A Quick Thirty Minutes from Ranksboro' Gorse

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I read Max Stewart's excellent recent essay *In Search of Dick Christian* with keen interest, not least because as an 'outsider', my impressions of the fabled country over which Christian hunted during his long life are all the more susceptible to romance, and perhaps a degree of whimsy. The far-famed coverts, the meets of hounds and the landmarks of High Leicestershire are like a great peal of bells to any ardent foxhunter.

I seldom find myself anywhere near those hallowed precincts, but my sister lives in the Belvoir Friday country, and while visiting her just a few weeks ago, I found myself unexpectedly at Oakham for a few hours. My wife and daughter were preoccupied within the town, and I, thinking to spend a quiet spell at Rutland Water - an old trout-fishing haunt - drove out of the town towards Burley. I never made it to the reservoir, however, as *en route* my attention was suddenly arrested when I spied a finger-post road sign informing me that Ashwell was but a couple of miles distant. Ashwell! How those lines came back to me:

> *Well saved! We are over! Now far down the pastures*
> *Of Ashwell the willows betoken the line*
> *Of the dull-flowing stream of historic disasters;*
> *We must face, my bold young one, the dread Whissendine!*

I had got Mr William Bromley-Davenport's wonderful poem *The Dream of an Old Meltonian* by heart more than forty years ago, and yet never had I visited Ashwell or Whissendine, or indeed any of the other places that it mentions: Stapleford, Ranksborough Gorse, Woodwellhead Cover. The poem contains sufficient information to afford the opportunity to 'walk the course', so to speak; and that (albeit by car) was precisely what I there and then decided I would do.

Having started, naturally, at Ranksborough - the scene of 'the find' - I proceeded to Ashwell, Whissendine village and Stapleford, and having taken a few photos of the Whissendine brook itself, I returned to Oakham to collect my wife and daughter. Once back home in Norfolk, I picked up a few volumes from my library shelves, and did a little online searching, whose purpose was to satisfy my curiosity as to a rather whimsical notion that the run described in *The Dream* was based on an actual run that Bromley-Davenport had enjoyed in his younger days. And yet no mention of such a run could I find, whether by 'Brooksby' (Captain E. Pennell-Elmhirst), 'The Druid' (Henry Hall Dixon). Maj. George Whyte-Melville or any other prominent scribe of the time. It was at this point that I chanced upon Max Stewart's piece on the Museum of Hunting Trust's website. I had long been interested in the larger-than-life figure of Dick Christian, and it seemed to me at that moment that it could be said that the Whissendine forms an (admittedly equally whimsical) intersection between him and the imaginary run at the core of *The Dream of an Old Meltonian*. This is not least because Dick Christian not only enjoyed an often all too tactile relationship with that 'dull flowing stream of historic disasters', but also because he featured memorably in another famous fictitious run, wherein he gets a ducking in that same stream.

Of all Dick Christian's manifold exploits; his equestrian feats, his often-hair-raising falls and foibles, to say nothing of his encyclopaedic knowledge of the leading shire countries and their personnel in the Golden Age of foxhunting, the odd fact is that he is perhaps best remembered by virtue of featuring in the purely imaginary run described by 'Nimrod' Apperley in *The Chace, the Road and the Turf* of 1837. In it, he comes to spectacular, if fictitious grief, when he fails to clear the Whissendine brook, and ends up under his horse in the middle of the stream. Most keen hunting men and women

will, I am sure, have come across this story, but for the benefit of those to whom it is unknown, it is worthwhile giving it a little space here. 'Nimrod' prefaces it by remarking that:

> 'It is a hackneyed enough remark, that both ancient and modern writers make sad work of it when they attempt a description of heaven. To describe a run with foxhounds is a not much easier task; but to make the attempt with any other country than Leicestershire in our eye would be giving a chance away. Let us then suppose ourselves to have been at Ashby Pasture, in the Quorn country, with Mr Osbaldeston's hounds, in the year 1826, when that pack was at the height of its well-merited celebrity. Let us also indulge ourselves with a fine morning, in the first week of February, and at least two hundred well-mounted men by the cover's side.'

