

## A DAY'S RABBIT SHOOTING.



IT is February, and the partridges are stealing up the sides of the hedgerows, or in little slow-moving groups working up and down the furrows of the wheat stubble lands, now green with grass; free under the law, though yet liable to be lifted by the callous-hearted poacher. The pheasant, too, has an undisturbed range of the covert, though he has to keep a watch on sly Master Reynard; and shooting may well be considered over for the season, save for the mischief-making little rabbit, about which there has been so much legislation and wrangling between landlord and tenant in recent times. But while waiting between partridges and trout, one who loves rod and gun could not wish for better sporting fare indeed, if rabbits are strong, plentiful, and bolting well before the ferrets. Of course it has to be borne in mind that rabbit shooting in one part of the country may be quite different from rabbit shooting in another, and that in some places people do not care at all for it. Woodland rabbits bred inland, for instance, are much softer than rabbits bred on sandy gorse knolls where the herbage is scant, and are much more easily shot. They do not as a rule bolt rapidly, but come hopping out of the mouths of the holes and sit down quietly at times, as if wondering what part of the country to make for. It is possibly for this style of shooting for which Colonel Hawker says the sportsman should get up a tree. The hardest rabbits are bred on sandy hills near a sea shore, and the best shooting one can have at such is on the Firth of Clyde coast, which for miles is one huge rabbit-warren, the hills clad with flowing bent being literally honeycombed with rabbit-holes. Those who "shot small-bore" under Captain Horatio Ross for the Scottish Eight will recollect some parts of this country, as will those who now practise for the same on almost the same range which is now held privately by Mr. R. M. M'Kerrell, of Hillhouse, the well-known rifle shot, and on whose estate, a

couple of rifle-shots off, is always to be found some of the best rabbit shooting in the north country.

Possibly the best time for rabbit shooting is in the end of November or beginning of December, ere the trapper has been over the ground, and the young of the latest litters, the half-grown ones of September, are hardy, full-sized, and full of life and activity. Still, if snares and gins have not been too deadly, owing to the setting in of frost, a capital day's sport can be had over the ferrets till well on to March, though a good deal depends on the openness of the season.

Such a day we enjoyed but a short time ago, in the neighbourhood mentioned. Breakfasting early and well, we sallied out to the appointed place of rendezvous, where we found, sharp to the hour, the gamekeeper with his little green-painted box over his back, accompanied by a lad who carried a similar one, also a spade, for digging out, as ferrets will lie up under the most favourable conditions, or go to sleep comfortably beside some dead one that has succeeded in dragging its riddled carcass within the hole.

"Good mornin', gentlemen," is the salute, "you have brought a very nice mornin' with you, though I was afraid it was goin' to snaw, and rabbits never like to bolt if they think there's goin' to be snaw, ye ken. They're queer things, rabbits; sometimes they'll come quicker than you can load and fire, and sometimes they will not bolt at all."

"I suppose that depends a good deal on the ferrets, Donald," was the remark of my companion.

"Not so much as you think. I have as good working ferrets as is to be found in the country, and even open-mouthed, let alone muzzled, I have seen them beat at times. If a fox has been hanging about all night nothing will make them leave the hole, and I've bolted a fox with a muzzled ferret too; the foxes can't stand a ferret's smell, and the rabbits are the same way, I think. However, here we are at one of our best burrows, and we'd better put on the muzzles."

Opening the box he carried himself, he seized a large brown and yellow dog ferret, as heavy as a hare, and sitting down on his box commenced to force open his mouth with the point of a lead-pencil. Having muzzled many a one for him in my day, I laid down my gun, took hold of the proffered wax-end, made



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"Missed with the right! stop him with the left Sir!"

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a "grannie's" knot in the middle of it, slipped it over the under-jaw, brought it over the top of the other, and, knotting it, carried it up between his ears, where, fastening it again, I carried it round his neck and made him secure. He did not, of course, seem to like it, but after rubbing his nose against the bottom of the box, contented himself, and resolved to bear with the nuisance. Two others we muzzled the same way, and a couple of young ones and an old dam, small, but keen and active, we let go free, the latter's teeth being so short that she could not possibly have held a rabbit supposing she tried.

The ferrets having been got to rights, we moved over to the burrow, a round hillock, which was full of holes, some long and red, with newly-scraped sand, and some round and cosy-looking at the foot of brent bushes. We then took our positions.

