

## WITH THE RABBIT-CATCHER.



HERE is nothing the Legislature, now so largely composed of city-reared men, comes so much to grief over as rural matters ; in fact, it somehow bungles across country like a star-gazing horse with a bit in his mouth, reckless of bogs and quagmires, and totally regardless of disused quarries and pitfalls, lying hidden on the other side of blind fences. No man can withhold from the House the credit of wishing well, but at the same time it must be said that it comes to grief in a manner quite as ludicrous sometimes as did Leech's Lord Tom Noddy in the hunting field. When the Hares and Rabbits Bill was passed through Parliament, a most woful amount of ignorance was displayed as to the habits of ground game, even by many of the farmers themselves, and so it is no wonder that it has been the subject of much litigation and platform politics. Why hares should be coupled with rabbits is not very clear to anyone who understands anything about ground game ; there is nothing in common between them, and the expression "hares and rabbits" seems to be indeed a conventionalism, used in the same sense as rats and mice, cats and dogs, and so on. Every man reared on the land knows or ought to know that the hares do not burrow, and they propagate so slowly that they are always under the power of the landlord or his keeper to be kept down or reduced to a comparatively helpless number ; whilst the rabbit, on the other hand, is a most prolific animal, burrows in the hedgerows woods, and hillocks, or amongst the rocks, and is most difficult to keep down once the stock has been allowed to get large and troublesome. Yet the law allows no difference between them. It was, however, in the framing of the regulations of the Act for the trapping of the rabbits that the mistake was made ; for, though no doubt, as the Home Secretary said, it was never meant that the trap should be set actually beneath the roof or within the tunnel of the hole, they did not fix the distance from the mouth of the actual tunnel so that the rabbit-catcher was privileged to set it in the actual run from one hole to another fifty yards away. It is sad that these detestable gin traps should

ever be used, and it is earnestly to be hoped that Sir Alexander Gordon's motion in the House of Commons on the subject may be emphatically negatived. All sportsmen know that the greatest abomination above ground is this murderous H spring trap, with its serrated steel jaws snapping together on the fall of the tumbler as ferociously as the jaws of a tiger would on its victim, and causing hours of painful cruelty to the captured animal which, sometimes from six in the evening, is left twisting and wriggling on the threshold of its own home with legs broken and bones protruding from the flesh till daylight next morning. Pheasants scraping the fresh earth, and occasionally partridges (as a rule rarer) will be found in them, and more than once I have pressed down the spring to let some grand old cock fly off, with a hanging leg. Foxes, attracted by the squealing of some captured bunny, rush up to the spot, and find themselves with foreleg firm and tight, and only able to effect their freedom by the fearful process of gnawing off the captured piece of the limb, and limping off with the bleeding stump. Cases of this kind I have known, and I recollect of another experience quite as bad, in a hunting country. I was fishing the river Ayr, and in casting over the edge of a slight fall, fouled my flies, as I thought, on the moss-top of a sunken rock. I twisted, wriggled, and flicked with the slack of my line in several directions, but all to no purpose, and, as the water was already at the top of my fishing, stockings I felt rather annoyed, as I did not care to lose my casting line. At last I made up my mind and plunged up to—*the rock, no!* but a *grand old dog-fox*, with one of these wretched traps at his near forefoot, having been unable to ford the river evidently from its weight, and so had been drowned.

If it was bad for pheasants and foxes before the passing of the recent Act, it is doubly worse now when every farmer and every farmer's son is allowed to set his own traps at what hour he likes, and lift them when he likes. This right certainly belonged to those entitled to kill rabbits on their land before the passing of the Act, but then the rabbits were mostly killed by experts, men well skilled in the business, who made a point of looking at the traps the last thing they did at night, and who were round to examine and spring them before sunrise. Now, owing to laziness, traps are left un sprung all day, and, as everyone knows, pheasants and partridges which do not go out on the feed till sunrise, are

liable to be caught at every scrape of red earth, a thing which should not be tolerated ; indeed, the use of the traps, just as the use of the gun, should only be allowed between the hours of sunrise and sunset, an hour's grace being allowed for setting and springing either way.

But the rabbit-catcher with his bundle of gins is waiting for us ; not the modern half woodman, half rabbit-catcher, or village loafer who is too lazy to work, and wants the skill and temerity of the genuine old-fashioned poacher, but one who since he was the height of his own retriever dog, has followed his father in his rounds at night, and assisted him at times to handle his ferrets, and work the nets at the mouths of the holes.