He then proceeds with his very detailed description of the run (which consumes upwards of a dozen pages), in the latter part of which we learn that the fabled stream looms large:

> '"We shall have the Whissendine brook," cries Mr Maher, who knows every field in the country, "for he is making straight for Teigh." "And a bumper too, after last night's rain," holloas Captain Berkeley, determined to get first to four stiff rails in a corner. "So much the better," says Lord Alvanley, "I like a bumper at all times." "A fig for the Whissendine," cries Lord Gardner; "I am on the best water-jumper in my stable."
>
> 'The prophecy turns up. Having skirted Ranksborough gorse, the villain has nowhere to stop short of Woodwell-head cover, which he is pointing for; and in ten minutes, or less, the brook appears in view. It is even with its banks, and, as "smooth glides the water where the brook is deep," its deepness was pretty certain to be fathomed.
>
> '"Yooi, over he goes!" holloas the Squire, as he perceives Joker and Jewell plunging into the stream, and Red-rose shaking herself on the opposite bank. Seven men, out of thirteen, take it in their stride; three stop short, their horses refusing the first time, but come well over the second; and three find themselves in the middle of it. The gallant "Frank Forester" is among the latter; and having been requested that morning to wear a friend's new red coat, to take off the gloss and glare of the shop, he accomplishes the task to perfection in the bluish-black mud of the Whissendine, only then subsiding after a three days' flood. "Who is that under his horse in the brook?" inquires that good sportsman and fine rider, Mr Green, of Rolleston, whose noted old mare had just skimmed over the water like a swallow on a summer's evening. "It's Middleton Biddulph," says one. "Pardon me," cries Mr Middleton Biddulph; "Middleton Biddulph is here, *and here he means to be!*" "Only Dick Christian," answers Lord Forester, "and it is nothing new to him." "But he'll be drowned," exclaims Lord Kinnaird. "I shouldn't wonder," observes Mr William Coke. But the pace is *too good* to inquire.' [1]

That 'Nimrod' should have made a point of naming Dick Christian as one of three 'hardy divers' in his fictitious run is apt. Though he was, by all accounts, an exceptionally fine horseman, and as bold and fearless as any in that uniquely demanding country, there were Inevitably disasters aplenty. As Max Stewart mentions in his essay, 'The Druid' (Henry Hall Dixon) recorded in *Silk and Scarlet* (1859) the remarkable results of his conversations with Christian, during a three-day gig tour of the Quorn, Cottesmore and Belvoir countries, in course of which he regales Dixon with many anecdotes from his long life. It is striking, therefore, that when they come upon the Whissendine, Christian remarks to Dixon: "Not a bad jump that Whissendine there…I never seem to have been out of that brook." [2]

At the conclusion of the run described by 'Nimrod', when hounds get their just reward, he writes that 'Osbaldeston's who-hoop might have been heard at Cottesmore, had the wind set in that direction,' and then goes on to divulge that 'Sir James Musgrave, looking at that moment at his watch', observed that it had been "Just ten miles as the crow flies, in one hour and two minutes."

Quite some run, and twice as long, both in terms of point and time, as that recounted in *The Dream of an Old Meltonian*. It is highly unlikely that such a run could inhabit aught but the realms of fiction. In *The Sport of Our Ancestors* of 1921, Lord Willoughby de Brooke wrote that Apperley's tale: 'is admitted to be one of the best, if not the very best, of descriptions of a run from the riding point of view'. But he was careful to qualify his praise by remarking: 'This fine run was a ten-mile point accomplished in two minutes over the hour. It takes some swallowing; but the thing could only be done at something like top speed all the way. Yet Mr Osbaldeston contrived to change horses at the right moment, and to appear on Clasher when Ashton was getting blown. How did the second horseman get there? Not by riding to points, for according to time and distance the line from Ashby Pastures to Woodwellhead must have been nearly straight. He can only have done the deed by riding fence for fence after his master. This was the fashion for the second-horse man of a heavy-weight when the second-horse system was introduced. But when the master was himself a light-weight [as Osbaldeston was] there was nothing to be gained by it.'

