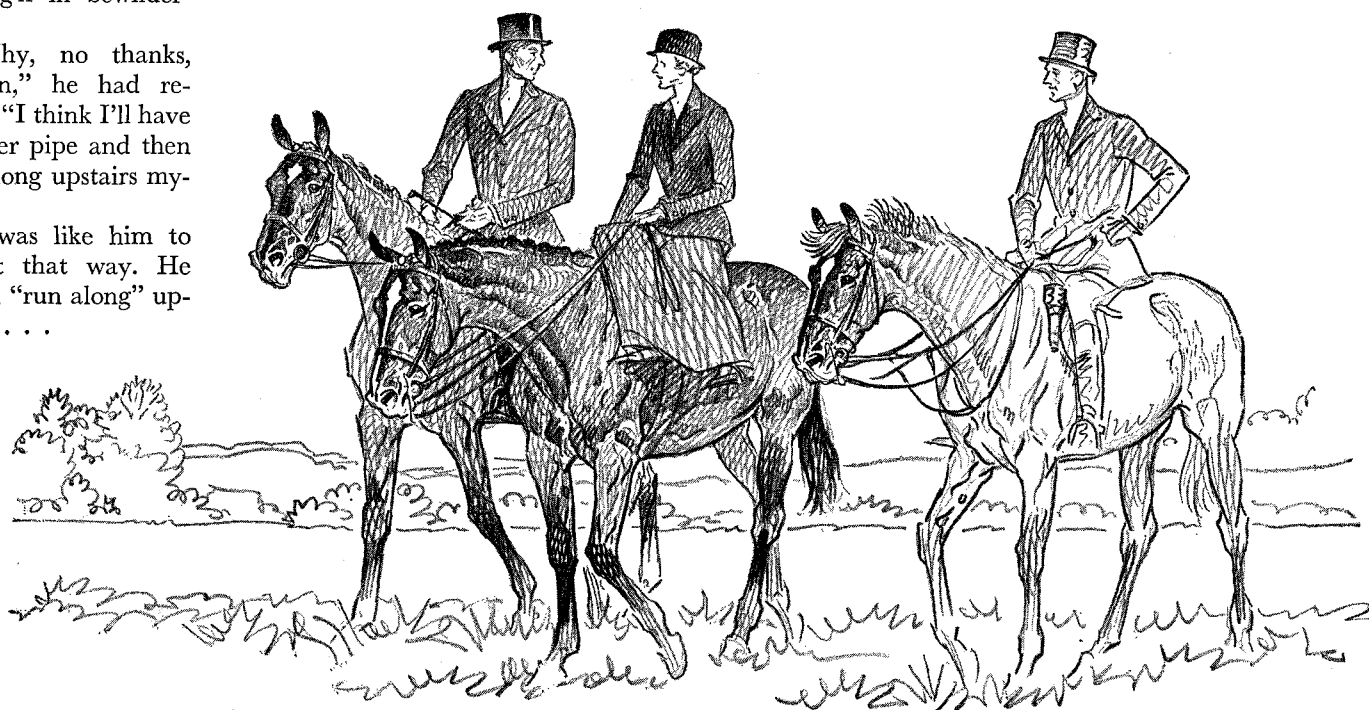
The man was gentle, unbelievably gentle. His tongue was untainted with the bitter malice that so often marks the incompetent. There was that time when our Club gave its Fall Festival, the annual affair at which we allow our wives and sweethearts to enter the saddle-smelling sanctity of our retreat.

Margrave dressed for these occasions, always. His stock was as white as that of any member, his Club kerchief as proud. And if his pinks had never known the sting of the whipping wind or the slash of the bramble tree, its glossy newness had been carefully buffed to unobtrusive age—and if you looked closely, you could see a faded patch that might easily have been the stain of a faded mud spot.

So he had sat, that night, sipping a drink and nodding his head delightedly in time to the music, when Sally Lou Ambers (she that later married Tod Greenaway) in heedless gaiety approached his chair. She had met Margrave only that evening, and in all fairness to her, she was not the first who had been deceived by Margrave's concealment of his condition. And thus it happened.

"Mr. Margrave, you can't just *sit* here when all the other men are dancing. Come—dance with me!" And, laughing, she had tugged at his hand.

To all of us who stood there, suddenly overconscious of our own damnably





sturdy limbs, it was a horrible, awkward moment. I cannot guess who would have broken the dead silence that greeted her words, or what stupid thing might have been said, had not Margrave himself answered.