"Well, Joe, which bit of ground is it to-night?" is our salute, as he touches his cloth cap with his finger and thumb, to the quietly murmured "Evenin', sir." "Well, I was thinkin', sir, o' tryin' the hillocks, but Farmer Robson, over here, he say he's going to have wheat in the field down i' hawthorn hedge-row here, and as there's such a plaguy lot of 'em, and I wouldn't like to see him get his young wheat all ate up, for he's a good sort, is farmer, and a bag o' potatoes at Christmas don't come amiss, sir, for the savin' o' his crops a little."

"You're quite right, Joe, and no man knows that better than old Robson ; it's a cheap bag o' potatoes to him, but I daresay you don't find farmers all the same."

"Oh dear, no, sir ; some of 'em would have you spend all your time at one bit of their ground, and then when the wheat braird comes through, raise a howl all at once, and talk about damages, when if they'd only let a fellow know about November what they were going to do, we would set to work at once and thin 'em down. It's not what a rabbit eats by way of grass, sir ; it's what he spoils by eatin' young shoots of crop. That's what they complain of, but they should let us know. However, here we are, sir. Lots of 'em here, you can see."

Flinging down his bundle, he seized one of the gins, scooped out a bed for it across the run leading to the mouth of the hole, bent down the spring, letting the safety ring close down to the jaws. Getting it nicely bedded about a foot from the hole-mouth, he fixed the tumbler plate and cross swivel, dexterously sprinkled the whole over with fresh earth, till not a bit of the iron was visible, drew the form of the run across the plate with

his left, so as to leave the whole appearance of the place as he found it, drew down the safety ring, knocked home the pin to which the cord that held the rope was fastened, and picked up his bundle again; the whole work occupying little more than a minute.

"You don't, as a rule, set the traps in the hole?" was my remark.

"Well, sometimes, but mostly a little bit outside. Rabbits are readier caught about a foot from the mouth, somehow; they seem to be kind of careless when outside. I've known 'em not to come out of a hole for days at which I have left a trap inside; they preferring to go out by some one or other of the bolt holes instead. Too much working with your hands at the hole-mouth makes them suspicious."

"Do you get many traps sprung without anything in them?"

"Sometimes. The squirrels, hang 'em, are fearful mischievous little imps that way. I could sometimes swear that they watch me and do it a purpose, the little rogues, though I can never make up my mind to harm 'em or let the dog do, either, though many a one he's chased up a tree. Sometimes, too, I gets a stump of a leg, and then I know I've got a bothersome customer to deal with, for I think they uses him with his stump to spring all the traps. You rarely catches anyways a rabbit that has lost a leg again, but nearly always with a snare or net; though I shot one once that had only one fore and one hind leg, the off one and the near one, and he could go along nearly as fast as if he'd the whole four of 'em."

Loosening another trap from the bundle he soon had it covered over at a hole's mouth, and gradually, as we moved up along the fence, his bundle got smaller. At last there was but one left, and this he soon found a hole for, after which he re-lit his pipe and bent his steps for home. Next morning I was up and out to meet him just as the first streaks of sunlight were lighting up the eastern horizon to see the result of his labours. A short walk along the hedgerow showed him to be tolerably successful. Seizing each of the unfortunate conies he with a smart jerk dislocated its neck, then chucked it over the hedge. Those traps which were found to contain nothing he sprung, else, he said, pheasants would get their legs snapped off,

scraping for food. When he had examined all, he found himself with twelve couples, which he arranged in pairs by means of severing the sinews of the hind-leg of one with the teeth of the other, and drawing the latter's legs through in a style which formed a sort of a knot.

In the daytime with gun and ferrets we killed twenty couples in another part of the ground, and the evening setting in wet and windy, and there being no moonlight, was voted good for snaring. Getting out over a hundred of these fatal little brass loops, Joe stepped from hillock to hillock, planting one down at each point in a run where the wild grass was blowing, and where he knew, from long experience, the rabbits would be galloping about and gambolling. Smartly the work went on, and ere night fell he had the whole hundred over the whole of the hillocky ground, each wavering about neck-high, and undistinguishable from the wild grass. Next morning saw between twenty and thirty rabbits, almost strangled, squealing as they rolled and wriggled at the cords to which the snares are fastened. The same old twist of the neck and system of coupling, and the old rabbit-catcher was off home, quite pleased with the result of his labours, which was far beyond that which the novices who are now allowed to try their hands could have achieved.

Were such men still entrusted with the work it is needless to state that it would be more efficiently done, and with a considerable amount less of cruelty than is now the case. At any rate, if traps are to be allowed to be set in the open as formerly, the law should make it compulsory that they should be examined at sunrise, and sprung where found empty.