The Dream of an Old Meltonian was first published in 1864, so far as I can ascertain, and thus when Bromley-Davenport - who was born in 1821 - was some forty-three years old. How interesting that he chose to describe a similar run to that given by 'Nimrod' 27 years earlier in *The Chace, the Road and the Turf*, with a run over the Whissendine, ending at Woodwell-head cover. What is still more intriguing is that twenty years later in 1884, the year of his death, his last work, *Sport* was published. It contains four monographs, dealing respectively with fox-hunting, salmon-fishing, covert-shooting and deer-stalking. The fox-hunting section, rather curiously, largely consists in regaling the reader with a very detailed description of a run which is almost an exact replica of that described in *The Dream of an Old Meltonian* , although it makes no mention at all of any specific place. Was he recalling, once again, a favourite run? Or was he just building on foundations laid by *The Dream of an Old Meltonian* that in turn had taken its inspiration from 'Nimrod'?

In the following passage, I have quoted extensively from his chapter in *Sport* (although by no means have I reproduced it in full), and in italics I have interpolated the strikingly similar passages from *The Dream* at the appropriate places:

> 'But the fact is that fox-hunting from the cream of the cream of sportsmen described by "Nimrod," to the humbler class immortalised by " Jorrocks " spreads a vast amount of pleasure, satisfaction with self, and goodwill towards others over a wide surface of humanity.
>
> *Select is the circle in which I am moving,*
> *Yet open and free the admission to all.*
>
> 'All classes enjoy it.
>
> *Yet here all are equal - no class legislation,*
> *No privilege hinders, no family pride:*
> *In the 'image of war' show the pluck of the nation;*
> *Ride, ancient patrician! Democracy, ride!*
>
> 'The "good man across country," proud of his skill, prouder still of his reputation, and anxious, sometimes too anxious, to retain it perhaps derives the keenest enjoyment of all, so long as all goes well; but this important proviso shows that his position is not so secure, as regards happiness, as that of his humbler, less ambitious, or less proficient brethren. A slight accident, a bad start, a sudden turn of the hounds especially if in favour of some distinguished rival on the other flank will send him home with a bitterness of soul unknown to and

incapable of realisation by those whose hopes are centred on a lesser pinnacle of fame or bliss, with whom to be absolutely first is not a *sine qua non* of enjoyment.

‘But supposing all does go well. There is a burning scent, a good fox," a good country; he is on a good horse, and has got a good start; then for the next twenty or thirty minutes (Elysium on earth can scarcely ever last longer)…

Deep, deep in that heart has fond memory engrafted
Those quick thirty minutes from Ranksboro' Gorse.

‘…he absorbs as much happiness into his mental and physical organisation as human nature is capable of containing at one time.

What is time? the effluxion of life Zoophitic
In dreary pursuit of position or gain.
What is life? The absorption of vapours mephitic.
And the bursting of sunlight on senses and brain!
Such a life have I lived—though so speedily over,
Condensing the joys of a century's course,
From the find till we eat him near Woodwellhead Cover,
In thirty bright minutes from Ranksboro' Gorse.

‘Such a man, so launched on his career, is difficult to catch, impossible to lead, and not very safe to follow; but I will try to do the latter for a page or two on paper.

‘The fields are chiefly grass, and of good size. The hounds are " racing," heads up and sterns down, with very little cry or music indicative of a scent rarely bequeathed by modern foxes.

Vain indeed! for the bitches are racing before us —
Not a nose to the earth—not a stern in the air;
And we know by the notes of that modified chorus
How straight we must ride if we wish to be there.

‘The fences are, as a rule, strong, but not high the "stake and bound" of the grazing countries; but ever and anon a low but strong rail on the nearer, or the glimmer of a post on the furtherside, makes our friend communicate silently and mysteriously with his horse a fine-shouldered, strong quartered animal, almost, if not quite, thoroughbred as he approaches the obstacle, on the necessity of extra care or increased exertion.

‘It is, as the rider knows, an "oxer," i.e. a strongly-laid fence, a wide ditch, and at an interval of about three or four feet from the former a strong single oak rail secured between stout oak posts. Better for him if the ditch is on the nearer and this rail on the further side, as, if his horse jumps short, his descending impetus will probably break it, provided it is not very strong and new, in which case a calamity will probably occur; but a collision with such a rail on the nearer side may lead to risky complications of horse and rider in the wide ditch and fence above alluded to.