"Now, I'm sorry, Miss Ambers," he smiled regretfully. "I'm really sorry—but I can't dance tonight, much as I'd like to. You see, the truth is—" We held our breaths as he hesitated. "—The truth is, I came a cropper this morning. Roughed the old ankle up a bit, you know. So if you'll have patience with a clumsy old man and sit this one out—"

And of course she did; they laughed over Margrave's stupid fall at "... that cursed Chokehole Ditch, my dear. I might have known that the turf would be soft . . ." until Greenaway, white-faced and apologetic, finally came to take her away.

*

So spring came again, and fall, and yet other springs and falls, until five years had passed—and even now, looking back, I cannot understand where those years fled. For my only recollection of those vanished seasons is that in them Longditch knew a golden era, and that an ineffable something had stolen into our Club life that made us the jolliest, the happiest club in the East. If not in the entire world. Somehow, our riders always got their fox those years. And perhaps I, too, am getting old and querulous, but it seems to me that in those days the air was more winy, the turf more springy, and the woods and the

hills of Longditch greener and more fragrant than they are today.

Certainly we had finer mounts than ever before, or since. And that was Margrave's doing, for it was he who, seated in his wheel chair before the paddock, matched wits and guile against the horse dealers—choosing and rejecting with uncanny judgment, to build us, slowly but certainly, a perfect stable of hunters. And it was his purse strings that loosened when the Rockway Stables failed and their fine string went on the block, finding its way thence to us.

He knew dogs, too, and only a true huntsman will understand what I mean when I say it was he who "tuned" our pack, tuned it until its pursuit music was a bell-toned symphony.

No wonder at all, then, that though O'Hara retained his Mastership of the Hunt, the members created a special office for Margrave. Somehow this seemed necessary. I remember to this day how, when he was notified of his election to Club Housemaster, his face twitched hungrily, and how one lean hand crept from beneath his blanket to dab at his cheeks. But his reply was typical.

"Dammit, men," he coughed, "you've gone crazy! I have no right to— Well, hell! Let's all have a drink!"

That was the year, too, when young Jipper Tappen's filly, Princessa, took the Golden Steeplechase at the Downs, and Tappen drove home, his broad face one tremendous grin, in triumph with his trophy. We were all gathered at the Club to welcome him that day, but he didn't even answer our greetings. He went directly across the room, carrying that

huge cup his filly had won, to Gray Margrave.

"Gray," he said, "it was you who picked Princessa for me, and it was your training advice that won her the 'Chase Cup. So here—this is yours!"

And he handed that big trophy to Margrave, whose hands, damn it all, trembled so that the cup fell to the floor. You can still see the dent in its side. But I know that was the happiest moment in Margrave's life. . . .

Five years! Now that I look back, I wonder how it was that I never noticed, in those days, that Margrave's face was growing thinner; that his steel-gray hair was getting white; that his once firm shoulders were beginning to sag more and more unsurely.

But I did not notice these things—and so it came as a shock to me to tramp, whistling, into the Club that evening to find him missing from his accustomed seat by the fireplace. O'Hara was there, standing with his back to the fire, and Jeffries, and Wilcoxon. Rupert was seated on a stool, staring into the blaze.

O'Hara caught my questioning glance and lifted his head expressively.

"Upstairs, lad. He's unwell."

Even then I couldn't believe it.

"Upstairs?" I repeated stupidly. "Margrave?"

"He's not been well for months, lad," said O'Hara gravely. "It's only the great heart of the man that's kept him sittin' here, and we fussin' and blatherin' him with our own little troubles."

"But it can't be anything serious!" I protested. "Why, only yesterday I was talking with him—"

"That's as may be, lad," agreed O'Hara, "and was it not always so—with all of us? But I'm afraid . . . the doc-



tor is afraid . . . that this may . . .”
“No!” I said, a trifle too loudly. “No! It’s impossible! I don’t believe it!”

*

But you cannot stay the fox in the brush, nor the hound in the hollow. Nor can the heart of a strong man stay his end when the last huntsman closes in. And though we waited there, as one by one the other members heard the news and came posthaste to the Club, it was not within our power to do more than wait. Wait and hope—and curse whatever stupid God had crushed a soul as great as Margrave’s into a damaged mold—while upstairs the doctor and old Muldoon wrestled vainly for Margrave’s life.