The brown dog ferret was dropped into a hole on the far side, another in a hole a few yards off, and one of the young ones in a corner hole, not in a hap-hazard fashion, but after a keen examination of the lay of the land by the man, and some apparent slight consultation with his memory, for he had ferreted that same burrow for years, and knew very well how the holes were connected. Silence, strict silence, being the rule, no sound was made, save the clicking of our gun-locks as we backed them to half-cock. Then we heard some ominous thumping and rumbling, which was followed by the whisper from old Donald that "they had lifted her." Another ominous thump, almost under our feet, was followed by Coney, who, with a race like the first rush of a two-year-old on the fall of the flag, made right for a burrow lying 50 yards off. My friend was a little smarter than I was myself, I having been finishing leisurely a cigar, and got—serve me right—a cloud of smoke in my eyes at the very moment they should have been clear. His shot being well forward, it was rolled over and over, shot through the head. Ben, the huge black retriever, was down on it in a moment, and soon had it at his master's side, where he dropped it and coolly stood watching in his wake the movement of the ferret, which raced out, looked round, and returned no doubt after fresh quarry. It was my turn next, and a very clean miss past the nose with the right as it jinked round a little whin-bush was followed by my sending the left right where, according to its course and speed, it should *have been*, but *where*

*it was not*; it having dropped clean out of view in a grass-fringed bolt hole.

A slight breeze was now, however, coming in from the sea, ruffling the brent grass and making it much more difficult to follow the rabbits in their pathways, which were ragged and uneven. Smart work it was, indeed, and at no time very certain; and so on that account the misses were excusable. Unlike his inland-bred brother, the rabbit of the seaside came out with an unmistakable "plunk," and at full speed dashed along the runs so well known to himself from his midnight gambols. Three and four shots at times would he take when not hit in the head or heart, and even then at times he would drag himself out of the dog's reach into a hole. Often we caught them with their heads just touching the edge of a hole, and would go up to find that the force with which they were running had carried them dead a full yard inside.

Shifting from burrow to burrow we soon raised a far heavier bag than we cared to carry home, but the timely arrival of the gamekeeper's little pony-cart relieved us of all our fears on that score. As the sun began to sink our ferrets began to show some signs of tiring, and we knew that if we hunted them longer they might lie up for a night and be lost. So lifting the last of them we made for home, quite well pleased with our day's rabbiting, and not at all certain that we would give up the gun for the rod so long as there were so many snow clouds in the atmosphere, and so much snaw-bree in the water. Possibly some may think that rabbit shooting will soon go down before the Hares and Rabbits Act. That is not, however, likely to be the case on the class of lands mentioned, which are specially suited for rabbit propagation, and where there are no crops to get damaged. In hedgerows, or in woodlands bordering on grain-growing lands at a high rental, the rabbit undoubtedly is a great nuisance, as he destroys far more than he is worth; but upon common lands, where natural grass is grown, he is worth, in the way of sport, all he eats, though I for one cannot say I care for him regarded from a nutrimental point of view. In many counties in the south good rabbit farms might well be laid off, where they could be preserved for shooting over ferrets, just as trout streams are preserved at so much a rod. To get an afternoon at rabbits should be almost as great a privilege, and one as well worth

paying for as a day at grouse, and there could be no better way of shooting them than in the way I have described. A man who can kill rabbits bolting hard in uneven places is a fair good match for anything running or flying, and if the cruel iron trap were less in use, we might have far more rabbit shooting than we at present have. The latter, as is well known, is forbidden to be set outside the hole—that is, it must be under the roof of the “scoop,” and not placed in the ridge of the long run of scraped-out sand which I have alluded to. Rabbit-catchers, however, prefer the “outside” run to the hole, as, owing to the noise made in setting inside, the alterations in the ground, and the smell of the hands, the little conies will not come out where the burrows are so full of holes that one would require all his traps to make death certain, at that particular hole, not even for days after the trap has been lifted. Partridges and pheasants scraping for food in the early mornings are frequent victims, however, to outside traps as well as foxes, and so it is quite right that the law should remain as it is. That it is a cruel weapon I have frequently argued, much more so when used after the month of February, as cases have been known of bleeding does with broken legs struggling in the traps being suckled by their young, and I personally have seen blood and milk spilt round the plate, the stump of a foreleg showing how the victim had escaped. Perhaps it would have been better to give the farmers a right to kill the rabbits unconditionally, save that the steel trap must not be used at all, only snares, ferrets, guns, and nets—guns only to be allowed in certain months and on certain days, in order that the keeper may know that the reports he hears from time to time are not from the guns of poachers.