‘Our friend, however, has an electric or telephonic system of intercourse with his horse (no whip or spur, mind you) which secures him from such disasters, and he sails onwards smoothly his gallant horse taking the fences in his stride and now, the crowd being long ago disposed of, and his course truly laid for two or three fields ahead, he has leisure to inspect his company. Right and left of him (no true sportsman ever looks back) are some half-a-dozen

good men and true going their own line; those on the right perhaps two hundred yards wide of him, as none but a tailor will ride the line of the hounds, and they on their side allow the same lateral space or interval that he does on his. Those on his left are nearer to him, and so far have done their devoir gallantly in the front with himself; but this cannot last. His is the post of advantage as well as of honour, and a slight turn to the right occurring simultaneously with the apparition of a strong "bullfinch," or grown-up unpleached thorn Fence.

‘Getting tight hold of his head, his anxious eye earnestly scans the sky line, where looms out an obstacle, the most formidable yet encountered a strong stake-and-bound fence leaning towards him, which he instinctively knows to be garnished on the other side with a very wide ditch, whether or not further provided with an ox-rail beyond that, he cannot tell.

Oh! gently, my young one; the fence we are nearing
Is leaning towards us — 'tis hairy and black.
The binders are strong, and necessitate clearing,
Or the wide ditch beyond will find room for your back.

‘What he sees is enough considering the ground he has just traversed, and that he must go at the fence uphill to make him wish himself safe over. However, with a sense of relief, he sees a gleam of daylight in it, which he at first half hopes is a gap, but which turns out to be a good stiff bit of timber nailed between two ash trees. It is strong and high, but lower than the fence; the "take off" is good, and there is apparently no width of ditch beyond. So, thanking his stars or favourite saint that "timber" is his horse's special accomplishment, he " goes for it." It don't improve on acquaintance. Now is the time for hands. Without hurry, just restraining his impatience (he has the eagerness of youth), yet leaving him much to himself, he puts his horse at it in a steady hand canter, dropping his hand at the instant the sensible beast takes off to an inch in the right place, and he is safe over without even a rap. A glorious sea of grass is now before him, A smooth and gradual slope with comparatively small fences leads down to the conventional line of willows which foreshadows the inevitable brook, without which neither in fact nor story can a good run with hounds occur.

Well saved! We are over! now far down the pastures
Of Ashwell the willows betoken the line
Of the dull-flowing stream of historic disasters;
We must face, my bold young one, the dread Whissendine!
No shallow-dug pan with a hurdle to screen it,
That cock-tail imposture the steeple chase brook;
But the steep broken banks tell us plain, if we mean it,
The less we shall like it the longer we look.

‘Now it is that our hero shows himself a consummate master of his art. The ploughed and ridge-and-furrow fields, above alluded to, followed by the extra exertion of the timber jump at the top of the hill, have rather taken the "puff" out of his gallant young horse, and besides, from the same causes the hounds by this time have got rather the better of him. In short, they are a good field ahead of him, and going as fast as ever. This would the eager and excitable novice ay, not only he, but some who ought to know better think the right time to recover the lost ground, and "put the steam on" down the hill. O fool! Does the engine-driver " put the steam on " at the top of Shap Fell? He shuts it off saves it: the incline does the work for him without it. Our friend does the same; pulls his horse together, and for some distance goes no faster than the natural stride of his horse takes him down the hill.

‘Consequently the lungs, with nothing to do, refill with air and the horse is himself again; whereas, if he had been hurried just at that moment, he would have "gone to pieces" in two fields. Half a mile or so further on, having by increase of pace and careful observation of the leading hounds, resulting in judicious nicks, recovered his position on the flank of the pack,

he finds himself approaching the brook. He may know it to be a big place, or be ignorant of its proportions; but, in either case, his tactics are the same. He picks out a spot where no broken banks appear, and the grass is visible on the other side, and where, if any, there may be a stunted bush or two on his side of it; there he knows the bank is sound, for there is nothing more depressing than what may happen, though mounted on the best water jumper in your stable, to find yourself and him, through the breaking down of a treacherous undermined bank in the very act of jumping the brook subsiding quietly into the water.

‘The bush at least secures him from such a fate. About one hundred yards from the place he " steadies " his horse almost to a hand canter till within half a dozen strides of the brook, when he sits down in his saddle, and lets him go at it full speed.

Then steady, my young one, my place I 've selected,
Above the dwarf willow 'tis sound I’ll be bail,
With your muscular quarters beneath you collected,
Prepare for a rush like the ' limited mail.'
Oh! now let me know the full worth of your breeding,
Brave son of Belzoni, be true to your sires,
Sustain old traditions—remember you 're leading
The cream of the cream in the shire of the shires!