And when old Muldoon crept down the stairs, finally, the firelight glistening on the wetness of his withered old cheeks, there was not one of us could bear to break the silence. Only it is good

to know that it was Lannihan who, at the last, lifted Margrave’s glistening, unused spurs from the members’ rack to hang them tenderly with those rusting others on the Old Members’ board. . . .

*

Now, there is one thing else, and it the strangest thing of all when you come to think of it. O’Hara was speaking, and there was a faraway note in his voice that I have never heard again.

“Faith,” he said, “and I wish we were in the Old Country now. It is autumn there, too, and the fields are all crimson and gold—and Margrave would have his wish at last in the sight of pink coats and the sound of bugling hounds in the dawning.

“I remember,” he said, turning away from us heavily, “a tale as I heard when I was a lad in the Isles. They will tell you, there, that the same is true of an old sportsman as of an old soldier . . .

that he does not die, but slowly fades away. . . .

“They say, too, that ever when a true huntsman dies, he does not forever put away his leather and his bit . . . but that one day, lying coldly, he will be roused from his last sleep by the song of silver bugles in the air and the baying of deathless hounds in full cry. And that he joins that hunt to ride hell-for-leather each morning of time after a fox that is the canniest and wisest of all foxes——”

*

I may be a fool. It was imagination, of course, and the magic spell of O’Hara’s words that inspired it—and perhaps it was an early breath of winter that stirred through me like a thin, cold wind from beyond—but for a frozen moment I could have sworn that I heard, far off in the distant hills, the plunging echo of pounding hoofs and the faint, far *tantiva* of a sounding horn. . . .

An Arm Upraised

ALAN MACDONALD

HE SAW the child for the first time on a hot morning in July. She was standing at the edge of the concrete highway along the only straight stretch between the two towns. He was driving fast, for he wanted to be at his work in the bank earlier than usual in preparation for mill payday.

He scarcely noticed her that first time, except for a faint irritation as he saw her arm go up stiffly, like the handle of a pump, just as his car was passing her. If she had wanted a ride, why hadn’t she started to point when she saw him coming?

He didn’t stop.

Two mornings later he saw her again, standing in the same place, as he came around the curve into the straight stretch. Unconsciously he slowed down a little. When he came opposite her, up went her arm again with clocklike rigidity.

There was something in the mechanical dullness of the movement that made him feel like shaking her. Almost against his will he brought the machine to a stop, reaching over to push open the right-hand door.

She didn’t hurry to cover the few feet that intervened between herself and him.

She seemed to move even more slowly as she approached. As she put one hand on the door handle, she paused for a second to look in at him, with no expression whatever in the dullest blue eyes he had ever seen.

“Park City?” she asked. Even her voice had an unpleasant thickness which grated against his ears.

He nodded.

“Get in. I’m in a hurry,” he said, not unkindly. He tried to keep the quick distaste he felt for her from showing in his words. For the child was not only ugly, but inexcusably dirty.

As she sat down and he leaned over to close the car door, he became instantly aware of that peculiarly acrid odor which comes from a human body, long unwashed. Her clothing, too—dress, stockings, shoes, and the knotted handkerchief which she clutched in one hand—all were filthy with the crusty filthiness of repeated wear.

He could only guess how old she might be. Probably twelve or thirteen to judge from the size of her scrawny body. But the face, with its blotched unhealthy skin, might have belonged to a woman of thirty or more. It was a big face, too big for the rest of her.

Without reason and without pity, he instantly hated her. Hated the smears of chalky powder which showed on her cheeks and nose. Hated the way she settled back into the spotless cushions of his car. Hated everything she represented as opposed to the clean, precisely ordered design of his own existence.

As the machine gathered speed again, she sat beside him awkwardly, staring straight ahead, saying nothing, seemingly interested in nothing in the morning-washed countryside.

He tried to analyze the instant revulsion of feeling her mere presence caused in him, to justify it by telling himself that the most poverty-ridden people can be clean. Like other children, she must have gone to school, for that was compulsory. She must have come in contact with other girls her own age, must have had teachers to tell her about herself, even if there had been no training in her own home.

He made a conscious effort, looked over at her, and smiled. “I’ve never seen you before along this road. Do you live around here?”

He knew she heard him, for her eyes blinked. But she said nothing. A moment later he thought he detected a