‘The gallant beast knows what this means, and also by cocking his ears, snatching at the bridle, and snorting impatiently, shows his master that he is aware of what is before him. Through the combination of his own accurate judgment and his master's fine handling, he takes off exactly at the right distance, describes an entrancing parabola in the air, communicating to his rider as near an approach to the sensation of flying as mortal man can experience, and lands with a foot to spare on the other side of the most dreaded and historically disastrous impediment in the whole country a good eighteen feet of open water.

With a quick shortened stride as the distance you measure,
With a crack of the nostril and cock of the ear,
And a rocketing bound, and we 're over, my treasure.
Twice nine feet of water, and landed all clear.

‘And now, perhaps, our friend realises the full measure of his condensed happiness, not unmixed with selfishness ; as perhaps he would own, while he gallops along the flat meadow, not forgetting to pat his horse, especially as he hears a faint "swish " from the water, already one hundred yards in his rear ; the result, as he knows, of the total immersion of his nearest follower, which, as he also knows, will probably bar the way to many more, for a " brook with a man in it " is a frightful example, an objectionable and fear-inspiring spectacle to men and horses alike, and there is not a bridge for miles.

What! four of us only? Are these the survivors
Of all that rode gaily from Ranksboro's ridge?
I hear the faint splash of a few hardy divers,
The rest are in hopeless research of a bridge.

‘As for proffering assistance, I fear it never enters his head. He don't know who it is, and mortal and imminent peril on the part of a dear friend would alone induce him to forego the advantage of his present position, and he knows there are plenty behind too glad of the opportunity, as occasionally with soldiers in a battle, of retiring from the fray in aid of a

disabled comrade. So he sails on in glory, the hounds running, if anything, straighter and faster than ever.

Vae Victis! the way of the world and the winners!
Do we ne'er ride away from a friend in distress?
Alas! we are anti- Samaritan sinners,
And streaming past Stapleford, onward we press.

‘That very morning, perchance, he was full of care, worried by letters from lawyers and stewards, duns, announcements of farms thrown upon his hands; and, if an M.P., of a certain contest at the coming election. Where are these now? Ask of the winds! They are vanished. His whole system is steeped in delight; there is not space in it for the absorption of another sensation. Talk of opium? of hashish? they cannot supply such voluptuous entrancement as a run like this!

"Taking stock" again of his company, he is rather glad to see (for he is not an utterly selfish fellow) that the man on the right has also got safely over the big brook, and is going well; but there is absolutely no one else in sight. It is clear that unless a "check " of some duration occurs, or the scent should die away, or the fox should deviate from his hitherto straight course, these two cannot be overtaken, or even approached. No such calamity for in this case it would be a calamity takes place; and the hounds, now evincing that peculiar savage eagerness which denotes the vindictive mood known as " running for blood," hold on their way across a splendid grass country for some two miles further with undiminished speed.

‘Then an excited rustic is seen waving his hat as he runs to open a gate for our friend on the left exclaiming, as the latter gallops through with hurried but sincere thanks, " He's close afore 'em: they'll have him soon!”

‘And sure enough, a field or two further the sight of a dark brown object slowly toiling up a long pasture-field by the side of a high straggling thorn fence causes our now beaming rider to rise in his stirrups and shout, for the information and encouragement of his companion on the right, " Yonder he goes ! "

Ah! don't they mean mischief, the merciless ladies?
What fox can escape such implacable foes?
Of the sex cruel slaughter for ever the trade is!
Whether human or animal — Yonder he goes!

The hounds, though apparently too intent on their work to notice this ejaculation, seem nevertheless to somewhat appreciate its import, for their leaders appear to press forward with a panting, bloodshot impatience ominous of the end. Yet a few more fields, and over the crown of the hill the dark brown object is to be seen in slow rolling progression close before them. And now " from scent to view," with a final crash of hound-clamour followed by dead silence, as fox and hounds together involve themselves in a confused entangled ball or heap in the middle of a splendid pasture only two fields from the wood which had been the fox's point from the first.

‘Our friend is off his horse in an instant, and leaving him with outstretched legs and quivering tail (no fear of his running away he had been jumping the last few fences rather "short"), is soon occupied in laying about the hounds' backs with his whip gently and judiciously (it don't do for a stranger to be too energetic or disciplinarian on these rare occasions), and with the help of his friend, who arrives only an instant later, and acts with similar promptitude and judgment, succeeds in clearing a small ring round the dead fox. "

Whoohoop! " they both shout alternately, but rather breathlessly, as Ravager and Ruthless make occasional recaptures of the fox, requiring strong coercive measures before they yield possession.

> *Never more for the woodland! his purpose has failed him,*
> *Though to gain the old shelter he gallantly tries;*
> *In vain the last double, for Jezebel 's nailed him!*
> *Whoohoop! in the open the veteran dies!!*

‘"Who has a knife? " They can hardly hear themselves speak; and a fumbling in the pocket, rather than the voice, conveys the inquiry. Our friend has; and placing his foot on the fox's neck contrives to cut off the brush pretty artistically. He hands it to his companion, and wisely deciding to make no post-mortem surgical efforts on the head, holds the stiff corpse aloft for one moment only the hounds are bounding and snapping, and the situation is getting serious and hurls it with a final

‘"Whoohoop!" and " Tear him! " which latter exhortation is instantly and literally followed, among the now absolutely uncontrollable canine mob. And now both, rather happy to find themselves unbitten, form themselves on the spot, and deservedly, into a small Mutual Admiration Society, for they are the sole survivors out of perhaps three hundred people, and ecstatically compare notes on This long-to-be remembered run.

‘Meanwhile the huntsman first, and the rest of the field by degrees and at long intervals, come straggling up from remote bridges and roads. It has not been a run favourable to the "point rider," who sometimes arrives at the " point " before the fox himself, for it has been quite straight, measuring on the map six miles from point to point, and the time, from the "holloa away" to the kill, exactly thirty minutes.’

And that brings us to the end, not only of Mr Bromley Davenport’s runs, real or imagined, but also of this piece. The result of a pleasant little piece of whimsy on my part, in physically following the course of the run described in *The Dream,* and the excuse it afforded to re-consult many of my favourite tracts, and then to set down my thoughts. If the reader derives a fraction of the pleasure which your wonderful Cottesmore country has given, albeit vicariously, to me in putting this small offering together, I shall be more than happy.

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Notes

[1] Apperley appends a foot note to his mention of Dick Christian in this passage, at which he provides the following information: *‘A celebrated rough-rider at Melton Mowbray, who greatly distinguished himself in the late grand steeple-chase from Rolleston. He is paid 15s per day for riding gentlemen’s young horses with hounds.’*

Fifteen shillings a day must have been a very handsome recompense, at a time when workers in the factories that were springing up in the north of England were being paid around that amount for a six day week, and a skilled London bricklayer was usually paid six shillings and sixpence per day.

There is also a second foot note to the same paragraph, which refers to the incident where Frank Forester wears a friend’s new red coat. Apperley’s note states simply ‘A true story’. This, if any were needed, confirms that the rest of the story is a work of fiction: the sole item of historical truth that it contains must perforce be verified by means of this foot note.

[2] It is perhaps fitting that Dick Christian and Henry Hall Dixon actually took a spill themselves during their three-day gig tour. Dixon recorded Christian's description of events thus:

'There's a go! Oh dear! Get to the horse's head! I wish we'd never come here. I kep on a talking and you a writing, and we never saw that grip. What a balcher I comes out of the gig! I drove my nose right into the ground: then you tumbles out on top of me, and pins my legs right down. There's above twelve stone of you! I thought the wheels would be over me. It's all very well – you've done nothing but laugh at me these ten minutes; but your hat's quite as bad knocked in as mine. There's your note book – I see it come flying over my head; that 'ull be your pencil in that tuft of grass. Deary me! How Captain White would have laughed, if he had seen us! This pimple's bleeding on my nose; it was in the ground, I don't know how deep. That 'ull only be a graze on my eyebrow; I'm bleeding badly though. Just lead the horse, and I'll get to this pond, and get you to give me a bit of a rub-down.'

He remarks that they "must keep it snug when we get back to Melton", clearly fearing that the locals will have a laugh at his expense if they see what has happened, and concludes by saying "Sing'lar thing, wasn't it, we should have had that tumble together? I'm always in for them things"